

# English Teacher Motivation and Students' Perspectives in Japanese Secondary Schools

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An important finding in motivation research is that teachers greatly influence students (e.g., Kikuchi & Sakai, 2016). As studies focusing on language teacher psychology have increased (e.g., Haukås & Mercer, 2021), more have examined teacher motivation, including what motivates and demotivates teachers (e.g., Kassabgy et al., 2001). However, these studies have focused on the teachers' perspectives, and few have examined how teachers interact with students in the classroom. This study fills this gap through semi-structured interviews with teachers, classroom observations, and focus group interviews with students, with all data collected longitudinally over one academic year. The findings indicate that teachers had clear goals, and their teaching was based on these objectives. Students also had positive attitudes toward their teachers and classes, and reported that their teachers had a positive influence on their learning.

これまでの動機づけ研究によって、教師が学習者に対して多に影響を与えることが明らかになりつつある(例: Kikuchi & Sakai, 2016)。その結果として、教師の心理に焦点を置く研究が増加しており(例: Haukås & Mercer, 2021)、教師の動機づけ研究も行われつつある。例えば、何によって教師の動機づけが増大、減退するのかが調査されている(例: Kassabgy et al., 2001)。しかしながら、これまでの研究は教師の視点に焦点を置くものが中心であり、教師が実際どのように教え、また学習者に影響を与えているかについて調査している研究は限られている。よって、本研究は、教師対象の半構造化インタビュー、授業観察、生徒対象のフォーカスグループインタビューを1年間にわたって実施した。結果として、今回の参加者である教師は明確な目標を持ち、それに基づいて教えていることが明らかとなった。生徒は教師や授業に対して肯定的であり、良い影響を受けているようであった。

While motivation research in second language acquisition (SLA) has mainly focused on learners (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), in recent years researchers

have started to investigate teacher motivation, as teachers can be influential in learner motivation (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2016). Although teachers need to have positive motivation, this might be difficult in Japanese contexts. The working hours for teachers in Japan are long, and teachers have duties unrelated to teaching (OECD, 2021). It has also been reported that the number of people taking teacher recruitment exams is decreasing in Japan (e.g., Ujioka, 2021). Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) initiated a project to illustrate the benefits of a career as a teacher based on teachers' opinions, the teachers shared complaints about their work (Ito, 2021). Therefore, it is important to understand the complex factors involved in the motivation of Japanese teachers. This study investigated two Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) using a longitudinal design with data from semi-structured interviews with the teachers, classroom observations, and focus group interviews with students.

## Literature Review

### Teacher Motivation

Teacher motivation can be difficult to define because teachers are engaged in a wide range of professional duties. For instance, secondary school teachers in Japan are responsible for students in homeroom class and in club activities, and they also need to communicate regularly with parents. Thus, teachers experience a wide scope of responsibilities beyond simply teaching. In this context, teacher motivation can be described as that which promotes and supports teachers' behavior when they work (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). This study focuses on overall teacher motivation, including teaching and the other duties teachers are involved with.

### Empirical Studies

Although the research is still limited compared to that examining learner motivation, studies of teacher motivation have been conducted in various contexts. One of the most

researched topics concerns motivators and demotivators for teachers (e.g., Aydin, 2012; Kiziltepe, 2008; Sugino, 2010). These studies were conducted using questionnaires and revealed factors that commonly motivate and demotivate teachers, as presented in Table 1 and 2.

**Table 1**  
*Motivators Identified by Previous Studies*

Motivating factors	Source
Curricular matters	Johnson (2001)
Student-related issues	Kassabgy, Boraie and Schmidt (2001); Kiziltepe (2008); Sinclair (2008); Tsutsumi (2014)
Professional development	Sinclair (2008)
Colleagues	Johnson (2001)

**Table 2**  
*Demotivators Identified by Previous Studies*

Demotivating factors	Source
Curricular matters	Johnson (2001)
Working conditions	Aydin (2012); Johnson (2001); Sugino (2010)
Student-related issues	Aydin (2012); Kim, Kim and Zhang (2014); Kiziltepe (2008); Sugino (2010)
Colleagues	Aydin (2012)

In addition to these more general studies, more have been conducted to investigate teacher motivation in specific contexts. One example is Kumazawa (2013), who interviewed four novice Japanese teachers of English over two years to examine how their motivation changed during that time. Participants were initially demotivated by a gap between their ideal image of teachers and the reality. As time passed, they became able to depict more appropriate ideal images. Another example is Kubanyiova (2009), who investigated teacher identity and motivation in a mixed-method study exploring how an in-service teacher development course impacted eight non-native speaking EFL

teachers in Slovakia. The study used possible language teacher self theory, and found that, for instance, the teachers' ideal selves were reflected in their classroom behaviors.

### Theories of Teacher Motivation

One of the theories commonly used in teacher motivation research is expectancy-value theory, which proposes that “educational, vocational, and other achievement-related choices are directly impacted by one’s abilities, beliefs, and expectancies for success on the one hand, and the value one attaches to the task on the other” (Richardson et al., 2014, p. 5). This means that the way teachers engage in particular tasks varies depending on their expectations of how well they will do on the task and how much they value its achievement (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). According to this theory, there are two important factors involved. First, it is necessary for teachers to have positive attitudes towards their goals, and they need to believe that they can achieve them if they work hard. Second, teachers should be able to see the value of the task and its outcomes.

Another theory derived from applied linguistics is the L2 teacher self, which was introduced by Kubanyiova (2012) based on Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 motivational self system. The L2 teacher self consists of three elements. The first being the ideal language teacher self, which refers to language teachers’ goals and hopes. The second is the ought-to language teacher self, which means teachers’ responsibilities, obligations, pressures, and expectations in a situated context. The third is the featured language teacher self, which is the state in which teachers feel they may not be able to achieve their ideals or fulfill their obligations. Kubanyiova (2009) suggested that the L2 teacher self, especially the ideal language teacher self, influences teacher motivation. The study found that the ideal language teacher self was widely reflected in teachers’ behavior and was, for instance, closely connected with classroom behaviors. Teachers seemed not to emphasize what was unrelated to their ideal teacher selves very much. As these two theories suggest, it is important for teachers to set goals and believe that they are able to achieve these goals. In this study, these two theories were used to guide the analysis of the data.

### Research Questions

Although studies of teacher motivation have been conducted in various contexts, data have been collected using teacher interviews and questionnaires. As a result, findings have depended on what teachers wrote and said, rather than how teachers taught and interacted with students. As teachers influence students’ motivation to

learn, it is important to determine what factors might play a role in this in the classroom context. Studies in the Japanese context are also limited, especially of secondary schools, indicating the need to explore teacher motivation in that environment. The following are the research questions for this study:

- RQ1. What are the salient concepts that shape teacher motivation in the secondary school classroom?
- RQ2. How is teacher motivation reflected in teachers' classroom practices?
- RQ3. How are these salient concepts perceived by students?

### Method

This article is part of a larger study conducted with seven JTEs and focuses on two full-time JTEs. Participants were recruited through personal connections. I first asked teachers about their interest in participating in the study and their availability. I also asked a few university professors in charge of a teacher training program to introduce me to any teachers they knew who were available for the study. The participants' background information is summarized in Table 3. Names are pseudonyms.

**Table 3**  
*Participants' Background Information*

Name	Gender	Age	School	Region	Working experience
Haruto	Male	20s	Public high school	Kanto	Three years
Jun	Male	30s	Private junior and senior high school for girls	Kanto	None

Before contacting the teachers, I received permission from the university's ethical research board and adhered to their procedures. I first explained the purpose of the study to participants and assured them that their participation depended on their willingness and that they could withdraw at any time. Participants signed a consent form in Japanese. Participating teachers first introduced the study to students before I went to each school. I further explained the purpose of the study on my first visit, and each student signed an informed consent form. I also sent a letter to parents detailing the purpose of the study so that they would be able to ask questions. School administrators

were initially contacted by me or the participating teacher, followed by further explanation from me during my first visit, when permission was formally obtained.

Data were collected over an academic year using three collection methods to enable triangulation. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted three times with Jun and four times with Haruto during the academic year. All the interviews were conducted in Japanese and lasted from 60 to 90 minutes. The first interview focused on participants' past experiences, such as how they had studied English as learners and why they became teachers. From the second interview, we talked about their current experiences working as teachers, especially focusing on important events. Example questions are available in Appendix A. The second data set was collected through six classroom observations at each school. At Haruto's school, classes were video recorded, while at Jun's school, the classes were audio recorded as some students were uncomfortable being video recorded. The third set of data came from focus group interviews conducted twice with students in each of the teachers' classes. In each interview, four to five students talked about their teachers and classes. Example questions are available in Appendix B.

I was the only person involved in coding and data analysis. I first organized and coded the data using NVivo 12, first with broad categories such as *teaching English* and *interacting with students*, and then with greater detail, following Bazeley's (2013) that coding is like indexing a book. After organizing the data, I looked at the interview data, categorized the codes, and examined them for salient concepts related to the teachers' motivation. Based on the motivation the teachers expressed in the interviews, I explored how this was reflected in their teaching and how it was perceived by the students.

### Findings

In this section, I describe the findings of this study, starting with participants' backgrounds, followed by findings from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and focus group interviews with students.

#### Haruto

Haruto stated that he became a teacher for three reasons. First, when he was a junior high school student, he enjoyed teaching English to his friends. In high school, he met a JTE who taught English enthusiastically, and he felt that he wanted to become like this teacher. During teaching practice for three weeks at university, he felt that he wanted to be involved with students for a longer period of time in order to experience their growth.

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After graduating from university, Haruto first worked as a substitute teacher for two years and then began working full-time in a public high school. At the time of the study, Haruto was a homeroom teacher in charge of two sports teams and had organized a school tour for junior high school students.

### Motivation

In interviews with Haruto, two themes emerged regarding his motivation. The first was Haruto's desire to become an *eigoya*, which is an expression that Haruto encountered when he conducted practice teaching. Translated literally, *eigoya* means an English shopkeeper and refers to a person who has expertise in English. However, his interpretation was different. For Haruto, the *eigoya* was a teacher who helped improve students' English proficiency. It also meant teachers who continued using and studying English to improve their own proficiency. Haruto became a teacher to teach English, and doing English-related activities was crucial for him.

The other theme was that of making a lasting impression on students. In my second interview with him, Haruto said:

I want to become a teacher that students can remember, either for good or bad. Ten years later, I want my students to remember me, whether in good or bad ways, such as "I didn't like him," "He was annoying," or "He was a good teacher." (2nd interview)

In short, he wanted to do something important for his students so that they would remember him even after they graduated.

### Classroom Observations

In the English classes that I observed, Haruto taught using both Japanese and English, using English roughly 60% of the time. Haruto always used English when instructing students and leading communicative activities. On the other hand, he used Japanese when explaining grammar and the specifics of reading passages. He taught from a textbook and introduced additional activities, focusing on pronunciation and communication. He also believed the importance of studying grammar and ensuring that the students were aware of this. In the fourth interview, he said, "In my class, I focus on grammar as it is. I try to tell students the good points of grammar, what they can do if they understand grammar." The following extract is from one of his classes. The students had already studied relative clauses several times and were familiar with them. (The underlined sentence was spoken in English, and the rest was spoken in Japanese.)

Haruto: [Reading from the textbook] In most countries, there were more students who answered "yes" than "no." Let me check to make sure. [Concerning who in the sentence] Which one is it?

Some students: Subjective.

Haruto: Oh, it's subjective? Objective? Possessive? Who thinks that this is subjective (most students raised hands)? Objective? Possessive? Right. It's subjective. I will not explain why this is subjective. Is there anyone who needs an explanation? [Haruto looked around at students' faces, and no one seemed to need further explanation.] (5th observation)

At that point, Haruto explained the meaning of the text mainly in Japanese. He found a relative clause in the passage and asked additional questions to check students' understanding. The students had already studied relative clauses and likely understood this. It seemed that the students knew the answer to Haruto's questions, and he only had to explain them briefly.

### Focus-Group Interviews

During focus-group sessions, Haruto's students stated that they understood subtle points of grammar by studying with Haruto. They were already interested in English itself, but studying with Haruto deepened their understanding of the language, such as the different nuances of "will" and "going to," as the students were taught that there was no difference in junior high school. In the following extract, students were talking about the example sentences Haruto used in the class.

Student 1: We can enhance our understanding. The examples are relatively clear. "I will kill you," and "I am going to kill you."

Student 2: The meaning is dangerous, but it's impressive.

Student 3: Example sentences do not appear in the textbook, but are ones we can laugh at.

Student 2: We can understand them easily, and they have a huge impact. He explained like I went to buy a knife.

Student 1: When we say "I am going to," the person is prepared [for killing].

Student 3: When we say "will," we just think of the idea.

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Student 1: In junior high school, we learn that whichever is fine [there's no difference between will and be going to]. So, thanks to his explanation, I understand the difference clearly. (1st focus-group interview)

The other important theme emerging from the focus group was that the students thought that Haruto was *ningen rashii* (very humane). As indicated in the following extract, the students saw him as different from the other teachers:

Student 4: I feel that Haruto is different from the other teachers. I feel that he has lived appropriately. He has something inside and interacts with us just the way he is. For example, when I told him I wanted to leave school early, and he said, "That's fine." I like him because he is very human. I just feel that he is a human like me rather than a teacher. He says he hates something, and he explains to us why we have to do something. (2nd focus group interview)

Overall, the findings suggest that there was consistency between Haruto's goals and students' attitudes towards him. Haruto taught the class and interacted with students based on his goals, and students appreciated what he did for them.

## Jun

Jun said he became a teacher because of his own high school teachers. When he was a high school student, he planned to become a professional baseball player. However, he was injured during his 1st year and had to change his plans. His teachers supported him greatly in this difficult situation, and he became interested in becoming a teacher, without an interest in teaching a particular subject. He checked the recruitment statistics for teachers for Japanese, English, and social studies, and found that the number of English teachers was the largest. He thought that he would most likely become a teacher if he chose English. Thus, he decided to become an English teacher. After graduating from university, he first worked in several cram schools<sup>1</sup> for around 15 years. At the time of the study, he had just begun working in a secondary school teaching English only (not homeroom).

## Motivation

Two themes emerged from interviews with Jun. The first was the stimulation of changes in students so that they would be able to achieve their goals. In Jun's school,

the students were supposed to achieve two goals: pass the pre-2nd grade Eiken (Eiken, n.d.) and obtain more than 60 points out of 100 in a regular exam. Jun aimed to help and support students in achieving these goals.

The other theme was paying attention to individual students. Since Jun had worked in a cram school, he conducted consultations with individual students, a common practice in cram schools. He maintained this at the secondary school and held consultations with each student every time there was an exam. He explained that he believed that doing so enabled students to achieve their goals.

The purpose of the consultation was to check whether the students understood what they had learned. I also talked about what students did well on the exam and what they needed to work more at. We, of course, talked about studying, but the students asked me questions about daily life, various types of questions. (2nd interview)

## Classroom Observations

In the class I observed, which focused on textbook content and grammar, Jun taught mainly in Japanese, speaking English only when reading text aloud from the textbook. The students mainly listened and answered the questions Jun asked, and there was no pair or group work. The students did not speak in English. The following is an example of a class where he was teaching participles. He used only Japanese in the class, and the following extract has been translated into English.

- Jun: This is the second or third class, and probably some of you have not understood. Let's study carefully. First, participles are of two different types. What is the first, [Student 1]-san?
- Student 1: Present.
- Jun: Right. The other one is, [Student 2]-san.
- Student 2: Past.
- Jun: Right. How about the form? What comes after the verb in the present participle, [Student 3]-san?
- Student 3: ing
- Jun: The meaning is?
- Student 3: Doing. (4th classroom observation)

One of the characteristics of Jun's classes was asking questions that were simple and easy to answer if the students were listening carefully.

### Focus-Group Interviews

The focus-group sessions with the students demonstrated that they understood the importance of grammar because of studying with Jun. They felt that they had not learned as much in the previous year because the teacher (not Jun) had not explained English grammar in ways they expected. Therefore, the students felt that they did not understand the grammar well and appreciated that Jun explained it thoroughly.

Interviewer: What do you think about Jun's teaching?

Student 4: I'm happy because he teaches grammar very well.

Student 5: Even when I was wondering about grammar, the [previous] teacher quickly moved on to the next point. (1st focus group interview)

The students also felt that they developed a trusting relationship with Jun. Jun talked with each student both during the class and outside the classroom, which seemed to help them build a relationship with him.

### Discussion

This study was conducted with two JTEs in secondary schools to examine their motivation to work as teachers. Although previous studies have used interviews and questionnaires with teachers, this study also incorporated classroom observations and focus group interviews with students for triangulation. The study was able to gain further insight into teacher motivation by including data from classroom observations of teachers and focus groups with students.

The results indicate that teachers' goals and visions are important factors in teacher motivation (Kubanyiiova, 2012), and this was reflected in their classroom teaching. For Haruto, teaching English was very important, and because of this, he taught English by mainly focusing on pronunciation, communication, and grammar. Jun, on the other hand, taught by asking questions, as he believed that would be the most helpful way for students to achieve their goals. In other words, these two teachers had clear ideal L2 teacher selves (Kubanyiiova, 2012) that were reflected in their teaching.

In addition to having clear ideal L2 teacher selves, the teachers also had positive attitudes towards achieving their goals. According to expectancy-value theory, people need to see the value of a task and believe they can achieve goals if they work hard (Richardson et al., 2014). Both Haruto and Jun understood the importance and value of what they wanted to focus on and so were able to teach based on those goals.

The study also demonstrates that the students were influenced by what the teachers focused on during class. The students I talked to in both Haruto's and Jun's classes had positive attitudes toward how their teachers taught. Haruto focused on grammar, pronunciation, and communication, and the students said that they had deepened their understanding of English. Jun thoroughly explained grammar, and the students felt that their understanding had improved as a result. One possible reason the students were positively influenced by their teachers was their trusting relationship. Trust is reliance on another's competence (Baier, 1985) and is important in learning because the extent to which people learn greatly depends on the degree to which they believe their informants (Goddard et al., 2001). Haruto and Jun frequently interacted with their students, enabling them to build trusting relationships, and the students clearly believed that what the teachers taught was important.

### Conclusion

This study, conducted with two full-time secondary school JTEs, investigated teacher motivation and how it influenced classroom teaching and student attitudes. The findings demonstrate that Haruto and Jun had clear ideas of what they wanted to achieve as teachers and used this as the basis for their classroom behavior. The students understood what the teachers focused on and had positive attitudes toward both the classes and teachers.

Although this study illuminates one aspect of teacher motivation, it has some limitations. First, it looked only at teachers from similar contexts. Both Haruto and Jun were from secondary schools where teachers were able to focus on teaching. Therefore, research that includes teachers at different types of schools is necessary (e.g., Gkonou & Mercer, 2017). The other limitation is that the data collection was limited. It was difficult to communicate with the teachers between the interviews and observations, and there is a possibility that key events were missed. Therefore, future studies should establish ways to consistently track teachers' experiences throughout the year, which might provide clearer and more robust data. This suggests that it is important to continue conducting studies with teachers to determine how they influence students. Nevertheless, this study

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helps to deepen the current understanding of teacher motivation and demonstrates its importance for both teachers and students.

### Notes

1. A cram school is a school where students study after school and on weekends mainly to prepare for entrance exams. While studying at a cram school greatly depends on willingness, many students do so to prepare for university entrance exams.

### Bio Data

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## Appendix A

### Sample questions for interviews with teachers (translated into English based on original Japanese questions)

#### The first interview

1. Relationship with English
  - When did you start learning (using) English?
2. Experiences in the process of learning English
  - What did you major in at university?
3. Past teaching experience
  - In which type of schools did you teach?
  - Which year of students did you teach?
  - What kind of important events did you experience in the process of teaching?
4. As a teacher
  - What is your priority in your teaching?
  - What do you value as an English teacher?
  - How do you spend most of your time and energy as a teacher?
  - How would you like to spend most of your time and energy as a teacher?
  - What do you value when you teach English?
  - What kind of difficulties do you have at this point?
  - What do you think about the relationships you have with others?
  - How close do you think your relationship is with students?

#### The second, the third, the fourth interview

1. Reflection for the first semester
  - Important events and experiences.
  - What did you emphasize the most during the semester?
2. English classes
  - How do you feel in your daily teaching?
  - In what kind of situation (or when) do you enjoy teaching?
  - In what kind of situation (or when) are you reluctant to teach?
3. The relationship with the students
  - What kind of influence do you have on your students' behavior and responses in the class?
  - Have there been any important responses or remarks from the students?
4. The relationship with colleagues
5. Individual questions based on the previous interview and monthly teaching journal

## Appendix B

### Sample questions for focus group interviews with students (translated into English based on original Japanese questions)

1. English
  - What do you think about English as a subject?
  - What is your goal for studying English?
  - What do you want to be able to do in the future in English?
  - Is English necessary for you?
  - When and where will you use English in the future?
2. English classes
  - What do you think about English classes? (General impressions and opinions about class)
  - What activities do you enjoy?
  - What activities do you not enjoy very much?



- What do you think about specific activities in the class? (I chose several activities after observing the class and asked questions)

3. Teachers

- How does the teacher influence you?
- (I will choose several teachers' behavior and ask how it influences them.)
- What kind of response or feedback from the teacher makes you happy?
- How does the teacher motivate you to study English?
- How does the teacher demotivate you to study English?