Motivating learners

with immersive speaking tasks

Contents

Introduction (the magical moment)

One of the most satisfying experiences for a teacher in the classroom is to see all their students actively engaged in a speaking task, leaning forward listening attentively to each other, supporting each other in expressing and sharing ideas and experiences, totally focused on their task and unaware of the passing of time. The classroom is full of students' voices and the teacher can lean in and actually hear language learning taking place. This is a magical moment, and in this paper we want to explore why these moments are so important and look at (1) what is going on in terms of language learning, and (2) how we can design speaking tasks so that we can consistently experience the 'magic' of seeing students totally immersed in communication.

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Why are these moments so important?

When teachers talk to students about their language learning goals, students often say things like, 'I think speaking is the most important skill' (Dörnyei, Adolphs and Muir, 2017). In fact, most students measure their language proficiency by their ability to speak the language, regardless of their grades in tests and exams. This is especially true of adult learners. This is no surprise since language 'level' is commonly judged by others according to how well you speak. When people ask about your knowledge of a language, they don't want to know about your knowledge of grammar or the phonetic system. They invariably ask, 'Do you speak French / Arabic / English?' and this skill is seen as the end goal of any language course. This attitude is consolidated by evaluation frameworks, such as the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference), which measure language competence in terms of what a student 'can do' with the language.

It is natural, therefore, that students set great store by learning how to speak. At the same time, they often report that this is the area where they have the greatest difficulty (Dörnyei et al., 2017). They look to their teachers and their English classes to prepare them to communicate outside the classroom and gain a lot of satisfaction and motivation when they perceive that they have succeeded in classroom speaking activities.

What does 'success' look like for them? Often, it is when they have engaged fully with their peers in discussion and have achieved a positive outcome to the task. The successful achievement of task goals helps learners feel that they can successfully accomplish concrete tasks in English and are progressing toward their overarching goal of being a proficient speaker of the language. This in turn feeds their continuing motivation and engagement in their English studies (Muir and Dörnyei, 2013).

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What is going on from a language learning perspective?

The role of speaking in language learning

Speaking plays an important role in the process of learning a language and it has long been accepted that 'a language is learnt, at least in part, through the students' attempts to use it' (Scrivener and Sayer, 2007: xii). This is borne out in two language learning hypotheses that were developed in the 1980s: the Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985) and the Interaction Hypothesis (Long and Porter, 1985; Long, 1996).

In her Comprehensible Output Hypothesis, Swain suggests that exposure to comprehensible input is not enough for language learning to take place and that output is at least as significant as input. She argues that speaking not only 'provides the opportunity for meaningful practice' but also provides students with the opportunity to experiment with new language forms and structures and 'stretch their interlanguage to meet communicative needs' (Swain 1993: 159).

Long (1996) also emphasises the importance of speaking and interacting in his Interaction Hypothesis. He also stresses the importance of negotiating meaning. Plough and Gass (1993) support this view, claiming that negotiation of meaning is a necessary element in language acquisition. When students collaborate to negotiate meaning, they are actively processing language and practising a wide range of language resources in order to make their meaning clear to their

listeners. For more on the benefits of student interaction, see 'Enhancing student interaction in the language classroom', another paper in this series.

It is interesting to note that more negotiation of meaning takes place when learners of the language are talking to each other than when a student is talking to a teacher. This is because the students have to take on the responsibility for creating meaning rather than handing over that responsibility to the teacher / expert (Long and Porter, 1985). Nunan (1999: 51) builds on this, saying that 'language is acquired as learners actively engage in attempting to communicate in [the] target language' and that 'acquisition will be maximized when learners engage in tasks that "push" them to the limits of their current competence.' Immersive speaking tasks can offer students the opportunity to do just that – to engage successfully in meaningful interaction.

The role of tasks in language learning

Before we discuss the role of tasks in language learning, it is useful to look first at what we mean by a task in the context of a language classroom. Bygate, Skehan and Swain (2001: 11) offer this very simple definition as a starting point: 'A task is an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective.' A task differs from an exercise in that the purpose of a task is not the correct use or practice of specific target language. The aim is not a linguistic outcome. The purpose of a task is to achieve a goal which

is specific to that task, and which will often reflect a real-life task (Skehan, 1996; Ellis, 2003), such as reaching a consensus, solving a problem or recreating a story.

Tasks support language learning by providing students with a reason to communicate and a real need to create and negotiate meaning. Language is the vehicle by which the task must be achieved and collaborative group tasks provide opportunities for prolonged interaction that are often difficult to engineer in teacher-led tasks that involve the whole class (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). As we have already seen, prolonged interaction supports language development. In addition, group tasks can offer a safe environment for speaking (Long and Porter, 1985). Students don't feel that they are being scrutinised or judged as they might feel when speaking in front of the whole class (Jiang, 2009). This is crucial as language learning is often an emotional experience and many students feel anxious when required to speak. During group work, students feel they have the 'privacy' they need to experiment with language and ideas. (See more about private space in 'Enhancing student interaction in the language classroom', another paper in this series.)

It is also believed that success in a classroom-based task can improve students' overall motivation (Muir and Dörnyei, 2013). If they perceive their success in the task as being the result of their successful use of the language, they will feel that the task is helping them to move closer to their overall goal of becoming an independent user of the language. It will boost their confidence and make them feel more positive about their speaking abilities. This, in turn, will motivate them to take an active part in any future tasks. In short, success breeds success and motivation feeds engagement.

The importance of immersion

Having defined tasks in the context of the language classroom and explored the benefits of using tasks to support language learning, we now want to look in more detail at the idea of 'immersive' tasks.

When a task is immersive, it requires us to give it all our attention, to focus all our energies, to engage totally with the goal, whatever that may be. Immersion of this kind has been identified in psychology as a state of 'flow'. The Hungarian psychologist Csikszentmihályi (1990) describes flow as a state when you are so completely involved in what you are doing – playing a musical instrument,

figure-skating, writing poetry – that you are lost in the activity, you are unaware of the world around you, time flies and the activity itself becomes its own reward. In a state of flow, he says, we will be performing at optimal levels, pushing ourselves to our limits, intrinsically motivated by our own success. He claims that flow is the secret to happiness, and some applied linguists have wondered whether it might also be a key to successful learning (Egbert, 2003; Henry, Davydenko and Dörnyei, 2015).

According to Egbert (2003: 500), flow can take place in the language classroom given the right conditions: 'the interplay among individual learner characteristics and classroom environment variables, such as task features, can lead to flow'. And that flow may 'contribute to more effective or more motivated language learning [and] help learners to persevere in their language studies'. Various studies (Grabe and Stoller, 1997; Snyder and Tardy, 2001; Schmidt and Savage, 1997) suggest that speaking tasks can lead to flow (or immersion) if they fulfil the following conditions as outlined by Egbert:

1. There is a balance between challenge and skills.
2. The students' attention is focused on the task.
3. The students find the task interesting and/or authentic.
4. The student perceives a sense of control.

> In a state of flow we will be performing at optimal levels and pushing ourselves to our limits, intrinsically motivated by our own success.

If all these conditions are fulfilled, the students will immerse themselves in the task, perform to their optimal ability and feel intrinsically motivated to participate and achieve the task goal. The focus on the task will also help students feel less inhibited and more willing to speak, which in turn will boost their confidence in their own ability and help them feel that they are making tangible progress towards their goal of being competent communicators (Muir and Dörnyei, 2013).

How can we create immersive speaking tasks?

As we have seen, speaking tasks are different from practice activities. A task needs to be planned carefully in order to provide an immersive experience. The following guidelines offer some suggestions for the different decisions teachers need to make to plan an immersive task.
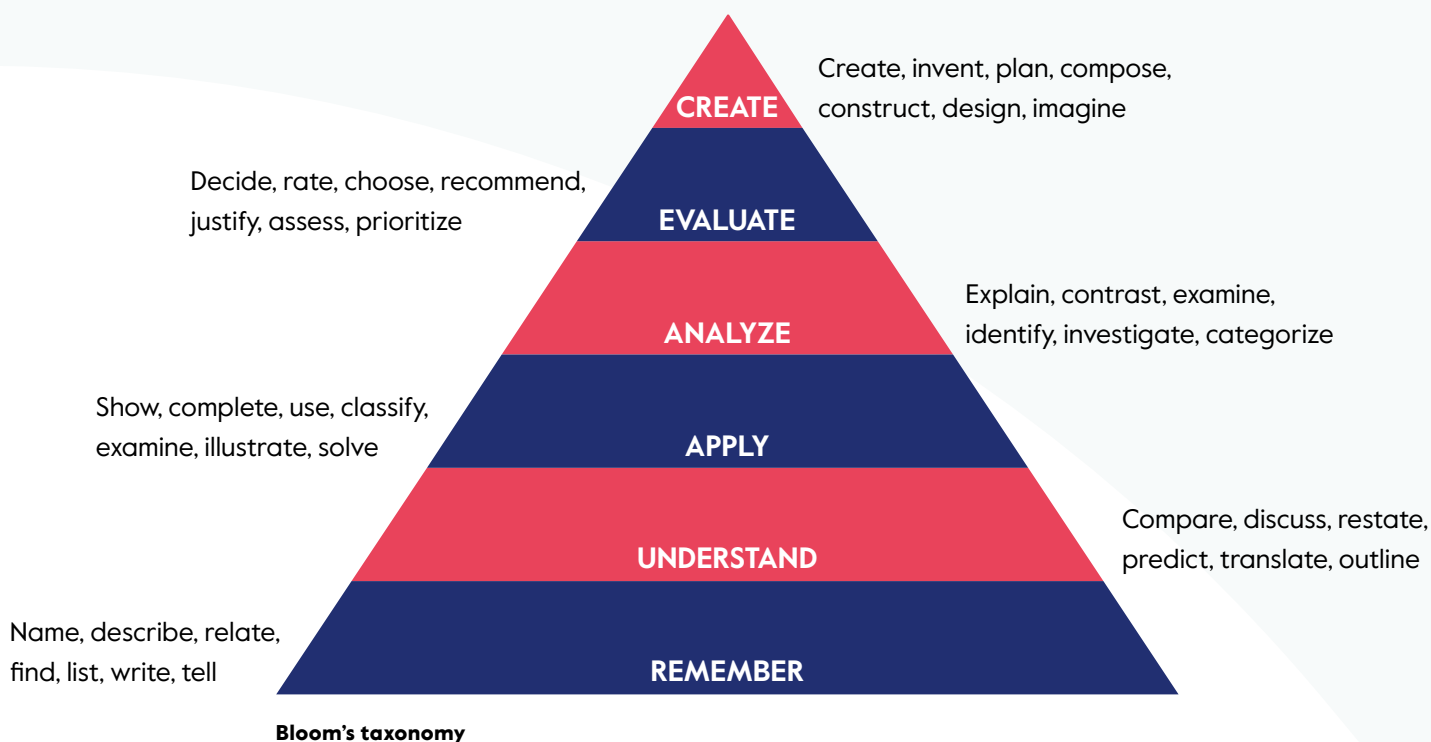
Choosing a topic

Students are more likely to engage with a task when the topic interests them and therefore, choosing the right topic is essential. Adult students often express the desire for topics that are contemporary, have real-world application, are relevant to their field of study or work, and address their personal interests from travel to hobbies and from politics to relationships. Asking students to suggest topics for classroom tasks is motivating and affirming for them. They will have greater interest and emotional investment in engaging in and completing a task if it has been based on an idea they proposed. This increases the chance of experiencing immersion and flow, as well. (For more about choosing topics, see 'Using learner-centred content in the classroom', another paper in this series.)

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Choosing a task type

A good task needs an objective as well as a sufficient level of challenge to interest and engage learners. To ensure the task contains a sufficient challenge, it is useful to look at Bloom's taxonomy of higher- and lower-order thinking skills. Lower-order thinking skills include remembering, understanding and applying information, whereas higher-order thinking skills require students to analyse and evaluate information and use it to create something new. Tasks usually contain several stages that require learners to use a variety of thinking skills. Below are five commonly used categories of tasks, which activate a combination of these skills. It should be noted that although discussions and debates are task types in themselves, discussion and opinion exchange also take place at various stages of the other task types.

1. Solve a problem: These tasks test learners' logic and include puzzles and problems. They have a single correct solution. For example, learners work together to solve a mystery.

2. Make a decision: Learners gather and share information in order to arrive at a decision. Although there are a number of possible outcomes, they work towards one, such as who gets the scholarship money or what activities would suit a particular group of people on a three-day trip to a popular tourist destination.

3. Create something: These collaborative tasks result in a product, for example, a poster, an advertisement, a class newspaper, a collectively composed story, or a set of survey results (Willis and Willis, 2007).

4. Share a personal experience: These tasks are based on the learners' own experiences and include storytelling, anecdotes and memories of the past (Willis and Willis, 2007).

Create, invent, plan, compose, construct, design, imagine

CREATE

Decide, rate, choose, recommend, justify, assess, prioritize

EVALUATE

ANALYZE

Explain, contrast, examine, identify, investigate, categorize

Show, complete, use, classify, examine, illustrate, solve

APPLY

UNDERSTAND

Compare, discuss, restate, predict, translate, outline

Name, describe, relate, find, list, write, tell

REMEMBER

Bloom's taxonomy

5. Discuss or debate a topic: These involve an exchange of opinions and ideas on various issues and topics, in which individuals or groups can come to independent conclusions and even defend their position.

When creating the specifics of a task, it is helpful to consider three sets of contrasting terms used to describe tasks. These are related to the language used in a given task, the task outcome and the student interaction required to reach that outcome.

Focused or unfocused

A focused task is designed with a particular linguistic feature in mind (Ellis, 2001), whether grammatical or lexical, and use of that feature is required in order to complete the task (Nunan, 2004). The language may not always be specified in the rubrics but it is implicit in the context. Other language may be brought in as well, of course. Most activities and tasks in coursebooks are focused. In an unfocused task, learners can use any language in order to complete the task (Nunan, 2004). Such tasks may include a planning stage, where students work together and consider what language they wish to use to achieve the task but linguistic features from preceding lessons are not prescribed or expected. Learners are free to make choices based on their existing linguistic resources and to experiment with new

language. As learners rise in level and have greater language resources at their disposal, it can be beneficial to use an increasing number of unfocused tasks.

Closed or open

A closed task has one correct answer or solution that learners know they must arrive at. Solving a mystery, matching several people with suitable jobs, and 'spot the difference' are closed tasks. In an open task, however, learners are aware that there is no predetermined correct solution. The outcome, therefore, is unpredictable. Such tasks include 'free conversation, a debate, ranking favourite leisure time activities, explaining how something works, and discussing and eventually choosing (individually or by consensus) a few items' (Lee, 2004: 11–12).

If the aim of teachers is to promote more student collaboration in terms of ideas, creativity, and language negotiation, they may prefer to use a larger proportion of convergent tasks.

Convergent or divergent

In a convergent task, learners work together towards a shared outcome. In a divergent task, no consensus is required and each individual may reach an independent conclusion or outcome. In a study of students performing a discussion task (divergent) and a problem-solving task (convergent), Duff (1985) found some interesting differences in student interaction patterns and language production. The discussion task led to longer turns, more complex discourse, and more extended discourse. The problem-solving task led to more turn-taking, a higher use of target language, and more questions as the learners negotiated meaning with each other. Although more research is needed, it seems to indicate that varying the types of task is beneficial to students, as they stimulate different linguistic production. However, if the aim of teachers is to promote more student collaboration in terms of ideas, creativity, and language negotiation, they may prefer to use a larger proportion of convergent tasks.

Building the stages of a task

Here are some practical suggestions for designing a successful immersive task.

Set goals

- Set a clear goal and be ready to inform students of the purpose of the task and the conditions for its success at the beginning (Ur, 2012).

- Set specific interim goals for different stages of the task so learners know exactly what they have to do along the way (Willis and Willis, 2007). For example, there may be stages for preparation, research, discussion, presentation and agreement. It is useful to give and check instructions at the beginning of each stage, especially when dealing with large classes.

- Define what the end product of the task should be, such as a final vote or decision, a list, a rating or ranking, a plan or a product. Plan the stages of the task so they lead students towards this outcome.

Consider the language needed for the task

- Ensure the challenge level of the task and the language level required to achieve the task are suitable for the class. Decide whether the task should recycle language from previous lessons.

- Build in time for students to familiarize themselves with the topic or problem and plan their language before they begin.

- Decide whether, or at which stage, you will scaffold language. This is sometimes done at the beginning to avoid disturbing flow, but it may result in students focusing on form rather than meaning during the task. 'Useful expressions' (usually sentence headers) are sometimes provided on the board or task sheet to assist certain stages (discussion, presentation) and students may use them if they wish.

Provide opportunities for learner autonomy

- Encourage guided internet research when useful for the task (Willis and Willis, 2007).

- Allow students to manage their own task so they can develop skills usually associated with the teacher, that is, topic-nomination, turn-allocation, focusing, summarizing and clarifying (Long and Porter, 1985).

- Inform students of how much time they have for the task, or particular stages of the task, so they can pace themselves and 'engage in cohesive and coherent sequences of utterances' rather than just hurried, discrete sentences (Long and Porter, 1985: 209).

Decide how to manage the task

- Use pair or group work (rather than whole-class discussion) to maximize learner talk and lower inhibitions. Use pair work at some stages and group or all-class work at other stages. Consider whether students should take on different roles in the task.

- Vary the pairs and groups: sometimes stronger and weaker students together, sometimes students of the same level together.

- Plan an extra task for fast finishers: a variation on the main task, a short reading text, a written summary of the task outcome, or a report on the steps they took to reach the outcome. Teachers could also send them to assist weaker students if both parties are willing.

- Provide an opportunity for task repetition to promote fluency and confidence. Re-match the groups or pairs so they have a fresh reason to communicate and listen.

- Plan feedback and reflection stages

- Provide supportive feedback on the task, highlighting successful collaboration and task achievement. Give feedback on useful words and phrases you heard during the task. Provide corrective feedback if desired, but use caution as too much can be discouraging.

- Include a reflection stage at the end, where students can evaluate their own experience and share it with the class. This can include thoughts about their fluency and linguistic resources, new language learned, present and future needs, task success and task enjoyment. You can take their reflections into account when designing future tasks.

(For more about planning time and repetition of tasks, see 'How much time should we give to speaking practice?' and for more about feedback, see 'Giving feedback on speaking', two of the other papers in this series.)

Planning a task

As mentioned above, the key to an immersive task is planning. For example, imagine that a teacher of a beginner's class wants to design a motivating task to practise the language from a previous lesson about music and music genres. First, she chooses a task type and thinks of a suitable task. In this case, she chooses a decision-making task: the students will work together to agree on a music playlist for a class party. The teacher thinks about the specifics of the task. She decides it will be a focused task because she wants and expects the students to recycle language from their previous lesson (different music genres as well as *music, playlist, band, singer, song, album*). It will be an open task because there is no pre-determined correct answer: the students are free to come up with their own choices for the playlist. She also decides that it will be a convergent task because this encourages more collaboration and discussion as the students work towards their shared outcome. The teacher then plans the stages of the task:

- Students familiarise themselves with the topic and task requirements, and plan what language they will use.

- Pairs discuss their musical tastes. They then prepare a mutually agreed list of choices (allow internet research for names of songs, singers, etc.).

- Pairs compare their lists with the class to see which choices they all have in common.

- Class agrees on a final selection of ten songs for the playlist.

The teacher feels confident that this task will be the right level for her class, that it will activate both lower-order thinking skills (remembering, understanding, applying) and higher-order thinking skills (analysing, evaluating, creating) and that it will engage her students. She knows that her students enjoy talking about music and that they will be enthusiastic about working on the task together. In other words, she has created an immersive task, a task which her students will genuinely be interested in completing and which will give them the feeling of having successfully achieved something in English.

Conclusion

As Lightbown and Spada said, 'The principal way that teachers can influence learners' motivation is by making the classroom a supportive environment in which students are stimulated, engaged in activities that are appropriate to their age, interests, and cultural backgrounds, and, most importantly, where students can experience success' (2006: 185).

Immersive tasks support learning, provide a safe environment for speaking, boost self-esteem and increase intrinsic motivation. They allow learners to engage in the kind of conversation and interaction patterns that take place in the 'real world' outside the classroom. As stated at the beginning of this paper, students want to feel that they are making progress in speaking. Successful immersive tasks, in which they experience magical moments of flow, can help them maximise and perceive that progress.

> "
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>
> Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 185

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Recommendations for further reading

The book by P. Ur is a comprehensive, clearly written guide to teaching English and is valuable for use in initial teaching training and as a reference guide for practising teachers. The other three works focus on task-based learning and the speaking skill.

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To cite this paper

Hendra, L. A. & Jones, C. (2018). *Motivating learners with immersive speaking tasks*: Part of the Cambridge Papers in ELT series. [pdf] Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
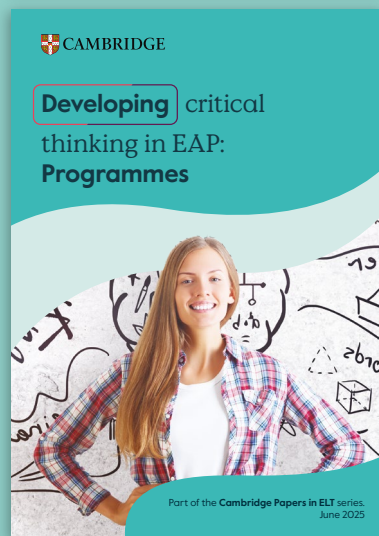
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