

5 Unorthodox Techniques for Motivating Learners

by [Patricia Hart](#)

If you agree that occasionally your classroom situation requires out-of-the-box techniques for lowering stress, boredom, and any other negative emotions, read on. Below are a few tips I have learned from more than 13 years of teaching all ages—from children to university and adults—with Latin American, South African, Asian, and Middle Eastern students.

1. Humor

Assign a joke for homework. Students must research, write, and memorize their joke, and tell it to the class the next day. Good examples of jokes to inspire learners include:

- What's black and white and read/red all over? (A newspaper/a zebra with a sunburn)
- Why is 6 afraid of 7? (Because 7 "ate/8" 9)
- Did you hear the latest news about chocolate? (It makes your clothes shrink)

Neurological studies show that smiling lowers affective barriers when people communicate and interact. Even fake smiles (from bad jokes) can do the trick, as the muscles involved in smiling release beta endorphins, biochemicals that create good moods (SkillsYouNeed.com, 2014).

An added bonus is that it kicks off class with a truly learner-centered hook to reel in attention, and it provides plenty of teachable moments with word plays.

2. Yoga-ish Moments of Meditation

Stress about grades, exhaustion from studying, feelings of homesickness, bad weather, and a plethora of other factors can create dull days in any class. So, just when students seem ready to drop out, drop kick their books, or drop the ball on any progress made in class, stop the class.

Ask them to stand up, stretch up for a count of three while breathing in, and then down for three while exhaling. Repeat three times, saying "in with good feeling...out with the bad." Next, have everyone roll their heads, shake out arms, hands, legs, and feet. Then sit and let all their negative thoughts leave and be replaced with feelings of peace. You can also have them visualize having successfully completed a task or goal.

Granted, this technique is a bit flaky, but it has worked in all cultures, and every age I have worked with so far.

3. Role Reversal

There may be times that you feel you have tried every possible way to explain a difficult concept, such as a challenging grammar point, to the class, but a few students still seem to be unable to grasp the gist of it, no matter what. A great trick is to ask a student who has mastered the concept to be the honorary teacher. Give the student a marker to write on the whiteboard, or

whatever other educational tools he or she may need. Then sit down with the students at a desk, and act like a student. Ask basic questions—for details, clarification, and so on—ask all the questions you recall students asking you when previously teaching the subject matter. If you pretend to be particularly challenged with respect to comprehending the content, the material will be reinforced even more strongly for the entire class. This is because the “teacher” will need to repeat, clarify, and restate with other explanations the same information, and students will be exposed to a variety of ways to analyze and understand.

For a little laugh to wrap up this activity, do something you find annoying in classes—such as pulling out your cell phone and text messaging, or asking over and over again if you need to know it for a test or final exam.

4. Empower With Empathy

Many who teach the English language have (a) been students and (b) had both good and bad teachers. The reason we had good or bad teachers is probably partly due to the fact that we thought those teachers thought we were good or bad students: exceptionally good at something we were indubitably exceptional in, or not as good at something as we *knew* we were good at, given half a chance with a *good and caring* teacher who *liked* students or showed a bit of understanding. It helps, when facing overly assertive or demotivated students, to take a moment and remember all this.

By taking just 15 minutes outside of class to ask how we can help them—with studies or with getting acclimatized to life away from home—we build a positive relationship and establish some comfort and reassurance for another human being. This opens up a more trusting line of communication—in English. It can lower affective barriers to both teaching and learning, and if students feel that you are being unfair, the positive reinforcement and constructive feedback allays these insecurities and doubts.

Asking what activities the student feels would benefit him or her better in class helps teachers come up with some great ideas for raising student motivation in classes. When learners are asked for feedback about how classes could be improved, it is a sign of mutual respect; students at first seem caught off guard with the question, and then flattered. Even on days when I feel stressed out about meetings, deadlines, and other duties, if a student wants to talk, or if there is reason it seems very important to talk with a student outside of class, I make the time. The payoff is that the hours and days I spend working in situations with them are far more pleasant and positive. (Well, okay, and perhaps also a more positive course evaluation.)

Sweet treats—cookies or candies—work well too. I keep a stash in my drawer for students who meet with me about changing a grade on a test, with a special reserve of good chocolates for when I don’t change the grade.

5. Play With Power

By the second week of classes, it should become apparent if some students are assertive to the point of being inappropriate (i.e., a bully); are disruptive and breaking all class rules for punctuality, mutual respect, or cell phones; or are demotivated to the point of setting up a cot for naps in class.

These are the students who need to be assigned the role of class captain, enforcing rules, reminding students to speak in English, put away cell phones, say “please” and “thank you” when asking and receiving something, wait their turn, and so forth. This little trick motivates the uninspired to pay attention to what is happening in the learning environment, meaning they also pay attention to what you are teaching. It makes the rebel feel like last of the girl or boy scouts. It feeds the power hungry the fuel they crave.

Before assigning these roles to the classroom cast of characters, it is helpful to set the classroom stage, with a learner generated “constitution.” In the first class session, divide the class into groups of three. Give each group butcher paper and markers. Tell them to imagine that they are teachers. What rules would make an ideal learning environment?

After each group explains their rules to the class, ask student to think of consequences for breaking the rules. Examples could be singing a song if late, leaving class without being able to make up a test if caught cheating, or even (depending on student age) buying pizza for the whole class if they are caught using their cell phone a certain number of times.

The five activities listed above are mere suggestions—they have worked in my classes here in America as well as in many other countries. They create a positive, proactive, peaceful learning environment. But they may not be for everyone. I do wish that if any readers try them, their classes turn out to be wonderful experiences for them, as well.

Reference

SkillsYouNeed.com. (2014). Improving Communication - Developing Effective Communication Skills. Retrieved from <http://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/barriers-communication.html>

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