

Deconstructing Teacher Motivation at English Language Schools in the UK

By Caroline Webb

Context of the study

Private language schools are located throughout the UK (Smith, 2006), with the majority of them located in London, larger tourist-friendly towns, such as Oxford and Cambridge, and large seaside resorts such as Brighton. Although some schools are independent, many are international chains (e.g. International House, English First). These schools draw young adults and adult learners from around the globe, and are busiest in the summer months when teenagers and young learners attend English programs as well. In general, schools offer general English courses for all proficiency levels, business English, academic English, and exam preparation classes.

Motivation and theoretical framework

Motivation concerns the choice of whether or not to carry out an action, the level of persistence with that action, and the effort spent to do it (Dörnyei, 2001). In general, teacher motivation is an overlooked area of research (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Hoy, 2008) with research on EFL/ESL teacher motivation even scarcer (Dörnyei, 2001, 2003; Kassabgy, Boraie, & Schmidt, 2001). Research in this area is often conducted in a state school environment (e.g. Spear, Gould, & Lee, 2000; Varlaam, Nuttall, & Walker, 1992) and is often focused on job satisfaction (e.g. Pennington, 1995; Slaalvik & Slaalvik, 2011; Spear et al., 2000; Varlaam et al., 1992) rather than on motivation to teach. Even the few EFL/ESL teacher motivation studies (e.g. Kassabgy et al., 2001; Yau, 2010), which provided guidance for this study, blur the lines between job satisfaction and teacher motivation. Rarer still is research conducted in the context of private language schools in the UK, where this research was conducted.

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory (SDT). SDT concerns the types of motivation and the factors that promote or diminish motivation. On the one end of the SDT continuum is *amotivation*, (not being at all motivated), and at the other is *intrinsic motivation* or self-determination (doing an activity because you take personal enjoyment from it). At the center is *extrinsic motivation* (doing an activity to receive external rewards or to avoid punishment). In SDT the three most critical motivating factors for self-determined teaching are autonomy, competence, and relatedness (The University of Rochester Motivation Research Group, n.d.), which this research paid particular attention to in the data collection and analysis phases.

Research Questions

The present study investigated the following three research questions:

1. *What are teachers' perceptions of the rewards available in private language schools in the UK?*
2. *What is the nature of the rewards which motivate teachers when they are teaching or performing teaching related duties?*
3. *To what extent are teachers in private language schools in the UK motivated to teach?*

Data collection and analysis

Thirteen teachers at five private language schools in the UK completed online closed-question questionnaires. Three respondents were chosen for retrospective one-to-one interviews.

The data analysis procedure for the questionnaire was adapted from Kassabgy et al. (2001) and Yau (2010). First, rewards and their respective evaluations of how motivating they are were pre-labeled as intrinsic or

extrinsic. For example, the motivating factor *helping my students learn English* and its respective reward *I help my students learn English* were categorized as intrinsic, whereas, *a good salary* and its respective reward, *I have a good salary* were categorized as extrinsic. In total there were five intrinsic statements and 20 extrinsic ones.

To answer RQs 1 and 2, participants' responses on the questionnaire were assigned numerical values to calculate the percentage of availability of rewards and the degree of motivation each reward has for teachers. To answer RQ 3 (to what extent teachers are motivated to teach), an original scale and mathematical procedure was created and applied to each respondent's questionnaire data. No assumptions were made about the possible motivational effects of rewards (e.g. *job security* is not necessarily a motivating factor, as one can imagine teachers with no job security being motivated to teach to avoid being fired, and oppositely, experienced teachers with tenure being unmotivated to teach). Hence, all results were calculated from participants' own responses.

Findings

The results show that teachers are intrinsically motivated and derive pleasure and satisfaction from helping students learn and from developing and growing as teachers. All five intrinsic rewards were available to teachers and many extrinsic rewards, such as *I have friendly relationships with students*, *I have positive evaluations from students*, and *I am treated fairly at work* are some of the most available rewards in this context. Interviews also pinpointed a reward which was not included in the original list, *motivated students*. Teaching motivated students clearly motivates teachers. In contrast, when teachers have unmotivated, difficult or rude students and need to take on the role of disciplinarian, they become frustrated and unmotivated, and become less self-determined.

Fortunately, the findings show that there are only two *very motivating* rewards which are not readily available to teachers; *a good work vs. free time balance* and *a good salary*. When teachers are not paid for certain duties, such as lesson planning, marking, and writing reports, their motivation to perform these duties decreases significantly. Even though lesson planning is critical for delivering organized lessons, and thorough marking helps students notice errors, teachers are nonetheless unmotivated to perform these tasks. A potential reason for this finding is that teachers in this study are most motivated by rewards pertaining to students (e.g. *good relationships with students*, *positive evaluations from students*), but this is only the case when they are teaching a class and directly interacting with students. Despite the negative factor of a low salary, the majority of teachers were found to be *very motivated* (38%) or *motivated* (46%), and most teachers self-reported being *very motivated* or *motivated*.

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