

Narrative Study on Japanese EFL Teacher Motivation in Tertiary Education

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Today it is becoming increasingly clear that English teachers have a very significant influence on the motivation of language learners. However, very little is known about the motivations of English teachers themselves, including the factors that might influence their day-to-day teaching behaviors and their longer-term career choices. Therefore, I conducted this study in order to identify what motivates university teachers at work, considering the situations which English teachers face in their daily schedules. In addition, I conducted this teacher motivation research to facilitate awareness of EFL teachers' mental processes at work, and to make a positive contribution to teacher education by gaining some understanding and insights about teachers' professional growth and transformation, drawing directly from their own perspectives via their personal narratives.

What is teacher motivation?

Since teacher motivation research in TEFL/TESOL is a relatively new area, I became aware of the necessity of clearly defining what teacher motivation for EFL teachers really means. Four specific characteristics of teacher motivation were suggested by Dornyei and Ushioda (2011). Their explanations help us to get a clear picture of what teacher motivation is. First, they emphasize that as a main source of teacher motivation, the intrinsic component plays a significant role. Secondly, teacher motivation is deeply related with contextual factors such as institutional demands and social and environmental aspects in the profession. Third, teacher motivation is described as a lifelong process including career motivation in general, since it often includes considerations of career structures and promotions. Finally, teacher motivation is often fragile since teachers are exposed to various negative influences in the workplace. In my teacher motivation research, the two main aspects I cover are teaching and motivation for research in tertiary education in Japan.

Importance of intrinsic components

As noted above, the intrinsic components of motivation pertain to rewards that can be obtained naturally from engaging in the activity itself- in this case teaching. Two sets of rewards were suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1997) where teaching is concerned. One source of reward for teachers is the educational process itself, and another is the subject matter, which in this case is English. At the same time, three basic human needs related to intrinsically motivated behavior suggested by Deci and Ryan (1985) include autonomy, (i.e. having a certain level of freedom regarding what to do at work), relatedness with others at work, and competence, (i.e. feeling of efficaciousness and sense of accomplishment).

Negative influence on teacher motivation

Previous research shows various specific aspects which have a negative influence on teacher motivation, such as stress (Ehrman & Dornyei, 1998; Kieschke & Schaarschmidt, 2008; Pennington, 1995), restricted autonomy (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2009), insufficient self-efficacy (Alexander, 2008), lack of intellectual challenge (Pennington, 1995), and inadequate career structure (Pennington, 1995). Furthermore, factors typically related to dissatisfaction for TESOL teachers include the low status of TESOL (Johnson, 1997; Senior, 2006), marginalization (Johnson, 1997), and lack of professional recognition (Senior, 2006).

As for strategies to enhance and/or maintain teacher motivation, some recommendations by Shoaib (2004) included ministerial and institutional leadership, pre-service training, in-service training and professional progress, supervision, more effective management, and more manageable workload and curriculum input. In the Japanese context, Falout (2010) suggested a list of strategies to enhance/maintain teacher motivation for native EFL teachers. The list included managing emotions, joining communities, and boosting efficacy.

Considering these findings from previous teacher motivation research, I addressed the following two research questions in the present study.

1. What kind of specific factors empower/ affect teacher motivation?
2. What kind of strategies do EFL teachers utilize to enhance and maintain their motivation?

Method

I conducted a narrative inquiry to explore the detailed voices of current EFL teachers who work at institutions of higher education in Japan. Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, with the length of each interview being 60 minutes on the average. The entire interview was conducted in Japanese since all the participants were Japanese. All the interviews were recorded and the scripts were transcribed and then coded after the interviews.

Interview Questions

In the semi-structured interviews, each teacher was asked questions about their academic background and professional experiences, initial motivation to be a university English teacher, specific factors which influence teacher motivation positively, specific factors affecting teacher motivation negatively, work life balance, and future career goals.

Participant Information

Participant	Gender	Age	Teaching Situation	Hiring Situation	Educational Background	Research Background	Classes per week	Area	Marital Status
A	Female	40's	Associate Professor	Full-time tenured	PhD	TESOL	5-6	Kanto	Single
B	Male	40's	Associate Professor	Full-time tenured	MA	Linguistics	8	Kanto	Married
C	Male	40's	Associate Professor	Full-time tenured	MA	Applied Linguistics / TEFL	5-6	Kansai	Single
D	Female	30's	Assistant Professor	Full-time contract	MA	Linguistics	8	Kanto	Married
E	Female	30's	Part-time lecturer	Part-time	MA	TESOL / Applied Linguistics	11	Kanto	Married

Results and Discussion

Initial Motivation to be EFL teachers

Participants A, B, D, and E were initially planning to be English teachers at junior high/ high school. However, they became interested in learning more about the field and continued their education, in either a Master's or a PhD program. After receiving his graduate qualification, Participant C had a somewhat unique background. He used to work in the business field after gaining his first degree, a B.A. in English at a private university in Japan. However gradually he found it more attractive to work as an English teacher after earning three Master's degrees in an English speaking country.

Factors empowering teacher motivation

Through their daily lives as university EFL teachers, the teachers related various factors that motivate them as teachers and researchers. Most of the factors which were given by the teachers were intrinsically oriented aspects of teaching. Participant A shared that her own motivator is a sense of affiliation through daily interaction with her students in creative ways, such as giving advice on their subject matter or even their career. Participants D and E, both younger female teachers, described their primary motivator as EFL teachers as seeing students' growth both in their English skills levels as well as interest and motivation levels. However, one male teacher, participant C, emphasized the achievements that can be gained through successful research such as publishing papers. One male teacher, Participant B, mentioned that transformation as a teacher is one of the most significant motivators for him as a professional. He has been experiencing various new challenges throughout his career and he looks forward to seeing how he will keep transforming as a teacher and researcher in the future.

Factors negatively affecting teacher motivation

As for demotivating factors, it became clear that various factors affect teacher motivation, such as affiliation issues with colleagues, affiliation issues with students, having some difficulty in keeping a good work life balance, too much work besides teaching and research for full-time teachers, and job security for part-time lecturers.

This is a direct quote from Participant A:

“When I used to work at a university, one Japanese older female colleague was very difficult to communicate with and gave me a hard time. Now, I feel quite happy in my present work situation since I have a good relationship with my colleagues.”

She clarified that not having a good relationship with colleagues affected her teacher motivation dynamically in the past. Moreover, affiliation issues with students can be a powerful de-motivator. Participant B described issues he has been dealing with at work as follows:

“Sometimes, it’s difficult to communicate with some students even in Japanese since some of them have mental/psychological problems. I find the root of the problem is not related to their English skills.”

One very different de-motivator which was given by one part-time lecturer, and which differed from the ones given by full-time teachers was job security. Participant E explained the difficulty she has been facing as follows:

“The difficulty in my life is to focus on both teaching and researching. I am constantly busy with teaching many "komas" and working on my research for the next conference presentation and publications. I really want to find a full time position as soon as possible just to focus on doing what I have passion for as a teacher and have a decent life as a person.”

Work-life balance

In my previous research that examined teacher motivation, (Tsutsumi, 2014) one of the biggest gaps between their ideals and reality was to have a good work life balance. Therefore, I examined this particular issue in the present research by directly asking the participants about their views on it. Three married teachers admitted that they wish that they could have a better work life balance. On the other hand, two single teachers answered that they have a good work life balance.

These are the comments from two female married teachers, and it shows their struggle to balance their career and personal lives:

“I’ve been married for a decade, and my parents hope to have a grandchild. However, I’m not sure if I can take a maternity leave, as now I feel I need to focus on my career first. I was finally able to get a full time position after working as a part-time teacher for ten years.” (Participant D)

“I wish I can have a child and enjoy my personal life more. However, now it’s difficult to think about it since now I’m too busy with teaching and researching in order to get a full time position.” (Participant E)

This quote reflects Participant B’s perspective, one male teachers’ voice, on his work life balance:

“I got married recently, but my work life balance is certainly not well balanced. Since there is much work to do, I am spending much time to work at home as well.”

This comment given by Participant A, a single female teacher shows that she can maintain a good work life balance:

“I’m satisfied with my work life balance. I’m single and don’t have children, so I can focus on what I want to do.”

Future Goals

The next question I asked the participants concerned their future goals. All the teachers were eager to develop their career and sought self-growth through that career. The following quotes capture the direction they would like to pursue as professionals in the field. Participant A is currently teaching general education courses, but hopes to teach in her own area of specialization by teaching seminar courses.

“I hope to be able to teach seminar courses in the future.”

Participants E and D who are female teachers with short-term contracts and part time positions mentioned having job security as a specific goal as follows:

“I hope to get a tenured position at a university where students have higher skills and motivation levels.” (Participant D) “I would like to get a full-time position where I can focus on teaching and research and make a contribution to students’ lives.” (Participant E)

Through this teacher motivation research, I found some crucial statistics regarding the percentage of female full-time teachers in higher education in Japan. According to one of the statistics shown in *学校基本調査* (2013), the proportion of full-time female teachers makes up only 22.0% of all full-time teachers in higher education in Japan. Furthermore, recent statistics in *男女共同参画白書* (2013) show that the proportion of full-time female researchers makes up only 14.0%. In fact, the ratio of full-time researchers regarding female compared to the total in Japan is very small compared to other developed countries such as 16.7% in Korea, 34.3%

in the U.S., 38.3 % in the U.K., 41.7% in Russia. More specifically, the current specific statistics regarding the ratio of female professionals categorized by the position are as follows. In 2013, the proportions were: 14% for professor, 22% for associate professor, and 30% for lecturer.

Strategies to enhance/maintain EFL teacher motivation

Finally, I was hoping to explore what kinds of specific strategies current EFL teachers implement to enhance/maintain their levels of teacher motivation. The specific strategies given by the participants were similar. In addition, it appeared that all the teachers have been working vigorously on their academic research to strive to be professional researchers. For example, one female associate professor who has been working extensively on her research shared her views that everything is connected and many things inspire and give hints for teaching and research. The following comments reflect such views:

“I used to go to only TESOL related conferences; however I have started to go to various types of conferences and workshops recently. It’s because I realized that all sorts of things such as arts, including going to museums, watching films, and reading novels inspire me in both teaching and research.”

Participant C who is more like a researcher-type teacher shared his views as follows:

“Conducting practitioner research and incorporating my teaching and research gives me a sense of achievement. As I accumulate successful experiences on my research, I feel more motivated to conduct the next study. ”

Participant D implied that since research can be a relatively lonely process especially for younger university teachers, she found meaning and importance in building a community to share ideas on teaching and research outside of her current university. The following comments reflect such ideas about the importance of socialization within the professional community:

“For me, socializing with various teachers/researchers in TESOL or the applied linguistics fields gives me energy and stimulation to keep on working harder on teaching and research.”

Finally, Participant E who has been making efforts to get a full-time position was trying to enjoy what she does to reach her goal and try to find meaning in what she has been doing. This comment reflects her positive attitude on her career development:

“Accumulating professional experiences by giving conference presentations at various international conferences, visiting various countries, and enjoying something new give me much energy.”

Concluding Remarks

To summarize, this qualitative case study of Japanese university English teacher motivation presents teachers’ values, experiences, and perspectives. The study found that students can be powerful motivator for teachers. This provides an important insight, particularly as other research studies have shown that teachers can be great motivators for language learners. (Carbonneau et al, 2008; Patrick et al., 2000; Vallerand & Houlfort, 2003). These findings of the present study suggest that teachers and students can mutually influence each other’s lives through the motivation they inspire. Finally, this teacher motivation study suggests that job security and working environment play significant roles in regards to teaching and conducting research in the field of higher education in Japan. Most importantly, through this teacher motivation research, it was found that all the participants were eager to develop their teaching and research skills with very passionate attitudes and they were constantly striving to find ways to perform more effectively. However, they seemed not to have enough opportunities to share resources and ideas with others. This finding suggests that teachers in higher education in Japan need to have more opportunities to share new ideas on various issues - from daily teaching creativity to their professional academic activities.

To conclude, I would like to show my deepest gratitude to all the participants who made this study possible, since each of the life stories they shared gave vivid and clear pictures of their excitement and the challenges they face both in teaching and researching as language teachers and researchers in Japan.

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