

## Motivating Adult Learners through a Fluency Development Activity

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“I have so much work! After working, it’s difficult to focus”. “It’s hard to find time to study.” These are typical examples of comments adult English learners would often write in their reflections after my evening communication classes at a language school in Tokyo. They may resonate with the sentiments expressed by many other adult learners in the workforce under pressure to improve their English in the face of expanding globalization. Although these working adult learners may have clear goals for their language learning, it does not seem to always translate into satisfactory investment in their learning as the above comments illustrate. Squeezing in time to study may be a very difficult challenge for many adult learners juggling various demands from work and life in general. However, it could also be due to the fact that they are often driven not so much by intrinsic factors as by extrinsic or instrumental ones, such as promotion and career advancement, as frequently mentioned in the questionnaire submitted at the beginning of a course. Thus what seemed necessary was to introduce measures which would increase genuine interest and motivation for more investment, and as part of an attempt to do so I implemented a fluency development

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activity in the communication classes mentioned above. The levels of the students were between false beginners and low advanced, and they were aged from 20s to 60s. Most of the students were already using English in their work or hoping to do so in the near future. The activity was designed by adapting “4/3/2” (p. 153), “Q->SA+EI” (p. 120), and “retelling” (p. 118) suggested by Nation and Newton (2009). The length of the activity was 30 to 40 minutes.

### **Procedure**

#### **1. Preparation of a 40 second talk**

As homework, students were asked to prepare a 40 second talk on topics of their choice. They could talk about past events or future plans, or could also summarize a book, a movie, or a news report. Preparation was to be made using an outline and notes instead of a written script, and use of vocabulary learned in previous lessons was encouraged. The length of one talk was determined in consideration of the time that could be allocated for the whole activity within one lesson.

#### **2. In-class preparation/rehearsal**

In order to lower the students’ affective filter, they were told to first go over their talk in their mind and then rehearse out loud for 40 seconds respectively. As the activity was conducted at the beginning of each lesson serving as warm-up, and students

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often seem to experience high anxiety when giving unscripted talks, this facilitating step was considered necessary.

### **3. Giving a 40 second talk/taking notes**

Students were told to form pairs alternating between the speaker and the listener. The listener was asked to take notes of the main points of the talk with the aim of increasing their attention.

### **4. A 1.5 minute Q & A session**

After one speaker finished his/her talk, the listener was to ask either for clarification or follow-up questions on the language and/or content of the talk. In answering a question, the students were encouraged to respond in two or more sentences. The one who gave a talk was also allowed to ask questions. This session was added to the activity because students expressed interest in their partners' stories and took initiative to ask questions about the message. The length of the session was again determined in consideration of the limited time constraint. After the session, the partners switched their roles and repeated step 3 and 4.

### **5. Changing partners/giving a 30 second talk**

Students were told to change pairs and each speaker gave the same information in 30 seconds to a new partner following step 3 and 4.

### **6. Changing partners/giving a 20 second talk**

Students changed pairs again and as in step 5, each speaker delivered the same information to yet another partner following step 3 and 4.

### **7. Reviewing notes/retelling information**

Students reviewed the notes they made while listening to the partners and prepared to briefly retell the information they received during the three pair interactions. Time to prepare for retelling was given because it was supposed to increase each student's chance of success (Nation & Newton, 2009). Students took turns retelling one of the stories to the whole class. The purposes of conducting the sharing as a whole class activity were 1) to share each student's story to increase students' interest and motivation to prepare for the next talk and 2) to provide them with an opportunity to practice speaking in public without a script and with a limited preparation time, as many of the students often faced such challenges in their work or expected to do so in the future.

### **Variations**

The length of each talk can be extended or shortened depending on the time available or learners' proficiency level as long as the length of the third talk is half the length of the first one. Also, if the class size is large, the whole class task can be either

simplified by having only some students present their retelling or transformed into pair or group work. Furthermore, if the available time is limited, the Q and A session can be omitted.

### **Rationale**

How would implementation of this activity lead to adult learners' increased motivation? Some of the strategies suggested by Dörnyei (2001) and applied in the activity and student comments that seem to illustrate their efficacy may provide some explanation.

#### **1. Promotion of group cohesiveness**

Dörnyei claims that a cohesive class is one of the conditions that create an environment where learners' motivation is likely to bud and increase (2001). Cohesiveness is characterized by a sense of belonging and mutual support, and as Dörnyei's (2001) strategy 6 suggests, it can be promoted through, among others, interaction and the sharing of authentic personal information. The activity allows students to choose their topics from their own personal experiences and interests, and to share them with the whole class. The students certainly seemed to feel secure about and find enjoyment in making contributions to the class, which appears to be reflected in written comments such as "I think it's good practice because I can express my

thoughts” and “It’s fun to be able to talk on various topics”. Positive influence and increased involvement among students was also apparent in comments such as “I tried to talk about something interesting [for the audience]”.

## **2. Presentation of peer role models**

Once a favorable condition is established, initial motivation can be generated. One powerful strategy that can help to achieve that is strategy 9, which suggests use of peer role models (Dörnyei, 2001). Students were inspired by the performance of those who were enthusiastic during the pair and class tasks, and motivated to further improve their own. This seems to be shown in the following comments: “I’m impressed by the size and variety of other students’ vocabulary and expressions” and “I’d like to summarize a story like (student A) next time”.

## **3. Each learner as an active participant**

Finally, Dörnyei’s (2001) strategy 19 is one way that could help to maintain the learners’ motivation that has been generated. According to the strategy, when each learner is given specific roles and required to be actively involved, he/she becomes more motivated. For this activity, the speaker has explicit goals of communicating their message with clarity while meeting the time limit. In addition, not only the speaker but the listener must also maintain their attention in order to successfully complete the last

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task. These goals keep both the speaker and the listener focused on their tasks, and motivate them to improve their skills to perform better the next time.

## References

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