

This article was originally published in the International & Heritage Language Association (IHLA) Newsletter. Newsletters feature reflections and strategies with Dr. Olenka Bilash, long-time supporter of IHLA. For full Newsletters visit online at: <https://ihlanewsletters.wikispaces.com/>

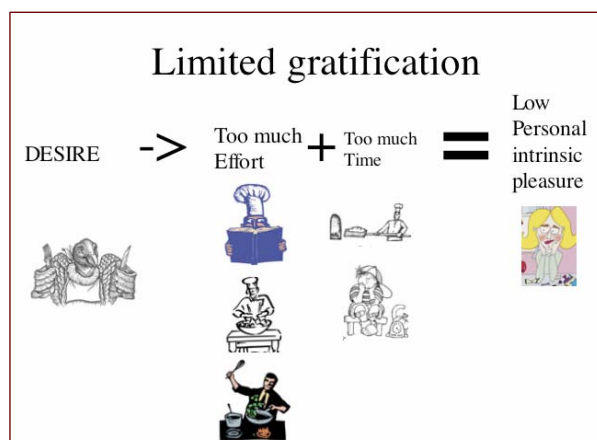
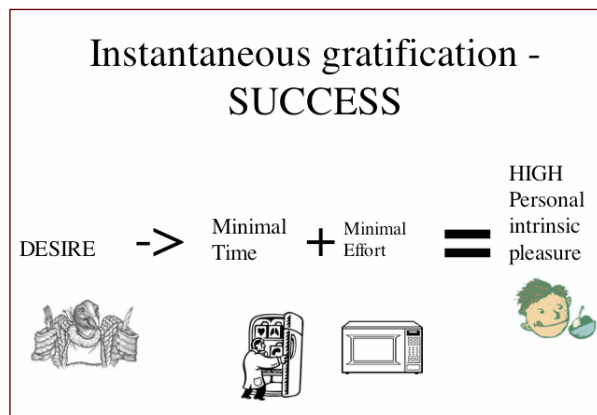
Why does it take so much energy for me to motivate my students?

As the new school year begins in heritage language (HL) programs throughout the province, many teachers are busy planning and preparing for instruction. At the back of their minds is often the desire to keep their students motivated, enthusiastic and wanting to attend the HL school.

In our technological society keeping young people motivated is not easy. Most expect personal intrinsic pleasure by giving very little time and effort of their own. They expect instantaneous gratification.

In today's world learners have become accustomed to feeling satisfied without having to do very much or wait very long. For example, when they are hungry they go to the fridge/freezer or a fast food outlet and eat within minutes of experiencing their 'desire' for food. When they feel a desire for entertainment - a movie or video game - they go to satellite TV or other form of technology and use the remote control to quickly satisfy their desire; when they have an urge or desire to talk with a friend they pick up their cell phone and are in touch with that friend within seconds. . . With minimal effort (time and energy) they experience positive results (pleasure or reward). With minimal effort (owning the technology) their needs are quickly 'satisfied'.

When learners cannot meet their needs quickly they either experience frustration or expect greater 'satisfaction' from the extra effort re- quired. If the time and effort required to meet the desire is much greater than the 'satisfaction' gained learners can experience limited gratifica- tion and negative sentiments toward the activity or individuals associated with it.

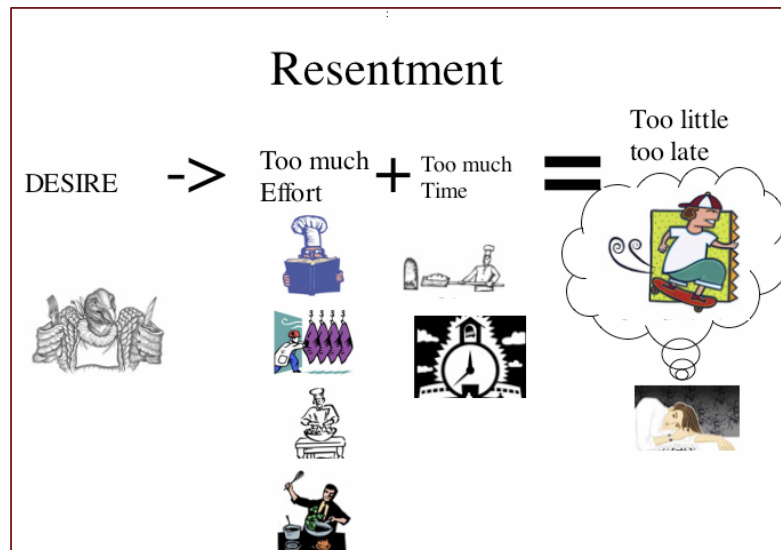


Many things in everyday life can be learned quickly and yield instantaneous gratification or satisfaction. Learning and using a heritage language in the home from birth is a natural process and can yield lifelong satisfaction. Additionally, most children learn to read or do simple mathematics in school or learn to ride a bicycle outside of school relatively easily and quickly—with minimal time and effort. Learners who do not succeed at achieving these common tasks often experience low self esteem, low self confidence and develop negative attitudes to activities associated with these endeavours. Teachers who can see the needs of these learners can often provide positive intervention through breaking the task down into smaller steps or by adding more guidance, praise and encouragement.

However, some skills cannot be learned quickly. Learning to play an instrument or communicate in a HL, if it was not learned and used in the home, requires a long term investment of TIME and EFFORT (practice, review), before any notable progress or success can be felt or demonstrated to others. Without the ability or opportunity to see their own progress during this long term process, some learners lose the desire to try, cease trying and, in turn, do not succeed.

Since HL schools often offer classes only once per week learners have very few opportunities to feel success. Thus, parents must provide opportunities during the week to keep students motivated. If they do not, then the HL learners will either come to the Heritage Language program to see their friends (with whom they can communicate in English and feel instantaneous gratification) or they begin to complain about going, reminding their parents about

the other things that they would rather be doing (and begin to develop resentment to the HL program). Unfortunately, such learners are not able to suspend their need for satisfaction long enough in order to experience the lifelong benefits of having a HL. Maintaining a heritage language in a minority context requires a partnership. For students to really experience success in a HL school learners, their parents and their teachers must work together. Learners have to learn to suspend their desire for instantaneous gratification. Parents have to offer as many opportunities to use the HL outside the classroom as possible, even if that means driving their children across the city to play with other HL speakers, visiting grandparents or other HL speakers more frequently, or becoming more self disciplined and using the HL more themselves. Teachers have to design activities that help learners develop a sense of success. This can be done in many ways.

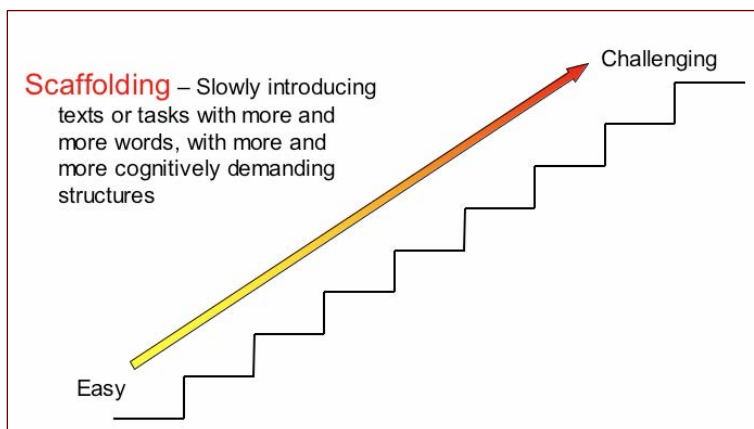


Three suggestions are:

1. Select interesting and motivating projects that allow learners to use their creativity
2. Scaffold activities into 'bite-size' learning steps - instruction that helps learners reach a goal in a step by step way
3. Select activities that help learners see the progress they are making and have made.

By selecting interesting and motivating projects that allow learners to use their creativity learners become affectively engaged. Affective engagement makes one experience pleasure or satisfaction. Projects that are interesting and engaging include preparing a menu as an assignment for food, making up a game and teaching it to the rest of the class when teaching imperative forms of verbs, developing a class phone book when teaching numbers, drawing a picture of one's bedroom and presenting it to the class when studying colours, or writing a letter to someone who lives in a different historical time period.

Once an interesting project has been selected the teacher must plan backwards to discover everything that the learner needs to know or be able to do in order to succeed at creating it. In doing so the teacher becomes aware of what the students already know and can apply as well as what they might need to learn in order to create the project. For example, if the project was to create a menu the students would have to know names of foods, categories of foods (appetizers, entrees, beverages, desserts), prices, descriptions of ingredients, how to make a catchy restaurant name and the lay- out of a menu. Each of these parts could be taught in isolation and then combined. Making sure that you have enough activities to help learners understand and remember is a key support for their learning. Some students may learn, remember and be able to apply something by only being exposed to it. Others need to be told about it. Still others need to be told and given a chance to practice it. Teachers must respond to the needs of all learners. They usually must prepare materials for the weakest students, even if they often do not use all of them for most students. Breaking a task into steps helps students focus on what they have to learn. Breaking each step into tinier steps means scaffolding instruction so that a goal can be reached. When scaffolding or breaking the learning into steps teachers must think about interesting activities that will help learners see their own progress. Sometimes it is useful to give a pre- and post- quiz.



Asking a set of questions at the beginning of a unit helps the teacher to find out how much the students know. If they know more than was anticipated the teacher can plan other content and activities. If they do not, then the teacher can proceed with the plan as prepared. Then asking the same set of questions at the end of a unit helps students see that they have learned something.

Such questions must be done in writing for the value to be 'seen' and felt.

Asking students what they learned – orally or in writing – is another way of helping students become aware that they are learning. Video- taping students as they are giving a self introduction or presentation at the beginning of the year, half way through the year and again at the end of the year AND allowing students to see all three presentations is yet another way of helping them SEE and FEEL that they are learning. These activities alone can yield satisfaction!

As the new HL school year begins may teachers think about ways to help HL learners experience weekly success, and may school administrators forge partnerships with parents so that they can help their children experience daily success in the HL.

Original Publishing Date: September 19, 2005