Teacher Motivation:  
The Missing Link in ESL Motivational Studies

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Abstract
The study of motivation is a prominent area in the field of Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Understandably enough, most of these studies have dealt with the issue of student motivation. A number of instruments to survey and measure student motivation have also been developed, such as the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery developed by Gardner (1985). However, there have been far fewer studies of teacher motivation, which has been shown to be a relevant issue not only in SLA, but in education in general. This paper first reviews some of the major studies that have been done on student motivation. It then shows how teacher motivation is also an important area in SLA, and has a direct influence on student motivation. Major studies on teacher motivation are also reviewed. The paper concludes by citing the need for further research in teacher motivation, including the development of survey and assessment instruments, such as those that have been developed to measure student motivation.

1. Introduction
Like many other areas in the field of Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), motivation came to the field from elsewhere, mainly psychology and mainstream education. It is a difficult construct to define, and Crookes and Schmidt (1991) note that there is no generally agreed upon definition of motivation. Still, there are some commonalities in the definitions which various researchers have come up with. Dornyei (1998) calls it a “process whereby a certain amount of instigation force arises, initiates action, and persists as long as no other force comes into play to weaken it and thereby terminate action, or until the planned outcome has been reached” (p. 118). Williams and Burden (1997) call motivation a multi-faceted construct and define it as “a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals)” (p. 120).
Motivation is important, and basic, to all human endeavor, including second language acquisition, and it has been widely researched in SLA. Yet most of this research has dealt with student motivation, and there has been very little research on teacher motivation, though it seems that teacher motivation is a central factor affecting student motivation, and an important component in classroom learning. Noting this lack, Dornyei comments that teacher motivation “has been a largely uncharted area in the L2 [second language] field. . . . As far as I am aware, no L2 study has explicitly linked the level of teacher motivation with that of students, and the topic of teacher motivation has also received little attention in general educational psychology. This is all the more surprising since the teacher’s level of enthusiasm and commitment is one of the most important factors that affect the learners’ motivation to learn. . . .” (Dornyei, 1998, p. 130). Perhaps teacher motivation can be called the missing link in ESL motivational studies.

In this paper I will review some of the major studies on student motivation, and then I will try to establish how insights into motivation are relevant to teachers as well as students by reviewing some of the work that has been done on teacher motivation.

2. Views of Motivation

Williams and Burden trace the course of motivation theory in psychology (p. 197). They note that behaviorism viewed motivation as a drive to satisfy needs. This led to drive reduction theories of motivation. For example, Maslow created a pyramid-shaped hierarchy of human needs, in which basic physiological needs are at the bottom of the pyramid, proceeding upward through need for safety and security, need for interpersonal closeness, need for self-esteem, cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, and finally, self-actualization (Maslow, 1968, in Williams & Burden, 1997). The pyramid proceeds from lower level needs to higher level needs.

Motivational views of L2 learning have been largely social psychological, influenced by Gardner’s theories of integrative and instrumental orientations in motivation to learn a foreign language (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Gardner also developed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (1985), in which motivation is operationally defined as the desire to learn the language, motivational intensity, and attitudes towards learning the language.

Earlier theories of motivation were criticized for viewing motivation as a reaction to factors outside human control. This led to cognitive approaches to motivation, which saw choice as the main factor. Williams and Burden broaden the cognitive perspective into what they call a social constructivist view (1997), leading to the definition given above, which emphasizes the individual uniqueness of motivation. Each person is motivated differently, and makes choices to act based on his or her own personal reasons. At the same time, each individual’s motivation is also influenced by social and contextual factors.

Following the presentation of their social constructivist view, Williams and Burden (1997) go on to elucidate the various types and components of motivation as they relate to language learning. It is worth looking at these now, as they will be relevant later when discussing teacher motivation.

The first distinction is intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation involves doing something for internal reasons, such as meeting a challenge, because something is enjoyable in itself,
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or satisfying personal interest and curiosity. Extrinsic motivation involves doing something for external reasons, such as getting good grades or other rewards, avoiding punishments, and pleasing parents and teachers. Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are not diametrically opposed or mutually exclusive. They can be interactive, with extrinsic motivation leading to intrinsic motivation.

A further aspect of motivation is perceived value of the activity: “The greater the value that individuals attach to the accomplishment of or involvement in an activity, the more highly sustained effort into succeeding in the activity. This would appear to be true whether they are influenced by intrinsic or extrinsic reasons” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 125). Thus, if students can see a value in the lesson they are studying, they will be more motivated to study it.

They next discuss the aspect of arousal, which goes with curiosity. If teachers try to give their activities some element of surprise or uniqueness, this can help students concentrate on the activity by keeping them aroused and curious. In connection with arousal, they also refer to Csikszentmihalyi’s concept of flow experience (1997), which will be discussed later.

The next group of motivational factors center around learners’ beliefs about themselves. These include a sense of agency, locus of causality, locus of control, effectiveness motivation, and motivational style.

A sense of agency refers to the sense people have of either causing and being in control of their actions, or feeling that what happens to them is controlled or caused by others. This is related to locus of causality and locus of control, which are essentially the same thing. Whether or not learners feel in control of their learning has an effect on motivation. Effectiveness motivation has to do with self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986, in Williams & Burden, 1997). This refers to learners’ sense of competence, the belief that they have the ability to do things and to meet their challenges. Some research indicates that learners with high self-efficacy may actually do better on achievement tasks than learners with higher ability but lower self-efficacy.

One type of motivational style is learner helplessness (Seligman, 1975, in Williams & Burden, 1997). This type of learner attributes failure to a lack of ability and has a low locus of control. They may suffer from depression and anxiety. Another style is mastery oriented, in which learners attribute failure to their own lack of effort.

Goal setting and achievement is another important factor in motivation, especially in sustaining motivation. Williams and Burden contrast performance and learning, or mastery, goals. Those who set performance goals are concerned with looking good and appearing to master the target material. They tend to believe that intelligence and ability are fixed, and that effort will not change this. Those with mastery goals, on the other hand, tend to believe that ability is changeable, and that effort is worthwhile.

Goals may be internally set by the learner or imposed from the outside. Effort avoidance motivation occurs when externally-set goals conflict with a learner’s internal goals, and the learner responds by deliberately trying not to achieve the externally-imposed goals.

The “involvement of significant others” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 133) can also have an effect on motivation. Learners’ relations with those close to them, such as parents and teachers, influence their motivation. This includes such factors as learners’ feelings toward their teachers and how teachers present
classroom activities.

Feedback is another factor in motivation involving the teacher’s role. Feedback can be negative or positive, including rewards and punishments. Williams and Burden point to research which finds that punishments are ineffective in bringing about positive change, and that rewards such as praise are more effective. However, too much praise can backfire and have a negative effect on motivation. They suggest that the most efficacious way to make feedback effective is to make it informational and useful to the learner.

Crookes and Schmidt (1991) and Dornyei (1998) also give brief overviews of motivational theories in psychology. Crookes and Schmidt refer to Keller’s education-oriented theory of motivation, which posits four major determinants of motivation: interest, relevance, expectancy, and outcomes (Keller, 1983, in Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). In this view, relevance is necessary for sustained motivation. It arises when learners perceive that the learning situation is meeting personal instrumental needs, such as need for achievement, for affiliation, and for power: “That is to say, we like to be successful, and usually find activities in which we can achieve success pleasurable. . . and adults are accustomed to and desire a measure of control over the situations in which they find themselves” (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). Expectancy involves learner’s expectations—people who expect to succeed will be more motivated than people who don’t.

Dornyei (1998) mentions three further motivational theories from psychology: expectancy-value theories, goal theories, and self-determination theory. In expectancy-value theories, “motivation to perform various tasks is the product of two key factors: the individual’s expectancy of success in a given task and the value the individual attaches to success in that task. . . it is unlikely that effort will be invested in a task if either factor is missing, that is, if the individual is convinced that he/she cannot succeed no matter how hard he/she tries or if the task does not lead to valued outcomes” (Dornyei, 1998, p. 119). Aspects of expectancy of success include attribution theory, self-efficacy theory, and self-worth theory. Aspects of value include attainment value (importance), intrinsic utility value, and cost (cost refers to negative valence, such as anxiety and fear of failure).

Dornyei’s discussion of goals is similar to Williams and Burdens’. He also points out that goals are important in sustaining persistence, and in directing attention and effort towards accomplishing a task. The discussion of self-determination theory basically has to do with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Dornyei also points out the interactive nature of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation: “. . . under certain circumstances. . . extrinsic rewards can be combined with or can even lead to, intrinsic motivation” (p. 121).

The above is a very brief and abbreviated overview of motivational theory. These theories have often been applied in discussions of learner motivation in ESL, and I think it is clear that they could also be applied to discussions of teacher motivation. I would now like to establish the relevance of teacher motivation to learner motivation, and then to look at how these motivational theories have been applied to the issue of teacher motivation.
3. Relevance of Teacher Motivation to Learner Motivation

Teacher attitude and performance are important factors for learner motivation. The Attitudes and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (Gardner, 1985) includes sections on class anxiety, and attitudes towards the course and teacher. Dornyei (1998) notes that some research has found that appraisal of the classroom environment is an important factor in learner motivation for Hungarian learners (Clement, et al., 1994, in Dornyei, 1998). Dornyei’s model of components of foreign language learning motivation includes teacher-specific motivational components, which “concern the teacher’s behaviour, personality and teaching style, and include the affiliative motive to please the teacher, authority type (authoritarian or democratic teaching style), and direct socialisation of student motivation (modeling, task presentation, and feedback)” (Dornyei, 1998). Group-specific motivational components, which relate to learner group dynamics, would also seem to be an area that is influenced by teacher motivation.

In Tremblay and Gardner’s model of L2 motivation, language attitudes, including attitudes towards the L2 course and attitudes towards the L2 teacher, lead to self-efficacy (performance expectancy, L2 use anxiety, and L2 class anxiety), which leads to motivational behavior” (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995, in Dornyei, 1998).

Williams and Burden also note that “the role of the teacher is important at all stages of the motivational process” (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 133). Teachers are one of the “significant others” in the motivational spectrum. Learners are influenced by their personal feelings towards their teachers, and by the way activities are presented in class. It makes sense that motivated teachers are more likely to behave in ways that contribute positively to learner motivation, such as developing learner autonomy and self-efficacy, presenting activities in interesting ways, and giving effective feedback. Teachers with positive feelings and beliefs about themselves and positive feelings and beliefs about their students are more likely to nurture positive beliefs and feelings in learners.

4. Studies of Teacher Motivation

I noted at the beginning of this paper that teacher motivation has been a neglected area in ESL research. That does not mean that there has been nothing written about it. There are actually a number of people who have turned their attention to this issue. Horwitz (1996), studying anxiety rather than motivation, studied nonnative ESL teacher anxiety, due to lack of self-confidence in the target language, and how this anxiety negatively influenced their class performance, thus contributing to anxiety and negative feelings in L2 learners. Though not specifically about motivation, anxiety is certainly one of the negative motivators, and this study shows interaction and mutual influence between negative teacher feelings and negative feelings on the part of the learners.

Oxford, et al. (1990) noted the possible negative effects on teacher performance and motivation of clashes between teacher styles and student styles in the classroom.

There have been two comprehensive volumes that deal specifically with teacher motivation: Teaching Well and Liking It, edited by James L. Bess, and Work Satisfaction, Motivation, and Commitment in
Teaching English as a Second Language by Martha C. Pennington. While the Pennington book deals specifically with ESL, Bess is concerned with university teaching in the United States, though much of it is also applicable to ESL. In this book we can see how many of the motivational concepts in psychology that are relevant to learners are relevant to teachers as well. For example, expectancy-value theory, self-efficacy theory, goal-setting, self-determination theory, and flow experience are all discussed in relation to teaching.

Walker and Symons (in Bess, 1997), in discussing social motivation theory, report on what must be a common phenomenon among teachers everywhere over time, the development of negative feelings towards students: if teachers perceive negative feelings on the part of the students, and if they feel unappreciated in spite of their best efforts, then they will respond with anger and anxiety. For these teachers, showing contempt for students is a way of preserving self-esteem: “For college teachers, these theories predict that over their professional lives, they will be inclined to fear students early in their careers and despise them later in their careers” (Walker & Symons, in Bess, 1997, p. 15). They also comment that “Human motivation is at its highest when people (1) are competent, (2) have sufficient autonomy, (3) set worthwhile goals, (4) get feedback, and (5) are affirmed by others” (p. 16-17). Elucidating the way that these criteria are met or unmet forms the basis for the rest of the book.

One of the most interesting articles in the book is “Intrinsic Motivation and Effective Teaching: A Flow Analysis” by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (in Bess, 1997). He asks the question, “What makes teaching enjoyable? Is it possible to learn to enjoy teaching?” (p. 82). This leads into his general model of enjoyment, which he calls flow—an experience of enjoyment, characterized by “a deep spontaneous involvement with the task at hand” (p. 82). The optimal condition for flow is when there is a good balance of challenges and skills. When a task is too easy, boredom results, and when it is too difficult, anxiety results.

In their paper on goal-setting, Latham, Daghighi, and Locke point to research evidence for the positive effects of specific goal-setting on motivation across a variety of jobs, and they claim that “goal setting theory has demonstrated more scientific validity to date than any other theory or approach to work motivation” (Latham, et al., in Bess, 1997, p. 128). They emphasize the importance for teachers of setting personally attainable goals, noting that failure to meet goals can result in dissatisfaction and depression. Attained goals can lead to enhanced self-efficacy.

McKeachie (in Bess, 1997) reports that studies have found that American university faculty have a high degree of motivation and work satisfaction in comparison with other professions. However, faculty members also report a high level of stress due to the feeling of not having enough time to meet all the demands made on them. In general, positive faculty satisfaction is due to intrinsic motivation, and negative satisfaction is due to extrinsic factors. Thus, if intrinsic motivation is lacking, faculty members tend to concentrate on negative extrinsic motivators, such as low pay, administrative policies, and working conditions. Obviously, intrinsic motivation can be influenced by extrinsic factors, such as administration policy. McKeachie notes the importance of person to environment fit. A good fit between an individual teacher’s motives and the actual job is a factor in intrinsic motivation. If too many administrative demands are made on teachers, or if teachers must teach courses outside their areas of interest or expertise,
motivation will be negatively influenced.

McKeachie also charts how teacher motivation changes over time, affected by various factors, such as feeling out of touch with youth culture. He makes the claim that individual differences increase with age, and there is also fear of declining intellectual and creative powers. In another paper, however, Blackburn (in Bess, 1997) finds no evidence for the existence of phases over time in the motivation to teach. He claims that teaching motivation over time is often individualistic and idiosyncratic, and cannot be predicted.

The sections of the book dealing with extrinsic motivation and organizational culture depict a number of factors which could create problems for teacher motivation on U.S. campuses today, including the increasing trend towards using part-time and adjunct faculty, lack of job security and poor working conditions, and lack of opportunities for advancement. But one of the most negative influences on teacher motivation at American universities is the conflict between teaching and research. Many universities value research over teaching. It is natural that faculty will respond to this situation by personally valuing research over teaching. For faculty who are primarily motivated to teach, they often feel unrewarded, unacknowledged, and unappreciated. Higher order needs, and needs for achievement, affiliation, and power will not be met. Deci, Kasser, and Ryan state, “One might wonder just how pervasive the value of good teaching is in institutions of higher learning, particularly the research universities. Do administrators and colleagues really value good teaching? Disconcertingly, the answer is probably, ‘Not particularly.’ It is not at all clear that one’s teaching skills are given much weight in hiring decisions, promotion decisions, or salary decisions. And to the extent that they are not, the message is clear—teaching is not valued” (Deci, et al., in Bess, 1997, p. 65).

This condition might seem different from international ESL, but for ESL teachers at the tertiary level, there are actually many similarities. ESL teachers often face a lack of understanding and appreciation from administration and colleagues in other fields, and feelings of isolation within their institutions. A survey of the literature on work satisfaction and motivation among teachers in general, including ESL teachers, is contained in Pennington’s book (1995). Interestingly, one of the things ESL teachers have in common with American university faculty, according to job satisfaction questionnaires, is a generally high level of job satisfaction compared to other professions. Also, as in McKeachie’s paper, teachers who report high satisfaction tend to list intrinsic motivators as the reason, and teachers who report low satisfaction tend to report extrinsic motivators as the reason. Pennington states: “The significance of the teacher-student relationship in the work satisfaction of teachers seems to be a universal” (Pennington, 1995, p. 80).

But Pennington notes that there has been a trend since the 1980s towards higher levels of dissatisfaction among teachers. The reasons for this seem to be a deterioration in external motivators, such as the low status of teachers in many societies. In this respect, comparatively low pay becomes symbolic of the value which society places on teachers.

Regarding work satisfaction among ESL teachers, Pennington reports several studies which reported low satisfaction. In one of these studies, a British Council survey in 1990 of British ESL teachers around the world found the lowest level of job satisfaction among ESL teachers (Blackie, 1990, in Pennington, 1995). This survey found widespread poor working conditions, low pay, a high number of inexperienced
and untrained teachers, high turnover and few career positions. In another study, this one of ESL teachers in Philadelphia conducted by Stevens (Stevens, 1991, in Pennington, 1995), it was found that three fourths of all the ESL teachers in Philadelphia were part-time.

There have been several studies of TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) members, among which Brown (1992, in Pennington, 1995) found that the three biggest problems perceived by ESL teachers were respect, employment, and funding. According to these surveys, TESOL members are more highly motivated, better qualified, and have better working conditions than the general ESL teacher population.

A study by Pennington and Riley (1991a, in Pennington, 1995) found that TESOL members have a moderate to high general level of job satisfaction, but that the level of satisfaction varies across different work aspects—again, intrinsic motivators (personal satisfaction and human relations) are rated highly, and extrinsic motivators (pay and advancement prospects) are rated lower.

In all the studies reported by Pennington, career structure and advancement seem to be the least satisfactory aspect of ESL teaching. She takes the same position as Bess (1997), that administrations need to be much more active in creating environments in which teaching is highly valued and conditions for teachers are optimal. Because improved motivation among teachers leads to improved performance, and improved teacher performance leads to improved student motivation and performance, she calls this “an ethical imperative” (p. 104).

Pennington takes an activist approach to promoting ESL teacher motivation. She proposes a “morale action program” (p. 142) on the part of managers and administrators to improve standards, objectives, and the attainment of goals. Such a plan would provide:

Many and varied growth opportunities to keep their [teachers’] intrinsic motivation and performance high;
Encouragement and incentives for them to join and participate in professional organizations and to extend their knowledge and expertise in their field, in order to maintain work centrality and commitment;
Incentives and resources for collective projects, collaborate roles, cooperative decision-making and networking, coupled with strong administrative support and recognition, to increase their commitment, loyalty, involvement, and innovation, and to decrease their risk of stress-related health problems;
Horizontal and vertical job changes to enhance long-term career motivation for younger and older teachers through career ladders and mentoring programs which increase job diversity, leadership opportunities, and professional self-image;
Equitable pay and benefits and a contractual commitment that will serve as tangible evidence of job security and status;
Bonuses, promotions, reduced teaching load, and other concrete rewards for taking on new assignments and extra responsibilities;
Smoothly functioning administrative systems and procedures that can sustain an environment conducive to experiencing high levels of the intrinsic satisfactions that come with a teaching
career. (Pennington, 1995, pp. 143-144)

This is a pretty tall order, and obviously not all these proposals are likely to be realized any time soon in all situations, but the papers in Bess (1997) come to more or less the same conclusions.

Pennington also proposes activism among teachers. Teachers need to become involved in professional organizations such as TESOL, and work to improve the professional standards of the profession and the recognition and acceptance of ESL as a profession in both academia and the general society. She also proposes continuing studies and surveys of ESL teacher motivation by both teachers and administrators.

5. Assessing Teacher Motivation

If teacher motivation is a legitimate and important area of ESL, as it surely is, then it seems that it might be a good idea to devise a valid and reliable instrument for assessing it, as student motivation has been assessed by the Attitudes and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). Several studies of ESL teacher motivation have had their findings diminished because they did not use recognized instruments (specifically, Ochsner, 1980, and Lanier, 1985, in Pennington, 1995).

Pennington notes that there are recognized instruments for surveying work satisfaction which have been used to survey teachers, including ESL teachers, though not specifically designed for teachers of ESL. One is the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire (MSQ) (Weiss, et al., 1967, in Pennington, 1995), which asks respondents to rate items on a 5-point scale from “not satisfied” to “extremely satisfied”. Another is the Job Description Index (JDI) (Smith, et al., in Pennington, 1995), in which respondents use a three-way scale—yes, no, or undecided—to decide whether certain adjectives describe their job situation in areas such as pay. Another instrument with a more restricted area of interest is the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Johnson, 1986), which investigates whether employees are suffering from burnout by looking at emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and lack of personal accomplishment. Pennington is in favor of using instruments such as these, though she does point out limitations and validity problems in them.

In this paper I have reviewed some of the major studies that have been done in the field of motivation in second language learning. Most of these studies have focused, naturally enough, on student motivation. A number of instruments have also been designed to survey and measure student motivation, such as the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 1985). There have been far fewer studies of teacher motivation, but as some of these studies show, teacher motivation has a direct effect on student motivation, in either a positive or negative direction. There is a need for further research in this area, including the development of survey instruments of teacher motivation, as there have been for student motivation. Such instruments could, among other things, assist administrators in making informed decisions on improving teacher satisfaction by optimizing working conditions and matching teacher expectations with job realities, teacher interests and skills with tasks that utilize those skills, with the ultimate aim of helping teachers to do the best job they can possibly do, and thereby serving the personally and socially useful function of giving learners what they want and need in the way of an education.
Note

1. The idea of significant others can be traced back to the psychological notions of Lev Vygotsky and Reuven Feuerstein (in Williams & Burden, 1997), specifically the notion of mediation, the mediator, and dynamic assessment—teachers (mediators) are of central importance in shaping learner’s ability to learn and attitudes toward learning.

References


