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著者	Estes-Dotani, William Earl
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# DISTRACTIONS AND MOTIVATIONAL INFLUENCING IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

William Earl Estes-Dotani

‘The first step in knowing is to locate the problems which need solutions.’ — John Dewey.

Considering the Japanese EFL University student’s daily life environment, where most of his or her functions and exposures are usually experienced in the Japanese language, the EFL classroom is a primary and vitally important place for students to learn and acquire English knowledge and application usage skills.

The EFL classroom should give a student an awareness of their English learning needs and be a place where the student can use English functionally by using maximum time on task learning applications procedures.

The EFL teacher needs to be aware that student exposure to English, in their classroom, is of most importance, since it is the primary place where English can be isolated for student learning benefits. In this regard the teacher must be mindful to use classroom time efficiently in preparing students for their learning tasks, and for that of learning applications and evaluations.

Student pre-knowledge, attentiveness, learning needs appreciation of lesson materials, response time, and other factors all fall within a teacher’s assessment of presentation rate, materials selection, and the criteria used to evaluate student learning performance. Maximizing

the amount of knowledge students can obtain and retain, and getting students to show their knowledge through various skill applications, is the primary learning objective of any methodology the teacher employs.

Using the allotted classroom time efficiently and effectively is a problem for the teacher. In my lessons, I usually use a clock to set time limitations for student time on task (TOT) activities. As my approach is eclectic, giving students many general tasks to perform, I use a spherical learning approach. By monitoring student performance, I can see where students are having learning problems and I can always incorporate a specific learning need in any lesson. The context of a learning need situation associated with that of other learning stimuli causes such learning to be that of elaborate rehearsal instead of maintenance rehearsal.

Using TOT, I believe, is a must for using classroom time efficiently. A teacher needs to make on the spot assessments of student pre-knowledge. A teacher should spend only minimum time giving instructions. When he or she puts students to work on a task, student response will show understanding levels. The teacher can then decide whether more explanation is needed, or work with the handful of students who are having problems. When I go back over a previous lesson, after explaining, I purposefully make mistakes in writing on the blackboard. Usually a student will notice my mistake. This helps all of the students get the meaning of that they are learning. This efficiently helps in reducing the time needed for explanations. Understanding brings competence and competence brings success, which helps in learning motivation.

Motivation is a key element in the learning process. It means the student is making efforts towards continuation of growth in learning abilities. Retention and attainment of learning are the natural by-

products of motivation. Motivation is usually observable. It is a behavioral response that welcomes self-reliance influenced by positive relationships with others, and that of his environment. Motivation is usually defined as being 'intrinsic' or 'extrinsic'. Simply defined: Intrinsic motivation is shown through the desire to find information and solutions to problems. Extrinsic motivation is that of doing or learning as a means to an end.

Students are inclined towards intrinsic motivation when they see clearly defined purpose of self-worth and benefit in their learning. I like to call this learning appreciation for the student is clearly expressing satisfaction in their self learning progresses. Extrinsic motivation is often shown by students making concerted efforts to do well on a test or by focusing most of their efforts towards learning a specific they believe will help them in the future. Both of these motivations can be positively or negatively influenced by the classroom environment. The teacher's role in student learning, and that of motivational continuity is based on many factors, including how the teacher reacts to, and controls classroom learning distractions. 'Even what you do remember may not be of maximum value if you have not thought about how it can be applied in a classroom'. (Biehler/Snowman p.40).

The physical environment of the classroom can be a positive effective learning place or it can be an uncomfortable place that dampens student learning motivations. A teacher's role is not just that of instruction. A teacher should make every effort possible to provide a positive classroom learning environment.

Room temperature is often discomforting in the summer and winter seasons in Japan. Not all classrooms have temperature regulating systems. The teacher should be aware that classroom temperature can negatively affect student learning and seek ways to improve the

situation. Universities vary in policy concerning classroom use, so it is best, if possible, to understand school policy before seeking solutions. Whenever possible, a teacher should always visit the classroom prior to his lesson to assess environmental conditions. A teacher could open or close windows. He could deem classroom temperatures unsuitable for lessons. In this case, he could make an administrative request for a temporary classroom change, or he could change his lesson plans having students go to the library for fact finding or research.

Last July, two of my students left my classroom about twenty minutes after class had started. I later contacted them. They told me that the classroom temperature was so hot that it made them feel sick. I understood their feelings. I had a high absentee rate in my classes that day. I think that if the students know the teacher is aware of the temperature situation in the classroom, and they have faith and trust in the teacher that he or she will do everything possible to change the circumstance, then the student will be apt not to absent themselves from the class. Student motivation to learn and efficient use of classroom time for learning, has needs of basic comforts the teacher must be aware of. The state of the body governs the state of the mind.

Non-behavioral disruptions are too often a factor that distracts student attention from learning. ‘...attention can serve two purposes: a general monitoring of the environment and a selective focusing on specific items. The purpose of monitoring is to detect change. When the value of these stimuli changes, (the lights flicker or someone knocks on the door, the aroma of sirloin steak fills the air), you notice them. This is usually what we mean by being distracted.’ (Biehler/Snowman pp.425-6). Noise is a common distraction. Students in the hallways, and students in adjoining teacherless classrooms are often so noisy that you can see your students are losing their ability to focus on the

specifics of their lesson. In every single school I have taught at in Japan, this has been a constant problem. The only solution I have found to be effective is to momentarily stop the lesson, step into the hallway, asking the students to be quiet. Most students comply.

Another distraction is having students opening your door peering inside looking for friends, looking for an empty classroom for their studies, or looking for a place to eat their lunch. A solution would be to put a **Do Not Disturb** sign on your classroom door each time you conduct lessons. Even with a solution, the distraction has caused a loss of learning time, which compounds the fact that the teacher must take time to refocus students towards the specifics being learned preceding the distraction.

There are many possible distractions arresting student attention from outside of the classroom that the teacher has little or no control for a corrective response. Abnormal weather, odors, music that can be heard from other buildings and other distractions should be expected. The teacher needs to take a moment of time and make a comment about the distraction, if he sees that it is consuming student interests. '...teachers who prove to their students that they know what is going on in a classroom usually have fewer disciplinary problems than teachers who appear to be unaware of incipient disruptions.' (Biehler/Snowman p.605).

In class distractions can also be causes of student inattentiveness. I will give two examples. A few years ago I had put posters of Canada on my classroom walls. An Economics teacher also used this classroom. He complained that the posters were distracting to his students. I understand his point. Anything out of place or unusual to the expected normalcy of the classroom environment can, and often does, distract student attention. By simply putting an object back to its proper

place, or removing a distracting object from view is an easy solution. Sameness is a non-distractor.

The second point concerns that of classroom equipment failure, or teacher inability to use classroom equipment properly. A teacher should check all classroom equipment, or, at least, familiarize himself with its use before he begins class. Even so, there is always the possibility of a mechanical breakdown, or complications arising. Getting flustered over a mechanical problem does nothing to help class learning. A teacher needs to exude confidence to maintain the learning focus and class discipline in this situation. A teacher should have a contingency lesson plan ready, as a transition, to keep the students learning tasked focused. ‘...very effective teachers clearly demonstrate that they have thought about classroom procedures ahead of time.’ (Biehler/Snowman p.611)

Even the most aware teacher will find factors of negative distractions that are outside of his ability to control. You cannot anticipate every problem. A teacher can be aware and learn from past experiences how to limit any such damaging impact to student attentiveness. For students to express learning motivation, they need continuity in their learning experiences. A teacher needs to minimize all possible classroom distractions to maximize continuity in student learning. In regards to all I have said; the wisdom of an ancient Confucian prayer: ‘Give me the strength to change what can be changed, the courage to accept what cannot be changed, and the wisdom to tell one from the other.’

**Keywords:** *Attentiveness; Efficient use of classroom time; distractions; learning appreciation; motivational continuity in learning.*

## **Bibliography**

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