

Language Learning: Switching Focus from Motivation to Habit

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INTRODUCTION

While it is possible to know what motivation is, one can never know for certain whether a student possess motivation or not. A lack of motivation is a convenient conclusion for a teacher to come to should a student fail to complete an assignment. The failure to learn lies with the student: they did not complete the work because they are unmotivated. However, there are many possible reasons why a student may not have completed the assignment. For example, how to complete the assignment could have been poorly explained by the teacher, there may have been some problem with the assignment that confused the student, or the assignment could have been at an inappropriate level (too challenging or too simple). It is impossible to know the extent to which motivation plays a part in a student's work. A student could be highly motivated, yet still not complete an assignment for one of the reasons listed above.

Furthermore, motivation is a very personal issue. While one student may be motivated to try hard on a weekly vocabulary test so that they can achieve a high grade, another student may find the tests boring and monotonous. The latter student may respond better to a more challenging and dynamic task, or the chance to use the vocabulary in a piece of writing or a conversation. Although measuring students by the same standards is certainly the simplest approach for teachers, it may not give an accurate reflection of their ability. Similarly, we should not assume that every student will be motivated to study English for the same reasons. Believing that English is the key to a fulfilling career, or that knowing English will facilitate international travel, may be weak incentives for some students.

This paper will argue that for language learning, the focus should transition away from the traditional reliance on motivation and towards the nurturing of a language-learning habit. Habits can lead students towards success in a way that vague language-learning goals that rely on motivation cannot. This paper will explore the psychology behind successfully creating and maintaining a language-learning habit.

1. THE PROBLEM WITH MOTIVATION

For decades, motivation has been viewed as a key factor in learning. Having salient goals to focus on helps learners to use effective learning strategies, take on challenges, and have a more positive attitude towards learning (Ames and Archer, 1988). When considering motivation, there are

two aspects to consider : intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation can be thought of as the internal push towards a goal, while extrinsic motivation is the external pull towards a goal (Oxford and Shearin, 1994). Intrinsic motivation is often believed to be more powerful because it connects with an individual at a deeper level, relating to their personal desire to achieve something. By contrast, extrinsic motivation is derived from outside factors, such as grades, praise from a teacher, and even tangible prizes, such as stickers, if a goal is achieved. The following sections describe some of the problematic issues regarding motivation.

1.1 Intrinsic motivation is hard to sustain

Intrinsic motivation is generated from the personal reasons that one has for doing something, and this requires deep thought (Oxford and Shearin, 1994). Students must rationalise their behaviour and think about the potential future benefits of their behaviour. For language learning, intrinsic motivation is difficult to sustain because the process of language learning slow and improvement is often imperceptible. A compounding factor is the nature of language learning in schools. Students are always at the edge of their knowledge, learning new vocabulary, phrases, and grammar, without having the chance to appreciate the level of competence that they have reached. A talented student may achieve 80 percent in all their class exams from junior high school through until the end of university, but they are never able to grasp the amount of language that they have acquired over those years as they tend to focus on the 20 percent that they did not answer correctly in their tests. Today's students are also of a generation who demand instant gratification. Thanks to the Internet, communication, access to knowledge, and entertainment are all instantly available. In order to maintain intrinsic motivation, students today want to know immediately that they are making progress. The prospect of achieving a distant goal is simply not appealing.

1.2 Extrinsic motivation can be damaging

With intrinsic motivation being hard to foster and to sustain, schools have developed extensive methods which utilise extrinsic motivation by way of tests and semester grades. This focus on extrinsic motivation can actually erode intrinsic motivation and create a dependency on the extrinsic reward. Students have been programmed to work only to gain a reward or avoid a punishment. In Japan, elementary and junior high school students are commonly rewarded with small stickers after completing a task. This provides a momentary spike in excitement and can encourage students to complete the work, but the satisfaction felt by the student is tied to the acquisition of a new sticker for their collection, and not to having successfully completed their English assignment. Also, in order to sustain this level of student work, teachers find themselves under pressure to acquire new and more elaborate stickers, which can be a time-consuming and expensive process (many teachers will pay for these stickers using their own money). The students have been pushed through English classes using these external motivators with little consideration for their intrinsic motivation. Once these incentives are removed, we see that students lose their motivation to work (Shindler, 2013). Essentially, the students have been trained to only perform if there is something to be gained from their effort. If we focus too much on pushing, then the natu-

ral reaction of the students is resistance (Tran and Baldauf Jr., 2007).

2. FOCUS ON HABIT

We want the students to move forward willingly, but to achieve this we need to understand that the goal of language learning cannot be achieved by focusing on motivation alone. Perhaps by consider the day-to-day mechanics of learning as a behaviour, we might be able to offer the students the tools they need to develop their language abilities in the long-term.

2.1 Focus on a study system, not a goal

Motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, must have a clear goal in mind, whether it is achieving a high score in an end-of-term test, or learning English to a level that will enable a student to travel and work abroad. However, these goals are unattainable without a system to pave the way. The nature of language learning is that it is a long-term challenge. Focusing on a goal, especially a rather ambitious and distant goal, can be intimidating. Mastery or fluency, which many students strive for, can feel so far from their grasp that they are paralysed into inaction; they simply do not know how or where to begin. A clear system that allows them to work regularly and consistently towards that goal is needed. However, a manageable, daily habit of language learning does not require the learner to focus on the broader goal, but rather the simple task of completing the work assigned for today.

Returning to the idea of instant reward for work done, this is exactly what a well-planned study habit can provide. It enables students to say to themselves that they have done what they set-out to do that day; they have taken a step forward by completing that day's assignment. Negative thoughts of "I can't speak English well" or "English is impossible" are replaced by the satisfaction of successfully completing a short, achievable task.

2.2 Creating and maintaining a habit is a transferrable skill

If we understand confidence to be a behaviour successfully repeated over time, then it follows that a habit can create confidence. Habits can instil important skills in a student, such as planning, determination, and an awareness of the importance of routine. So much can be achieved through the simple behaviour of "turning up" and doing the work that has been assigned. This a skill that can be applied to many other behaviours in different aspects of a student's life, and to gain such an insight at a young age is vitally important.

2.3 Habits can foster a growth mindset

As mentioned earlier, motivation is intangible, and it can be difficult to know if a student is motivated or not. A student may not have clear motivation for studying English, which can lead them to believe that will never achieve that goal. However, with a carefully-planned habit, students can move slowly towards that goal. What needs to be nurtured is a growth mindset. Students need to develop a belief in their ability to perform a task and achieve a goal, rather than having a fixed

mindset, which means that they believe that their intelligence or talent is a fixed quality that cannot change (Dweck, 2016). Goals are still vital, but they need to be re-thought. Rather than having the ill-defined goal of fluency, students set themselves the smaller, easily-measurable goal of doing today's work. This is something that is clearly achievable and within their control. By repeatedly doing today's work, the students learn that they can achieve what they set out to achieve. The students can begin to feel in control and focused, rather than rudderless.

Of course, motivation is required for a student to complete the task of the day, but it is a markedly different level of motivation. It is the satisfaction of completing the small amount of work that creates the motivation to repeat the process the following day. Importantly, the task each day must be manageable and measurable. The student must know what they have to do and that there is a high chance that they will be able to do it. This is what encourages the student to turn-up again the following day and complete the next step in their journey. Students will often say that they cannot speak English, or that their English skills are weak, but perhaps their journey towards gaining the skill has not been well-planned; they do not know where they are on the journey and they do not know in which direction to take their next step. This is why a carefully-planned habit is needed.

3. FROM BEHAVIOUR TO HABIT

It is important to distinguish between a habit and a behaviour. While a behaviour is any action that we do, a habit is a repeated behaviour that has become automatic. We consider brushing our teeth as a habit; it is behaviour that we do not need to devote much thought to, it is merely a behaviour that we do at certain times of day. By analysing this habit, we can deconstruct what a habit actually is. There are three parts to a habit: a cue, a behaviour, and a reward (Duhigg, 2013).

Cue

A habit begins with a cue. In the case of brushing your teeth, the cue typically takes one of two forms. One possible cue is the time of day, where people brush their teeth in the morning and at night. Other people will brush their teeth after each main meal, so they brush their teeth after breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The cue for this group is that they have completed a behaviour, namely eating. Whichever system is being used, the pattern is the same: there is a clear cue that tells the person that it is time to brush their teeth. This removes any real thought from the behaviour, and the person does not have to engage higher-level brain functions to decide to brush their teeth, the behaviour naturally follows.

Behaviour

After the cue, we have the behaviour itself. Brushing your teeth may be a simple behaviour, but there are important elements that should be highlighted. First of all, the activation level is low. The activation level is the effort required to begin a behaviour. The toothbrush and toothpaste are al-

ways easily accessible and are located together, next to the bathroom sink. This means that we can be brushing our teeth within seconds of arriving at the bathroom sink. However, if the activation level were high, we would be less likely to conduct the behaviour. For example, if the toothpaste were kept in the refrigerator and the toothbrush were in a locked box in a drawer in the living room, the activation level would be much higher we would be less likely to brush our teeth. If something is too much trouble, no matter how important it is, we are less likely to do it. If the gym is a short walk from our home, we are more likely to go regularly than if it were a 45-minute bus ride away.

Reward

The final part of the habit loop is the reward. The reward for brushing our teeth, apart from having beautiful white teeth (a long-term reward), is the immediate feeling of cleanliness and freshness. The mint flavour of the toothpaste gives us the sense that our teeth are clean. We also have a slight tingling sensation after brushing our teeth, which makes us believe that the toothpaste is tackling on the dental plaque on our teeth, and that the film of bacteria has been removed. The truth is that the tingling sensation is not part of the cleaning process. Toothpaste manufacturers add chemicals to toothpaste that cause mild irritation (tingling) to our gums, which make us believe that the toothpaste is working (Duhigg, 2013). For us, this sensation, and the belief connected with it, is our immediate reward (see figure 1).

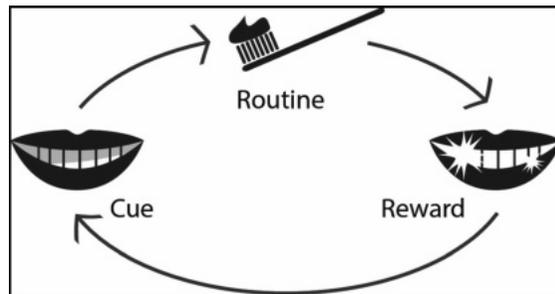


Figure 1. The habit loop

We can break down any habit into the three components of cue, behaviour, and reward. Serious problems, such as alcoholism, can result from habit loops : frustration with work or a spouse can be a cue that leads to the behaviour of drinking at home or going to a bar. The reward in this habit loop is the temporary relief through drunkenness or companionship shared with fellow drinkers. Similarly, momentary boredom can be a cue for checking your smartphone for new emails or Line messages, and the reward is some interesting, important or amusing information that relieves that moment of boredom. Similarly, positive behaviours, such as exercise, can follow this pattern, too : finish work (cue), go to the gym on the way home (behaviour), a rush of endorphins (reward). The important element here is that the reward is immediate, not delayed.

4. CREATING A HABIT

The challenge we face is how we can utilise the habit loop to design an English study habit for our students. The following are some considerations.

4.1 Cue

The easiest cue for the behaviour is time, simply because it is a constant. The time could be first thing in the morning, last thing at night, lunchtime, or after dinner. The important thing is that the time is decided in advance and that it works for the student. For cues that are at a specific time of day, a smartphone alarm reminder can be useful. One potential problem is that on some days, a specific time may be inconvenient. If another activity has been scheduled at that time, the behaviour may be skipped, which may lead to skipping the behaviour again in the future. However, a cue such as first thing in the morning is different. Our morning, before we leave our home, is ours. We control everything that happens before we officially start our day, provided that we can get out of bed early enough ; this may require creating another habit for going to bed early to get a full night's sleep. Scheduling study for first thing in the morning increases the chances that the behaviour will happen, but it can also help to start the day on a positive note of having already achieved something.

4.2 Behaviour

Of course, the behaviour should be studying English, but some conditions need to be met. Firstly, the activation level must be low. Everything that is needed to begin studying should be easily accessible and ready for use. If books and writing implements have to be gathered from different locations within an apartment, and free space has to be created on a crowded desk, then it is unlikely that studying will happen. By contrast, if the study area is tidy and the study materials kept nearby and are ready for use at a moment's notice, then the activation level for studying is much lower.

A simple behaviour that we can employ is to ensure that, after studying, the study is returned to its original state and that it is ready for the next study session. Books and notepads are returned to folders and writing implements are put in their place. By introducing this notion of returning the study area to its neutral state, the students can ensure that the activation level for studying remains low. While this may be troublesome for a student in a small apartment, studying at the university library ensures that the area is always ready for study. However, in that case, the activation level is higher because the student now must travel to the library to study and bring all the necessary materials with them each time.

The second condition that must be met is that the behaviour should be manageable. If we use the analogy of someone who wants to start going to the gym, it would be foolish to begin with a target of attending the gym for one hour, five days every week. This commitment in time and in physical effort is simply too high as a starting point. When the person inevitably fails to meet

their target, they will become frustrated, dejected and probably stop attending the gym altogether. However, if the person sets an initial target of attending the gym twice a week or three times a week, and perhaps taking a brisk 30-minute walk outside on days when they do not attend the gym, then they are more likely to achieve their target, and therefore be motivated to continue. If the bar for success is set too high, then failure is more likely, but there is a balance that must be found ; if the bar is too low, then no real development will occur. For that reason, we need to find activities that are achievable and that provide the greatest return on time investment. Also, some activities are more challenging than others. For example, watching a YouTube video is a passive activity and easier than working through a unit in a grammar textbook, or writing an essay. As a short, regular study activity for students, I would recommend reading a graded reader for 20 minutes. These books can be entertaining and informative, providing not only the chance to review old grammar and vocabulary, but also to learn new vocabulary and grammar at a level and pace that is appropriate for the learner. So, with activation levels in mind, a book should be readily available and the place for reading should be quiet, comfortable, and devoid of distractions, even if that means using headphones to create neutral background noise. Noisli (2018) (see figure 2) and Coffitivity (2018) are two of the many mobile applications that help users to focus their attention and block-out distracting background noise.

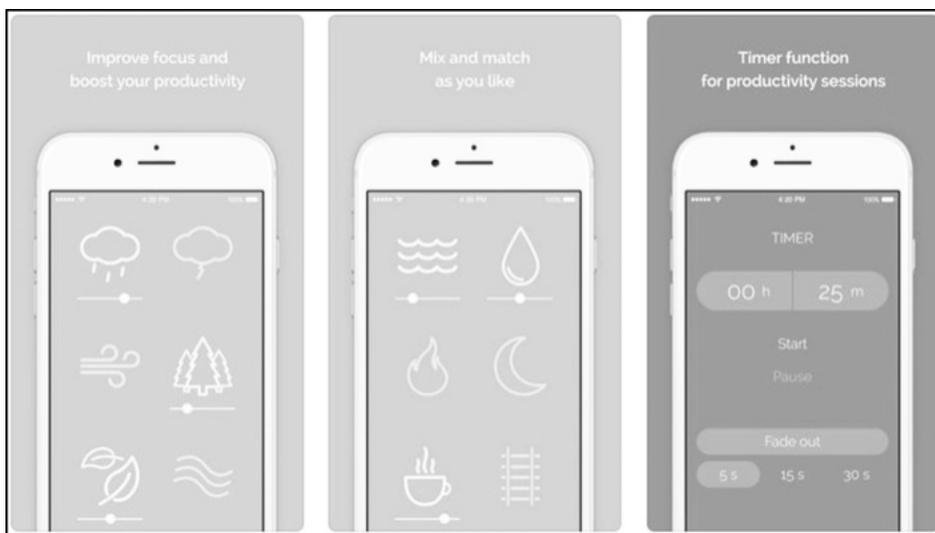


Figure 2. Noisli creates background noise to promote relaxation and concentration.

The third thing to consider is that content to be studied must be decided in advance. If a student knows *when* they will study, *where* they will study, but not *what* they will study, then every time they sit down to study, they will waste a few minutes deciding what to work on. The result will often be that the work done is not taking the student forward in any constructive way. This is where having a schedule of activities or tasks becomes important.

4.3 Reward

The reward for studying can take various forms and depends on the student. For example, a student could reward themselves with some kind of treat, such as drinking a delicious cup of coffee, making a telephone call to a friend, or watching 10 minutes of YouTube videos. However, the student must understand the rule that reward comes after their study session. This clearly involves a degree of self-discipline, as there is nothing to stop the student from enjoying their reward unearned. However, if the study task is carefully selected and not too challenging, hopefully the student will complete that first.

4.3.1 Gamification

Reward can also take the form of a game. Gamification can be defined as “the use of game mechanics and experience design to digitally engage and motivate people to achieve their goals” (Burke, 2014). This allows students to experience entertaining and engaging elements of games in non-gaming situations, such as learning a language. One tool that employs this concept well is Duolingo (Duolingo, 2018). Duolingo is a language-learning platform, available online or via smartphone application, which uses the ideas of streaks to encourage learners to keep returning to the platform to study. Daily reminders are sent to users asking them to complete short, five-minute lessons. If the user completes all the questions for the day, then another day is added to their streak. Other elements of gamification that are used include : a *skill tree*, in which user can see what skills they have completed and what is still to be done ; lessons must be *unlocked*, meaning that the students must earn the right to complete new lessons (this can be seen as a reward for hard work) ; *lingots* (the currency in Duolingo) allow the user to buy power-ups, such as a *Streak Freeze*, which allows them to miss one day without losing their current streak ; and *Double or Nothing*, which allows them to gamble some lingots on whether they can complete a seven-day streak.

Duolingo is a free application, and it has advantages and disadvantages. It can certainly help the students to develop a study habit. It satisfies many of the conditions that have been discussed earlier, such as providing a cue, an achievable task with a low activation level, and a reward in the form of lingots or streaks. A disadvantage of Duolingo is that the types of activities available are somewhat limited. There are no extensive reading or extensive listening activities, for example, and the audio in the application is computer-generated, rather than spoken by a human. However, in my experience of using Duolingo with students, they have responded positively to its gamification features, and this is particularly the low-level students who perhaps feel disillusioned with conventional English lessons.

However, it is possible to create a similar experience for students if we take the time to plan it. If we can design a habit and consider the cue, behaviour, and reward, then we can have much more control over what we do in our daily lives. Over time, the behaviour should become habit in the most real sense, something that is done automatically, without too much thought, and something that makes the day complete.

4.3.2 Streaks

If we can take the idea of streaks from Duolingo, but choose our own study activities, then we have very powerful study tool. Streaks can encourage students to maintain a study behaviour for a series of consecutive days, with the hope that they may feel pride in their achievement and want to maintain that streak. Again, this may not work for all students, but provided that the tasks are manageable, they may find that the challenge of maintaining a streak is quite motivating. Today, there are many smartphone applications related to productivity that can help with the tracking of daily habits. Applications like Productive (Productive, 2018) (see figure 3), and Streaks (Streaks, 2018) allow users to identify the behaviours that they want to complete and then applications send a timely reminder to complete the behaviours. Simply tap or swipe to indicate that the behaviour has been completed and the graph or chart showing how often each behaviour has been successfully completed, and for how many consecutive days, will be updated.

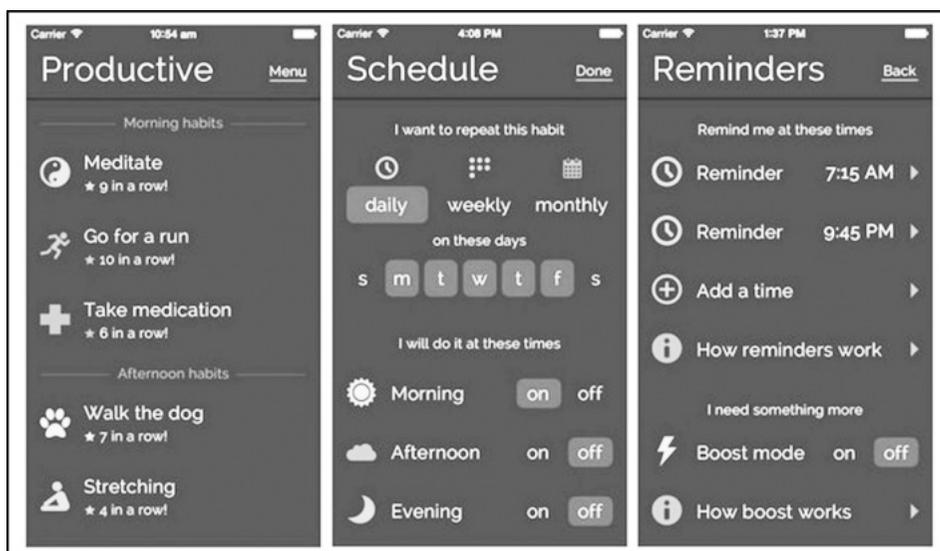


Figure 3. Productive is an application to help identify and maintain habits

CONCLUSION

The benefit of having a well-planned habit, from cue through to reward, is that a student can distance themselves from the intimidating goal of language mastery or language fluency. Removing this burden allows the student to enjoy small victories each day by simply turning-up and completing their work. As the proverb states, a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Likewise, the journey towards language proficiency is made up of a single step repeated. Motivation is needed to continue stepping each day, but it is the motivation to complete a single, achievable step, without having to contemplate complete mastery.

With habits, it is helpful to think of the efficiency of studying. The goal is to reduce the friction

that can often prevent studying from happening. If we can identify where friction occurs, we can reduce it. This is more actionable than asking students to dig deep and find their true motives for studying English. This is especially true for younger students, who may be unable to connect the hard work of studying now with rewards in the distant future. Furthermore, lower-level students, who may be entirely demotivated with regards to studying English, suddenly find that the goal has become a small, daily, achievable task that can provide them with an instant reward and satisfaction that they cannot gain when focused on a distant goal.

Habits, both good and bad, are automatic and they are often sub-conscious. They may not be actively designed, yet they evolve and, in a sense, design us. Now that we have a better understanding of how habits form, we can reflect on how we should advise students about their study habits. By stepping back from what they are currently doing and thinking about how their study routine is planned out, students may be able to create a healthier studying environment that promotes study.

Lastly, for the current generation of students, distraction is a fundamental problem. The ability to set aside time for deep work without thinking about social media or checking for new emails is something that many students struggle to do. There is a social pressure to respond quickly to the messages that one receives, but that can disrupt a period of concentration. The Internet and smartphones are designed to keep us engaged and consuming their content as much as possible, and addiction is a word often used to describe our relationship with our devices. We need to help students plan in order to create sacred time for studying. Understanding how to create and maintain a study habit, and the different elements involved, is a necessary skill, not just for their life as a student, but for their life in general. Once a study habit has been designed and maintained, the students should start to see the benefits of sustained study. Moreover, by taking control of their studying behaviour, they will develop self-efficacy and improve how they approach future goals, tasks, and challenges.

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