

HOW TO MOTIVATE STUDENTS IN A MIXED ABILITY GROUP

ЯК МОТИВУВАТИ СТУДЕНТІВ У ГРУПІ ЗІ ЗМІШАНИМИ ЗДІБНОСТЯМИ

The article is devoted to the analysis of the ways of motivating students in a mixed ability group. It is stated that the success of learning process depends on the fact if there is the sense of community in the group of learners. It is shown that the ways of motivating students and organizing them into groups may vary and the choice of teaching methods in a mixed ability group can be defined by the language skill the teacher is targeting at. A set of activities efficient for developing the communicative skills of learners` with different levels of language proficiency are offered in the article.

Warming-up exercises can help the teacher to get the students into the right mood as well as practice necessary language skills. The ice breakers described in the article appear to be efficient and helpful for a mixed ability group as repetition is typical for the exercise, and students acquire and memorize a lot of new words easily. It is proved that properly organized questioning and matching up activities give the opportunity for every learner, regardless of his or her proficiency level, to use the language.

It is stated that using role plays and interactive games can contribute a lot to getting students more interested and motivated. Role-playing exercises can be combined with the other English language teaching techniques at all the stages of an English lesson.

It is shown that role plays properly organized can help the teacher to reduce stress and to create such learning environment, which leads all the students regardless of abilities and proficiencies to progress and joy of learning. The learners` interest and motivation can be aroused by involving into enacting life situations and performing various roles. It is proved that hiding behind a role even the most reserved and timid students come to life and start enjoying the process. Feeling of joy contributes to getting students motivated and can lead to real homogeneity.

Interactive games and role-playing exercises often focus on particular grammar structures and give the students opportunity to practice the language in the contexts which are exciting and meaningful for them. It is essential that each learner`s contribution should be approved and appreciated as it effects student`s confidence and provide further motivation and making progress.

The role plays offered in the article are easily adaptable to any language material or teaching format.

Key words: *mixed ability group, motivation, communicative skills, role plays, interactive games, teaching format.*

Стаття присвячена аналізу способів мотивації студентів у групі зі змішаними здібностями. У статті зазначено, що успіх навчального процесу залежить від наявності відчуття спільності тих, хто навча-

ється. Показано, що способи мотивації студентів та організації їх у групи можуть бути різними, а вибір методів викладання у групі зі змішаними здібностями може визначатися мовними навичками, на які орієнтується викладач. У статті запропоновано низку вправ, спрямованих на розвиток комунікативних навичок студентів з різним рівнем володіння мовою.

Розминочні вправи допоможуть викладачеві налаштувати студентів на потрібний лад, а також потренувати необхідні мовні навички. Описані у статті вправи-крижоломи виявляються ефективними та корисними для групи зі змішаними здібностями, оскільки їм притаманне повторення, і студенти легко засвоюють та запам'ятовують багато нових слів.

Доведено, що правильно організовані ігри, побудовані на постановці запитань та вправи на встановлення відповідності дають можливість кожному учневі, незалежно від рівня володіння мовою, користуватися нею.

Зазначається, що використання рольових та інтерактивних ігор значно сприятиме підвищенню зацікавленості та мотивації студентів. Рольові ігри можна поєднувати з іншими методами викладання англійської мови на всіх етапах заняття.

Показано, що правильно організовані рольові ігри можуть допомогти викладачу зменшити стрес і створити таке навчальне середовище, яке спонукає всіх студентів, незалежно від здібностей та рівня володіння мовою до прогресу та радості від навчання. Зацікавленість та мотивацію учнів можна викликати, залучаючи їх до інсценування життєвих ситуацій та виконання різноманітних ролей. Доведено, що, ховаючись за роллю, навіть найбільш стримані та боязкі студенти оживають та починають відчувати задоволення від процесу. Відчуття радості сприяє підвищенню мотивації учнів і зрештою може призвести до справжньої однорідності класу.

Інтерактивні ігри та рольові вправи часто зосереджені на певних граматичних структурах, і надають студентом можливість практикувати мову в цікавих та значущих для них контекстах. Важливо, щоб внесок кожного студента було схвалено та оцінено, оскільки це впливає на впевненість у собі та забезпечує подальшу мотивацію та прогрес у навчанні іноземної мови.

Рольові ігри, запропоновані в статті, легко адаптуються до будь-якого мовного матеріалу та формату навчання.

Ключові слова: *група зі змішаними здібностями, мотивація, комунікативні навички, рольові ігри, інтерактивні ігри, навчальний формат.*

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Problem statement. Nowadays communicative approach to teaching foreign language appears to be the most productive and efficient. Communication in a successful learning surrounding includes getting new information, memorizing and recycling

it with other students as well as speaking in groups, discussing, playing games and having fun. The success of learning process depends on the fact if there is the sense of community in the group of learners. No matter how many students there are in a group, it

inevitably becomes a mixed ability class as it includes individuals representing various temperaments, belonging to different learning types and possessing a range of proficiencies. Even the group consisting of two learners with the similar proficiency level but different levels of motivation, self-discipline or responsibility is viewed as a mixed-ability class. It's not likely that even two students will be able to memorize new vocabulary, understand a new grammar structure at the same time. If the study pace in a class appears to be different, the real trouble may begin.

Taking into consideration the concept of mixed ability class, the British teacher, teacher trainer and writer, D. Hicks points out that «heterogeneity in a foreign language class is a normal situation and shouldn't be thought of as something to be avoided if possible» [3, p. 79]. In the researcher's opinion, such weakness can be gradually turned into strength. The situation seems to be typical of most educational establishments in most countries. Is there any ways of solving the problem? Can a teacher find the way of keeping the study pace, suitable for learners with different proficiencies and abilities? All sorts of well-organized group work may become an excellent way of motivating students, practicing the language in a mixed-ability class and developing learners' communicative skills.

Analysis of recent research and publications. The features of foreign language teaching in a mixed-ability class have been the object of research in the studies of many both native and foreign linguists. The work by D. Hicks is devoted to the question of differing strengths and weaknesses the teacher deals with in a mixed ability class. The researcher analyses the ways of increasing learners' confidence and interest as well as pays attention to the necessity of considering every student's individual characteristics. D. Hick's method gives learners the opportunity of evaluating their language skills and helps them to realize that every person in a language class is in some degree a mixed ability group. «Once learners are aware of their individual weaknesses, students will understand that all the other students have weakness too and will be less likely to dismiss themselves as guilty of being *bad at English*», – points out the researcher [3, p. 81].

Many linguists regard well-organized group work as the important condition of developing learners' language skills in a mixed ability class. Group activities may help teachers to reveal students' knowledge gaps as well as display their skills. Working in a group every student is more likely to compare himself / herself with others, understand what activity is more simple or difficult and subsequently to realize what he or she is to work at or practice more in order to keep up with the groupmates. The researcher N. McIver, whose experience ranges from teaching English in Europe to running summer courses in Britain, points out that working

in a group students always have reason to speak to each other and to discuss something regardless of their proficiency level. Well-organized group work gives the opportunity to create friendly, non-judgemental and relaxed atmosphere, necessary for overcoming the heterogeneity of a mixed ability class. Such kinds of group work as *Triads* and *Pyramids*, worked out by N. McIver [9, p. 72], make it possible to change the teaching format more often in the class and require the active involvement of all the learners what contributes a lot to further students' motivating.

The linguist points out that teachers shouldn't be afraid «of losing control in class, as it is easier to exert control from within the group than from outside, and students usually react much more positively to *freedom* of doing it themselves» [9, p. 73]. Taking part in such group work learners feel more confident to let go and don't worry that their phrases, replies and moves are being closely observed, corrected and criticized. On the other hand, using such teaching format makes it possible for students with different level of proficiencies to discuss their achievements and failures in a frank and helpful manner.

A. Littlejohn's research is focused on the psychological background and features of motivation in a foreign language class. The linguist analyses the sources of motivation and characterizes the ways of maintaining it. In A. Littlejohn's opinion, teachers should «develop learners' sense of success and a feeling that they can do something rather than a feeling that they can't do. It means that teachers need to be sensitive to the psychology of language learning. Psychology is involved in everything we do in the classroom and this is concerned with the students' feelings of success / failure, high / low self-esteem, high / low confidence and this has a direct impact on motivation» [6, p. 96].

The creative approach to foreign language teaching is taken into consideration by A. Maley. In the introduction to the collection of articles, devoted to the issue of creativity, the researcher pays special attention to the necessity of creating the right atmosphere aimed at fostering creativity. A. Maley emphasizes that the right environment can encourage every learner to build and develop language skills regardless of his or her proficiency level or individual characteristics. «Everyone has the capacity to exercise creativity, it is not the preserve of a privileged elite. Encouraging an environment of trust between teacher and class and among class members is absolutely crucial» [8, p. 12].

L. Howe and M. Howe [4] analyze the features of human relationships in the English learning classroom which are essential for efficient studying. If a student in group is taken seriously as an individual, it will enhance his sense of self-worth and improve his self-esteem. The set of role-playing exercises, worked out by the scientists, is based on the principle of values clarification approach.

In A. Wright`s opinion, «the range of individual preferences in ways of learning can be covered by such a communicative activity as simulation» [10, p. 6]. The scientist pays attention to the fact that simulations can be easily adapted both to different classes and different learners` needs.

F. Klippel takes into consideration communicative fluency activities aimed at minimizing competition and maximizing challenge. Well-organized role plays can be used as the technique that may help students to develop their «feeling of the language and maximize success for all the learners» [5, p. 6]. The researcher emphasizes, that such activities are based on team work which seems to be necessary for making each student experience success as well as developing learners` communicative skills.

Focusing on creativity in teaching foreign languages and training teachers the researchers A. Maley and A. Duff designed the set of role plays and simulations, «aimed at students` motivating and integrating creative thinking into everyday classroom practice» [7, p. 8]. In their works the linguists show the ways of developing learners` speaking skills as well as their imagination and personal judgements.

The aim of the article is to reveal the ways of motivating students in a mixed ability group and to offer a set of activities efficient for developing the communicative skills of learners` with different levels of language proficiency.

Presenting the main material. The ways of motivating students and organizing them into groups may vary. The choice of teaching methods in a mixed ability group can be defined by the language skill the teacher is targeting at. The creating of communicative situation is considered to be the integral part of a foreign language class aimed at developing any language skill. Well-organized language activities, based on the communicative situations close to real life, give students the opportunity to gain knowledge, to develop their skills and take the initiative.

J. Feher, a freelance teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer, underlines the connection between creativity and motivation. The researcher points out, that «creativity is a life skill we can use on a daily basis» [1, p. 64]. All the learners regardless of their abilities or proficiency levels, can combine «elements of a language in a way they have never heard before». [1, p. 64]. Learning the foreign language gives students the opportunity to improvise and to imagine, to act and to make decisions. In J. Feher`s opinion, the learners should be «engaged in a creative process» [1, p. 65]. Besides ready-made exercises students can be given a chance of creating games and activities for each other. In such activities the learners` own experience can be combined with some imaginary or dramatic components. As soon as the students stop from being passive and merely receptive, the levels of interest and motivation will naturally increase.

Let`s have a closer look at the way the communicative activities can be used in a mixed ability class for developing certain language skills and what teaching format can be especially beneficial for providing the opportunity for each learner to practice the language. One of the most essential requirements for getting students motivated is creating of relaxed and friendly atmosphere in class. Warming-up activity, we start the lesson from, can help the teacher get the students into the right mood. Let`s have a look at some examples of ice breakers which can be organized at the beginning of the lesson or before starting a new project or a new grammar structure. The game «Picture Matching» is aimed at developing speaking skills as well as checking students` knowledge of the topic «Appearance and Character». The game consists of several steps.

Step 1: Prepare about two times as many different pictures of people as there are students in the group.

Step 2: Prepare the list of adjectives describing person`s character.

Step 3: All the pictures are put on the table. Each student chooses two pictures of people and two or more adjectives from the given list to describe the people`s character. Then the student comments on the choice and explains his/her opinion.

The teacher can prepare the sentence patterns for the learners of elementary or pre-intermediate proficiency levels. Such patterns can help them to express their opinion in a proper way, build phrases correctly and just feel more confident. The patterns may be used during two or three classes and then should be put away in order to emphasize students` progress. If there are enough students of intermediate or upper-intermediate or advanced proficiency levels the game may include discussion to play with ideas and language structures.

Matching exercises can be organized both as pair and group work. The procedure of such activities remains the same. Working in pairs is more suitable for beginners and for students who are less confident. Each student gets a card with a part of a sentence, a proverb, a film title or a compound word. Together with his/her partner they have to find the second part to match.

Matching-up activity can be organized as an intellectual competition. Taken creatively such exercises can be modified into something more challenging and exciting. The students can be divided into two or more teams and can be asked to match the countries with their capitals, flags or products they are famous for.

The activity «Footsteps», known and used by many foreign language teachers, can be modified and practiced as the ice breaker as well as revision exercise after introducing new vocabulary. This game can be prepared by the teacher together with the learners. Fun involvement can help to achieve classroom goals as well as get learners to enjoy themselves. The exercise may be also organized as a competition.

Step 1: The students are divided into two teams.

Step 2: One team prepares the list of words they are going to describe to the second team. The representative of this team stands as far as possible from the learners of the second team.

Step 3: The learners of the second team line up, facing the first team leader, who starts describing words. The students answer in turn trying to guess the word described. If the answer is correct, the student takes a step forward, if the answer is wrong, the student takes a step back. The first student to reach the first team leader becomes the winner inside his or her own team. The team is considered to be the winner if all the participants have answered correctly and reached the opponent team leader as soon as possible. When all the words described are guessed, the first team starts describing words for their opponents.

This activity appears to be efficient and helpful for a mixed ability group as repetition is typical for the exercise, and students acquire and memorize a lot of new words easily. The game helps to fix the meanings of new words in students' minds as well as integrate them into already existing word store. If there are more beginners and students of elementary or pre-intermediate level, the teacher may change the format and ask the students to translate the words from their mother tongue.

As soon as the students learn how to ask the simplest yes/no questions most of questioning activities can start. The game «Lie Detector» is the example of the *questioning activity* which can be suitable for beginners as well as for the learners of intermediate proficiency level. This activity can be practiced in a group of 8-10 learners.

Step 1: The students are divided into two teams and prepare the list of questions which can be answered *yes* or *no*.

Step 2: One member of each team leaves the room. In their absence the teams decide on a set of six to eight questions they want to ask the student who has left. The questions can be personal or can be connected with the topic under discussion. If the questions are factual, the students asking them must know the answer either.

Step 3: The students who were outside return to the classroom and start answering the questions. They have to answer all questions, except one, truthfully. In one case they may lie. Having listened to all the answers, students have to decide which answer was a lie. They have to be persuasive and argumentative in their choice. The students are asked to give reasons to justify their opinion.

Step 4: The team, which guessing was right and whose arguments and reasons were more logical and observant, becomes a winner.

Questioning activity, even the primitive one, means communication and gives the opportunity for every learner, regardless of his or her proficiency

level, to use the language. Questioning exercises are versatile in their subject matter and can be devoted to any topic and easily combined with the other creative activities. The game «Personal Profile» requires preparation and the use of a projector.

Step 1: Each student receives a big sheet of paper and coloured markers or felt-tip pens. Then the students are asked to draw several pictures describing their personalities. The learners can draw something about their habits, hobbies or interests.

Step 2: Taking turns each student places his or her picture on the projector. The students ask questions, connected with the images they see. The student explains the symbols or images his or her group-mates don't understand.

This format can be used in newly formed groups or in groups which have been working together for a short period of time. If the learners have been working together long enough, the format of this activity can be changed. Every drawing can be given a number and shown for a short time while students try to guess whose drawing it could be and comment on their choice. Each student's work should be approved and appreciated as it effects student's confidence and has inestimable value. This game can help to encourage learners to discuss their work together in frank but friendly manner.

The activity «Ask me a question» is a good way for students in a big group of getting to know others better as well as of practicing grammar structures and developing communicative skills. The learners are encouraged to practice various types of questions using appropriate tense. The interaction between students appears to be more open and emotional.

Step 1: The learners are divided into two teams. The teacher asks the group to devise and write down ten questions they would like to ask their group-mates. The students are to ask all types of questions using different tenses.

Step 2: The learners representing two teams make two long rows of chairs and take their seats in front of each other. The first team sitting in the right row starts putting their questions to the first representative of the second team sitting opposite.

Step 3: After about two minutes the teacher asks the students representing the second team to move one chair to the left. It allows the learners to put the same questions to the next person. This activity can help the teacher to encourage learners' active participation and to increase both grammar and communicative proficiency. When the last representative of the second team finishes answering the questions, the teams change their roles.

This game appears to be especially efficient in a mixed ability group as each student has a turn both to ask and to answer questions. The procedure is repeated and all students irrespective of ability or proficiency contribute something to the lesson and

start feeling more confident of his or her grammar and speaking skills.

As teacher's experience shows, using role plays and interactive games can contribute a lot to getting students more interested and motivated. Let's have a closer look at some role-playing activities that can be used within the main part of a lesson for introduction and explaining of a new theme, checking up of home assignment, summing up the results of a lesson or just for having some fun. Role plays are often enacted around everyday situations which are familiar to each learner. Acting out the situations they often find themselves in, all the students regardless of their abilities and proficiencies usually feel more comfortable and relaxed. It's important that playing a role each learner gets a new personality and the right to speak, act and behave in a new different way. Hiding behind a role even the most reserved and timid students come to life and start enjoying the process. Feeling of joy contributes to getting students motivated and can lead to real homogeneity. Interactive games and role-playing exercises often focus on particular grammar structures and give the students opportunity to practice the language in the contexts which are exciting and meaningful for them. Most interactive games appear to be multipurpose as they can offer practice for a great variety of language units and structures.

The activity «Treasure Hunt» is a good example of a *search game*, aimed at increasing students' motivation in a mixed ability group. Being actively involved in the process all the students feel encouraged and do their best to use the language.

Step 1: The teacher prepares the tasks for the game in advance. The tasks should be made for individual students in order to exploit their strengths as well as to be aware and overcome their weaknesses.

Step 2: Each learner gets the task, fulfils it and is rewarded with an envelope, containing a piece of information, necessary for finding the treasure all the students are hunting for. The piece of information can be a letter, a word or a sentence. All the pieces of information are collected by the students and combined to find the general solution which can give them the clue for finding the treasure.

The tasks worked out by the teacher offer the students the reason for speaking as well as get the learners to focus on particular language point. It is essential to adapt the tasks to the individual students and make them practice the skills they need to improve. The activity involves the whole class and each student appears to be a giver and a collector of information.

The role play «The World Train Tour» is designed for developing grammar and vocabulary proficiency as well as communicative fluency. The activity requires preparation and additional equipment: projector, laptop, paper for drawing the map.

Step 1: The teacher prepares the role cards to each student and the copies of hand out with the information about the famous cities and interesting places of the world. Each role card contains the description of the character the student is going to perform.

Step2: The teacher makes the plan of the tour and offers it to the group. The plan includes all the countries, cities and interesting places the students are to visit during their tour. The plan is shown by means of the projector or laptop. The teacher can also prepare the map of their imaginary journey on which are shown all the cities and places they are passing through.

Step 3: The teacher explains that the students are going on a long tour around the world. The learners are divided into groups of five or six according to their role cards. The group leader is in charge of each group. He or she can be appointed by the teacher or chosen by the group members.

Step 4: The students start packing their suitcases naming all the words connected with topic «Traveling».

Step 5: Students practice communicative skills making up conversation with their fellow travelers. Playing their roles, the learners share travelling experience and dramatize various situations they can find themselves in. Recommended vocabulary units, grammar structures and communicative phrases can be given on the hand out. The group leader has the list of possible situations and topics to be discussed. He or she coordinates and directs the conversation and together with other students marks the places the train stops at on the map.

Step 6: When the train comes to the certain city or place, the learners have the excursion, given by one of students. The excursion can be shown on the big screen with the help of the projector. The students practice asking questions about the most exciting and beautiful sights they see. When the excursion finishes, the train goes on its way around the world. At the end of the tour the teacher can organize a general group discussion. The students can express their opinion and tell the class what places and sights impressed them the most. The activity can be divided into several stages according to the lexical items and grammar structures the teacher is going to revise or to work at. Such an exciting multitasking interactive game can help the teacher to encourage use of imagination and enhance students' communicative skills. The emphasis of this role play is both on successful communication and correctness of the language. Organized properly this game can provide intensive language practice as well as an opportunity for real communication. Such activities can easily «constitute the bridge between the classroom and the real world», – points out J. Hadfield [2, p. 5].

The interactive game «Making a TV programme» is aimed at developing all language skills. This activity

also gives the opportunity to exercise students' creative capacities. The role-playing exercise requires preparation on the part of the teacher and the use of additional equipment such as a video-recorder, tape-reorder and a microphone. The collection of interesting articles can also be needed.

Step 1: The teacher discusses the scenario of the game with the students and the roles they are going to play. Together they decide who will be responsible for advertisement, sound effects, selecting and recording music, interviews, presenting the program, communicating with the viewers. The learners are divided into the groups according to their role cards and start working at their part of the programme.

Step 2: The students responsible for the interviews find suitable topics in the Internet or in the articles recommended by the teacher and write up the list of questions they would like to ask. If the group is big enough they can interview all the students representing the viewers. If not, someone can play the role of a celebrity. The interviews are recorded.

Step 3: The interviews are interrupted by the advertisement. The students responsible for this part of the programme, promote the use of some imaginary product or service they would like to improve. Both interviews and advertisement are accompanied by the pieces of music, found by the group of students working at the sound effects. Each group presents its part of the programme, if necessary some corrections are done and last alterations are made. The sequence of the interviews in combination with advertisement is fixed.

Step 5: The presenters work out their remarks and all parts of the programme are recorded and then shown on a big screen. This activity gives all the students the opportunity to display their creative skills as well as to make connection between what they have already learnt and new information they get. The role play can challenge the learners to assume and share responsibility for their part of the work. As the students work together towards reaching the common goal, it is necessary to create a positive emotional climate in the group. Only under this condition the teacher will be able to show caring for students and respect for their creative ideas and diligent work. The students' contribution should be appreciated. The programme can be shown to other groups and used as a listening exercise. It can be also helpful for students learning «English Teaching Methods».

The activity «Newspaper report» is also a quite demanding role playing exercise. Being designed for the whole group, the game maximizes challenge and gives each learner irrespective to the proficiency level to feel inspired, to have a turn and to do his best.

Step 1: The teacher prepares a large number of photographs taken from magazines, newspapers or the Internet.

Step 2: The students get the pictures and the role cards. The teacher explains that they are going to act out the situation in the editorial office. The students are divided into several groups representing the departments of the editorial office such as sport, culture, advertisement, science and technology, crimes, fashion, industry, education, agriculture, shopping. The learners can express original ideas as for possible departments they can represent.

Step 3: Each group choose the pictures connected with the issues their department deals with and write their reports of the events shown on the photographs. The reports are read out and discussed at the general meeting of the editorial office. It is recommended that all the reports should be popularized among other students and teachers, shown to other groups and each student's contribution ought to be emphasized and appreciated. In the atmosphere where everyone is approved and encouraged learning becomes enjoyable and successful.

Conclusions. Using role plays and interactive games can make good teaching sense and become the desirable alternative to traditional teaching format for those who work with a mixed ability group and do their best to overcome heterogeneity and get all the students irrespective to their abilities and proficiencies to enjoy leaning. It is shown that warming-up exercises of repetitive character appear to be efficient for creating relaxed and friendly atmosphere in a group as well as for practicing language skills. Being versatile in the subject matter questioning activities can be devoted to any topic and easily adapted to any level of proficiency. The procedure of the questioning exercises described in the article is repeated, each student has a turn to give the answer and contribute something to the lesson.

Role plays properly organized can help the teacher to reduce stress and to create such learning environment, which leads all the students regardless of abilities and proficiencies to progress and joy of learning. The learners' interest and motivation can be aroused by involving into enacting life situations and performing various roles. The interactive games described in the article appear to be multipurpose and multitasking as they are designed to practice a great variety of language units and structures.

The long-term and open role playing exercises such as «The World Train Tour» or «Newspaper report» can be demanding both for the teacher and learners but they give the students opportunity to make connection between what they know as well as experience new information. As role plays get the whole class involved, it is essential that each learner's contribution should be approved and appreciated as it effects student's confidence and provide further motivation and making progress.

The **further research** in this area is to be devoted to the analysis of creative writing activities as the way of encouraging and motivating students.

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