# Why Isn't Jinny Learning (Remembering) Words? Motivation, Affective Filters and Vocabulary Learning

"Whether or not a child is motivated to learn English will depend to a large extent on whether she sees learning as a personal adventure or not…" David Paul (2003).

### Introduction: What Kind of Practice Leads to More Practice?

To be fluent in a second language a learner needs to be fast. Practice is necessary to ensure that particular behaviors (such as producing language) are quick. Gass & Selinka (2008) liken this to Roger Federer practicing tennis every day for years before becoming a champion. Indeed, it is the repeated practice of a variety of shots on the practice court which transfer to the same shots being able to be played 'fluently' in the heat of an actual match. In the field of language learning, students who have learnt enough grammatical rules and chunks of language, then practiced enough, can also progress to a higher stage of 'shot' production. Fluency in language production occurs where 'procedural knowledge' through 'automotization' becomes 'fast and without deliberation' (DeKeyser, 1997). To achieve this automaticity, students need time on the practice court of language learning. This will go a long way towards guaranteeing their success in the L2. But what if they don't enjoy certain key aspects of the practice? It's obvious that if we are going to 'remember' things we need to practice remembering them, but what kind of practice will lead to students committing to more practice with the foundational aspects of language learning such as vocabulary? With children, this is surely where the traditional classroom ends and the 'personal adventure' which Paul (2003) refers to begins.

### Successful Teachers Motivate Students with Appropriate Pedagogical Solutions

In this article I'd like to present the case of a student named Jinny. Investigation by this teacher found that Jinny wasn't spending enough time with vocabulary practice because she found repetitive practice with word cards boring. Furthermore, she had learned a technique from a previous teacher of writing the same word many times while looking at it. For obvious reasons, this is an activity that builds 'penmanship' (sic) skills rather than vocabulary knowledge. Faced with a challenge like this, one which requires an 'appropriate pedagogical' solution (Mantle-Bromley, 1995), the teacher needs to find inspiration; hopefully without too much perspiration ourselves. Thankfully we teach in an era where there are many such solutions at hand. Indeed, Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008) claimed that "motivation research has reached a level of maturity so that theoretical advances have started to inform methodological developments." This means that there are many solutions available to solve the problem of 'boring vocabulary study' – especially in the area of blended learning. In order to shed more light on this case, the relationship between vocabulary learning and motivation, as one of 6 'affective' factors which can prevent effective language learning and acquisition, needs to be considered.

### Vocabulary: Building a Foundation for Acquisition

In language learning and acquisition, language goals fall into four main categories; language items, ideas (content), skills and text (discourse) [Nation, 2001]. Among the language items category identified by Nation, vocabulary stands out as the key factor in the progress of the student. Without the vocabulary building blocks of language acquisition, students are building the other language items (grammatical constructions and pronunciation) on a foundation likely to collapse in the stress of communication in L2, whether inside or outside the classroom. Furthermore, students need many repeated meetings with words to be able to 'know words' perhaps as many as 10-30 'meetings' (Waring & Takaki 2003 & Nation, ibid). These findings create a clear direction for educators and curriculum designers in terms of utilizing appropriate pedagogy which maximizes the opportunity for language acquisition to take place. Students must 'meet' vocabulary in different contexts numerous times, and it is the duty of educators and material designers to create these contexts. Without enough of these meetings they will not 'know' words well enough so that they can be 'fluently accessed' for both receptive challenges and productive performances (Nation 2001, 2006).

### Affective Filters: Why Isn't Jinny 'Remembering' Those Words?

In order to look at another key factor in language acquisition, and make the vocabulary motivation connection, I'd like to return to the case of Jinny. Everybody has a student like Jinny: A student who falls behind the others and demonstrates this during communicative tasks by beginning sentences then stopping in the middle because she doesn't 'know' the word she needs. As well as being comparable to 'shot-making' in tennis, learning a language can also be compared to learning a musical instrument – you simply have to practice 'remembering' to get a certain level of competence. Play a song 'enough' and it will become melodious 'enough'. So why then are the words not 'sticking' for Jinny? Why is her tune so awkward that the other kids in her class seem to be in pain when she tries to talk but can't remember a word she needs? Vocabulary research tells us that she is failing probably because she hasn't 'met' the word enough times in practice. As usual, the question that needs to be asked by the 'problem-solving' teacher is 'why not?' Research in the area of educational psychology suggests that 'affective' variables may well be the cause of this lack of 'knowing'. These 'affective' variables are those that relate to the "emotional reactions and motivations of the learner" (Scovel, 1978, in Finch, 2005) and emerge from the human limbic system, which controls emotion, behavior and long term memory. Finch (2005) defined these factors as "(i) motivation; (ii) attitudes to learning; (iii) self-esteem; (iv) anxiety; (v) linguistic courage; and (vi) cultural pressures." He argued that all of these 6 factors required 'serious attention from educators' because "learners' attitudes control learning." Thus to solve the problem of Jinny's lack of remembering we need to look deeper into these factors, and consider the question – is the problem being caused by the student's fears and weaknesses, or is it the classroom or the materials? A balanced solution would address both aspects of this dialectical puzzle.

### Taking on the Motivation Challenge: How do you Create Win-Win?

Mantle-Bromley (1995, in Finch 2005) suggested that if "we attend to [both] the affective and cognitive components of student's attitudes" and use "appropriate pedagogical techniques" then it is likely that we can "increase the length of time students commit to language study." Again if we consider the musical and tennis metaphors of 'more time and more focused study creating better performance' then we need to think about what it takes to get students to schedule this "committed time" in their busy lives of work and play. In the experience of this teacher, motivation is most often the key. It takes on the same "building block" character as vocabulary, and emerges as the fundamental factor among the 6 affective factors listed above: Certainly when it comes to 'remembering' vocabulary, at the very least. Krashen famously argued that whilst adults can either learn or acquire a language, children can only acquire one (Krashen and Terrell, 1981). His argument was that children need to get 'input' or 'meet' language in ways natural to them rather than simply 'studying' the language as some adults might be able to do. Since then many language educators and materials designers have sought ways to address this, such as extensive input approaches (Krashen 1981, 1985, Day and Bamford 1998) and 'task based language teaching' which Nunan (2003) defines as "lessons based on learning experiences that have non-linguistic outcomes". Simply put, activities need to be meaningful to give kids the best chance of being motivated enough to get past the other 5 affective filters that prevent acquisition. Meaningful, student centered, student driven activities where students themselves hold the keys to their own adventure are a must. Success with this puzzle is what it takes to create win-win situations for all the stakeholders involved in children's' second language acquisition.

### Give the Learner What They Want: And… Jinny Wants Something More Fun

Finally, when Jinny was asked what the problem was she said she needed something 'more fun', and something that she could 'do using my [her] notebook computer'. The job of the teacher, administrator or parent is to solve this affective problem. We need to give her the best chance of finding the tools she needs to tackle the other affective (fear) factors and cultural obstacles which may also prevent her second language acquisition. The issue in this case is clearly one about motivation – so it shouldn't be too difficult to fix. Doing so will go a long way to ensuring that Jinny acquires the target language and creates that win-win for herself, her parents and her teacher.

### References:

- Day, R.R. & Bamford, J. (1998). Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press.
- DeKeyser, R.M. (1997). Beyond explicit rule learning: Automatizing second language morphosyntax. Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 19(2), 190-221.
- Finch, A. & Shin, D. (2005) Integrating EFL Teaching and Assessment in the EFL CLassroom: A Practical Guide for Teachers in Korea. Seoul: Sahoipyungnon Press.
- Gass, S.M. & Selinka, L. (2008). Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course. New York: Routledge.
- Guilloteaux, Mary J. & Dornyei, Z. (2008). Motivating Language Learners: A Classroom Oriented Investigation of the Effects of Motivational Strategies on Student Motivation. TESOL Quarterly, 42, 55-77.
- Krashen, S. (1981), Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning. Pergamon
- Krashen, S. (1985), The Input Hypothesis: Issues and Implications. Longman
- Krashen, S. & Terrell, T.D. (1983), The Natural Approach. Pergamon.
- Mantle-Bromley, C. (1995). Positive attitudes and realistic beliefs: Links to proficiency. The Modern Language Journal, 79/3, 372-386.
- Nation, I.S.P. (2001). Learning Vocabulary in Another Language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (2003). Practical English Language Teaching. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Paul, D. (2003). Teaching English to Children in Asia. Hong Kong: Longman.
- Scovel, T. (1978). The effect of affect on foreign language learning: A review of the anxiety research. Language Learning, 28, 129-142.
- Waring, R. and M. Takaki, (2003). At what rate do learners learn and retain new vocabulary from

Aaron D Jolly is a writer, curriculum designer and consultant, as well as a teacher trainer and presentation skills coach. Currently he runs a language institute for young learners from 4 years old to 14 years old in Suwon, just south of Seoul in South Korea. Previously he was a visiting lecturer at Korean universities, taught at a public middle school and most recently was lead instructor for a kindergarten and elementary age extensive reading based program through a Korean University. His main area of interest is in materials design and program implementation for English programs for young learners and teenagers based on extensive reading, blended learning and critical thinking, as well as activities for textbook adaptation. He loves to bring great textbooks alive in the classroom. Aaron has taught in Korea for 8 years and before that worked in the media industry and sports coaching in Australia. He is a KOTESOL Teacher Training featured presenter having facilitated workshops for more than 6000 teachers these past 5 years. Currently he is also the National 2nd Vice President of the organization. He can be contacted via his blog http://www.thejollyprofessor.blogspot.com/