HOW CAN WE MAINTAIN LEARNERS' LS MOTIVATION IN A CLASSROOM SETTING?

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present an attempt to evaluate students' motivation in learning of foreign language in general and English in particular. It is mainly a theoretical concept of motivation including a definition of the concept, a presentation of the most important theories for motivating, and the factors influencing it.

Key words: learners' motivation, motivation, foreign language learning

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Introduction

Over the last few decades, there has been a prominent shift in the field of L2 (in this paper this refers to learning a foreign language) education research, with less emphasis on teachers and teaching but greater emphasis on learners and learning. Learning a foreign language is a difficult time-consuming process, in which a number of variables concerning the learners' individual differences are found to influence learning outcomes. Only with a deep understanding of the language learners can effective teaching methods be developed.

To date, research has focused on individual differences between students with respect to personality, intelligence, language learning aptitude, language learning strategies, motivation, and cognitive style. The present study focuses on motivation, because many of these other variables are dependent on motivation for their effects to be realized (Gardner, 2001). For example, language learning strategies probably will not be used if the individual is not motivated to learn the language, and there is little or no reason to take risks using the language if there is little intention to learn it, etc. Motivation is considered to be one of the main determining factors in L2 development (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). It mainly determines the extent of active, personal involvement in L2 that enables learners to develop their potential L2 skills.

The importance of the role of motivation in the field of SLA is also supported by a considerable amount of empirical evidence (Gardner, 2001).

L2 motivation research started relatively late in China. This is partly due to the misunderstanding in some Chinese teachers who have taken it for granted that the contribution of motivation to L2 learning is self-evident (Qin, 2002), without knowing about the complex mechanism of the role played by motivation in EFL learning. As a result, L2 motivation research has not received as much attention in China as the learner's individual differences (such as language learning strategy) in the field of SLA. The narrow perspective of Chinese scholars has impeded the development of Chinese L2 motivation research.

This paper will start with a literature review on the motivation research and proceed to compare different definitions by different researchers and analyze the factors that may influence motivation and affect Chinese learners. Finally, methods of

promoting motivation are suggested.

Motivation and Relevant Theories

Definition of Motivation

Motivation has been widely accepted as one of the key factors that influence the success of L2 learning. Although it is a term frequently used in both educational and research contexts, there is little agreement as to the exact meaning of this concept. The following are some definitions quoted from different researchers.

A simple definition is provided by Keller (1983). In current psychology: “motivation refers to the choices people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect” (cited in Crookes and Schmidt, 1991:481).

Kanfer and Ackerman (1989; cited in Dornyei, 1998) develop the definition of motivation further by saying that motivation refers to “the direction of attentional effort, the proportion of total attentional effort directed to the task (intensity), and the extent to which attentional effort toward the task is maintained over time (persistence)”.

Dornyei (1998) defines motivation as a “process whereby certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action or until the planned outcome has been reached”.

Williams and burden (1997) have attempted to achieve a synthesis of conception of motivation by defining it as “a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (goals)”. To make the three stages of motivation clearer, in 1997 they proposed the following model of motivation:

Reason for doing something → Deciding to do something → Sustaining the effort, or persisting

From reviewing various definitions proposed by different researchers, it is concluded that there has been no general agreement on definitions of motivation. In addition, motivation research is an area of ongoing debate and, therefore, definitions are continuing to mature as more discussion takes place.

Although there has been no consensus on definitions of motivation, it can be seen from the above review that most studies agree that it concerns the direction and magnitude of human behavior, that is: 1) the choice of a particular action; 2) the effort made towards accomplishing that action; and 3) the persistence towards accomplishing the action. Hence, the author holds that motivation is responsible for: 1) why people decide to learn a language (herein this means English as a foreign language); 2) how hard they are going to pursue this study; 3) how long they are willing to sustain the activity.

The three elements of motivation are interrelated to one another. Motivation starts with the learner’s choice of a particular action. Without a choice in the first place, there will be no motivation at all. Does having choice guarantee a high level of performance? The answer is obviously no and motivation behavior needs other elements: effort and persistence.

This is more likely to happen in an EFL setting. For example, in a country like China, English is a compulsory subject so students definitely have no choice but take the course. Without effort, persistence will make little sense and motivation will be greatly weakened; furthermore without persistence, motivation will be terminated and can no longer make any contribution to learning outcomes.

Therefore, both effort and persistence are meaningful elements of motivation and should receive as much attention as reasons for action. In the particular setting mentioned above, effort and persistence play a more important role.

Types of Motivation

Integrative and Instrumental Motivation

L2 learning motivation research was initiated by Gardner and Lambert (1972) in Canada. Their research is grounded in a social psychological framework, which links L2 motivation with attitudes toward the community of the target language speakers, with an interest in communication with the target language community.

Gardner (1985) identifies two types of motivation: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. They define integrative motivation as the desire to achieve proficiency in a new language in order to know about the other culture and participate in the life of the community. Or in Cook's words, this type of motivation reflects the L2 learners' identification or rejection towards the target culture and its people.

"The more that a student admires the target culture- reads its literature, visits in on holidays, looks for opportunities to practice the language, and so on- the more successful the student will be at the L2 classroom."(Cook, 2001:115). This is different from intrinsic motivation (to be discussed later) because it reflects the learners' wish to integrate themselves within the culture of the L2 group, to identify themselves with and become a part of that society.

In contrast, instrumental motivation occurs when the learners' goals for learning the L2 are functional (Ellis, 1986:117). That is to say, instrumental of L2 learning is for utilitarian purposes (e.g., to pass an examination), to be more competitive in finding a job and so on. A survey made among young people in Europe and found that 29 percent wanted to learn more languages for the purpose of high career possibilities, and another 14 percent for the purpose of living, working or studying in the country (Commission of the European Communities, 1987 in Cook, 2001:115). This type of motivation reflects the practical value and advantages of learning a new language. Students of this kind have limited interest in the people and the culture of the target language community.

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Motivation

Deci and Ryan (1985) also classify motivation into two types: extrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation comes from the desire to get a reward or avoid punishment; the focus is on something that is external or functionally unrelated to the activity in which they engage. To some extent, it has something in common with instrumental motivation. With intrinsic motivation the learning experience is its own reward. As Deci and Ryan (1985:245) put it, "Intrinsic motivation is in evidence whenever students' natural curiosity and interest energize their learning". In other words, intrinsic motivation exists when some one works because of an inner desire to accomplish a task successfully, whether it has some external value or not. Furthermore, according to Chambers (1999:52), these two groups corresponding to each other, that is to say, both intrinsic

motivation and integrative motivation are internal while extrinsic motivation and instrumental motivation are both external. Though both intrinsic motivation and integrative are internal to learners, their inner desires are different.

Motivation Types of Chinese EFL Learners (at the tertiary level)

However, it seems that Gardner and Lambert's classification has gained more preference among the Chinese teachers and English. Although conflicting evidence has emerged since that time regarding the types of motivation, the basic 'integrative' versus 'instrumental' distinction has been a lasting one (Quinn & McNamara, 1988:25). Since the beginning of the 21st century, motivation research has gained increasing attention among Chinese researchers.

More and more have started to broaden their view and borrow new Western motivational theories in their investigation of EFL motivation in the Chinese context. Gao et al. (2003) pointed out that studies on the learning motivation of Chinese students of English have mostly followed the classical model (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985) and its expansions (Tremblay et al., 1995), which originated in contexts different from EFL in China. The present writer is trying to examine whether we can apply Gardner's classification to the Chinese context or whether some modification is needed.

Gao et al. (2003) conducted a study among 2,278 undergraduates from 30 Chinese universities in 29 provinces, autonomous regions and municipalities using a Likert-scale questionnaire. They found seven types of English-learning motivation:

- Intrinsic interest: learners have an intrinsic interest in the English language and its culture such as English songs, films and literature.
- Immediate achievement: learners with this motivation have purposes, to pursue higher education or meet the requirements for graduation.
- Learning situation: learners are motivated by the outside learning environment such as curriculum, textbooks, classroom arrangements and teachers.
- Going abroad: learners are motivated by the desire to go aboard for different purpose like immigration or looking for better education and work opportunities.

- Social responsibility: the feeling embodies a sense of responsibility towards one's own country, that is learners want to try to let the world better understand China or not to disappoint their parents.
- Individual development: learners are motivated to improve their individual language competency so as to get a better job or higher social status.
- Information medium: the learner's reason for learning English is to obtain useful information through English media, for example, keep abreast of current developments in world economy and technology. (summarized by the present writer based on the work of Gao et al., 2003)

Among these types, "intrinsic interest" was related to "integrative" motivation in the classical model, whereas "immediate achievement", "individual development" and "information medium" all had some features of "instrumental" and "instrumental" elements. "Immediate achievement" and "social responsibility" might be characteristic of the Chinese EFL context. Therefore, it may be correct to say that the main motivation type among Chinese collage students is instrumental.

It seems that examining the types of L2 motivation fascinates Chinese scholars. However, the intensity of the motivation is more important than the type (Ellis, 1994). As Grander (1985) states, when students first enter the language class, they are often motivated by dreams of learning the language quite well: no matter what types of motivation they hold, meaning that quite often they are very excited about learning another language and begin the study with enthusiasm; however, this often does not last very long. So, questions are raised for L2 researchers: what motives have impact on the learning achievement? And what strategies could the language teachers use to promote learners' motivation?

Factors that May Influence Learners' L2 Motivation

Dornyei and Otto (1998) provided a summary of the previous theoretical and empirical studies of factors of influence on L2 learners' motivation:

a. Expectancy value theories assume that motivation to perform various tasks is the product of two key factors: the individual's expectancy of success at a given task and the value the individual attaches in the task.

b. Attribution theory places the emphasis on how one processes past achievement experiences (successes or failures).
c. Self efficacy theory refers to the individual's judgment of their capabilities to carry out certain specific tasks.
d. Self-worth theory claims that the highest human value is the need for self acceptance and to maintain a positive face.
e. Goal theories propose that human action is spurred by purpose and key concern with various goal properties.
f. Self determination theory, and the accompanying intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivational paradigm, is that the desire to be self initiating and self regulating is a prerequisite for any human behaviour to be intrinsically rewarding and, therefore, the essence of motivated action is a sense of autonomy.
g. Social psychology theory assumes that it is attitudes that exert a directive influence on people's behaviour since one's attitude towards a target influences the overall pattern of the person's responses to the target.
h. Some other factors: inner forces such as instincts, volition, and psychical energy; stimulus and reinforcement contingencies; basic human needs, etc. (excerpted from Dornyei & Otto, 1998.

Then, Dornyei and Otto (1998), inspired by Heckhausen and Kuhl's 'Action Control Theory', developed a different 'Process Model of L2 Motivation'. It includes three phases: preactional phase, actional phase and postactional phase, with each containing a list of main factors influencing motivation (see Doryei & Otto. 1998:6 for details).

Taking Chinese students' motivation types into account and the focus on the classroom setting, we now briefly discuss the learners' goal setting and teacher authority type versus learners' autonomy. Another reason why only chose these two factors are chosen is, as point out by Dornyei and Otto (1998), other factors (e.g., in 'intention formation' of preactional phase) are very complex and far beyond the scope of this paper.

1. Learners' goal-setting

Dornyei and Otto (1998:7) argue that the term ‘goal’ is always ill defined or over defined in motivation theories. They (1998:7) go on to point out in the predominating social psychological theory of language learning motivation by Gardner, 1985 even did not include goals. However, Locke and Latham’s (1994) think highly of the value of the ‘goal’, for example, they see goals as the ‘engine’ that fires the action and show clearly the direction in which to act. Dornyei and Otto’s point of view falls in the middle of the goal theory continuum.

They see goals “as the first concrete mental representations of a desired end state” and they hold a view that goals “do not directly determine action but are an indispensable step in the motivated behavioral sequence” (Dornyei & Otto, 1998:7).

However, one thing remains certain, that goals do play an important role in learners’ motivation. Oxford and Shearin (1994) claim that goal-setting can have exceptional importance in stimulating L2 learning motivation. In order to obtain an indication an indication of the relationship between different goals and different motivational behaviors, a number of studies have been conducted. These studies indicate that goals regulate learners’ motivational behavior. There are three mechanisms by which goals affect motivation (Dornyei 2001):

a. They draw attention and effort towards goal-relevant activities at the expense of actions that are not relevant.
b. They regulate effort expenditure in that people adjust their effort to the level of difficulty required by the task.
c. They encourage persistence until the goal is accomplished.

To achieve sufficient motivation, goals should meet several requirements. Setting appropriate goals is an important part of motivating individuals so that the decision can be carried out and the required effort sustained. Locke summarizes the main findings of previous studies (cited in Donyei 2001): "individuals will be more committed to the goals when the goals are specific and explicit. Individuals will not dedicate themselves to reaching vague ‘do your best' goals".

The goals can be challenging and difficult, but not outside the range of students' capabilities. On the one hand, when the level of challenge is perceived as lower than the

individual's ability, the result is boredom. Nobody will make great efforts to perform boring tasks. On the other hand, when the level of challenge is perceived as higher than the learners' level of ability, the result is anxiety (Crookes & Schmidt 1991). Only when the individual is convinced that the goal is attainable, or that at least, progress can be made toward it, will he/she commit to the goals.

Goals are important. In the context of language learning, language students may devote considerable effort and persistence if he or she believes that his or her goals are of high importance.

Now let us take a close look at the situation in China. From the seven motivation types discussed above, we can see most of the learners have learning goals like passing the examinations, going abroad, earning a certificate, etc. Without these particular goals, one could say there may be no reasons for them to learn English. (The writer has often chatted with students after class and many of them have expressed this kind of feeling.) This is why a lot of teachers in colleges and universities complain that their students are not well motivated. Many of them only are occupied with examinations and they hardly have any interest in learning English at all (Gao et al., 2003).

Looking at Chinese learners' goals, according to Locke's summary (see above), they are quite specific, explicit and challenging as well. They are also important (e.g., the 'certificate goal') towards their future development and job-hunting prospects. The problem is most of these goals have a distinct facilitative focus and are short-termed. Oin (1998) has conducted a survey among 500 Chinese students at the tertiary level to examine the relationship between various goals and motivational behavior of language learners.

Oin concludes that although both short-term goals (the learners' desire to pass exams) and long-term goals (the learners' expectancy of future development) have positive efforts on motivational behavior, long-term goals can help the learners achieve higher levels of motivational behavior. Furthermore, Gardner and Lambert claim that 'integratively' motivated learners would be more successful in language learning than those motivated 'instrumentally'(cited in Quinn & McNamara 1988:25). Hence, what can classroom teachers do to help improve students of this kind who will easily become demotivated and arouse their intrinsic interest toward English leaning?

First teachers need not adopt a negative attitude toward examination-related goals

for having some purpose is better than none. Since the teachers can do little to change the overall educational system, what they can do is to make their classroom teaching more effective and attractive. An effective way to minimize the negative influence of examination-related goals is to make examinations more mastery oriented. Teachers should emphasize those productive and communicative skills needed in the examination.

Secondly, the teachers should use the communicative approach instead of a performance approach, which is concerned only with the learners' performance. As we all know, the former fosters participation in the classroom, such as showing list of names in sequence of examination scores which have make those students with low grades really upset. Serious competition which focuses on outperforming peers is not a particularly useful vehicle for L2 learning (Oxford & Shearin, 1994).

More specifically, teachers need to explain clearly the purposes of tasks and the real-world significance of the knowledge and skills they can derive from the practice. If a task is similar to those encountered outside of the school environment, students will be more interested in it. Here the author, who always uses an integrative approach to teaching with his Chinese students, would like to give an example drawn from personal experience. The author does give students exams but also assigns them more real-world related tasks, such as working as a waiter or waitress in a western restaurant. One can never forget the expression on a student's face when they tell the teacher that they never knew learning English could be so interesting and exciting.

Clearly, although goal setting is quite learner-specific, classroom teachers can still do something through their everyday teaching to maintain their learners' motivation, even when the goals are short-term and instrumental.

Teacher Authority versus Learners' Autonomy

The role of teacher in language learning motivation has recently been receiving increasing attention. Some researchers (Dornyei 1994; Williams 1997; Noels 1999) claim that teachers play a significant role in shaping the motivation of their students. As Finocchiaro (1981, cited in Ellis 1994:516) puts it, "Motivation is the feeling nurtured primarily by the classroom teacher in learning situation." Dornyei's (1994) model of L2 motivation offers an elaborate conceptualization of teacher-specific motivational

factors, which constitutes affiliate motives, authority type (autonomy supporting or controlling), direct socialization of motivation (modeling, task presentation and feedback).

Among these factors, teachers' authority type and style of providing feedback are of great significance in influencing students' motivation as has been confirmed by empirical evidence.

1. Authority type

The teacher's authority type, that is, whether the teacher is autonomy supporting or controlling, has a motivational influence on students, which makes teacher's behavior a powerful 'motivational tool'(Dornyei 2001). When the students are given more autonomy, they become more highly motivated and that autonomy leads to better, more effective work.

Learner autonomy has been shown to exert a significant positive impact on motivation in L2 contexts well. According to Knowles "…there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning, learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers. Passively waiting to be taught… They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation." (cited in Dickinson 1995:165). In Ushioda's (1996) extensive discussion of learner autonomy and L2 motivation, he concludes that autonomy and motivation go hand in hand: Autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners. Dickinson (1995) refers to a study by Bachman (1964) which indicates that involving learners in decision-making tends to lead to increased motivation and thereby, to increased productivity. In his own study, Dickinson makes the assumption that an active, independent attitude to learning and personal involvement in decision making leads to increased L2 motivation. Williams and Burden (1997) also hold that if teachers help learners take control of heir own learning, then there is a greater chance that learners will be motivated to learn.

Learner autonomy is ensured by the teacher's democratic teaching style. Teachers should adopt a more democratic teaching style and be prepared to step aside to give the learner a meaningful role, only intervening when necessary. As Dornyei (2001) summarizes, democratic leaders involve the learners in decision-making about their own functioning, share with them the long-term goals and steps to be taken to achieve these,

and take part in the activities themselves. That is, they consciously promote learner autonomy: students are given positions and tasks of genuine authority, and are invited to design and prepare activities themselves.

Dickinson (1995:166) suggests “motivation can be enhanced through encouraging learners to exert personal control over their learning and take responsibility for it.” This is definitely not the case in EFL teaching in China, since learners themselves do not have much autonomy to choose. With an influence dating back to Confucianism, Chinese teachers still adopt an autonomy controlling approach in class, and are usually seen as the dictators in the classroom. Sometimes they may even give excessive use of punishment, for example, copying one sentence hundreds of times as a consequence of making a mistake (Wang, 2003).

The traditional authoritarian role of Chinese teachers should be changed. The teachers' roll is not only to offer a description of the language but also, through various strategies such as allowing students real choice, sharing responsibility with them for organizing their learning process and encouraging student contribution, to create conditions that would help students learn through active involvement in activities and tasks.

Undoubtedly, no learner autonomy can be achieved successfully unless teachers have a positive attitude toward it. Therefore, developing this positive attitude towards autonomy is of great significance in the current Chinese situation. The presupposition of autonomous learning is that teachers are willing to change their traditional roles as information providers and prepare to accept their new roles as facilitators in the classroom. Little (1995) points out that learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy. Generally speaking, in a formal educational context, learners do not take the initiative to accept responsibility for their leaning.

This is especially true of Chinese students. Due to social, cultural and educational reasons, many Chinese students tend to adopt a passive role in learning and believe that to be a learner is to listen to or to be dependent on teachers (Wang, 2002). Teachers must first raise their own awareness of autonomy supporting, and then help students take an active, independent attitude to learning. The job of teachers working on an autonomous pedagogy includes helping learners raise their awareness of responsibilities, helping learner plan and carry out their independent learning tasks and

helping learners monitor and evaluate their learning (Wang, 2002).

Allowing students autonomy is of great significance in improving motivation in the Chinese context. For example, an effective way to motivate students who learn ESP is to let the students themselves decide when they will take the course. Although training qualified ESP teachers may be crucial in the long run, creating students' autonomy may have immediate and positive effects in motivating them.

However, juniors are still faced with the pressure of CET-4 or CET-6. If they are allowed to have a say in curriculum planning, they can establish in task completion. Given autonomy, they can plan their English learning and choose the proper time to take the course. By doing so, they may not have the feeling of being controlled and they will voluntarily get involved in the learning process. Even if these suggestions cannot be carried out according to current Chinese EFL context, at least the teachers can do the following:

a. Allow students to participate in the design of their academic tasks and the means of evaluation.
b. Give students choices in how tasks are completed. After reading a story, students might choose from among several assignments to write a summary of the story, to write a sequel to the story, or to write about a similar experience of their own.
   The teacher's goal for the writing is accomplished regardless if their choices, and by having some freedom, students acquire more control and assume greater responsibility.
c. Give students some discretion about when they will complete particular tasks. Some people like to do the most difficult or least appealing tasks first. Others prefer to do a few easier or more pleasant tasks to give them a feeling of accomplishment before they tackle the hard ones. Giving students the opportunities to order according to their own preferences may give them a greater feeling of responsibility.

2. Feedback

Psychologists also recognize another aspect of the teacher's role in motivation, that is, as the provider of feedback. Feedback can be given by means of praise, by any

relevant comment or action, or by silence (Williams & Burden, 1997).

External reinforcement in the form of rewards, merit marks or simple praise, are often considered to be excellent ways of motivating underachieving or reluctant learners. However, punishments are not only ineffective in bringing about positive changes, but they can often have the opposite effect. Wheldall and Merrett (1987) cited a large number of studies that show that rewards, such as praise, are far more effective than punishment. However, the learners see too much praise as detrimental, and more is not always better. For any sort of feedback to be effective, teachers need to state their reasons for approval or disapproval (cited in Williams & Burden, 1997).

In addition to theoretical proposals, researchers have also conducted empirical testing. Caffyn (1984, cited in Noels et al., 1999) has carried out an investigation into the attitudes towards reward and punishment in a group of more than five hundred learners and a hundred teachers. The findings show that learners unanimously reject punishment as a motivating force. Noels et al. (1999) conducted a study examining the motivational impact of the teachers' teaching style, particularly the extent to which teachers are perceived to support students' autonomy and provide useful feedback about students' learning process. In accordance with the findings in educational psychology (eg., Deci & Ryan, 1985), Noels and his colleagues find that the degree of the teachers' support of student autonomy and the amount of informative feedback they provide has a significantly positive relationship with the students' intrinsic motivation (Noels et al., 1999).

Unfortunately little evidence can be found related to the effectiveness of Chinese teachers' feedback to their students. From the writer's own observation, his Chinese colleagues tend to mark their students' homework by showing graded or only provide vague feedback. Personally speaking, the present writer believes the teachers must make good use of external evaluation and feedback to direct their future efforts. Here are some ways the writer has often used:

a. Provide clear, specific and informative feedback. For example, we can give comments such as "The use of time sequence is quite good", or "You don't have topic sentences for your paragraphs", instead of just saying "good" or "bad".
b. Teach students to evaluate their own work or get advice from their peer learners.
c. Before giving a final grade or evaluation, talk with the students and listen to their

views of their own work and give them chances to rearrange their work.

Conclusion

This study examines classical motivational theories that originated in a western education context. The goal is to try to find out if those theories, especially the classification of motivation, can be applied directly into the Chinese EFK context. Based on the previous discussion, we have found that there are seven types of Chinese college learners' L2 motivation, as related to Gardner's classification, but they have very clear Chinese characteristics.

We go on to talk about the factors that may influence Chinese college students' L2 motivation, particularly in a classroom setting. Here the writer only discusses the factors from a very narrow perspective, focusing on the learners' goal setting and classroom teachers. Meanwhile, some strategies for classroom teachers are provided to help maintain the learners' L2 motivation.

One thing the author wants to emphasize is that human motivation is a highly complex issue. Even with the help of the theories, the teachers should observe, identify and explain students' behavior, and then use strategies to motivate their students to learn. Moreover, teachers should adopt different approaches for different groups of learners. The principles of effective teaching made in any book need to be adapted to each teacher's style and skills and to the specific characteristics of each group of students.

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