

The Good Guy Greg Guide to Motivating Language Learners

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## **Introduction**

*Why isn't he coming to class?*

*Why does she come to class and not do anything?*

*Why is he so confident of passing when he's done so little work?*

*Why does she think she'll fail when she's working so hard?*

*Why do they spend so much time talking about IELTS when this is a TOEFL preparation course?*

*Does he even want to be in this room?*

*It feels like she's deliberately trying to fail this course... why would that be?*

Do any of the above questions look familiar to you? How many of them have you uttered yourself? Do you find from time to time that you are utterly perplexed by a student's complete lack of interest in your marvelously prepared classes? Well, it's time for you to take a chill pill and understand that there is always a good reason why a given student is not motivated to perform to their peak in your class. It might not always be an obvious reason, but it is invariably a good one.

Occasionally in life, you get to kill two birds with one stone. When that happens with an e-book like this, it's an absolute joy, I can tell you. In this instance, I'm part of a task group looking into what motivates our learners, and I'm doubling up on the use of some of my initial findings in this here collection of chapters. As you read through the theories I discuss, I'd like you to consider the cases of demotivated students you've encountered in the past and think if their situation is more understandable when you put it in the context of what the research says.

This book is ostensibly split down the middle. In part one I look at many of the contemporary theories of motivation, with questions to help reflect on instances when you've encountered students who exhibited related motivational problems. In part two I present a series of scenarios that revolve around our unlikely teacher hero: Good Guy Greg. Greg helps us work through issues and leads us towards practical techniques for solving the motivational issues we may encounter.

## **1. Issue one: Do I really expect to pass this course?**

‘Expectancy-value theory’ by Brophy (1999) and Eccles & Wigfield (1995)

Key components: The expectancy of success / The value attached to that success

- The two key factors which influence the motivation to perform are a person’s expectancy to succeed and the value they place on having succeeded in doing that particular task.
- A person will be more highly motivated when both of these are developed.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

To start off, do our students expect to pass the course? What is it worth to them if they do pass the course?

Is there any other course of action (by which I could mean any other course) which can deliver the same outcome?

Could they expect, rightly or wrongly, to pass a different course more easily?

Is it unreasonable to expect them to attach greatest value to the course of action that will most likely be successful for them?

## **2. Issue two: Is it really failing if I never tried in the first place?**

‘Achievement motivation theory’ by Atkinson & Raynor (1974)

Key components: The expectancy of success / Need for Achievement / Fear of failure

- Achievement motivation is determined by conflicting approach and avoidance tendencies.
- Positive influences include the expectancy of success, the incentive values of successful completion and a need for achievement.
- Negative influences the expectancy of failure, the incentive to avoid failure and the fear of failure.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

Are the fear of failure and the need for success leading our students to alternatives which offer (perceivably higher) chances of success?

Are the incentives to avoid failure so great that they dare not risk trying to succeed?

### **3. Issue three: I don't believe I have it in me to do this**

'Self-efficacy theory' by Bandura (1997)

Key components: Perceived self-efficacy

- Self-efficacy concerns a person's assessment of their ability to carry out a given task.
- Consequently, their sense of efficacy will influence the choice of task they choose to carry out, as well as the amount of effort they put in and the level of persistence displayed.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

Do they think that they have it in themselves to fulfill the requirements of the course?

#### **4. Issue four: If I fail, it will be because of my teacher and not my lack of effort**

‘Attribution theory’ by Weiner (1992)

Key components: Attributions about past successes and failures

- Causal attributions are a person’s explanations as to why past successes and failures occurred, and these have consequences on the way they initiate future actions.
- Most commonly, people attribute failure to a lack of ability on their part, rather than to insufficient effort.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

Do they understand why they’ve passed or failed in the past?

To what extent do they equate success to effort rather than ability?

## **5. Issue five: It doesn't matter if I fail when I didn't even try in the first place**

'Self-worth theory' by Covington (1998)

Key components: Perceived self-worth

- People are naturally inclined to behave in ways that enhance their feelings of personal value and worth.
- If anything threatens these perceptions, the resultant face-saving behavior may manifest itself in many unique ways.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

Is it better to not try than to try and fail?

## **6. Issue six: I have no idea what I'm doing or where my end point is!**

'Goal setting theory' by Locke & Latham (1990)

Key components: Goal properties include specificity, difficulty and commitment

- The driving cause of human activity is purpose. So, for any action to take place, goals must both be set and pursued by choice.
- If an individual is committed to the goal, the goal needs to be specific and sufficiently difficult to lead to the highest level of performance.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

Is the course too difficult (or easy)?

Do they have a clear idea of where they're heading?

Are they committed to their goals?



## **7. Issue seven: I've never had to do anything like this before and I don't know where to start**

'Goal orientation theory' by Ames (1992)

Key components: Mastery goals and performance goals

- Mastery goals focus on the learning of content.
- Performance goals focus on demonstrating ability and getting good grades.
- Mastery goals are better because they tend to lead to a preference for challenging work, to intrinsic interest in learning activities and to positive attitudes towards learning.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

What have they been required to do throughout their academic careers thus far?

Are our students aware of what it means to learn content rather than perform for a piece of assessment?

## **8. Issue eight: I really have no interest in doing this but I guess I have to**

‘Self-determination theory’ by Deci & Ryan (1985) and Vallerand (1997)

Key components: Intrinsic motivation / Extrinsic motivation

- A person’s intrinsic motivation is concerned with the doing of something for its own sake, in order to derive pleasure and satisfaction. This may be the joy of doing an activity or the satisfying of curiosity.
- A person’s extrinsic motivation is concerned with the doing of something as a means to an end, i.e. there will be some reward at the end of it all, or to avoid punishment.
- Motives can be placed along a continuum between self-determined (intrinsic) and controlled (extrinsic) form of motivation.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

To what extent is the desire to fulfill the requirements of the course based on the joy of learning?

To what extent is it based on receiving a reward or avoiding punishment from an interested party?

## **9. Everyone else is working hard so I guess I should, too**

‘Social motivation theory’ by Weiner (1994) and Wentzel (1999)

Key components: Environmental influences

- A large proportion of motivation is actually derived from the socio-cultural context rather than from the individual.

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

What is the culture of the classroom?

What are the overriding moods and emotions circulating among those on the course or in the university dormitory?

## **10. Issue ten: No one else thinks they can pass, so I guess I'll just stop trying**

'Theory of planned behavior' by Ajzen (1988) and Eagly & Chaiken (1993)

Key components: Attitudes / Subjective norms / Perceived behavioral control

- Attitudes exert a direct influence on a person's behavior because a person's attitude towards the goal will influence their responses to that attaining that goal.
- Things that can influence this are the person's subjective norms (the perceived social pressures to achieve the goal) and also perceived behavioral control (the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior).

How might this manifest itself in our classrooms?

Does everybody feel like they can or can't pass this course?

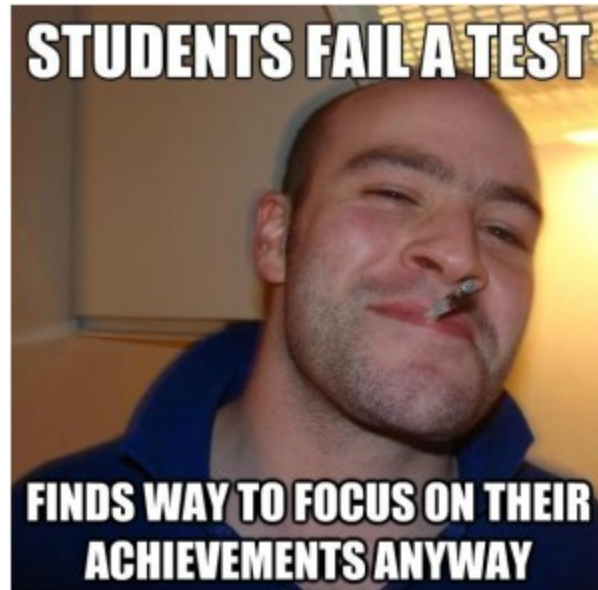
Is there a collective feeling about the ease or difficulty of passing?

Investigating these theories has really helped me to understand those cases where I really couldn't get why it was that the student wasn't performing as well as I thought they could. Like I suggested at the start of this e-book, the reason certainly isn't always obvious, but hopefully it'll now make a lot more sense to you too. Now that we've looked at the theories behind what drives seemingly bizarre behavior, let's now examine some case studies with the help of an unlikely internet hero...

Good Guy Greg (also known affectionately as GGG) is an internet phenomenon. His real identity remains unknown, but his image is that of a friendly man smoking a cigarette and smiling contentedly. Good Guy Greg is a kind, generous and empathetic character, the total opposite of Scumbag Steve (hid internet antithesis).

Good Guy Greg, obviously, is just a meme, but embodies the positivity of all those who ascribe their thoughts to this character. Fortunately, Good Guy Greg is very helpful when it comes to reminding us teachers how to motivate our learners.

**1. Learners – young learners in particular – are good at fulfilling the expectations of their teachers**

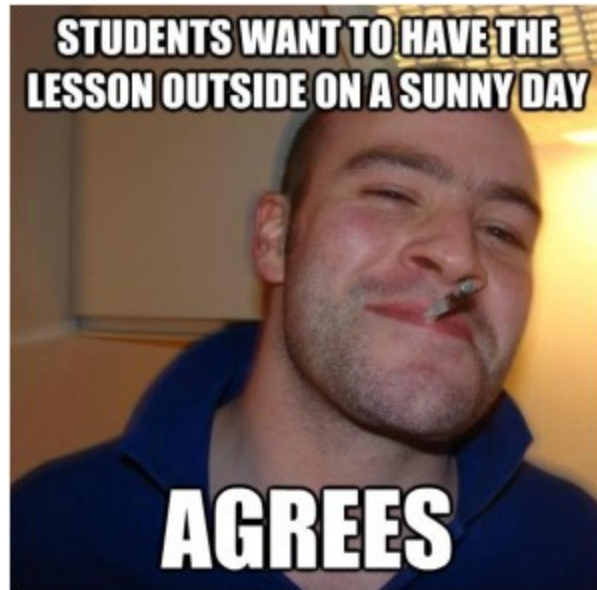


The fact is, almost anywhere you work, your learners will be subjected to standardized testing. It therefore follows that some of them will fail to reach whatever the required pass mark is. One way to view these learners is that they are failures. Indeed, those who don't reach the pass mark are going to feel like they have failed. We have, as Greg points out, a very important role to play at such times.

### **What Greg teaches us...**

Rather than focusing on the measure of failure, we must, at every opportunity, point out to our learners the areas in which we see progress and improvement. We must also for areas in which they are struggling, try to enable the learners to envisage success. If we can follow Greg's advice and encourage learners to visualize their successes, however modest, we will help them to achieve their goals and not worry too much about individual failures.

## 2. A change – of learning environment – is as good as a rest

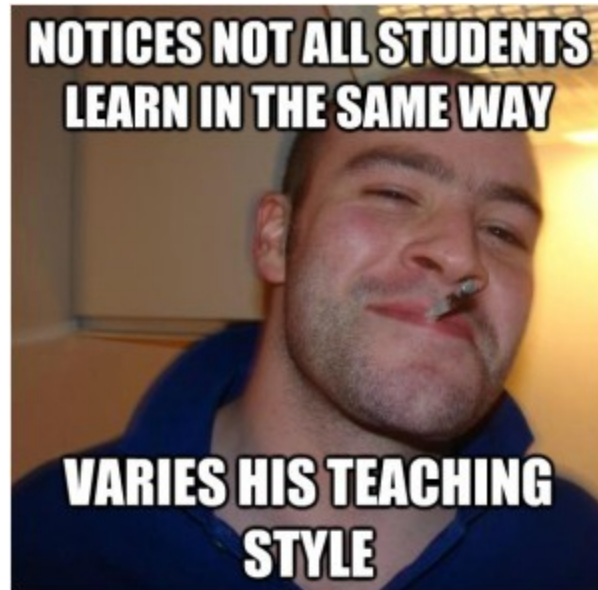


Greg's point, that you should be flexible in varying your environment in any way you can, is important as this might be exactly what learners need to find motivation. Fortunately, this can often be quite easy to achieve.

### What Greg teaches us...

There is no reason why field trips can't be totally compatible with your lesson objectives, so don't rule out the benefits of relocating your class beyond the classroom walls. Your students may also benefit from meeting in the school library, or even just in another classroom. Such field trips are always a great way to learn in what is ostensibly a practical setting. An even simpler solution, as Greg advises, can be to take your class outside for their lesson. Alternatively, try to plan ways to get your learners researching at the library, collaborating with another class in a different room, or, as is possible in my context, listening to professors deliver lectures in other departments.

### **3. Make sure you cater to all the learning styles in your classroom**



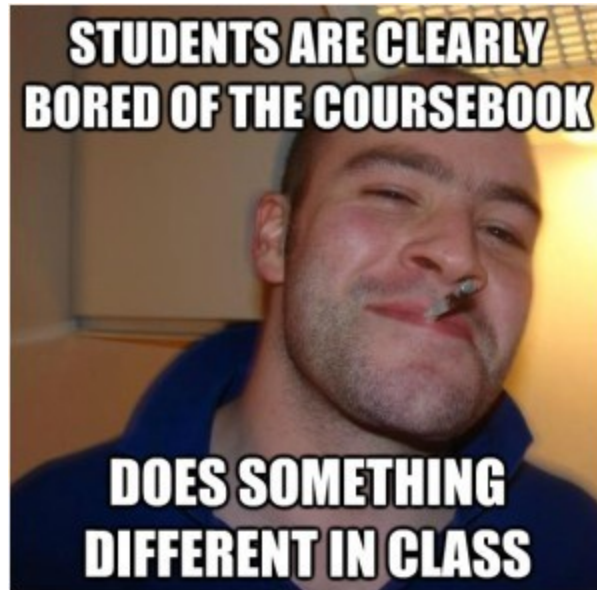
Say what you like about the notion of different learning styles, the fact remains that Greg has a point here: certain students will enjoy particular activities more than others. Consequently, if you fail to vary the type of activities you do in class, you will invariably end up alienating certain learners.

#### **What Greg teaches us...**

Just as auditory learners will be demotivated by constant reading exercises, a kinesthetic learner will be frustrated by having to do listening in every lesson. Keep a tab of what kind of activities you do. If you don't favor certain activities over others, I'll be amazed. The key here, as Greg notes, is to make sure, as you plan your lessons, that you are teaching to all the learning styles in your classroom. If you do, you will engage students who might otherwise struggle to pay attention in class.



#### **4. Vary the material you use**

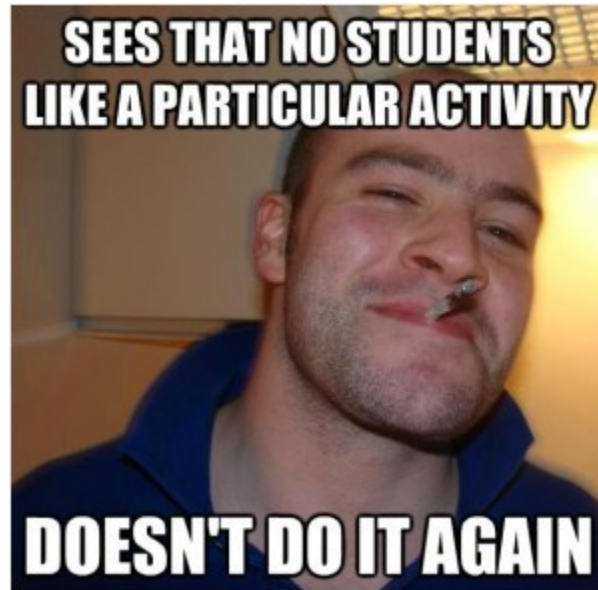


Unless you're in an extremely fortunate situation, you'll find yourself working for a school that chooses your syllabus for you. Nevertheless, this does not mean that you should ignore Greg's advice and never bring additional resources to class.

#### **What Greg teaches us...**

No matter how good any particular coursebook is, your learners will get bored of it if and when it is repetitively used as the only source of input. As Greg suggests, bringing a fresh perspective into the class in the form of different materials or approaches will reengage those learners who are bored of the prescribed materials. Furthermore, it will provide a fresh challenge to those who are already seeing success from the assigned coursebook.

**5. Take signals from your learners as an opportunity to reexamine your classroom practices**



As class goes on from day to day, you'll find that a lot of learners are perfectly OK with most of the things that happen in class. Be it the types of activity you employ, the method of error correction you use or even the amount of teacher talking time in class, a lot of your learners will be fine with what goes on. However, there will be learners who not only fail to connect with these methods, but who suffer because you regularly use them in your classes. This is a great opportunity for you to take Greg's advice: if learners start to disengage from your lessons, take time to examine the methods you are using and look for patterns.

**What Greg teaches us...**

One thing you need to remember is that it is going to be impossible to please all the people all the time. Nevertheless, if you see a collective sigh when you do a particular type of task, do as Greg says and make a note of it and stop: this will help learners perform better in class. In other words, go for what pleases most of the class most of the time.

## 6. Making learners accountable is an important element of being a motivating teacher



Without the ‘threat’ of an impending deadline or the possibility of a fail grade, many learners will never have the self-motivation that is required to successfully learn English. However, Greg makes a good point here: learners should be clear about what is expected of them. They should be fully informed of the deadlines and the criteria by which you will be assessing them.

### **What Greg teaches us...**

A good way of doing this is to contract learners; figuratively signing an agreement based on what learners say they will do to achieve a particular grade can be extremely motivating. From the start of class, your learners know exactly what they need to accomplish, and, more importantly, they know that success is completely based on their actions.

## 7. Competition can be a great way to motivate learners



Games are fun for reviewing the language recently taught in class and, as Greg has discovered, they serve to motivate and engage learners. Grouping learners is particularly effective, as it increases the opportunities for cooperative learning, plus it takes the pressure off the individual. Whatever the class is studying, there is always some way of adding a degree of healthy competition to the mix.

### What Greg teaches us...

While Greg is doing a good thing in creating competition within a game-like activity, he almost certainly wouldn't suggest developing competition in other ways. For instance, posting exam grades publicly or embarrassing your learners in some other way is divisive and damaging to the classroom dynamic. Greg is also clever enough to realize the importance of explaining why he plays games and not to do it too often.

**8. If you've warned of the consequences of particular actions, following through will actually motivate learners**



No one likes to be punished and we might initially think that Greg is wrong on this one. Nevertheless, if you've made your expectations clear, nothing can be more demotivating than failing to follow up with punishment when certain behaviors or levels of work ethic fall short of what you expected.

#### **What Greg teaches us...**

I'm sure, like Greg, we prefer to use positive reinforcement to get learners working effectively, but when this doesn't work, sometimes there has to be negative consequences to the learner's actions. Although they will complain, the net results of sticking to what you said you'd do in the first place will be positive.

## 9. Reward success



Greg is spot on here: one motivational method that never fails with learners is giving rewards. You might think that this could get expensive and that it would have to come out of your pocket. Don't worry; this doesn't have to be the case!

### **What Greg teaches us...**

Design your rewards to your students' personalities, and tell them what your plans are. A reward for doing well might be to get to watch a film connected to the topic you've been studying, or a two-minute 'Facebook' break in the middle of a lesson. As Greg suggests, learners look forward to even the simplest pleasures you can hand out during an ordinary day of classes.

## 10. You can't motivate all of the learners all of the time



Some learners – and the younger ones in particular – can be angels outside your class and horrors inside. For Greg they misbehave repeatedly, but bring in a substitute teacher and you wouldn't recognize them. Take a leaf out of Greg's book and don't take it personally.

### What Greg teaches us...

Bear in mind that some learners will be problematic in your classes, and that this is often more about them and the environment in which you have to teach them as it is about you. One thing you can do to break them out of this pattern is bringing outside influences into your classroom. Invite a guest speaker... or trade classes for a lesson with a colleague. A sudden change in style and authority, even for a short period, may be enough to ignite some motivation in those students who have become overly accustomed to your teaching style and expectations.

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## **About the author**

Adam has been fortunate enough to spend the last fifteen years of his journey as a lifelong learner working with others in what some call the ‘language classroom’. He is currently privileged to have the opportunity to help young adults meet their educational goals at Sabanci University in Istanbul. His professional interests include flexibility within the curriculum and the considered use of technology in the classroom. He occasionally finds time to blog about his life.

OFFICIAL WEBSITE: [myweb.sabanciuniv.edu/adams](http://myweb.sabanciuniv.edu/adams)

BLOG: [www.teachthemenglish.com](http://www.teachthemenglish.com)

FACEBOOK: [www.facebook.com/theadamsimpson](http://www.facebook.com/theadamsimpson)

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