

How Relevant is Relevance?: An Examination of Student Needs, Interests, and Motivation in the Content-Based University Classroom

- This article reports on two ethnographic studies that investigated student motivation in content-based ESL classrooms at a major U.S. university. The ESL population studied included immigrant and international students who were enrolled in the advanced level of the university's ESL service courses. The ESL course materials consisted of videotaped academic lectures from university content courses (i.e., history, communication studies) and excerpts from authentic course texts as part of an academic skills-based instructional sequence. Students were motivated through attention/interest, relevance, confidence, and satisfaction, according to a motivational theory of instructional design. Classroom observations and interviews as well as examination of existing documents revealed that relevance of ESL materials and tasks was indeed motivating to a wide variety of students but that the other aspects of motivation were of equal if not greater importance. These findings lead to the belief that skills-based ESL courses in content areas of high general interest, in which instructors emphasize the relevance of materials and tasks, can do much to enhance student motivation and academic achievement in both ESL and content course work.

Curriculum designers, educators, and researchers have long searched for effective ways to facilitate and expedite language acquisition. With the shift towards methodologies focused on language use, such as the language for specific purposes movement (LSP), and away from those focused on language usage, such as grammar translation, the relationship between the content of second language instruction and learners' educational goals has come under careful scrutiny. One recent curricular innovation which claims to achieve this match is content-based instruction (CBI). Underlying both the LSP and CBI movements is the premise that providing language learners with subject matter relevant to their real world needs will motivate them to acquire the language associated with those needs as well.

Proponents of LSP and its English language equivalent, English for specific purposes (ESP), however, have learned the hard way that relevance alone may not always motivate students:

... Teachers are realising that purpose-built ESP courses lacking some general components can be boring and demotivating to the very students they were especially designed for. It could well be that teachers, course book writers and programme designers have been guilty of focusing too much on the desired *end-product*, without giving enough thought to the *process* of achieving it. (Kennedy & Bolitho, 1984, pp. 136-7)

This insight from the ESP literature, i.e., that designing curricula around the notion of relevance alone does not guarantee student satisfaction, is an important one to keep in mind when investigating CBI and its underlying premises. The lingering suspicion when noting the purpose of such curricula and the claims made by CBI curriculum designers is that they may well be falling into the same trap. Thus an investigation of the notion of relevance as it applies to CBI is in order.

The American university English as a second language (ESL) setting is a particularly interesting one in which to examine the dimensions of relevance and need satisfaction given the widely varying backgrounds of the current university student population, which consists of significant numbers of both immigrant and international students (Kayfetz, Cordaro, & Kelly, 1988; Zikopoulos, 1990).¹ In spite of such diversity in the university ESL context, instructional approaches such as CBI and LSP assume that meeting student needs (i.e., relevance) is both motivating and attainable. Indeed, proponents of CBI claim that "even though learner language needs and interests may not always coincide, the use of informational content which is perceived as relevant by the learner is assumed by many to increase motivation in the language course. ..." (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989, p. 3). The broad purpose of this paper is to examine this assumption by focusing on the relationship between motivation and instructional design with special attention to the role of relevance.

Motivation and Second Language Acquisition

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), the study of motivation has been largely limited to variations on the sociopsychological approach of Gardner and Lambert (1959, 1972), whose notions of instrumental and integrative motivation have dominated the literature for decades.² Instrumental motivation and motivation based on relevance share characteristics of perceived functionality and utility for students who are learning a second language. Nevertheless, Gardner and his followers have generally considered

integrative motivation superior to instrumental motivation as a support for second language learning (Crookes & Schmidt, 1989, p. 219). Crookes and Schmidt argue that in the field of SLA, past research emphasizes on naturalistic, subconscious second language learning and a concurrent lack of classroom-based research on motivation have made the adoption of more instructionally oriented definitions and theories of motivation both difficult and unlikely. They do emphasize, however, that the time is right for a more practical, interdisciplinary approach to motivation in SLA.

Motivation and Instructional Design

From educational psychology, Keller's (1983, 1987) motivational theory of instructional design provides at least a theoretical basis for looking at motivation and relevance in the classroom. Motivation, according to Keller (1983), "is the neglected 'heart' of our understanding how to design instruction" (p. 390). His motivational-design model divides motivation into four conditions: interest, relevance, expectancy, and satisfaction. The most fundamental of these for the purpose of this study is relevance, which Keller claims "refers to the learner's perception of personal need satisfaction in relation to the instruction, or whether a highly desired goal is perceived to be related to the instructional activity" (p. 395). As is evident from this definition, relevance refers not only to the satisfaction of instrumental needs, that is "when the content of a lesson or course matches what the student needs to learn" (Crookes & Schmidt, 1989, p. 228), but also to the satisfaction of personal-motive needs such as achievement and affiliation, or the need to interact with others (Keller, 1983, p. 408). In second language course design, instrumental needs are often ascertained through needs analyses, whereas needs for achievement and affiliation are often part of the rationale for such course activities as individual contracting and group work (Keller, 1983).

Relevance of Content to Student Needs

As previously noted, it is not uncommon for curriculum developers to incorporate the needs of learners into the instructional design of language courses. Most often, this is achieved through formal and informal needs analyses. As we have seen, early practitioners of ESP may have placed too much emphasis on what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) call *target needs* (i.e., what learners need to do in the target situation) and not enough on their *learning needs* (i.e., what they need to do in order to learn). CBI, on the other hand, purports to balance both types of students' needs by combining subject matter instruction with skills-based second language instruction. Indeed, proponents argue that content-based courses are

... based directly on the academic needs of the students and generally follow the sequence determined by a particular subject matter in dealing with the language problems which students encounter. The focus for the students is on acquiring information via the second language and, in the process, developing their second language skills. (Brinton et al., 1989, p. 2)

In emphasizing both content instruction and second language skills, CBI attempts to meet both students' target and learning needs and to address students' relevance concerns based on instrumental and personal motives.

An Examination of the Relevance Assumption

From the background literature, it appears that several basic assumptions underlie CBI. First, the approach assumes that learners in a given academic setting will have similar linguistic needs. It also assumes that curriculum designers are able to identify those needs as well as create appropriate lessons from content materials to meet them. Finally, as has been indicated from the outset, an underlying assumption of CBI is that relevance is motivating, that is, that meeting the needs and goals of learners through subject matter instruction will motivate students to learn. The two studies reported on in this article examine this last assumption in an actual content-based, university ESL classroom. Specifically, three research questions were addressed: (a) What do university ESL students perceive their academic language needs to be?; (b) Given these perceived needs, to what degree is there a match between the CBI curriculum and students' stated needs?; and (c) Do students indeed find the content-based curriculum relevant and motivating?

Methodology

Setting and Program Description

To investigate the role relevance plays in influencing student attitudes towards a given language curriculum, we chose to examine the advanced level of the UCLA ESL Service Courses, which purports to meet students' real world academic needs through the use of content-based units. Participants in this program are concurrently enrolled students held by the university for an ESL requirement; thus, they are working towards their degree goals while improving their academic English language skills. Given this concurrent enrollment, the program's multiskill curriculum incorporates language skills that are deemed to be most relevant to the students' academic goals, as determined by experience and expert opinion rather than

a formal needs analysis. Since the ESL course participants come from a wide range of disciplines, have varying degree goals, and have experienced widely different exposure to academic English, a true adjunct, in which all students are enrolled in the same linked ESL/content courses, is not feasible.

Instead the curriculum, henceforth referred to as the simulated adjunct, combines elements from a true adjunct with those of a theme-based model. It is considered a simulated adjunct in that the academic content-based units used in the ESL course consist of authentic video lectures taken from UCLA undergraduate general education courses, and the actual reading and writing assignments designated by the content professor. For example, a videotaped lecture on media and the First Amendment, from an introductory course in communication studies, combined with the corresponding readings, form an argumentation unit in the advanced-level ESL class. Following practice with listening comprehension, notetaking, and reading strategies based on the videotaped lecture and readings, students write a persuasive essay on a topic relevant to the First Amendment. They also participate in a debate structured around an issue brought up in the lecture. In the advanced-level sections we studied, two academic modules were used: one based on an introductory lecture from a western civilization course, and the second from the communication studies unit just described.

Procedures

Two independent studies were conducted simultaneously in the winter quarter of 1991. Study 1 employed questionnaires, observations, and interviews in four sections of an advanced-level ESL course. The goal was to get an overview of students' perceived needs and their views on the efficacy of the instructional sequence in meeting those needs. Through weekly observations and interviews, Study 2 focused in depth on one section of the same course. The studies are described in more detail below.

In Study 1, three questionnaires were administered to identify students' perceived needs and satisfaction with the curriculum. The first, an open-ended, precourse questionnaire administered in the first week of the course ($n = 88$), collected demographic information, such as degree goal, major, and previous experience with ESL, EFL and CBI³ and elicited areas of students' perceived needs. Students' responses to the final question, "What academic abilities and skills do you need to be successful in your courses at UCLA?" were tallied, and the most frequently mentioned skills were incorporated into a second, Likert-scale survey. Administered during the second week of classes ($n = 76$), this survey asked students to rate the importance of these skill areas for academic success. A postcourse questionnaire ($n = 65$), in which students were asked to rate the emphasis given

in the instructional sequence to these same skill areas and the helpfulness of instruction in meeting their academic language needs, was given the final week of the academic quarter.

Study 2, as noted above, employed both weekly, participant observations and in-depth interviews to investigate the same issues as Study One. However, while Study One broadly surveyed students without a previously stated theoretical frame, Study 2 focused primarily on student needs and reactions ethnographically⁴ in light of existing theories of motivation and relevance.

Both studies employed observations as a primary data source. Participant observation allowed the researchers to view the curriculum in use and get a sense for the motivational level of the students vis-a-vis instructional activities. Study 1 focused on how students interacted with course materials and each other. Each of the four class sections was randomly observed at least four times during the 10-week quarter. In Study 2, the second researcher routinely observed one section's class meetings on a weekly basis, in order to monitor general motivational level and student reaction to the curriculum.

In both studies, observations yielded information on student personality type, and were used to identify possible interview candidates. The researchers found that some students were consistently voluble and active during class time, while others participated very little. Taking volubility and activity as a sign of possible motivation and interest (cf. Maehr, 1982; Stipek, 1988), students from both high and low volubility groups were selected for in-depth interviews.

In addition, students were selected on the basis of length of stay in the U.S. to ascertain whether interest and motivation were related to previous exposure to academic English. In Study 1, the researcher interviewed 36 students both individually and in small groups using a loosely structured interview guide derived from observed student reactions to the instructional sequence. In Study 2, eight individual, in-depth interviews were conducted using a highly structured interview guide designed to elicit student needs, reactions to the curriculum, and motivations.⁵

Additional attitudinal information was obtained from students' midterm evaluations and informal journal entries in both studies. The midterm evaluations ($n = 78$), administered during the sixth week of the quarter, asked students to rate instructional activities and materials on a three-point usefulness scale. Students also rated the time spent on global skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar, and vocabulary) on a five-point scale, ranging from *not enough* (1) to *too much* (5). This midterm evaluation included three open-ended queries on likes, dislikes, and suggestions for improving the course. Journal entries, in response to such instructor generated prompts as "How module #1 helped me to be a success at UCLA" ($n = 21$) and "If you could design an English class for a group of

students exactly like you, what would the class be like?" ($n = 19$), were a rich source of student commentary on needs and interests. Both provided valuable information regarding students' perceptions of the relevance of the curriculum to their needs.

Results

Student Needs

Students expressed a wide range of achievement and affiliative needs on a variety of measures. In the academic domain, based on the questionnaire data from Study 1 (see Table 1), the most frequently expressed need was for writing instruction and practice, a finding which was later confirmed in the in-depth interviews. Reading comprehension was the second most highly rated skill area. In addition, reading speed was identified as a *somewhat important* skill, although one not as highly ranked as reading comprehension. A third area of perceived need was for listening comprehension, judged by 76% to be *very important*. It is interesting to note that while this finding is supported by the interview data, a strong endorsement of the need for listening comprehension was more often expressed by international students. Not surprisingly, many immigrant students, given their aural proficiency, felt that listening comprehension was of lesser importance. However, many of those same students felt that study skills, such as notetaking, outlining, and test taking, were more important for their academic success. Another perceived need frequently expressed in student journals and interviews was the need for knowledge of grammar. The following excerpt from a Vietnamese immigrant's journal is illustrative of the attitude many students hold regarding the curricular importance of both grammar and writing:

If I could design an English class for a group of students who are all equally leveled in all academic abilities as I am, I would specifically focus on grammars [*sic*] and witting [*sic*] abilities. Everyone knows that to be successful in the real world, you must earn your audience's respect by expressing your point of view in good sense and be able to persuade them with your words.

Similar findings were reflected in the questionnaire data (Table 1), with 62% feeling that grammar was *very important*. Another skill noted for its importance was that of speaking, although once again this skill appeared more important to the international than to the immigrant students. A final category to note is that of vocabulary. Although on the first open-ended survey, this skill category was not initially identified by students as being important for academic success, vocab-

Table 1**Student Perceived Needs**

SKILL AREA	Importance			
	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important	Not At All Important
Writing	89%	11%	0%	0%
Reading Comprehension	87%	12%	1%	0%
Reading Speed	47%	46%	7%	0%
Listening Comprehension	76%	20%	4%	0%
Notetaking	64%	33%	3%	0%
Grammar	62%	34%	4%	0%
Vocabulary	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Speaking: Formal	50%	38%	12%	0%
Speaking: Informal	20%	48%	28%	4%

Note: (n = 65)

ulary later proved to be an area of great concern for many of the students, as indicated by observations, interviews and the midterm evaluations.

Affiliative needs emerged as another important area of student needs, primarily through classroom ethnographic observations employed in the second study. Observed student behavior and interview data indicated that the students enjoyed interacting with each other and being part of groups both in the ESL class and out. Indicators of this need ranged from students' preference to be interviewed together to anecdotes of the importance of groups in dealing with university academic life. One Taiwanese international student, for example, told of how classmates would intervene with professors who had difficulty understanding her. She added that this sense of group is particularly important in the ESL class: "We are in the same class and should know each other ... make friends with each other." While affiliative needs were vital for some individuals, for the majority of students they were not as highly stressed as the achievement needs.

Student Needs and the Curriculum

Now that the academic and affiliative needs of students have been described, it is important to examine the relevance of the curriculum to these needs, in other words to look at the match between students'

perceived needs and the instructional sequence, in order to begin looking at the motivational potential of the curriculum and instruction. Both strong and weak matches were found in the academic domain between students' perceived needs and the instructional sequence, whereas in the area of affiliation, interesting data regarding the role of groups and the instructor emerged.

Strong curricular matches to student needs were found in the areas of academic writing and reading. Eighty-one percent of students felt that the instructional emphasis placed on these two important skill areas was *about right* (see Table 2). There was a similar match between perceived needs and curriculum in terms of notetaking and listening skills. Seventy-one percent of the students surveyed at the end of the course rated notetaking skills as highly emphasized. In the interviews, several students commented that this particular aspect of the course really "helped me with other courses." As for listening comprehension, 79% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the present level of emphasis placed on listening in the instructional sequence.

Table 2**Match of Curriculum to Student Needs**

SKILL AREA	Emphasis/Time Spent On		
	Too Much	About Right	Not Enough
Writing	3%	81%	16%
Reading	5%	81%	14%
Listening	4%	79%	17%
Notetaking ^a	N/A	N/A	N/A
Speaking	1%	52%	47%
Grammar	0%	53%	47%
Vocabulary	0%	40%	60%

Note: (n = 78)

^a Although an evaluation of student perceptions of the emphasis placed on notetaking was not included on the midterm evaluations, an emphasis scale on the third questionnaire in Study 1 (n = 65) did include this skill category. Seventy-one percent of the students indicated that notetaking was *highly* emphasized in the curriculum; 25% felt the skill was *somewhat* emphasized, and 4% felt the study skill was *not very* emphasized.

However, weaker matches were found for other areas of perceived needs, namely those of grammar, vocabulary and speaking. Forty-seven percent of the students claimed that there was *not enough* time spent on grammar instruction. The interview data showed a certain level of frustration with the lack of overt grammar instruction, especially among the long-term immigrant students. A second area of frustration was vocabulary: On the midterm evaluations, 60% of the students felt that not enough class time was spent on vocabulary activities. One student wrote: "I think an efficient way of building vocabulary would be very useful, i.e., more direct work on vocabulary." However, during the interviews, a Yugoslavian international student summed up his views of the content-based nature of the instructional sequence as follows: "Writing is most present [and] through that writing I improve vocabulary. ... [there is] maybe less [emphasis on] grammar, but [I] have to pay attention [to grammar] in writing." For this student, who was somewhat exceptional in his understanding of the CBI model, the need for overt grammar and vocabulary instruction was unnecessary. As for the final academic area of speaking, 47% of the students responded that there were *not enough* activities in the instructional sequence to help them improve their oral skills.

Group interaction in the classroom did, however, allow students an opportunity to practice their informal speaking skills and to satisfy their affiliative needs. Classroom observations revealed that group work was an integral part of instruction, although not all students found it to be especially beneficial in terms of academic success. The classroom configuration of six square tables—each seating four students facing one another—marked a sharp contrast to the traditional university classroom with rows of seats facing a blackboard and lectern. This configuration gave the impression that discussion and cooperative work were encouraged, an impression confirmed by both interviews and midterm evaluations. When asked to describe the class in the structured interviews, one student mentioned that "discussion is [the] most important part" of classroom activities and "it's always present." Another interviewee concurred, saying, "We sit in groups and sometimes ... most of the time we talk ...; we discuss a lot".

Students' affiliative needs were further met through the endeavors of the instructor. In many cases, students felt a tie to each other and the instructional sequence through the efforts of the teacher. In response to the midterm query of what they liked most about the class, five students commented about the classroom atmosphere, describing it as "comfortable" and "not boring." In addition, one noted the role of the instructor: "I think it's great the way it is. But in my opinion, it's [*sic*] also depends on the instructor too." This comment was reiterated by another student in her interview: "The teacher influences a lot ... The way I get interested is the teacher." This

'teacher effect' is an important one to note, for it can greatly change students' perception of the relevance of instruction and their interest in it.

Relevance and Motivation

From the above discussion of student needs and the ESL curriculum, one begins to get a sense of the relationship between relevance and motivation. Students clearly expressed appreciation for their new-found ability to put study skills such as notetaking to use in other settings. For example, one student commented in her interview that the goals of the ESL course were to "[give] us skills for our other courses—how to notetaking [*sic*], how to read faster ...," a point expressed by several other students.

In regard to the other academic skills, students also perceived the writing component of the course to be both useful and relevant. Writing-related materials and activities, such as composition handouts, in-class essays, and brief or extended definitions, were rated by more than half of the respondents to be *very useful* (see Table 3). Comments such as "[I have to do] daily work for class—including writing [*sic*] which is fantastic" and "[this class has] more writing [than the previous course], it's tough a little, but I think it is working," were made in response to being questioned about what students liked most. These kinds of comments further indicate the value and usefulness of the writing component for these students.

Paced and timed reading practice, while not initially rated so highly by students, was strongly rated at the midpoint of the course with 60% of the students indicating that such activities were extremely helpful for them. Furthermore, one Iranian immigrant wrote in her journal:

This class is more useful than I ever thought it would be. One of my worst problems in studying is my low speed which I never knew how to improve it [*sic*]. However, this method of speed reading has really helped me to know that I should set a time and try to read in a set amount of time.

This student, demonstrating what McCombs (1984) would call "continued motivation to learn," later reported near the end of the term that the timed reading activities were so beneficial to her studies that she was interested in taking another ESL course which focused specifically on reading skill development. The value of the timed reading activities was also strongly supported in the midterm evaluations, with 10 students commenting that this reading activity was one of the things they liked most about the class.

Table 3

Student Ratings of Usefulness of Skill Area Activities

SKILL AREA	Usefulness		
	Very Useful	Somewhat Useful	Not Useful
Writing			
Writing in class essays	63%	37%	0%
Composition hand-outs	59%	40%	1%
Writing brief/extended definitions	51%	41%	8%
Journal writing	48%	51%	1%
Reading			
Paced and timed readings	60%	36%	4%
History textbook/reading activities	45%	45%	10%
Study Skills & Academic Listening			
Paraphrasing/summarizing	67%	26%	7%
Notetaking/outlining	58%	39%	3%
Video lecture	49%	45%	6%
Group/Speaking Activities			
Class discussions	53%	43%	4%
Group work	42%	48%	10%
Group presentations	34%	36%	14%

Note: (n = 78)

Sixteen percent of students (12), all from the classroom in which ethnographic observations were conducted, indicated that the category of group presentations was *not applicable*, perhaps reflecting the fact that no presentations had occurred up to that point in the quarter.

The emphasis on study skills was also perceived to be quite motivating by students in the ESL service courses. One particularly salient activity was that of paraphrasing and summarizing, which 67% of the students found to be *very useful*. Notetaking, as we have seen, was viewed by many students as being relevant to their other academic course work, as was the skill of outlining, which a clear majority of

the students rated as being quite useful. The response to the video lecture component, the primary source for the listening and notetaking activities, however, was not strong at the time of the midterm evaluation. In fact, in addition to being less highly rated than the study skills, the video component was specifically mentioned by eight students in their open-ended comments as one of the elements they disliked most. As with the history reading activities, this less than enthusiastic response could in part reflect disinterest in the topic of the first content-based unit—early medieval European History—as an additional 10 students commented negatively about that particular unit's subject matter.

In regard to group activities, students generally indicated a liking for group work, but not necessarily an appreciation for its usefulness in their academic work. Indeed, on the midterm evaluations, only 42% ranked group work as *very useful*, but 12 students named group work as the aspect they liked most about the course. In addition, nine more suggested increased or more varied group work in their suggestions for improving the course.

Paralleling the mixed findings concerning the usefulness of group work, certain students seemed to make an implicit distinction in the academic domain between materials and activities that were helpful and relevant and those that were interesting and enjoyable. One student, when asked what she liked about the class, began to talk about how she found that skills like notetaking and outlining “help” but are “boring” and later expressed her opinion that “this course is something you have to learn, you need to learn. . . .” A second student echoed this “no, but” refrain responding that the aspect of the course he did not like was “writing so often, but I know it helps.” Similarly, another international student said the aspect she disliked most was “writing papers” and then, laughing, responded immediately thereafter that the aspect she found most helpful was “writing papers.” Lack of student interest certainly played a role in the relatively low rating of the history textbook and reading activities. Taken as a whole, such findings again emphasize that there is more to student motivation than mere relevance of instruction to student needs.

Discussion

Face Validity: Meeting Student Perceived Needs and Expectations

As was previously indicated, grammar and vocabulary were the skills most often listed by students as not having been given enough curricular emphasis. From our observations, we found that virtually all of the skills that students perceived as fundamental to academic success could be found in the curriculum as it stands; the problem perhaps stems from students' confusion over the form, structure, and goals of a content-based approach to language teaching. Only

one student seems to have fully grasped that through the writing process in this CBI model, grammar and vocabulary instruction take place indirectly. For many students, however, it was difficult to get beyond expectations of a traditional language skills curriculum with an overt grammar component and weekly vocabulary lists. In an effort to deal with these expectations, we feel that it is fundamental for the students to have a clear understanding of the CBI model, and that the instructor must overtly state the rationale for each classroom activity. It also may be necessary and useful to include more explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction, perhaps through incorporation of a grammar reference book within the content-based instructional context.

Relevance Versus Interest in Instructional Design

Keller's (1983) instructional design theory of motivation distinguishes between *relevance* and *interest*. Instead of personal need or goal satisfaction, interest "refers to whether the learner's curiosity is aroused and whether this arousal is sustained appropriately over time" (p. 395). In this research, the distinction between perceived relevance and interest became apparent through findings that some instructional activities were perceived to be helpful, but not necessarily interesting or enjoyable. This was particularly the case for writing and study skills such as outlining and notetaking. Furthermore, in light of students' negative reactions to the European history module, the notion of student interest appears to have particular bearing for CBI in that a poor choice of topic seems to greatly undermine student motivation based on interest and, to some extent, relevance. When selecting courses for a CBI model such as this simulated adjunct program, curriculum designers must consider the students' general interests, backgrounds, and educational goals. For this particular program, broad, introductory courses which captured student attention and fostered discussion, such as those in Communication Studies and Psychology, greatly enhanced student interest and general motivation.

Affiliative Issues: Group Interaction and Instructor Role

As we have seen, Keller's notion of relevance refers to the satisfaction of not only instrumental needs, but also "personal needs," such as affiliation. The use of group work and the role of the instructor were found to be key variables in the affective and motivational reactions of these students to the instructional sequence. While it was not always viewed as relevant to academic success, group interaction in the course was highly valued by significant numbers of students because it seemed to offer them an opportunity to speak and get to know one another in a protected, culturally tolerant environ-

ment. Not surprisingly, the instructor was often a key player in setting the tone for this classroom environment. Our research findings also indicated that students prefer occasional restructuring of groups in order to get to know all class members. A final variable to note is that of instructor conviction about the efficacy of CBI: Observations of different instructors using the same materials revealed that variations in approach led to differences in student perceptions of interest and motivation. This demonstrates the importance of instructors' beliefs in the validity of CBI as well as the significance of instructor interest in and experience with the topic areas.

Thus, while support was found for CBI's claim that the instrumentality and relevance of instructional design are motivating to students, other factors such as student interest, expectations for language learning, and need for affiliation also heavily influenced student motivation. In the ESP context, Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have already noted the complexity of motivation as well as the importance of motivational factors beyond the scope of traditional notions of instrumental relevance:

Motivation, it appears, is a complex and highly individual matter. There can be no simple answers to the question: "What motivates my students?" Unfortunately, the ESP world, while recognising the need to ask this question, has apparently assumed that there is a simple answer: relevance to target needs. ... But ... there is more to motivation than simple relevance to perceived needs. ... [If] your students are not fired with enthusiasm by the obvious relevance of their ESP materials, remember that they are people not machines. The medicine of relevance may still need to be sweetened with the sugar of enjoyment, fun, creativity, and a sense of achievement. ... In other words, they should get satisfaction from the actual experience of learning, not just from the prospect of eventually using what they have learnt. (p. 48)

As these ESP specialists have advocated, CBI must go beyond a mere reliance on relevance to motivate students. In addition to emphasizing skills that students find imminently helpful in their academic coursework, the model should also address such additional motivational concerns as student interest and satisfaction through appropriate content choice, recognition of students' perceived language learning needs for grammar and vocabulary, careful instructor development and training, and the effective use of such instructional techniques as group work and cooperative learning.

Conclusion

Relevance is Relevant, but ...

In summary, based on our findings, relevant instruction is important and motivating to students in the university ESL setting. Content-based instruction that simulates a university course while emphasizing authentic academic writing, reading, and study skills such as notetaking and lecture comprehension can be both meaningful and quite powerful in motivating students. However, the lack of traditional and therefore expected ESL activities such as grammar and vocabulary instruction, content topics which do not address the majority of students' background experiences and interests, and affiliative concerns such as group interaction and instructor role play additional, mitigating roles in student motivation and perceptions of relevance. ■

Footnotes

1. Classified on the basis of length of stay in the United States and residency status, working definitions and refinements of these two groups as used in this article are as follows: *international* students have tourist or student visas and have been in the U.S. less than two years; *short-term immigrant* students have permanent resident visas or citizenship and have been in the U.S. from two to five years; *long-term immigrant* students also have permanent resident status or citizenship and have been in the U.S. longer than five years.

2. Integrative motivation refers to an orientation in which the second language learner's goals "are derived from positive attitudes towards the second language group and the potential for integrating into that group." Instrumental motivation, by contrast, "refers to more functional reasons for learning a language" such as getting a job or passing a required examination (Crookes & Schmidt, 1989, p. 219).

3. Additional demographic data were obtained from the departmental student information sheets, which are filled out at the beginning of each quarter. These forms include data on native country, languages spoken, length of time in the United States, and a self-rating of proficiency in 10 English skill areas.

4. Watson-Gegeo (1988) notes the growing popularity of ethnography in educational and ESL research "... because of its promise for investigating issues difficult to address through experimental research, such as ... how to gain a more holistic perspective on teacher-student interactions to aid teacher training and improve practice" (p. 575). In order to obtain just such a holistic perspective of motivation in the university ESL classroom, ethnographic field observations were chosen for the current study. To satisfy another requirement of ethnographic research in ESL as outlined by Watson-Gegeo (1988), that of attempting to understand the situation "from the perspective of the participants" (p. 579), a decision to use in-depth interviews with students was also made.

5. According to the ESP literature, the "structured interview has several advantages over the questionnaire" in identifying the nature of learners' needs, such identification of needs being one of the basic research foci of this study. From an ethnographic perspective, the greatest advantage of the interview comes from the fact that "the gatherer can follow up any avenue of interest which arises during the question and answer session but which had not been foreseen during the designing of the structured interview" (MacKay, 1978, p. 22).

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