



Motivating students: the Big Match and the Goldilocks Effect

Motivation in the MFL classroom is a major issue, I believe, for many of us! How can we motivate our students to do well, to become independent learners and embrace the learning of MFL? The constrictions of the GCSE syllabus, exam pressures, and harsh marking of papers for languages has definitely taken its toll, but not everything is grim looking!

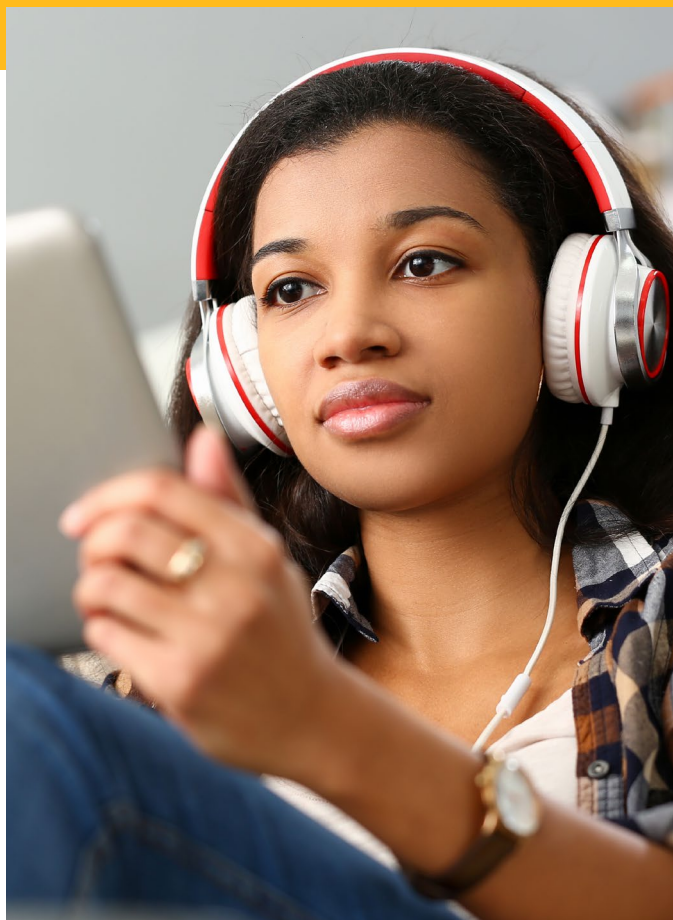
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At a basic level, there's a lot that MFL teachers can do in everyday lessons that can have a big impact on most students, and which we may take for granted. Project-based learning, collaborative work with partner schools, a rich extra-curricular activity programme and opportunities to take languages outside the classroom and raise the profile of MFL, are all important factors. But here, I would like to concentrate on the basics: *the ingredients for great teaching that help motivate students to take responsibility for their learning.*

What motivates students?

This is the big question. Over the years I have turned this question round and asked many students: "What is it about languages that may put you off?" Especially boys. I always get the same answer: "After years studying a language, I cannot SPEAK it, or I feel I DON'T MAKE PROGRESS." In other words, students complain about the inability to be able to communicate in *real-life situations* and consequently, they feel they haven't made enough progress in their learning journey.

This was a real turning point in my teaching career. *How can we create a rich curriculum focussed on real communication which will allow students to make steady and impactful*



progress? One that, in return, will increase students' confidence to speak and as result will intrinsically motivate them to make even more progress? After all, we end up loving the things we are good at!

This made me think about what a footballer might remember at the end of their career. Is it the training that took place leading to playing a major match or

the minutes they played in the actual match? Most certainly, their most memorable moment would be playing in the Big Match itself. However, the coaching and the training of the skills needed to successfully play and, ultimately, win the match, are vital too.

To engage and motivate our students, the MFL curriculum must seek to create a Big Match experience in ALL students.

That means, to equip the students with the skills needed to put the language into practice in a real-life experience (through oral communication), the curriculum must provide opportunities to put linguistic skills to the test in real-life situations through specific projects and classroom or school-based activities or virtual exchanges and create 'stickability' in everyday lessons, so students make progress and, most importantly, they feel it! This is achieved via great teaching.

Great teaching, where activities **are not too easy, neither too difficult, but just right**, will spontaneously make our students make progress. This motivates them to do well, to take pride in their learning and to become, ultimately, independent learners, able to speak in real-life situations. This is what I call **The Goldilocks Effect**.



What makes for great teaching or 'training' as we build to a Big Match?

Part of my essential kit are Rosenshine's Principles of Instruction. These principles build on the importance of giving students sufficient time to practise retrieval, ask questions, and get the desired help. For me, these are what MFL teachers need to really help students with their language training.

1. Modelling

At its most basic level, in MFL, this means modelling the structures and vocabulary we want students to master after a sequence of lessons. At a more complex level, it means providing worked-out examples of good answers, for example, narrating our thought process to students for writing and speaking tasks at GCSE or A Level.

These are some of my favourite activities at this stage:

- **Dictation tasks but with a twist!** Dictating sentences with deliberate grammatical/pronunciation mistakes in them, or dictating sentences randomly that students, in pairs, must arrange into a paragraph that makes sense. Also: running dictation and translation for faster learners
- **Trapdoor reading activities**
- **Battleships listening/reading activities**, where the teacher will read sentences from a grid and students need to find them and write the coordinates
- **Filling the gaps in a text**, which are read by the teacher but without providing actual gaps, so students need to really listen for detail

- **Dictogloss** which practises the skills of listening, reading and writing in the same activity. The teacher prepares a model text, reads it twice or three times to students who take notes in English, then in pairs they try to reconstruct the text back into the target language. Finally, the teacher shows the text on the board. At this point a conversation about key vocabulary and grammar can be had with the class.

2. Scaffolded and guided practice

This involves extensive practice of structures, controlled by the teacher, with scaffolds for difficult tasks, until these are mastered (the power of overlearning), which will increase confidence and

will help students make rapid progress; hence enhancing motivation.

If we add a real communication element (a little Big Match) to the practice process, such as a game or a real purpose to communicate, motivation is pretty much guaranteed! I teach interactional language to be used in lessons, especially during games, from day one, to help acquisition. These may include utterances such as "It's my turn/ I've won/ You are cheating/ Throw the dice."

At this stage, well thought-out, sequenced translation activities from English into the Target Language are key!

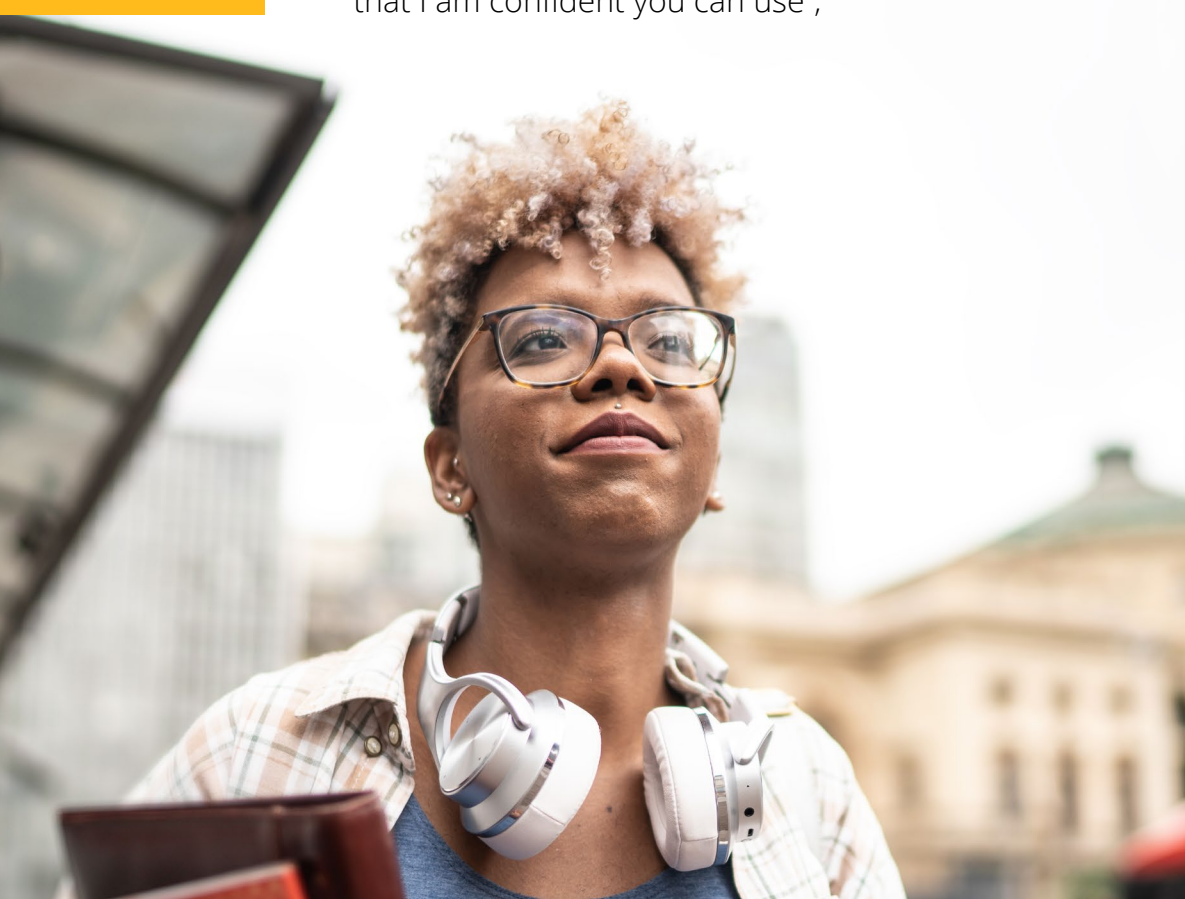
Having high expectations is fundamental. When I tell my Year 8 students: "This is a GCSE expression that I am confident you can use",

such as *Me gustaría que mi casa tuviera* ("I would like that my house had [subjunctive])," 99% of my students learn the structure and use it systematically! My motto for every lesson is: "How can I make my students feel clever today?" This allows me to establish a growth mindset in ALL my students which will lead to motivation too.

Always aim high and provide enough retrieval practice to master the language you modelled.

High-impact activities at this stage can include:

- **Translating key sentences from English into the target language.** This can be done in many different ways: via mini-whiteboards tasks, led by the teacher using digital tools, or orally as a whole class.



- **Any board game based on translating elements**
- **Any information gap activity** where students need to exchange information with a partner, orally based on those key structures we want to practice!

Remember to encourage the use of interactional language while these activities take place, especially in pair-work!

3. Checking for understanding: the use of questions

A good session of questioning after key, structured practice, or as part of this, is extremely powerful and will lead to retrieval practice while keeping students alert and motivated. In other words, questions should be the centre of lessons! For them to engage, make sure you always reward accurate, correct answers and adapt questions for different students and levels.

Some questioning techniques that help students make progress and keep them alert are:

- **Cold-calling**, not just volunteers, so no student can relax!
- **No opt-out**, if a student does not know the answers, I move to another student and then I come back to Student A again
- **Say it again, better**, after a few rounds of questioning, I come back to strategic students and ask them to say something again but better

- **Think, pair, share**. This is great for more open general conversation questions.
- **Whole class response via mini whiteboards**
- **Ask students: “What have you understood?”** versus **“Have you understood?”** Ask students to tell you exactly what they got from your lesson and reteach, if necessary, any gaps in subsequent lessons. This is great as a plenary!

4. Retrieval Practice: interleaving and reviewing material

This is extremely important in languages, in fact it is what we do all the time! Students must be given opportunities to revisit (and retrain) any given material over and over again. This is critical in the case of grammatical structures but also with high-impact expressions that can be used in many different contexts, and which should be embedded quickly in the students’ mastered lexicon corpus. Make sure that students obtain a high success rate before moving to a different concept! Techniques for retrieval practice can include:

- **Daily, weekly, monthly review**. Ask students to translate sentences from the last lesson, last week’s lesson and also from last month! As time progresses, from last half-term or even last year. Reward students who succeed in doing this

- **Involve everyone!** Mini whiteboards are ideal for this, but also quizzes using digital tools
- **Vary the way retrieval practice is carried out:** teacher-led, but also via self-quizzing or in pairs
- **Ask students to create a knowledge map starting with some key words, from memory!**
- **Train students to be proactive at this! Self-testing.** If you have a bank of resources available to students for each topic, you can prepare revision schedules for students to start with and encourage them to modify your schedule or create their own one based on their own needs.

5. Gradual mastery of concepts

Gradually, the scaffolding and support that we give students in 'training' via guided practice can be removed so students start producing language fluently, on their own, without having to be given prompts. When students manage to reach this stage, (as they are nearing readiness for their Big Match), even at a basic level, their confidence suddenly soars, and, with that, their motivation too.

Good activities at this stage are:

- **Speed dating** where students formulate/answer questions to a partner and at a given signal move to a different partner
- **Piedra, papel, tijera (stone, paper, scissors).** Two students play together and whoever wins asks a question to their partner

who needs to answer in the target language or for a set time on a specific topic (with prompts)

- **Creative written tasks via Padlet** so students can see each other's contributions and learn from one another
- **Creative oral tasks** via videos, short films, short stories, comics created by students
- **Any board games** but now, used with open-ended questions.

At this stage, providing real audiences for students to be able to communicate in their Big Match scenario is the ideal. Wherever you have the time and resources, project-based learning with a real audience such as a partner school, senior leadership team, school assembly, A Level students or parents, are always big winners as someone will read or listen to the work/project that students have been working on for different weeks. This is their BIG MATCH. If your school community has the funds, you may be able to link a trip to Spain, France or Germany to your curriculum – alternatively some schools make great new connections abroad via email and video link as well as through virtual exchanges!

By creating memorable, *sticky* lessons, with high expectations and lots of retrieval practice, you will help students master content and make natural progress, which in return will make them feel confident, which contributes to becoming motivated!

So, how do we motivate students? By delivering great lessons, having high expectations for ALL, and providing learners with all the training they need to make progress (Rosenshine's Principles), so they believe in themselves and find languages achievable! Creating the right balance of not too difficult neither too easy: **JUST RIGHT, (the Goldilocks Effect) so that students can use the language in their BIG MATCH.**

About the author

Esmeralda Salgado

Esmeralda is an Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) and a former Head of MFL and Digital Lead. She has taught languages for over 20 years from KS2 to KS5 in different school settings: in state and independent schools. Her GCSE and A Level results are excellent with a 100% success pass grade (9-4) at GCSE in the summer 2022 and 56% 9 to 8 grades. Esmeralda is passionate about the use of digital tools and collaborative projects among schools and has extensive experience in using eTwinning and Erasmus projects as tools to enhance the teaching and learning experience in the MFL classroom. Esmeralda is a Silver Pearson National Teaching Award winner for Secondary School teacher of the year and has collaborated to write one of the Language Gym Books: Spanish Verb Pivots with GianFranco Conti. Currently a MFL consultant, writer, blogger and CPD provider Esmeralda is going back to the classroom as Head of MFL from September.



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