

Exploring Relationships Between EFL Teacher Motivation, Meaningful Content, and Learner Motivation

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Abstract

This is a qualitative pilot study in which I investigated the motivation of three EFL teachers in Japan with regard to the global education material that they taught, their reasons for doing volunteer work, and the motivation of their learners. Preliminary results indicated that due to the autonomy these instructors had to teach material about which they were passionate, as well as the high motivation of their learners, these three busy instructors were highly motivated to volunteer their time to teach at Mother Theresa School (“MT School” - a pseudonym). Implications of this study for EFL pedagogy in Japan include the importance of instructors choosing materials about which they and their learners are enthusiastic, as well as ensuring that they have the autonomy to teach these.

Keywords: motivation, autonomy, content, global education

Dörnyei (2001) asserted that despite increases in literature on L2 learner motivation, there was a dearth of research on the motivation of ESL and EFL teachers. In his seminal tome, *Teaching and Researching Motivation* (2001), though devoting an entire chapter to the subject of teacher motivation, Dörnyei cited just five studies whose authors had collected data on second/foreign language teacher motivation. More promising, though, in the same book, Dörnyei directed readers’ attention to the considerable amount of theoretical and empirical articles on teacher motivation hailing from the fields of general education and psychology. Regarding the Japanese context, however, I have been unable to find any studies, either quantitative or qualitative, in which the authors have addressed the question of teacher motivation. Thus, the purpose of the pilot study described herein was to begin to fill this yawning gap in the research.

BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW

Meaningful Course Content and Teacher Motivation

Feuerstein, Rand, Hoffman, and Miller (1985) held that for concepts to take root at a deep level, they must be perceived by learners as having a purpose beyond the here and now of the classroom. Although Feuerstein and his colleagues were referring to students when they made this assertion, it is not inconceivable that their adage could apply to educators as well. As Dörnyei

(2001) noted, for example, some instructors have tended to be demotivated by a perceived lack of intellectual challenge in their teaching. In the same vein, Bergin (1999) asserted that learners' emotions toward classroom material could either stimulate or hinder their interest in such content. This could presumably also apply to educators' emotions towards the material they are teaching. Similarly, Csikszentmihalyi (1997, p.72) insisted, "The best way to get students to believe that it makes sense to pursue knowledge is to believe in it oneself."

The oft-repeated theme in the literature of the importance of educators finding personal meaning and relevance in the topics they teach prompted me to conceive of the first research question for this pilot study:

To what extent can opportunities that classroom teachers have to teach what they perceive to be meaningful content increase their motivation to teach?

Going the Extra Mile

Pennington and Riley (1991) found that most of the over one hundred ESL teachers in their study derived greater satisfaction from internal rewards such as values than from external benefits like a high salary. Pennington (1995, cited in Dörnyei, 2001) concluded that although there was considerable dissatisfaction worldwide among L2 teachers with a lack of advancement opportunities and poor financial compensation, most such instructors felt that the nature of teaching itself (for example, seeing learners progress) was sufficient to sustain them emotionally in their work. In a similar vein, Doyle and Kim (1999, p.6) reported one of their participants, a part-time ESL teacher in the United States, as saying, "if it's not fun for you, you really should get out of it, because it is not financially rewarding." Moreover, intrinsic motivation proved to be stronger than extrinsic motivation for the overwhelming majority of their over 200 teacher-participants from the United States and Korea.

Since the combination of internal and external factors mentioned above, as well as many others, cause teaching to be a highly stressful job, this led me to wonder how some teachers obtained the energy required to go the extra mile to volunteer their time for what they perceived to be worthy causes. Thus, I formulated my second research question as follows:

In a profession that is already known for inducing stress, why do teachers volunteer their time at institutions such as MT School?

Learner Motivation and Teacher Motivation

In reviewing much of the existing literature on student demotivation in second language education contexts, Dörnyei (2001, p.155) concluded, "...teachers have a considerable responsibility in this respect." As noted earlier, Csikszentmihalyi (1997) hinted that teachers' enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for their subject matter would be easily transmitted to their charges. Few researchers, however, have discussed whether or not unmotivated learners can demotivate teachers. One exception to this is Jelsma (1982, cited in Deci, Kasser, & Ryan, 1997). This author conducted a study in which actors were planted in classrooms and asked to play the part of disruptive learners. Teachers became visibly less motivated when they were forced to deal with

these “students.”

For their part, however, Deci, Kasser, and Ryan pontificated that although poorly motivated learners may indeed be a demotivating force for teachers, “...it does not absolve them of responsibility for devoting themselves to teaching” (1997, p.68). While I do not argue that classroom teachers bear a large share of the responsibility in motivating their learners, there are some students who are simply not motivated, despite having excellent instructors. It seems to me unfair that Deci and his colleagues, as well as Dörnyei, tenured professors in secure positions, were laying the lion’s share of the blame for unmotivated learners upon the shoulders of ESL and EFL instructors, many of whom are overworked and underpaid. Thus was born the impetus for my third research question:

In what ways can the motivation or lack of motivation by learners contribute to teacher motivation (or lack thereof)?

METHOD

Setting and Participants

The teachers of MT School (short for “Mother Theresa School,” a pseudonym, as are the names of the teachers and students referred to in this study), the setting for this study, volunteered their time one evening per week there to teach university-level and adult students a curriculum related to global education. Tuition fees, rather than being paid to instructors, were forwarded to charities chosen by the teachers and learners. All instructors held paying jobs outside of MT School. The founder of MT School, who I shall call Max, worked part-time at a number of tertiary institutions and used the income from these jobs to support his wife, who, at the time this study was conducted, was expecting their first child. Another teacher, Aline, held a full-time position at a vocational college, where she taught English to learners in their late teens and early twenties majoring in hotel management and tourism. The third instructor interviewed for this study, Ernie, was a full-time English teacher in the General Studies department of a national university in Japan.

Although the three teachers all focused in their MT School classes on issues related to global education, each of them concentrated on a different area of the world. Max had his learners study child neglect and orphanages in the Czech Republic. The students and teacher also examined together the legacy of the Nazi Occupation and Communism in that nation. Moreover, the learners corresponded with children residing in an orphanage in the Czech Republic. The students in Aline’s class examined issues related to poverty and child neglect in the Philippines. Hence, Aline encouraged her students to exchange letters with children based at an orphanage in the Philippines. For his part, Ernie had his learners study issues related to aging in Japan and in Kenya. Also regarding Kenya, Ernie’s students examined the consequences of the spread of the AIDS virus in Africa, and they corresponded with children based at an orphanage in Kenya. Many of the children at this orphanage had lost one or both parents to AIDS.

I shall call the three teachers in the study the “primary participants,” since they were the main focus of the research, and I gathered more data from them than from the students. However,

the students, or “secondary participants,” also shed some light upon the research questions, and I later discuss some of the students’ data that pertain to insights from the teachers regarding the three research questions. There were about 5 students in Max’s class, 5 in Aline’s class, and 15 in Ernie’s class. It is difficult to give an exact figure on student numbers. This is because students paid a fee of 5,000 Yen per person on a monthly basis, and a number of learners were unable to attend the classes during certain months, due to professional or personal commitments.

The students of MT School ranged in age from their early 20s to their mid 40s, and included salaried workers, homemakers, undergraduates, and graduate students. About seventy percent of the learners were female. Each of the three classes met once a week from early September to late December, 2003.

Data Analysis

I gathered my data for the research questions by observing all three teachers’ MT School classes, and by conducting interviews of approximately 25 minutes with each of the three teachers (one interview per instructor). Between September and December, 2003, I observed Aline’s class 7 times. I processed five of these observations into detailed field notes. Due to work and study commitments, I was only able to observe Max’s and Ernie’s classes once each. I summarized both of these observations in field notes. During most of the class observations, I tried to play the role of participant-observer, though in some cases it was a challenge juggling the twin roles of “student” and “researcher.” As to the coding of the observations and the interview data, I tried to take an approach in line with data triangulation, which was suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985, cited in Brown, 2001). In the case of this study, I attempted to triangulate the data by looking for similar patterns in the observations and interviews. In doing so, after gathering all of my interview and observation data and finalizing my research questions, I coded the data to fit with my research questions. Miles and Huberman (1994) defined codes as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (p.56).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Meaningful Content and Teacher Motivation

To review, my first research question was:

To what extent can opportunities that classroom teachers have to teach what they perceive to be meaningful content increase their motivation to teach?

In the interviews, the teachers constantly brought up the theme that it was very important for them to be able to teach meaningful content. Aline asserted, “I feel that it’s important to do something more meaningful than teaching students who are not at all interested in English. So, if I’m going to continue teaching English, it has to be on some level that has some kind of meaning.” She mentioned later in the interview that the students she was teaching at her vocational school demonstrated very little motivation with regard to the study of English.

Max made a more direct comparison of his two teaching situations when he declared, “If I didn’t need the money would I do it or not? MT School, definitely ‘Yes.’ XY University definitely ‘No.’ because it’s not satisfying...It doesn’t offer the same level of engagement and authentic motivation that MT School teaching does.” As noted earlier, Czikszenmihalyi (1997) and Brophy (1985), among others, have urged instructors to teach material with which they have a deep emotional connection. Max and Aline both felt that the material they taught at MT School was more meaningful to them than was the content they taught at their regular institutions because the former was in the area of global education, which they felt had implications for the world at large. They also noted that the students at MT School demonstrated a higher overall English proficiency than those they taught at their regular institutions. Thus, they experienced more freedom at MT School to introduce materials related to global education, since they felt that the learners at their regular institutions lacked the vocabulary necessary to study such issues.

Ernie, on the other hand, did not perceive a difference between his own motivation to teach at his regular institution and at MT School. Since he worked at a fairly high-level national university, he did not have the same problems introducing challenging global education content that Max and Aline experienced at their regular places of work. However, I did get the sense that Ernie was motivated by the intellectual challenges of teaching at MT School when he said, “One thing about the MT School that I like in addition to helping everybody is that I can learn a lot myself about, in this case, senior citizens’ issues.” For his part, Max contended, “It’s authentically engaging because I’m doing something that’s both intellectually and emotionally stimulating and that’s what I want to do. That’s the sort of teaching I want to do.” As Dörnyei (2001) observed, teachers tend to be demotivated when they lack intellectual challenges in their work. According to Max and Ernie, such challenges were not missing for them at MT School.

Many of the students in the MT School classes seemed to be inspired by the deep intellectual and emotional connections that they saw their teachers making with the materials. Yoshiko, a student of Max who responded to a brief written questionnaire I had given her, awowed, “We had really meaningful topics to talk about and a great teacher who was a wonderful and helpful facilitator at the same time.” During my observation of Max’s class, when he was having the students reflect on what they had learned at MT School, Yoshiko said that after watching a video in one of the classes about the Nazi concentration camps in Eastern Europe, she was inspired to go to the library to read deeply about the Second World War. In my only interview with a learner, Hamako, a student of Ernie’s, noted how the problem of the spread of H.I.V. became very personal to her: “I knew that there were lots of people who suffered from H.I.V. but just because I get a pen pal who’s affected by H.I.V., that problem becomes much closer.” The students in Ernie’s class were, as part of the MT School curriculum, corresponding with Kenyan children orphaned by AIDS. Many of these children, including Hamako’s pen pal, had themselves contracted H.I.V. at birth from their mothers.

Moreover, it was obvious from the classes I observed that the learners were engaged deeply with the content. They chatted excitedly in small group and large group sessions about what they were learning, and a lack of fluency in English didn’t stop them from trying to express themselves. I noticed in my observations, too, that the teachers were gesticulating in an excited manner when they were talking with the students about the content of the classes. The instructors

also went out of their way to prepare various multimedia materials, such as video clips and studies of relevant pop songs. Thus, both the teachers and learners seemed to be excited about engaging with content that they perceived to be meaningful, and in this way, they appeared to be influencing each others' enthusiasm in a positive manner. As Czikszentmihalyi (1997, p.77) held regarding students, "They look around them for adults who seem to enjoy their jobs, who believe in what they are doing, and take them as models." The MT School teachers in this study certainly seemed to be doing their best to be models of enthusiasm for their charges.

Going the Extra Mile

To remind readers, the second research question is:

In a profession that is already known for inducing stress, why do teachers volunteer their time at institutions such as MT School?

A partial answer to this question can be found by examining the background experiences recounted by the participating teachers. Jacques (2001) declared that understanding something of the background and life experiences of educators could shed valuable light on their motivation to teach. During my interview with Max, he talked about his time volunteering with the Peace Corps in the former Czechoslovakia. It is not coincidental, then, that the material Max chose for his MT School class centered on social issues related to the Czech Republic. Max also mentioned the influence that his volunteer work with the YMCA in America had on his decision to found the MT School in Japan. Almost in the same breath, Max stressed how volunteering was much more meaningful to him than was paid work.

As to Ernie, he claimed that his time in the Peace Corps in Morocco "changed my whole life." It would seem that some evidence for such a change is that over a decade after this experience, Ernie mentioned that he still possessed many artifacts from Morocco and corresponded with a number of his friends from that country. When I asked Aline what sparked her interest in global education, she reflected thus on her two years traveling throughout Asia: "That was my first experience of traveling that extensively and, yeah, I think that's what opened my eyes because prior to that I believed what I read about the United States being a good outfit."

The backgrounds of these three teachers influenced their desire to make a contribution not only to their learners, but to the world at large. As to why she found her volunteer teaching at MT School to be more fulfilling than the teaching in which she was engaged at her regular workplace, Aline asserted: "Because of the whole experience that you are contributing. If nothing else, you're contributing some money to a worthy cause, and at the college, you are...or I am...only babysitting in a way." Max put a similar sentiment even more strongly when he insisted, "You know...I think it has to be a nagging question - How can I make this world a little better?" For his part, Ernie expressed satisfaction not only in being able to learn more about issues related to senior citizens, but also having the opportunity to help them in a tangible way through financial contributions to a local home for seniors culled from the tuition fees at MT School. The wish on the part of these three teachers to make contributions to the betterment of humankind should not come as a real surprise, given that most of the 100 participants in the Pennington and Riley

(1991) study on teacher motivation rated “moral values” and “social services” as the highest of 20 facets leading to job satisfaction. These both have to do with intrinsic motivation, which Doyle and Kim (1999), as well as Jacques (2001) have insisted from empirical evidence in their studies is a stronger motivational impetus for ESL and EFL teachers than external rewards.

While the backgrounds of these teachers, as well their hopes of making a contribution to the world community were factors in explaining why they volunteered at MT School, an additional point that cannot be overlooked is the satisfaction they felt in developing communities of practice with each other, as well as with the learners at MT School. Both Ernie and Aline, for example, said that they had been inspired to volunteer at MT School after hearing Max, the founder, give a talk about it. In a follow-up e-mail to me after our interview, Ernie wrote, “The only thing I forgot to emphasize in the meeting is that I have a lot of respect for Max. Today I think he has a relatively low income because of the job he has now chosen to do.” Max himself mentioned the influence on him of a teacher in another part of Japan who had previously founded an organization similar in purpose to MT School.

The three teachers in this study also developed communities of practice by positioning themselves as co-learners with their students. As Max put it, “But here, we’re using English to explore something together. And we really are exploring it. And they often teach me things in a way.” Indeed, in none of the classes that I observed did the MT School teachers portray themselves as omniscient purveyors of knowledge. For example, they often had the students share with the class something that they had learned of the counties of origin of the children with whom they were corresponding. Moreover, Max encouraged his learners to use the Internet and other resources to seek relevant information about the countries being studied.

Learner Motivation and Teacher Motivation

As mentioned earlier, few researchers have been willing to look at the role played by learners in demotivating teachers. Most, such as Dörnyei (2001), as well as Deci, Kasser, and Ryan (1997) have claimed, rather, that it is the teacher’s primary role to motivate their students, no matter how unmotivated these learners seem. Hence, I decided in this pilot study to examine the following research question:

In what ways can the motivation or lack of motivation by learners contribute to teacher motivation (or lack thereof)?

As my preliminary research here indicates, the motivation of teachers is often largely affected by the motivation of their charges. Referring to her work at the vocational college, for instance, Aline opined, “So, there’s nothing for them that’s meaningful, so it becomes less meaningful for the teacher as well I think, yeah?” She lamented as well about how she had gone out of her way to prepare what she felt were relevant materials related to global education content, but that these learners, in contrast to those at MT School, responded with apathy. For his part, Max observed, “but I think, the experience is...it has a certain depth and resonance that other student-teacher relationships don’t have. And I do tend to have closer relationships with these students than I have with my other students.” In observing Max’s MT School class, I couldn’t

help but feel that his closeness to his learners was obvious, given the energetic and warm manner in which he was interacting with his learners. For his part, Ernie remarked that he didn't notice any difference between the motivation of learners in his regular workplace and those of the MT School class but he did mention that it was "fun to teach" the MT School classes "and the students are so nice." Similarly, Ernie's student, Hamako, seemed to draw positive energy from her classmates, enthusing that "they want to do something for the other person."

It must be said, though, that the role of the teacher as motivator in such classes is important. The two students of Max who responded to my short written survey questions on the MT School classes were duly impressed by his level of enthusiasm. Max himself responded positively to his learners' enthusiasm, so it seemed that with regards to his MT School class, the teacher and learners were mutually re-enforcing each other's fervor. It also seems to me unfair to pin the blame for low teacher motivation entirely on learners. As LeTendre, Hofer, and Shimizu (2000) have asserted, students in Japan who are tracked into low-level secondary schools often receive a poor quality education. I have seen firsthand that such learners inevitably end up taking menial jobs or studying at low-level tertiary institutions, such as those in which Max and Aline were employed. Those students who came to MT School, by contrast, tended to either have studied at elite universities or worked in highly paid jobs. Alternatively, some had spouses employed in such positions. Thus, more research needs to be done before a clear causal link can be made from learner motivation to teacher motivation.

CONCLUSIONS

Since this is a pilot study, I do not claim to provide definitive answers to the three research questions, though I hope that the preliminary findings outlined in this paper are a step towards formulating at least tentative responses. Regarding the link between teaching meaningful content and teacher motivation that seemed to be strong amongst the three participants in this study, more research, particularly in the quantitative vein, is needed before such a connection can be generalized. It could also conceivably be charged that it is merely common sense that teacher motivation will increase when instructors teach content that is meaningful to them. While this may indeed be the case, there are few studies I am aware of that outline empirical evidence for this claim. In my view, "common sense" has a higher standing in the research community if it is backed up with empirical data.

With regards to the second research question, while intrinsic motivation appears to be a stronger drive to most ESL and EFL teachers than are extrinsic rewards (Pennington, 1995), a number of researchers (e.g. Brown, 1994) have underlined how a lack of teacher autonomy can diminish teacher motivation. The three teachers in this study did not experience constraints to their autonomy in their regular workplaces *vis-à-vis* curriculum design. However, Max and Aline expressed frustration that the low level of their students at their employment locales precluded any possibility of their teaching content that they found meaningful (in this case, global education content), as such content entailed, they felt, a vocabulary knowledge that was beyond their students' capabilities. Thus, while Max and Aline did not feel that their autonomy was threatened from the administrators at their workplaces, they did hold that their freedom to teach meaningful

content was constrained by the low level of both skill and motivation of the learners at their places of employment.

With regards to this same research question, though, one weakness of the current study is that I did not interview teachers who experienced autonomy in their institutions but who appeared to have a low motivation to teach. In Japan, teachers at junior colleges and universities generally have the freedom to teach any content that they wish, but that does not necessarily guarantee that they will be highly motivated in their jobs. In future studies, I will seek to interview a broader cross-section of teachers from various tertiary institutions, in order to try to uncover driving forces other than autonomy that might explain their motivation.

As to the third research question, in which I tried to link teacher demotivation with learners' lack of motivation, I have already noted weaknesses in this study regarding this query. Common sense would dictate, too, that teachers naturally gravitate towards opportunities to teach highly skilled or motivated students, while they tend not to apply for jobs involving the opposite case. In my own informal conversations with a number of tertiary-level teachers in Japan, they have said that they could handle teaching students with poor motivation if such a condition were not combined with bureaucratic interference from above regarding curriculum decisions. Fortunately, such meddling doesn't appear to be common.

Although more research is needed into teacher motivation in order to add weight to my tentative answers to the three research questions, I believe I have made a promising start, particularly with regards to the first two questions. It seems to me, though, that tertiary institutions in Japan and elsewhere must do their utmost to protect teacher autonomy, as well as to promote financially and emotionally secure working environments for their employees. This will enable educators to enjoy the emotional freedom to more easily forge meaningful connections with their learners as well as the subject matter that they teach. The results of this study indicate that Max, Aline, and Ernie were able to make such connections freely because they faced no institutional constraints on their teaching at MT School, and because they had students who came to MT School due to a genuine interest in English and in using their English to make small but positive contributions to the world. Hence, it seems appropriate to conclude this paper with the words of Palmer (1999, p.27), who observed that many of his students told him that their best teachers are those who "connect themselves to their students, their subjects to each other, and everyone to the subject being studied."

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