

Teachers: How to Motivate your Students

(this article is also in Chinese)

1. ATTITUDE: *How can I establish a positive learner attitude?*

We want our students to have a positive attitude towards learning Chinese so that they will be willing to put out the effort needed to learn Chinese well. So, what can I, their teacher, do to help them want to learn, as well as for them to find learning Chinese an enjoyable task? We also want our students to have a positive attitude towards us - their teacher; students like and respect teachers who regularly demonstrate expertise, enthusiasm and empathy.

a) **Expertise:** in order to give our students confidence in our ability to teach, we must know our subject well, and be thoroughly prepared for every class. Make the first lesson as enjoyable as possible! (key words: safe, successful, interesting), e.g. the students learn 'Greetings & Farewells', or learn Numbers 1-10.

b) **Empathy:** show that you care about your students by taking the time & trouble to find out what their learning needs and learning goals are, as well as their expectations for your class. If you provide what they are needing, they will be more motivated to learn.

Let your students know you realize that learning Chinese won't be easy for them, and that it can be really frustrating at times. When you know that a sentence pattern will be difficult to grasp (e.g. *le 了*), say so to your student, but at the same time indicate your commitment to helping them master it.

Emphasize the importance of learning from mistakes by helping them see that mistakes are a way of improving their learning. When we are helping students learn from a mistake, we are directly showing them that thinking and trying are valued learner traits, and that we have confidence in their ability to learn. Adult learners have a need for self-respect, achievement, adequacy, mastery, confidence and independence. It is all too easy for poor teachers to take these away and substitute humiliation, incompetence, rejection, anxiety and fear. So beware of being too 'high & mighty'!

Make perseverance a valued learner trait. Tell them: "I like the way you try".

c) **Enthusiasm:** be enthusiastic about teaching Chinese - it's infectious and your students should be more likely to want to learn. Greater alertness produces better learning. Does the fact that we care about what we are teaching show by the enthusiastic way we teach?

Demonstrate a confident yet realistic expectancy that your students will master Chinese. Say to them "You can do it!", but don't say "It's easy". Whenever we tell our students that something is

easy, we have placed them in a 'lose-lose' dilemma. For if the person is successful at doing the task, there is no feeling of achievement because the task was an easy one anyway. However, if the person fails in the task, there is the feeling of shame because the task was easy in the first place.

d) **Clarity:** strive for clarity so that your students find your lessons easy to comprehend. Always check to see whether your students have understood the lesson. Note their facial expressions! Develop an insatiable interest by scouring books for simpler grammar explanations and clearer vocabulary definitions!

Key words: ***Interest - Relevance - Expectancy - Satisfaction***

2. LEARNER'S NEEDS: *How can I best meet the needs of my students?*

Try to understand why your students are learning Chinese, i.e. what is their purpose in learning, their language goals and present communicative needs? Ask them! Then think how you can help them meet these needs. Regularly relate the practical use of the content of each lesson to their daily living needs.

3. STIMULATION: *How can I continuously stimulate my students?*

Stimulate your students to participate in the lesson by creating a classroom atmosphere that is safe, teach in ways that students find interesting and moderately challenging, and help students to continually experience progress. Is your classroom a safe place where your students can learn, free from fear and anxiety, free to take risks and make mistakes? Language learners have to take risks, expose their weak areas, make mistakes, and become vulnerable. This isn't easy for adult learners. Our aim as teachers should be to help students feel relaxed (not fearful), yet alert (not bored) - because they're interested in what we are teaching.

How can we maximize student attention? Firstly, by providing frequent response opportunities. If they know they won't have to respond to a question (because their 'turn' came round a few moments ago), there is no incentive to pay attention to the question you are now asking. So try to be varied in your teaching approach - westerners like variety. Maybe we can't change the content of the course, but we can change the way it is taught!

4. EMOTIONS: *Are right-brain emotions combined with left-brain tasks?*

Ensure that your students are not passive listeners but active participants by maximizing involvement during class time, e.g. divide them into pairs for practice. Students need both cognitive and emotional stimulation, i.e. not just practice that seems irrelevant, but practice that is in line with their daily living needs here and now. Teach grammar communicatively by putting it in the context of everyday living situations.

Other emotions to encourage in the classroom are: optimism, enjoyment, curiosity, confidence, alertness and affection. Avoid threat, fear, rejection, humiliation, anxiety, incompetence. Anxiety and reduced self-confidence will adversely affect your student's performance.

5. AFFIRMATION: *How can I affirm my student's feelings of competence?*

Adults have an innate need to be competent and effective in what they do, and therefore need regular confirmation to know that they are doing O.K.. Hence, we can affirm our students through constructive feedback. Feedback is information students receive about the quality of their performance on a given task. It may be verbal ("Good try!") or written (comments on their exam results). Helpful feedback enhances student motivation because it allows them to: a) evaluate their progress, b) correct errors with little delay, c) receive encouragement, and d) spur them on. Also, it affirms the student's strong points, as well as effort expended. Encourage by pointing out measurable progress. Students will value your feedback as it will help them evaluate their progress.

Feedback should be: i) specific (with corrective procedures), ii) prompt, iii) positive - because the student is trying hard to improve; if you, the teacher, always emphasize their errors, it is discouraging for your students, iv) constructive - while pointing out their errors, feedback should be informational, acknowledges students effort, provides emotional support, and is seen in the context of overall progress.

Praise creativity. Allow for risk-taking because it increases the student's opportunity for talking, as well as aid their learning by testing their hypotheses and getting feedback about their correctness or otherwise.