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# An interpretative study of teacher motivation

**Timothy J. Knowles**
*Sophia University*

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This is a short paper describing a case study of the motivation of language teachers. The case in focus was a department of teachers of the English and German languages at a Japanese university. Both full-time and part-time teachers were investigated. Data was collected by means of semi-structured interview. The paper begins by detailing some of the questions that the study hoped to illuminate, and whether any of the current prominent theories might provide. It then examines the method used, and comments on the suitability and application of the interpretative method in this context. And finally, some of the results of the study are discussed and suggestions made for both the management of teaching and future research.

この短いペーパーは、語学教員のモチベーションについてのケーススタディの結果を分析したものである。ケーススタディは主に日本の大学の英語学科、およびドイツ語学科所属の教員を対象にしている。さらに専任教員、兼任教員両方が調査対象となっている。データは半固定化した形のインタビューを通じて収集された。本稿のはじめに、まず本調査が解明したいいくつかの疑問を列挙し、さらに近年の重要とされている理論が、それらの疑問に答えを提供しうるかを考察する。その上で、使用されている方法論を検証し、このコンテクストで、インタープリタティブな方法論の適切性や応用性について解説を加える。最後に、調査結果を論じ、教員の管理と今後の研究課題についての提案を示して論を結ぶ。

The initial reason behind this research was a curiosity as to why some teachers, including myself, work so hard, even when they are not being observed or evaluated, and are responsible for their own schedules and work rates. In other words, to take terms from the literature of education, I was interested in the motivation of teachers who have a substantial degree of autonomy. To quote Evans (1998, p.34), I was interested in the "condition, or the creation of a condition, that encompasses all those factors that determine the degree of inclination towards engagement in an activity." And professional autonomy, according to Hoyle & John (1995) means having the freedom to exercise independent judgement—to be able to make and implement one's own choices regarding practice.

An *a priori* answer to this question is that teachers are motivated by the assumption that their hard work benefits the students. While it might be hard to argue against the value of "hard work," however that may be defined, there is little, if any, conclusive evidence that a teacher's motivation has an effect on learning. The closest that we get is with such important findings as from Clark and Trafford (1995), who found that the teacher-pupil relationship is regarded by both teachers and students as the most significant variable affecting learners' attitudes. However, despite this, according to Dörnyei (2001), teachers are an "overlooked factor" (p.79) in research on language learner motivation, and, in particular, "the issue of teacher motivation has received little attention in educational psychology" (p.156). More specifically, Csikszentmihalyi (1997), pointing out the lack of research into the relationship between teacher motivation and teaching effectiveness, wrote, "there are virtually no studies of intrinsic motivation in teaching" (p.87).

An investigation of the effect that teacher motivation might have on learning and the motivation to learn would certainly be a worthwhile undertaking. However, before that is possible it is clearly necessary to obtain a fuller picture of the nature of teacher motivation, both intrinsic (provisionally defined as being that motivation due to the features of the job itself) and extrinsic (due to features outside the job, such as salary). And rather than accept perceptions of motivation that there might be in the literature, I was more interested in how the teachers themselves see it. The research question, then, is "How do the teachers themselves perceive their *motivation*, and can these perceptions aid us in either understanding current theory or adding to it?"

## Theory

There is a substantial body of theory of motivation, not all of which, of course, is relevant to occupational motivation. This short account will be limited to the main threads of theory that have been useful, or supported in recent research into teacher motivation. One of the most well known theories is the Hierarchy of Needs Theory (Maslow, 1954). Briefly, individuals need first to satisfy the three 'deficiency' needs: *physiological, safety and security* and *belongingness* before they can start to satisfy the two *growth* needs of *esteem and ego* and *self-actualisation*. However, even after adaptations from Alderfer (1972), who reduced the number of stages and allowed for regression from higher to lower level, needs theory founders on the rocks of definition. On close examination of a teacher's activity, it is not easy to identify what stage he may be in.

After a review of two decades of literature, Owens (1995) declared the "state of the art" (p.50) to be the *motivator-hygiene* theory (Herzberg, 1966). This contrasts *motivators*, or factors intrinsic to the job, with *hygiene* factors: extrinsic to the work itself, such as salary. Only the *motivators* can lead to satisfaction. The best that can be achieved by manipulation of the *hygiene* factors is a *neutral* state. Therefore, reliance on such things as salaries and bonuses may not have the desired effect. In the educational context, a third group of factors has been suggested by such researchers as Nias (1989) and Dinham and Scott (1998), related to the school as a social system; for example, recognition, teamwork, and relationships.

The contrast between intrinsic and extrinsic rewards is taken further by Ryan & Deci (2003), in their *self-*

*determination* theory. They are primarily concerned with individual wellbeing, and assume that humans need conditions that support activity and integration, as opposed to exploiting a vulnerability to passivity. In other words, workers work best if there is an inherent satisfaction in the activity itself, and managers should ensure conditions that provide this satisfaction. According to Ryan and Deci, such conditions would be those that support competence, autonomy, relatedness, and a degree of security. Extrinsic rewards tend to promote a more *controlling* environment, therefore bringing about a detrimental reduction in autonomy (unless there is an identification with these rewards and regulations, in which case intrinsic motivation might be enhanced). One important finding by Deci and Ryan (documented in Ryan & Deci, 2003) is that teachers who are not pressurised by extrinsic factors are more likely to allow their students more autonomy, and such autonomous students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated.

A fourth strand of theory is that suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1979), who also considers the intrinsic qualities of a task. He conceives that a person will perform best when he is in a state of *flow*, felt when "opportunities are in balance with the actor's skills" (p.261). If challenges are too great, the teachers will be stressed, and if they are too small, they will be bored. In the educational context, he describes *flow* in terms of the relationship between student and teacher, with students trying harder if they recognise commitment and enjoyment in the teacher (Csikszentmihalyi 1997).

Lastly, theories of *goal setting* (Locke, 2003; Locke & Latham, 1990) introduce the concept of *commitment*. Performance is affected by the setting of goals, and, as long as commitment is sufficient, the more specific and difficult the goal, the higher is the performance. This commitment would require a conviction that the goal is important and attainable and is enhanced by recognition, rewards, and participation in goal-setting. Feedback would also be necessary to indicate progress towards the goal.

## Recent research

Although it was suggested in the introduction above that there is a paucity of research into teacher motivation, if one divides the concept into a number of related issues, such as reasons for choosing a teaching career, job satisfaction, and the effects of salary policies, there is indeed a substantial body of research.

Unfortunately, there is very little research in the field of TEFL. A review of research into teacher satisfaction, motivation, and commitment can be found in Pennington (1995). More recently, Tardy and Snyder (2004) suggested that there was evidence to support the concept of *flow* among TEFL teachers in Turkey. Johnson (2000) reports on an open-ended questionnaire study into the motivation (and demotivation) of Mexican EFL teachers and paints a wide-ranging picture of both organisational and classroom matters. Doyle and Kim (1999) interviewed teachers in San Francisco (which they call an ESL context) and Seoul, South Korea (EFL). They illuminated the intrinsic attractions of the job, and the extent of extrinsic dissatisfaction. In Japan, Da Silva (2003) concluded from a series of guided discussions with teachers that there was support for the self-determination theory.

Most of the general educational research into the reasons for teaching, such as Lacy (2003), Scott and Dinham (1999) and Moran, et al (2001) found that intrinsic reasons were important. In a substantial review of research, Spear, et al (2000) found, "prospective teachers are principally attracted to the profession by the rewarding nature of the work involved, as opposed to the pay or conditions on offer" (p. iii). However, extrinsic motivation was not unimportant. Some investigations (e.g., Lewis & Butcher, 2002) even found that extrinsic factors were the greater motivators. Of interest is a growing amount of research from developing countries that suggests that we should take care not to be bound by the values of the industrial world. In Tanzania, Towse, et al (2002) found that education students appeared to be motivated mainly by salary, and turned to teaching only as a "last resort." In Jamaica, Bastick (2000), from a survey of 1433 trainees, found that most took up teaching for extrinsic reasons.

A synthesis of research findings into satisfaction in educational organisations can be found in Thompson, et al (1997) and in Spear, et al (2000). The conclusions of the latter were that the main factors for satisfaction were working with children, the intellectual challenge and independence, and for dissatisfaction were work overload, poor pay, and perceptions of society's view of teachers. Again concerning the developing world, Garrett (1999), argued the need for more data, and that the theories developed in the developed world should be tested in these different contexts.

Research into the effects of salary levels and changes have been mainly concerned with effects of performance pay, and have been almost universally negative about them. For example, Richardson (1999a, 1999b) evaluated the government's PRP policy for the National Union of Teachers, and concluded that while the British government's performance pay policy might motivate taxi drivers and sportsmen, the available evidence is that there is not a strong effect on public sector workers, and if there were, it might be at the expense of non-evaluated activities. From an American viewpoint, Ramirez (2001, p.16) argues that merit pay policies "misconstrue the sources of human motivation and devalue the work of educators." However, some researchers in the USA were more optimistic, finding that performance pay might motivate teachers if they have a stake in setting the criteria (Morice & Murray, 2003).

## Research Design

The research was treated as an *instrumental case study* (Stake, 1995). That is, by investigating a particular case, I hope to obtain insight into, and refine our understanding of a certain concept—in this case, teacher motivation. The case in focus was a group of teachers in a language-teaching department of a Japanese university. Many languages are taught, but as I only had resources to investigate those teachers who could communicate well in English, participants were restricted to teachers of English and German. Of 14 full-time English teachers, 10 were willing to participate. Of 42 part-time English teachers in the programme, five non-Japanese teachers were chosen at random, and then three Japanese teachers who were known to be fluent in English. All three full-time German teachers participated, and then, in order to broaden the field, two full-

time teachers from another department who also taught in the investigated department were added to the investigation. Thus, there were a total of 23 participants, of whom 15 were fulltime and 8 fulltime. Four of these were Japanese, three German, and 16 from various English-speaking nations.

Before deciding to take an interpretative (or qualitative) approach, the possibilities and drawbacks of a more quantitative approach were considered. Such an approach, which in fact has usually been taken in research into motivation, requires an *a priori* choice of which variables to consider. These might include, for example, measures of security, satisfaction, and salary. However, I was by no means satisfied with these categorisations, and wanted to cast a wider net to look for unpredictable information that a quantitative approach would not uncover. There were also obvious procedural problems. In order for findings to be reliable, a sample size much larger than that available would be required. Even if a questionnaire were sent to a sufficiently large population, there is always the problem that the respondents would be those with a particular motivation, thus affecting the validity of the whole exercise, for we are also interested in those who are not motivated to do such things.

It was decided to obtain data about the case from *semi-structured interviews*, conducted according to principles listed by Kvale (1996, pp.30-31). The topic of qualitative interviews is "the everyday lived world of the interviewee and his or her relation to it…. The interviewer registers and interprets the meaning of what is said, as well as how it is said." Descriptions, rather than opinions, are solicited, and the interviewer should be open to new phenomena, rather than have ready-made categories. Questions were focused on particular themes, with some standardised questions to return to topic if necessary, but in general the procedure was non-directive, allowing the interviewee to introduce to the conversation whatever he or she felt was important. It was hoped that the interview would be a positive experience for the interviewee, and that the very process might produce new insights and awareness.

There were 23 individual interviews in all, each lasting about one hour. Prior to the interviews, however, two focus groups were held, each with five teachers, and lasting approximately 90 minutes. It was hoped that these groups would produce a different type of data—that which might be forthcoming from conversations between teachers rather than in a one-on-one situation. Such conversations also provided an idea of the degree of agreement regarding certain issues, and also brought up themes and topics that could be approached in the individual interviews.

It is not possible here to provide a full list of interview questions. However, one important question was the very first one. In the focus groups, the participants were asked what they would mean if they talked about a *motivated* teacher. In the interviews, however, in order to be on a more subjective level, the teachers were asked if they thought that they themselves were *motivated* teachers, and if so, what they meant by that (all of the teachers believed that they were motivated). The interviews then each went in different directions from that beginning.

## Results

As can be expected, the 23 interviews and two focus groups produced a great deal of very interesting data. Each interview and discussion was recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were then categorized, at first with computer software, then by hand. Categorisation was initially by issues either decided beforehand, or introduced by the teachers in the course of the interviews, such as testing, salary, motivation of the students, the teaching environment, and status of employment. Eventually, however, as familiarity with the emerging patterns increased, it became possible to draw out the picture and the central themes of the world of the subjects.

One great problem of this kind of qualitative data is the need to compress it all into something which is useful for the researcher, yet manages to convey as much as possible of the meanings in the various contexts of the interviews. Any extracts shown here are a tiny fraction of the whole, and can take an entirely different meaning when taken out of context. The choice of extract is entirely that of myself, the researcher. I have done my best to ensure that these are representative of the overall body of data, and that they are not chosen to fit a predetermined pattern or theory. Nevertheless, I do not believe that it is possible to completely avoid subjectivity. The reader, consequently, is asked to trust the researcher's judgement, while accepting that the researcher is not infallible. In the following sections the readers should try to make their own conclusions from the data.

### *The context*

In order to judge qualitative data, it is important to have some idea of the context from which that data came. Rather than write thousands of words about the context, I have tried to describe it in the words of the teachers themselves:

> a) I have not encountered in 22 years of teaching as many motivated, capable students, and that's rewarding in itself.
>
> b) Here they have a good library, a good cafeteria, good students, and a good reputation, and I can't complain.
>
> c) I'm worried about their impression of me not being a Japanese teacher and not teaching in the way that they expect, and therefore they don't value me in the same way..
>
> d) Non-Japanese teachers could teach in sandals and jeans and that person may get some criticism, but when we do the same thing you are expected to act like Japanese, so there are more constraints.
>
> e) In Japan, it's a cultural thing, where you get lockjaw trying to repeat, "you can ask questions, you won't get shot at dawn or anything like that."

Thus, the teachers were, on the whole, satisfied with their jobs. There were, actually, few complaints, especially when compared with other employment situations. However, there was a certain amount of concern about the difference in cultures, and the way that the teachers were expected to act. From the non-Japanese teachers there were a number of complaints about the attitude that Japanese students have towards education and being in class.

### *The meaning of motivation*

I expected some of the participants to ask me what I meant by *motivation* (in which case I would have returned the question to them). However, not one of the 23 participants questioned the concept. In other words, nobody doubted that there was such a thing as *motivation*. However, to each teacher, it meant something different.

> f) This is what I want to do, and I enjoy doing it
>
> g) People who moan about the students, I feel they must be unmotivated.
>
> h) There's satisfaction knowing that we achieved the objective, and that they enjoyed meeting that goal
>
> i) This is a profession I chose….so I have to do a good job
>
> j) A teacher who is going through the motions half asleep is definitely not motivated.

For some, motivation meant enjoying doing something that they wanted to do, and for others it meant doing a good job—either by doing their duty, or by simply working hard and conscientiously. A number of teachers talked of motivation in terms of a relationship between them and the students, with varying degrees of focus on the students themselves. A few talked in terms of objectives and goals, and the need to achieve them.

There were more conceptions of motivation: almost as many as there were teachers. This variety of interpretations led me to suspect that motivation was too broad a term for constructive research. Yet I was intrigued by the convictions of each participant that motivation does exist.

### *Doing the job*

All the participants had different professional backgrounds and training and approached their jobs in different ways. From the interview and discussion data it was possible to draw out the attitude of the teachers to the actual activity of teaching, and the tasks that they do.

> k) …I think that generating energy and interest is one of my motivations. Once they've caught the fire, then it's a matter of facilitating, taking care of the fire.
>
> l) Our task is to motivate the students to learn, whether it's language or something else
>
> m) ….to get that person to recognise and express and communicate their opinion.
>
> n) They don't need the future, or another country. We're here, and it's now.
>
> o) So you have to gain respect by your personality, by the way you teach. You don't get it just like this. Respect in the way that they think, "OK, we can learn from this teacher."
>
> p) I don't want to be in a room if I feel I want to get out of there.

A lot of teachers saw that their job was to motivate the students (rather than to actually teach them). The word *facilitate* was introduced by a member of a focus group, and this was adopted and repeated by a number of other participants. Others described their task in terms of teaching a language, but there were numerous interpretations of what

teaching a language actually meant. *Communication* was often mentioned, but then there were many interpretations of the meaning of that. Some teachers saw themselves as representatives of an English-speaking culture or opportunity, and some felt that the main challenge was to simply be in the classroom, forming a rapport with the students.

To return to the first paragraph, above, Evans (1998, p.34) writes of the "degree of inclination to engage in an activity." From the responses of the teachers in this group, it is very difficult to decide what the actual 'activity' of teaching might be, and therefore the concept of *motivation to teach* becomes very elusive.

### *Goals*

Participants very often talked about goals or objectives, and sometimes, as mentioned in the section above, defined motivation itself in terms of goals. These goals were distinct from the activities and tasks in the previous section in that there was a clearly defined end (whether or not it was actually attainable).

> q) Whereas another teacher might think "I have to get them all the way to fluency and proficiency in one year", I don't see my job in that way.
>
> r) I can't teach them to write or speak. They do all those things. My goal is to get them to have confidence doing them in English, or greater confidence.
>
> s) The most important objective for me in university level education is to enrich their lives
>
> t) If I can motivate at least one student to go and study in Germany, then the year is good.
>
> u) I want to educate them about the injustices of the world. And I always think I have a very short time with them. I want to make an impact.

Many teachers had language-related goals, but all expressed in different ways, from vague to more specific. However, other teachers were adamant that their goals were not to increase language ability as such. Some teachers talked in terms of attitudinal goals, and others in terms of far wider, global goals.

However, what was very clear was that all the teachers did have goals, and no matter how they were expressed, or how attainable they were, these goals were important to them. Furthermore, in the absence of any goals set by the establishment, the teachers were well able and willing to set their own goals.

## Conclusions

It has not been possible in this paper to discuss the full scope of the research data. Nevertheless, I believe that we can make some tentative conclusions on the basis of what we have discussed. First, when confronted with the wide tapestry of the worlds of the teachers, the various theories, as related in the section above, can be seen from a different point of view. Rather than different, separate strands of theory, which may or may not fit the data, they

might better be seen as possibilities. Within the qualitative approach, for example, it is almost certainly possible that a teacher might tell a story that would fit the pattern of *flow*, or that an extrinsic reward might be described as hindering performance.

Secondly, it became clear that goals are important in the world of a teacher, and any manager should ensure either that set goals are appropriate to the goals of the teacher or that the teachers have the opportunity to set goals for themselves. Thirdly, and most importantly, it is apparent from the observations and reasons given above that we need to find some alternative to the concept of *motivation*. I would suggest *teacher energy*. That is, something which could take any form when the teacher enters the educational context, yet is preserved, in the same way as physical energy throughout various transformations in the educational process, until it is seen as energy possessed, in some way (perhaps as language ability) by the learner. If the teaching and learning environment is ideal, then most of the energy input by the teacher results in the energy of the learner. If it is not ideal, then much of that energy might be lost to the educational equivalent of friction.

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