

## **A-Z of teaching young learners: Motivation**

### **What and why?**

Initially, the motivation of young learners is generally very high. Over time, many children lose their motivation, and may appear bored, tired and unwilling to learn. Many teachers respond by looking for 'fun' things to do – more games, songs, etc. These often help but the effect is usually temporary because the basic situation causing the reduction in motivation has not changed.

There are many reasons why the motivation of children changes so much. Many of these reasons may be beyond the control of the English teacher – for example, family life, health, other school work, friendship, and so on. However, there are two significant aspects of what happens inside the classroom that can have a direct impact on the motivation level of children. Firstly, motivation is directly related to self-esteem. Children who have low levels of self-esteem do not commit themselves to learning. None of us want to fail, which is why failing students often pretend that they are not interested – they do this to protect their self-image. It is very important, therefore, that we try to help the children develop a positive image of themselves as language learners and create feelings of success, not failure. Secondly, motivation is directly related to a sense of being in control. As humans, we are always more committed to something if we have had a role in making a decision about it. It is also important, therefore, that children are involved, as thinking, creating beings, in making decisions over what they are doing.

### **Practical ideas**

- Try to ensure that the children have a clear idea of how much they have learned and a feeling that they are making progress. For example, look back on things you have done with them, not to revise them, but to show how much they now understand. Say things like 'Look! One month ago you couldn't understand that. Now you can!'
- Choose 'larger tasks' that give the children more 'psychological space' to plan their own work, set their own pace and make their own decisions about what they do. For example, craft activities, groupwork, pairwork and time to write, design and draw can all create a feeling of more personal control.

- Include tasks that involve a personal response, and value and appreciate that personal response by giving personal feedback: displaying the children's work, telling them how you have told someone else about the lovely work they have done, etc. Making posters or art designs, writing simple poems, making models, etc. can create feelings of pride in their work.
- Provide choice. Instead of saying 'Do this', say 'You can choose. You can do this, this or that'. This may be a choice of materials to use in a craft, a choice of whether they do something in writing or orally, a choice of what they do for homework, a choice of where they sit in the classroom, and so on.
- Involve the children in classroom decision-making. Many of the decisions that the teachers make can be shared with the children, without any risks to the course as a whole. You might be able to share decisions about when homework is set, how long they will spend on a particular task, what they will do next lesson, who will do what and when, whether they are going to act out something, whether they are going to sing a song again, how you can decorate the classroom, and so on.
- Find out what the children think. Find out if they think they need more practice, if they have suggestions of their own, if they find things easy or difficult, boring or interesting, if they would like to do something again, and so on. You could place a 'suggestion box' in your class, or write a guided letter that the children could complete with their ideas.
- Think about how you give feedback. Even very young children quickly develop an image of themselves in the classroom and can usually identify who is the 'best' in the class, who is the 'weakest', etc. They do this by monitoring and comparing the feedback that the teacher gives to each child. This, of course, affects their view of themselves – and how capable they think they are. Make sure you give positive, encouraging feedback.
- In general, it is best to avoid getting into giving 'rewards'. Most research in this area shows that this can have the effect of devaluing the work that leads to the reward by making the child focus on external rewards rather than their own feelings of success and satisfaction. Also, rewards are only motivating if you sometimes get them – for those who don't get them, or who have very little prospect of getting one, a rewards system is anything but motivating. In games, for example, it is probably best to avoid giving points for correct answers. At such an early stage in learning, being 'punished' for not knowing something is not very encouraging. A points system can be used, however, when it is obvious that points are earned because of 'luck' – such as spinning a spinner.