

# Motivational teaching as a relational practice: Three concepts, three connections

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Language teaching is all about relationships. As Earl Stevick famously put it, success in learning a language “depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom” (1980 p. 4). For the teacher, getting students engaged in learning activities, and involved in developing communicative competence, requires interpersonal skills. It requires the ability to create connections. In a systematic overview of the motivational dimension of language teaching, Lamb (2017) argues that it is “responsiveness”, a capacity founded on empathy and developed over years of practice, that “defines the successful motivator” (p. 312). Increasingly, researchers are coming to realize that language teaching may be best understood as a relational practice, and that students’ motivation is shaped not just by the things teachers do in the classroom, but also how they are as people (Mercer, 2016).

What, though, does responsiveness entail? How does it develop? And what are the characteristics of teaching that is relationally oriented? Drawing on ideas developed during work carried out in the Motivational Teaching in Swedish Secondary English (MoTiSSE) project (Henry, Sundqvist & Thorsen, 2019), I will explain how I understand motivational teaching as a *relational practice* and, in the context of teaching English in Sweden, how this involves connecting with students in three important ways: *first*, by creating learning activities that recognize and draw on students’ cultural experiences outside of school, *secondly*, by creating activities that enable students to work in ways and with tools that legitimize the types of creative interaction that take place in digital environments, and, *thirdly*, by creating positive teacher–student relationships through close and warm personal interactions. For each of these

three connections, I offer insights and examples from the MoTiSSE project. First, however, I will describe three useful concepts that can help us understand how motivational teaching is a relational practice.

## Concept 1: Connective instruction

The first concept is *connective instruction*. Developed by Andrew Martin and his colleagues at the University of New South Wales, connective instruction is part of an integrated model designed to show how achievement, motivation and educational practice can be understood in relational terms (Martin & Dowson, 2009). Rooted in this work, and in line with findings of research syntheses highlighting the importance of classroom relationships for students’ learning (Hattie, 2008), connective instruction suggests that students are likely to be more motivated, and more actively engaged in classroom work,

if they (i) connect with what the teacher is asking them to do, (ii) connect with the ideas underpinning the ways of working that the teacher encourages, and (iii) connect with the teacher as a person.

### **Concept 2: Perspective taking**

In connective teaching, the personal and professional capacities of the teacher come to the fore. As well as a personal relationship with the teacher, students need to connect with content that the teacher has chosen or identified (a substantive relationship), and the ways in which work is carried out in the classroom (a pedagogical relationship). Each of these three relationships is shaped by the teacher's capacity for *empathy*. Empathy lies at the core of interpersonal relationships (Davis, 1994). Not just about understanding, empathy is also about doing. In classroom learning, empathy is "the piece of the student-teacher interaction puzzle that connects what a teacher knows or thinks about students ... to what he or she actually *does* when negotiating appropriate responses to students' needs, or when the teacher is arranging learning experiences for students" (Warren, 2018, p 171). In teaching languages, where use of the language is the means through which skills are developed, empathy is exercised through *perspective taking*. Perspective taking involves the teacher's ability to adopt the student's perspective in all aspects of teaching. It is manifested in both *interactional* practices (i.e. moments of contact between student and teacher), and in *instructional* practices (the design of learning activities).

### **Concept 3: Funds of knowledge**

For many young people growing up in European countries today, English is a part of everyday life. Encounters and experiences with English beyond the classroom can be extensive (Sundqvist & Sylén, 2016). Rich and meaningful interactions can occur in networked environments.

Often, learning in the classroom takes place on a parallel basis with interactions with English online (Sockett, 2014). This means that teachers of English need to become attuned to the experiences students gain in networked environments, and develop ways of aligning curricula requirements and classroom learning with students' online encounters. While scholars working with language education have long been emphasizing the importance of bridging between experiences of language encounters in and beyond the classroom (e.g. Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008), the motivational influences of such bridging practices are only beginning to be explored.

One way of understanding how these connections can be motivational is through the concept of *funds of knowledge* (Esteban-Guitart, 2016; Subero, Vujasinovi & Esteban-Guitart, 2017). Funds of knowledge refer to the cultural frames and linguistic resources that young people bring to classrooms. Research shows that when teachers are responsive to students' lives beyond the classroom, and when popular cultural experiences are activated in learning, the points of contact that are created can support the development of targeted skills, and can function in ways that increase engagement and motivation. For young people in networked societies, funds of knowledge comprise digital literacy skills and knowledge generated through digitally-mediated communication. As Subero and colleagues (2017) explain, the activation of these resources "can help to connect school practice to the learning contexts and practices that take place at home, with peers and with those practices mediated by digital devices" (p. 260).

### **The MoTiSSE research**

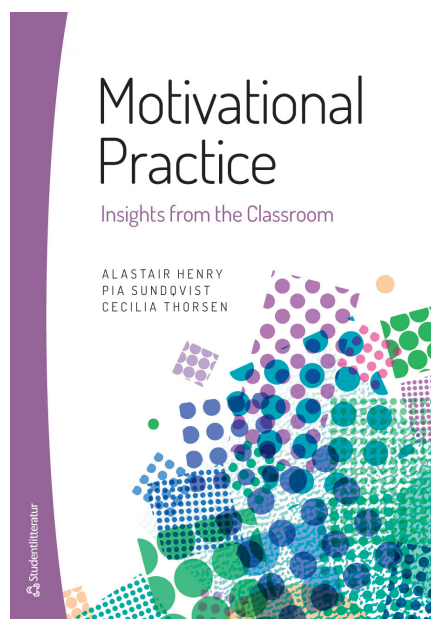
Having outlined these three concepts, I will explain how they are central to a motivational practice that is relationally oriented. First, however, I will briefly describe the MoTiSSE proj-

ect. Research was carried out in the classrooms of secondary English teachers in grades 6–9 in schools in the western part of Sweden. Taking an ethnographic approach, we observed the everyday work of eighteen teachers regarded as having a motivational practice, most of whom were identified in a randomized survey sent to 253 teachers. Roughly three weeks were spent with each teacher. In total, 258 lesson observations were carried out. Numerous interviews with the teachers and their students were conducted. We also collected lesson plans, and work students had produced. Findings illuminating aspects of the teachers' motivational practice have been published in a range of academic journals, and copies of these articles can be accessed via the project homepage (<https://www.hv.se/MoTiSSE>). There is also a book, which contains many examples of motivational activities (Henry, Sundqvist & Thorsen, 2019).

### **Connection 1 (the substantive relationship): Creating activities that recognize and draw on students' out-of-school cultural experiences**

In a context where English can form part of a young person's everyday life, activities that reference popular culture and encourage students to draw on experiences beyond the classroom can generate motivation, and stimulate engagement with learning activities. In each of the following examples, bridging between contexts of experience formed the centerpieces of the teacher's design.

In the unit 'Advertising', students investigated prejudice and stereotyping in media discourse. These abstract concepts were explored through connections with popular culture, and the activities drew on students' everyday engagement with media as a way of developing skills of intercultural interpretation and awareness. Students were encouraged to identify and analyse varying types of advertisement, and to use



knowledge about advertising genres to create an imaginary consumer who would be an ideal target for particular types of advertisement. At the end of the unit, students created their own advertisements, using forms of expression they themselves chose.

In a unit called 'Accents' students were provided with opportunities to encounter and explore various dialects of English. The theme was structured around a number of YouTube videos where the participants, often young people, came from different English-speaking countries. Each video was analysed phonetically. The teacher also directed students' attention to lexical and grammatical features. Students sometimes suggested watching a particular video they had seen online, and these films were also incorporated into the lesson. After watching and discussing the videos, students created a digital presentation about a dialect that interested them.

The unit 'Poetry' was carried out in a ninth-grade class. It involved exploring different types of rhyming verse. Students were hesitant about

working with the topic; they experienced poetry as abstract and intimidating. To make the unit work, the teacher intertwined unfamiliar poetic forms and popular culture genres. One example is how she introduced rhyming conventions through use of the ‘Roses are Red’ couplet. For the students, this rhyme was instantly recognizable as a high-circulation Internet meme parodying the poem’s original romantic sentiments. Aware of this fund of knowledge, the teacher invited students to create their own verses, which were first shared and commented on in a Facebook group, and then uploaded onto a blog. Through the meme, associations were triggered to discourses in social media. This facilitated language work – creating new lines – by making things accessible and appealing. In another lesson, the focus was on nursery rhymes. Like classical poetry, nursery rhymes also lacked immediate appeal. Here, as a means of triggering a positive response, the teacher encouraged the students to transition between genres, the nursery rhymes being transformed into more contemporary forms of expression, such as raps.

In all of these activities, students’ engagement can be understood in terms of the activation of “popular culture funds of knowledge” (Petrone, 2013), sensitivity to students’ media experiences being a consequence of this teacher’s highly-attuned perspective taking.

## **Connection 2 (the pedagogical relationship): Creating activities that enable students to work in ways that legitimize social interactions beyond the classroom**

For many students, learning about different text types (especially poetry) and the phonological and lexical characteristics of various dialects of English, might not have been inherently interesting. However, by making use of online media genres (user-generated video sharing,

blogging) and social media practices, a change was brought about in the conditions shaping students’ engagement. A more intense involvement with the activity arose. Engagement triggered in this way was seen most clearly when students created media artefacts – films, podcasts and blogs – in projects that involved imagined events and encouraged creativity.

In one project students spent a number of lessons blogging about travelling in an English-speaking country, and the various activities that took place. In another, students created a film about a city that would make a good tourist destination. Other activities involving media production included dramatizing scenes inspired by a text students had read, or a theme they had been working with. In one activity, students made a video introduction of the school for beginning students. In others, they recorded podcasts, radio programs, and created a digital depiction of ‘a day in their life’.

Activities of this sort, where students are provided with opportunities to use media skills and everyday digital technologies as a part of language learning, provide similar evidence of teachers’ perspective taking. By including cultural practices not normally associated with school, not only do these activities appeal to students’ out-of-school interests, they also legitimize modes of communication and interaction more normally characteristic of online leisure. Through the incorporation of digital resources in learning designs, and by drawing on funds of knowledge originating in online cultural practices, the activities enabled students to connect with a manner of working more generally characteristic of networked collaboration. Not only are such working forms familiar, they also provide opportunities for aesthetic self-expression and artistic control.

### Connection 3 (the interpersonal relationship): Creating positive teacher–student relationships through warmth in personal interactions

As we have seen, engagement generated by a particular activity can be understood in terms of the substantive relationship (*what* the teacher is asking students to do), and the pedagogical relationship (*how* the teacher encourages work to be done). However, to fully understand students' motivation, we need to also consider the interpersonal relationship (*who* is asking for the work to be done). Interpersonal relationships condition a student's response to an activity, and influence the meaning that they ascribe to it. As the MoTiSSE research progressed, we became increasingly aware of the importance of positive teacher–student relationships, and how the teachers we observed were actively involved in developing caring and trustful ties with their students. While on the one hand the teachers were highly focused on students' learning, and skilled in supporting language development and designing activities aligned with curriculum goals, they were also present, open, and available to students as caring people. Both in and outside of the classroom, their interactions with students demonstrated interest, curiosity, understanding, compassion and, above all, warmth. In lessons they took students' initiatives seriously; often a teacher would adapt, modify, or recalibrate a design to pursue an idea, or to accommodate a suggestion made by a student.

For their part, students were aware of their teacher's concern. They talked about the teacher's engagement with them as individuals, how the teacher could see things from their point of view, and how the teacher's motivation was something that shaped their own responses to learning. Of course, it is difficult to know how a teacher's *perspective taking* influences the motivation of specific students. There is however no doubting that it matters. It is on this note that I

would like to end the article, citing the words of a fifteen-year-old boy interviewed during the project. Asked about his motivation while writing an essay, he said he often thought about his warm, caring and trusting teacher:

*När man skriver, så tänker man på, alltså instruktionerna innan, följer dem och när man gör det... det är ju hon som har skrivit vad man ska göra, så gör man det, så är det ju som att lyssna på henne när man skriver till henne. Jag tror att det är lite både och, där faktiskt. Och att man tänker på [Läraren], också där hur man skriver. För när man skrev, man skriver bara mer och mer. Det är roligt och man vill uppnå något. Som [Läraren] vill att vi också ska göra. Så [uppgiften], det är en bra sak. Man vill ju nästan inte sluta skriva.*

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