



## Motivating EFL Classroom Participation by Rewarding at a Language Center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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### **Abstract**

Organizing an effective English language classroom has become a concern to EFL teachers in contemporary life. In addition, this effectiveness is usually in line with students' interest and motivation, which makes students' engagement in learning. Without this, learning takes place by no way. One of the ways to motivate and interest students in learning is rewarding them. This current experimental study has been conducted on four EFL classes at the intermediate level of proficiency at AELS Language Center and reveals that rewards can develop on students' motivation to learn. The study also provides hints for successive research studies on this area.

**Keywords:** motivation, EFL classroom, participation, rewarding

### **INTRODUCTION**

As a result of the growing demand for learning English, the competition between language centers in Ho Chi Minh City became harsher. When applying the communicative approach, all the teachers of English at AELS Language Center hoped that students would be more interested in class activities. However, they immediately realized, from observation, their students stayed passive or only active on request. One explanation about the problem was that most students were used to learning by memorization, which, to a certain extent, enhanced their language slowly and just drew learners' interest. Another explanation was that teachers only took little notice of motivating students. Motivating students, to some degree, was supposed to help students participate positively in class activities. A lack of motivation would result in students' apathy, misbehavior and a poor learning environment for other more motivated students (Davy, Gantwerk, Martz & Vermire, 2008).

A quick feedback form was conducted to identify the bottom of the problem. Most students agreed that the textbook was interesting and teachers were fine. However, the class was quite boring. After a hard-working day at work or day-time school, students

wanted to be involved in an interesting and active learning environment. AELS management thought of a rewarding system to interest and to activate its students. Brophy (2004, pp. 3-4) believes the students with high motivation engage considerably and dynamically in the classroom. In order to motivate students, teachers need to reward students. Both positive and negative comments influence motivation, but research consistently indicates that students are more affected by positive feedback (Cashin, 1979 & Lucas, 1990). If a student is not intrinsically motivated to do well, using extrinsic motivators such as rewards or punishments can sometimes prod the student into action (Brophy, 1998). That is, rewarding is very important to teaching activities.

### Research Questions

- To what extent are students activated by rewarding?
- Are the students interested in rewards?

### Hypotheses

- Teachers do not really know how to reward students.
- Rewards can motivate and activate students considerably in the classroom.
- Students prefer material rewards.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Motivating students

Motivation refers to one's desire or eagerness to do something (Green & Smyser, 1995). A motivated person can be reaching for a long-term goal such as becoming a professional writer or a more short-term goal like learning how to learn a skill successfully. Motivation is different from personality and emotion. Personality invariably refers to more or less permanent characteristics of an individual's state of being shy, extrovert, and conscientious. As opposed to motivation, emotion refers to one's temporary feelings (Brophy, 2004, pp. 1-4).

### *The importance of motivation in students' academic performance and teacher's career*

In order to eliminate apathy in students, the teacher needs to motivate them since unless motivation is sustained and protected when action has commenced, the natural tendency to get tired or bored of the task and succumb to any attractive distractions will result in demotivation. Therefore, there should be a motivational repertoire (Thanasoulas, 2002). Students' enthusiasm, involvement, and willingness to participate affect the quality of class discussion as an opportunity for learning. Your challenge is to engage all students, keep them talking to each other about the same topic, and help them make insights into the material (Davis, 1993).

Students' motivation is also very important to the teacher since it provides an ideal environment for the teacher to work better as classroom atmosphere is important for

teacher motivation. If a teacher experiences that the classroom is motivated for optimal learning, he or she tends to participate more than expected in the process of teaching, administration, and the overall improvement of the school (Ofoegbu, 2004). In summary, motivation can be created by the teacher in the EFL classroom and when the teacher realizes that his or her EFL students are motivated, he or she can feel satisfied with the students' attainment, which leads to teacher's better participation in return. Whatever is done by a teacher has a motivational, formative influence on students (Dornyei, 2001: 120). According to Alison (1993), a fundamental element is to establish a relationship of mutual trust and respect with the learners, by means of talking with them on a personal level. This mutual trust could lead to academic interests. At any rate, enthusiastic teachers impart a sense of commitment to, and interest in, the subject matter, not only verbally but also non-verbally - cues that students take from them about how to behave. It stands to reason that a tense classroom climate can undermine learning and demotivate learners (MacIntyre, 1999 & Young, 1999).

In order to help our students get motivated and work dynamically on the assigned tasks, we need seven rules of motivation (Brewster & Fager, 2000, pp. 7-10). First, we need to set a major goal, but follow a path inasmuch as when students learn to succeed at mini goals, they will be motivated to change grand goals. Second, students need to finish what they have started as a half-finished project of no use to anyone and then they can develop the habit of finishing self-motivated projects. Third, the teacher should help students socialize with others of similar interest because mutual support is motivating. However, dependency on others for knowledge supports the habit of procrastination. In other words, students need to learn how to get the goal. Fifth, students also need to harmonize natural talent with interest that motivates. Natural talent creates motivation, motivation creates persistence, and persistence gets the job done. The teacher also needs to lead students to increasing knowledge of subjects that inspires. A very simple explanation for this is that the more we know about the subject, the more we want to learn about it. Eventually, failure and bouncing back are elements of motivation; therefore, students should take risk sometimes. Failure is a learning tool. No one has ever succeeded without at any worthwhile without a string of failures.

### ***Rewards as an effective tool for motivating students***

Academic rewards refer to sufficient incentives to support the acquisition and creative transformation of knowledge (Wright, 1987, p. 17). In a context where students prove disengaged from the process of learning and consequently failed to learn much from it. Rewards and privileges are great motivational tools for hard work. Teachers can use a variety of them to encourage student participation (Richard, 2006 & Turner & Curran, 2006). The explanation is rewards, as a form of external motivation, can supplement the internal drive to assist students in achieving their goals as rewards appeal to them and in turn promote excellence (Bafile, 2003; Cotton, 1995 & Cowell & Butler, 1987). Although there is no clear correlation between teachers' incentives and students' performance, the means other than grades to encourage and reward participation can be verbal appraisals of good points, acknowledgment of valued contributions, or even

written notes of students' great participation on the bulletin. As a general rule, positively reinforcing good behavior or high achievement is far more effective than punishing bad behavior or low achievement (Lashway, 2001 & Hertenstein, 1991). However, rewards need to be used carefully, since even rewards can have an adverse impact on subsequent motivation. Deci and his associates (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) have put forward a cognitive evaluation theory as part of their self-determination theory to explain the reduction of intrinsic motivation by extrinsic rewards. In *Punished by Rewards*, Alfie Kohn (1987) argues that rewarding students for activities that are intrinsically motivating can decrease their motivation to engage in those activities in the future.

Teachers should use rewards only when they realize that their students are not intrinsically motivated. For most people there is also some satisfaction in rewards which are contingent upon performance in the task. The balance of these intrinsic and extrinsic sources of satisfaction varies from one person to another and between different situations. Some people indeed are highly motivated by both intrinsic interest and extrinsic rewards (Beswick, 2007). How extrinsic rewards affect intrinsic motivation obviously has many implications for the management of incentives for study where both extrinsic rewards and intrinsic motivation are very often found together inasmuch as extrinsic rewards trigger intrinsic motivation if they are used properly (Beswick, 2004, 2007). The feeling of satisfaction as a result of receiving a reward is a significant factor in reinforcing achievement behavior, which renders satisfaction a major component of motivation. Motivational strategies aiming at increasing learner satisfaction usually focus on allowing students to display their work, stimulating them to be proud of themselves and celebrate success (Covington, 1999, p. 127). Therefore, the teacher should reward students in a way that students highly evaluate what is offered to them as a compliment or a reward for what they have done (Brophy, 1998).

In terms of social cognition, Huitt (2001) believes that rewards can bring out external motivation which in turn generates operant conditioning. This is a learning process in which a specific behavior appears as a result of being affected by an instrument, commonly a reward. Students can be proud of themselves because they stand out in the classroom. Brophy (1998, p.1) found that teachers' rewarding can be successful following these strategies. First, the teacher needs to apply rewards as incentives for meeting performance standards on tasks or skills that require a great deal of practice or drill and repetition rather than as primary incentives to do things that teachers hope will be intrinsically motivating for the student. Second, rewards can act as motivators only for those students who believe that they have a chance to earn the rewards if they put forth reasonable efforts. Third, rewards are effective only when students value the reward. Fourth, rewards are most effective when they are delivered in ways that provide students with informative feedback about their performance. Fifth, it is important to explain the importance of learning, performance, and improvement, and use the incentives as markers for mastering key concepts or improving skills, rather than as the entire point of doing the work. Sixth, the teacher should be aware of some harmful things because students may decrease their performance and intrinsic

motivation when students are too dependent on rewards. Seventh, rewards are presented in ways that call a great deal of attention to them in front of the rest of the students. This can be very embarrassing for the student who receives the award. Eighth, rewards are given for mere participation in an activity rather than contingent on achieving specific goals. Ninth, rewards are artificially tied to the behaviors as control devices rather than being natural outcomes of the behaviors. Ideally, if teachers can design a system where a behavior is naturally reinforced, they will have the best long-term outcomes (Brophy, 1998, p.1).

### **Student engagement**

Students' engagement with class activities can be categorized into three main types: cognitive engagement, behavioral engagement and emotional engagement, which play a crucial role in preventing academic failure, improving language skills and abilities, and boosting outcomes. The cognitive engagement refers to students' investment in their learning owing to motivation and self-regulation. Behavioral engagement, differently, can be reflected via students' participation in education at school. Emotional engagement can be measured by students' reactions in the classroom. These three engagement constructs are interrelated (Fredrick, McColsky, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse & Mooney, 2011).

Cognitive engagement can be measured by students' active answering, passive answering and question raising. Behavioral disengagement is identified by erratic or no attendance, poor attainment, lack of interest in school or intention to leave, negative interaction with peers, and negative behavioral problems such as aggression, violence or social withdrawal. Emotional engagement is measured through students' sense of belonging to the community (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; Office of Communities Commission for Children and Young People, 2011; Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2009 & Fredericks and McColskey, 2012).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

Four 10-week classes of intermediate-level communicative English at AELS and 4 teachers responsible for these classes were involved in the study. These four classes, meeting three times a week with 90 minutes each time, are hereby labeled CE4A, CE4B, CE4C and CE4D, with 15-20 Vietnamese students of 18-30 years old each, over 50% of whom came from places other than Ho Chi Minh City. This range of class size is a good condition for teaching conversational English (Kelen, 2000). The four teachers were chosen fundamentally for their regular commitment with the students at this level. Their experience of teaching would help the researcher to participate the study easily. Especially, these teachers did not have any distinguished relationship with any of the students they were planned to teach.

## Instruments

### *Questionnaires, observation checklists and rewards*

Questionnaires on students' motivation were delivered to the students to determine their level of motivation at the beginning and end of the course. Students' interaction improvement during the course was determined by camera watching (a camera already installed in each classroom) and observation checklists were used to jot down students' participation. The rewards applied at AELS included notebooks, textbooks, comic books and CDs for learning English and pens and pencils.

Questionnaire 1 consists of 15 questions followed by 4 choices each marked (a), (b), (c) and (d) showing the lowest level to the highest level of motivation respectively. The level of motivation was determined by the total score achieved: 15 – 30: low motivation; 31 – 45: moderate motivation; 46 – 60: high motivation.

### **The treatment**

The four classes were divided into two main groups: controlled and experimental. The treatment of rewards was applied to Classes CE4A and CE4B at Campus 1 in District 3, Ho Chi Minh City and Classes CE4C and CE4D at Campus 2 in Binh Thanh District were controlled, receiving no rewards for their performance. This present study was conducted in four phases:

This present study was conducted in four phases. In phase 1, a questionnaire was delivered to the four intended classes to determine their levels of motivation prior to the study. In phase 2, the researcher had collaborative work with the involved teachers. A training course in the rewarding system was introduced to ensure that the four teachers would perform the lessons the same way. There was a meeting every week to discuss how the next lessons would be done in the following week. In phase 4, classroom observation was done via the installed cameras to measure students' dynamism in the classroom. The researcher observed moments of the class activities and took notes in the observation checklis by Frohlich and Spada (1995). In phase 4, discussions with participants, including both the teachers and students, were done and a quick feedback form was delivered to students to collect their comments on the rewarding system. The rewarding scheme applied to the students was both consistent and inconsistent. Consistent rewarding is described as below:

Student's participation	Reward
Voluntary answer/ raised question	Compliment at time
3 times volunteered per session	Praise to the class/ a star merit
Three students with most active participation of the week	Nomination on the school bulletin

Inconsistent rewards were given for each task. These rewards reduced during the course to leave time for generating intrinsic motivation.

**Table 1.** Rewarding Scheme

<b>Student's participation</b>	<b>Reward</b>
<b>Week 1-4</b>	
Completing a task earliest with a correct/good answer	a CD for each student
Most active student of the week	a notebook
Most active student of the month	a textbook for the course
<b>Week 5-7</b>	
Completing a task earliest with a correct/good answer	a pen/pencil for each student
Most active students of the month	a notebook/ comic book
<b>Week 8-10</b>	
Most active student of the week	a pack of pencils
Three most active student of the course	a certificate of merit/ set of books for the next course, nomination on the school bulletin

The consistent rewards were introduced at the beginning of the course and the inconsistent rewards were introduced every four weeks and whenever the class started.

## **FINDINGS AND DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Teachers' feedback**

Following the implementation of the research, the Chairman of the Training Department of AELS Language Center said "I have recognized a progressive improvement in students' interest in learning English at AELS since awards began to be applied. In class, as observed, students have participated dynamically". Agreeing this, one of the teachers involved in the research added "Rewarding students proves to be successful in helping my students contribute to the class activities. They worked very enthusiastically in order to deserve the awards". However, another teacher, worried about whether the rewarding system could be appropriate for kids, responded "Rewarding students regularly at the beginning and then reducing the frequency of rewards motivates students to make great contributions in class. However, I am worrying whether this reward system is suitable for kids because kids generally do not, psychologically speaking, maintain their motivation so long". A further teacher answered "Extrinsic motivation can produce intrinsic motivation if conducted in the proper manner. My students now are higher motivated than they were before the research. Nevertheless, extrinsic motivation should be used only when students have low motivation or no motivation at all". The other 2 teachers commented their students gradually formed the habit of raising questions when they had any and at the end of the research they were more competitive, as compared to their class performance at the start, with the other students in class to meet the teacher's expectations.

### **Students' feedback**

Besides getting teachers' feedback, an interview with students was also conducted. 5 students (1 from each class) were selected randomly for interview and expressed their ideas freely about the reward system that they had witnessed in class. The interview, in Vietnamese, started with demographic questions and background questions in order to

help the students feel confident and comfortable to provide as accurate information as possible. Huyen, a student involved in the research, revealed “I think I like the applied rewards. My class is livelier”. Tam said “I think rewarding is a good way to motivate students. It should be done every two weeks”. Tai answered rewards should not be delivered periodically but unpredictably so that students receive them unexpectedly and surprisingly, as Hanreddy and Whalley state “Surprises can be nice in everyday life. They can help people remember surprising events longer” (Haneddy & Whalley, 2007). Quay replied he was worried about the effectiveness of rewards: “If rewards are delivered frequently, students may just focus on how to get the rewards, which may negatively impact their academic performances when rewards are no longer offered”. Huong expressed she wanted to sign up for a course for her 10-year-old sister and asked whether the reward system was also applied to children programs at AELS 2 as her sister had low motivation to learn English and rewards may have been helpful.

### Students’ motivation

Students’ engagement in learning can be evaluated through such signs as raising questions, responding to questions, paying attention, interacting with other students, volunteering, participating in group discussion and being on tasks. Student engagement can, therefore, be measured through teachers’ reports, students’ self-assessment and observation (Fredrick, McColsky, Meli, Mordica, Montrosse & Mooney, 2011).

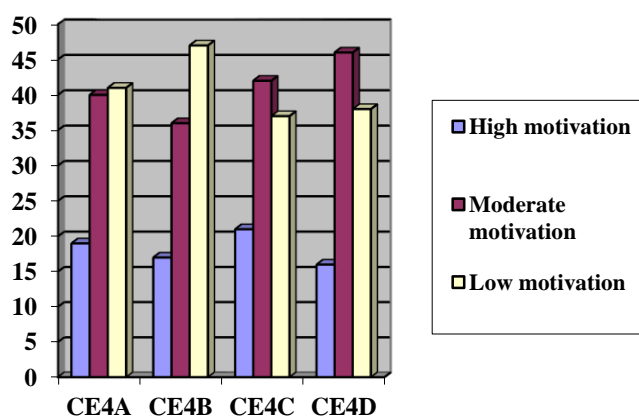
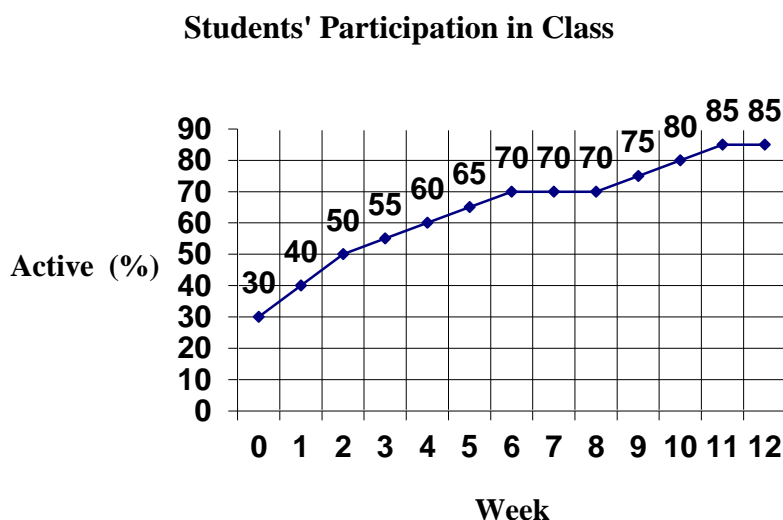


Figure 1. Students’ Motivation before the Study

Students’ participation in class was also necessary part of the research. It helped to find out whether students were more active due to the reward system. The following data were based on the observation checklists.





**Figure 2.** Students' participation in class

During the research implementation, students participated more actively. Administrators of AELS 2, who observed the 5 classes once a month and kept track of the research progress, remarked on the students' participation. At the onset of the research, students had little involvement in class, just about 30% of the entire class time (reflected by the Director of Studies of AELS Center). At this time, most of the class activities were done by the teacher and even though the teacher asked questions, students did not answer. During the research, students' involvement in class improved significantly, as the Chairman of the Training Department noted "When rewards began to be applied, students initiated to be more active in class. Even when the teachers did not ask them, students raised questions. As they were unclear about a certain point in the lecture, they immediately asked the teacher or their classmates for help". A teacher involved in the study, added "I recognized students' happiness through their facial expressions when they received rewards".

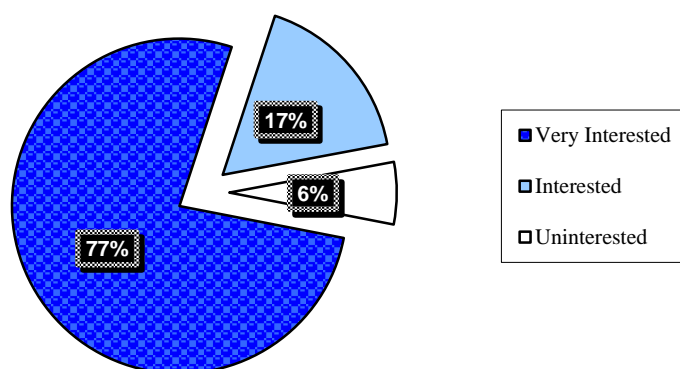
From the sixth week to the eighth week of the research, the students did not show a development in their activeness. Collection of feedback was immediately conducted with 25 students selected randomly, and they responded the applied rewards were new at the beginning, which first triggered competition between students; nevertheless, later the applied rewards were just the same. In other words, the four types of rewards were offered repeatedly. They also noted that, at that time, they were busy preparing for their mid-term test at their high school or university; as a result, they felt so tired that they could not concentrate more on learning at the center. Immediately, the feedback was reported to the school board and the owner of AELS Center, after considering carefully, decided to offer a discount of 10% of the school fee to those who show dynamic performance and arouse their classmates' activeness in class as well. This discount would be applied when they signed up for the next course. (AELS Center often offers a discount of 5% to those who register for the next course. In other words, students with positive attitudes towards learning received an additional 5% when signing up for the next course). This idea is supported by Cotton, Falvey, and Kent (2004), in *Market Leader*, who say the promotion system to clients should be changed

regularly to attract their attention as well as to avoid their indifference of what is offered in the promotion scheme. At the turn of the eighth week, the students began once again to be more dynamic as chronicled in the observation checklists by the observers. As asked, students stated they were interested in a further 5% discount as a reward although they had not yet finished their exams at their high school or university.

**Table 2.** Number of volunteers in classroom

	Week										
Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
CE4A	2	8	8	12	14	4	10	12	14	20	18
CE4B	3	7	9	11	14	5	10	11	15	18	17
CE4C	2	2	3	2	4	2	4	3	4	6	5
CE4D	2	2	2	4	4	3	3	4	4	4	5

As discussed in the research implementation, a survey on students’ attitudes towards the reward system was conducted (appendix 2). The data were collected and shown as follows:



**Figure 3.** Students’ attitudes towards the rewarding system

77% of the students were very interested in receiving the rewards and thought the applied rewarding system was very good. 17% of the students thought the rewarding system was interesting while a minority (6%) were uninterested in the applied rewards.

### CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Through the content of this current study, teachers as well as students realize more about the importance of extrinsic motivation in enhancing students’ behaviors. Thanks to the literature review and the findings, rewarding, as a means of extrinsic motivation, can help motivate students at AELS School to participate in classroom activities more dynamically. This current study also found that the success of a rewarding system may be affected by different classroom activities and the rewards teachers have used. Therefore, teachers should strictly follow rules of motivation and skillfully apply tips of rewarding while applying any rewarding system in their classes. During the

implementation, some strengths and weaknesses of the thesis have been found as follows.

### **Strengths**

The four classes involved in the research were taken charge of by the researcher. Therefore, he understood his students quite well. First, responsible for their study for two months ahead of the thesis implementation, he realized that his students were quite passive in classroom activities. Second, when designing the rewarding system, he took advantage of the time he had been with his students to use the rewards he thought they liked. The relationship between the teacher and his students was good enough for them to support the thesis with enthusiasm. It means that when the teacher handed the questionnaire over to them, they were willing to give their answers. These factors contributed a great deal of assistance to the questionnaire's reliable answers as well as the satisfactory result of the study. Being a teacher at AELS Language Center three years before the research were implemented, the researcher had a good chance to get precious experience in practical teaching while pursuing his appropriate major at Hong Bang university. The researcher accordingly had good relationship with other teachers at AELS School. Invaluable advice and support from these coworkers helped him achieve his goal more effectively.

### **Weaknesses**

The scope of this study was quite small and limited. At AELS School, there were thirty-five students at the same level participating in the survey. Furthermore, these students have the same purpose of getting high score in TOEIC. However, there are still other courses beside TOEIC. For example, there are a great number of students who are studying general English there. It is true that the thesis did not cover students in all courses at this language center. However hard the researcher tried, the thesis still has its own mistakes and weaknesses. Hopefully, in the near future, other research papers on extrinsic motivation in general and rewarding in particular will be implemented with more success. The researcher also hopes that the recommendations in this thesis partly help improve English teaching and studying for EFL students not only at AELS but also at many other language centers.

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