

# An Examination on English Teachers' Perceptions of Student Motivation in Higher Education

Hsiao-Wen Hsu

Kainan University, Center for General Education, Taoyuan, Taiwan

Email: [pennyshu@mail.knu.edu.tw](mailto:pennyshu@mail.knu.edu.tw)

## Abstract

To help young adults to be competitive for the future job market, the ability of mastering English is viewed as a basic skill to the global world. English plays an important role in educational system in Taiwan. Many students may have studied English for over ten years before enrolling in university, and they still need to study English for at least one or two academic years at tertiary level. However, English language teachers who are responsible for teaching these young adults in the university seem to have words to say. Many students become less interested in learning this essential international language, and this does frustrate teachers a lot. This study, therefore, examines student motivation from teachers' perspectives and the reasons for the lack of motivation teachers perceive in the process of teaching English at the university level. Thirty-two English language teachers working in Taiwanese universities participated in this study. Teachers completed the Perceptions of Student Motivation Measurement to determine their perceptions of student motivation and the reasons teachers attribute to students as having low or no motivation in English as Foreign Language (EFL) learning. Findings reveal that these university English teachers generally perceive student motivation as not very high and they indicate that students do not make enough efforts to learn English learning at the university level.

*Keywords:* Motivation, Teacher perception, EFL, Higher education

Received July 28, 2018; Accepted December 12, 2016.

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## Introduction

Learning a foreign language can be a difficult and challenging process, especially in an EFL context such as Japan, Korea or Taiwan where their native language is used throughout inside and outside the classroom. Among affective factors, “motivation” is the term language teachers and students often used to describe successful or unsuccessful learners. Researchers and educators agree that motivation is one of the crucial determinants of learners’ success, not only in foreign language (Csizer & Dörnyei, 2005; Deniz, 2010; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010), but also in academic learning in general (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). In many instances, however, students encounter obstacles to learning that may demotivate them. The teacher is viewed as playing a crucial role in constructing, maintaining and enhancing students’ motivation in learning. These roles are assumed to influence student motivation (Al Kaboody, 2013).

Generally speaking, in an EFL learning context, English is taught in school a few hours a week and does not serve as a daily communication tool. Most universities in Taiwan require two-hour General English course for freshman students. Within a limited target language environment, classroom experience usually plays as one of the crucial determinants affecting learners’ motivation. What teachers do and say may affect students’ learning outcomes to some degree. As Dörnyei points out, motivating learners is generally recognized as central to teaching effectiveness (Dörnyei, 2001). That is to say, how teachers perceive student motivation may affect the strategies they apply in teaching. Unfortunately, some published studies fail to examine how language instructors perceive their students’ motivation (Cowie & Sakui, 2011).

### Teacher Perception of Motivation

Motivation plays a crucial role in student learning and it is an important issue for educators. Language teachers are usually responsible for helping students engage and sustain in the long term process of second language (L2) learning (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998). The teacher can be an initiator, facilitator, motivator, mentor, consultant, model of the target language, and supporter, and these roles are assumed to influence student motivation. In 1990, Ramage highlighted the importance of motivation enhancement by language teachers. Students can positively and actively engage in their learning with teacher support. Although it is unlikely that everyone can be successfully motivated, it is suggested that student motivation can be improved and ‘worked on’ (Dörnyei, 2001).

Working with unmotivated students can be frustrating. However, observing students' learning behaviors is the first step in improving their motivation as students' behavior reveals itself irrespective the causes of the motivation problem (Stipek, 2002). In language classrooms, if teachers perceive that student motivation is manageable, they will make effort to encourage motivating behaviors (Hardré & Hennessey, 2013). On the contrary, if students are found to have low or no motivation that is difficult to change, teachers are less likely to invest energy in making improvements. Thus, teachers' knowledge of student motivation can determine their responses to the efforts and strategies they use in their classrooms.

Recently, teacher knowledge on student motivation has not been purely viewed as the sources of good or bad teaching, instead, it is increasingly considered that teachers' knowledge is socially reconstructed and rebuilt through personal experience and reflection (Johnson & Golombek, 2002; Cowie & Sakui, 2011). A study of Japanese EFL teachers examines how teachers perceive and respond to student motivation (Cowie & Sakui, 2011). Among the investigated 32 EFL teachers working at Japanese universities, Cowie and Sakui conclude that teachers perceive motivation based on practical manifestations, such as students' positive attitudes, clear goals, and the behaviors students exhibit in reaching those goals. In addition, teachers apply a variety of strategies to affect student motivation. Cowie and Sakui also highlight the importance of hearing from teachers, because theorizing motivation may make concepts too complex and difficult to employ in real teaching.

Studies of teacher perceptions and judgments have shown that beliefs are closely related to teaching (Borg, 2003; Liao, 2007), and teacher beliefs can be viewed as predictors for actual classroom practice. One might apply his/her teaching strategies differently based on perceptions of student motivation. Thus, the indicators teachers use to measure student motivation are important (Hardré, 2008; Hardré & Hennessey, 2013). If students lack crucial motivational features, they risk becoming unmotivated and might not perform well in learning (Pintrich, 2003; Schunk, Meece & Pintrich, 2013). However, motivation is an internal and invisible process, and it can be difficult for teachers to recognize (Hardré, 2007). If teachers can identify and address students' motivational needs, it can be possible to remove obstacles to student motivation and teach more effectively so that students can also learn more effectively (Hidi & Harackiewicz,

2000). On the other hand, understanding the causes for problems such as lack of motivation helps teachers identify strategies to solve problems (Jonassen, 2011).

With this in mind, this study sets out to first examine teachers' understanding of student EFL motivation, and then it investigates the causes and other factors involved in students' lack of motivation. The following two questions guide this study:

1. How do university EFL teachers in Taiwan understand student motivation in classrooms?
2. How do university EFL teachers in Taiwan perceive reasons for students' lack of motivation?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Context**

This study seeks to obtain an understanding of teachers' perceptions of student motivation as well as the reasons of being lack of motivation in a specific cultural and social context. Teacher perceptions and strategies employed regarding student motivation may differ due to the cultural and socio-political milieu. To obtain an understanding from teachers' perspectives, this study, focuses on non-native EFL teachers who are responsible for teaching General English courses in Taiwanese universities.

In many universities in Asian countries, English is required for both entry and graduation, and Taiwan is no exception. Usually, students need to take General English courses during their first year of university study, and some may even enroll for up to three semesters. These English classes may be streamed based on a placement test, but they also include students with a variety of learning abilities and attitudes towards English learning. Nevertheless, language teachers have to provide education for students with a range of abilities among their first-year students, distinguish the level of motivation among the students, and decide upon the best strategies to apply for the best learning outcome.

## Participants

A total of 32 college EFL teachers responded to an on-line survey (12 males and 20 females). The average age of these 12 male and 20 female teachers was 46.22. Table 1 summarizes the background features of teacher participants. As can be seen, these teachers were highly educated and experienced. Nearly 60% had a doctoral qualification, and others had master's degrees in related fields. Fourteen of the teachers (43.7%) have had teaching experience at the university level for more than 10 years, whereas two teachers had just started their career teaching at the university level.

Table 1  
*Teacher Participant Data (N=32)*

	Detail	N	%
Gender	Male	12	37.5
	Female	20	62.5
Qualifications	PhD/EdD	19	59.4
	Masters	13	40.6
Years of teaching at university level	Less than 5 years	2	6.3
	5-10 years	16	50
	11-15 years	5	15.6
	Over 15 years	9	28.1

## Measures and Materials

This study aims to understand Taiwanese English language teachers' perceptions of student motivation. The Perceptions of Student Motivation (PSM) questionnaire applied for this study was adapted and revised based on the version Hardré, Davis, and Sullivan (2008) developed to assess teachers' perceptions of students' motivation and the reasons for students' lack of motivation. Originally, the questionnaire was developed to measure high school teachers' awareness of student academic motivation, and it was tested and performed reasonably well across ethnic, nationality, and subject area groups (Hardré et al, 2008). However, university EFL teachers do not have close relationships with parents like those who are teaching in high schools and/or primary schools. This study, therefore, excludes three question items related to home

factors in the administered questionnaire. Consequently, the final version of questionnaire consists of 17 items rated on a 7-point Likert scale from Not at all true = 1 to Very much true =7.

To avoid an inherent shortcoming of self-reported questionnaires, teacher participants received a link to the questionnaire, which could be completed individually and at teachers' convenience within 20 minutes. A brief introduction to the study was attached along with the questionnaire link. Teacher participants were assured that all information was kept confidential and anonymous.

### **Data Analysis**

The PSM questionnaire measures EFL teachers' general and casual perceptions of student motivation including internal and external factors (Hardré et al, 2008). Based on the study of Hardré et al., two main scales are used: motivations and reasons. The motivation scale measures teachers' perception of students' overall academic motivation, including students' effort, engagement, and interest, based on what can be observed in class. That is, the scale measures teachers' perceptions of the degree to which their students' are motivated. The reasons scale, on the contrary, is set to assess the reasons students are not motivate as reported by their teachers. In other words, the scale notes the reasons that teachers believe their students lack of motivation to learn English. Four subscales are included in this category: current relevance/value, aspirations/future utility, peer factors, and personal factors.

### **Results**

The results are presented in two sections. First, teacher perceptions of student motivation in terms of teaching and learning English in Taiwanese universities are examined. Second, the reasons teachers' believed students lack interest in English learning and their strategies to promote student motivation are considered.

#### **Teachers' Perceptions of Student Motivation**

Table 2 illustrates teacher participants' understanding of freshmen's motivation. Overall, the teacher participants rated student motivation low (see Table 3), though students actively participated in class activities (M=4.01) and presented mild interest in the course content.

However, teachers rated students' effort in English language learning as noticeably low (M=3.73). Among the Motivation Scales, teachers believed that when students are interested in what is taught in class, their motivation is higher (M=4.03, SD=1.23). However, these teachers seemed to believe that students did not make enough effort to learn English. The Effort Scale (M=3.73, SD=1.16) is relatively low in this category. In short, teachers perceived that students did not show a strong learning desire, although they paid attention in class (M=4.03, SD=1.03) and participated in class activities (M=3.97, SD= 1.38). Hence, teachers still need to work on getting students' attention to prevent from becoming distracted (M=4.03, SD= 1.58).

Table 2  
*Motivation Scales (N=32)*

Motivation Scale (Cronbach's alpha= 0.86)	Mean	SD
Effort subscale	3.73	1.16
1.The students in my class really try to learn.	3.63	1.21
2.My students work at learning new things in this class.	3.75	1.27
5.The students in my class don't put forth much effort to learn the content. (Reversed item)	3.81	1.49
Engagement subscale	4.01	0.97
3.My students generally pay attention and focus on what I am teaching.	4.03	1.03
4.The students in my class generally do class-related tasks and assignments willingly.	3.97	1.38
6.My students are often distracted or off task, and I have to bring them back to focus on the topic or work at hand.	4.03	1.58
General interest item	4.03	1.23
7.In general, my students are genuinely interested in what they are asked to learn in my class.		

Table 3  
*Correlation for Motivation Scales*

Measure	Engagement	General interest
Effort	.764**	.534**
	.000	.002
Engagement		.587**
		.000

A further examination of the correlation among the motivation subscales teachers perceived (Table 3) reveals that teachers recognize that the Effort scale is significantly correlated with Engagement ( $r= 0.764$ ,  $p< .001$ ) and students' General Interest ( $r= 0.534$ ,  $p< .005$ ). That is, when students are interested in class, they are more likely to be involved in learning activities and tend to make efforts to learn.

#### Reasons for Lack of Motivation

A second set displays teachers' perceptions of the reasons students lack motivation. Table 4 presents the reasons for students' lack of motivation along with the details of each category. Overall, among the reasons these EFL teachers perceived for students' lack of motivation, the Relevance Scale is the most endorsed ( $M=4.70$ ,  $SD=1.43$ ) whereas the Aspiration Scale is the least endorsed ( $M=3.11$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ).

To be more precise, teachers deemed that the learning content should be relevant (Table 4). If the lesson is presented clearly and to the point, students generally display positive motivation in learning, and vice versa ( $M= 4.81$ ,  $SD=1.69$ ). This also connects to students' learning goals. When students fail to recognize the value of English learning, they show less interest in the class ( $M=4.56$ ,  $SD=1.72$ ). For the Personal Factors scale, those who have negative attitudes towards English learning are easily perceived as lacking in motivation. The Peer Factors scale, on the other hand, seems to be less affective according to these teacher respondents.

Table 4

*Reason Scales (N=32)*

Reasons Scales (Cronbach's alpha= 0.80)	Mean	SD
Relevance scale (content/value)	4.70	1.43
8. When my students aren't engaged in English learning, it's because they don't see the value of what they are being asked to learn.	4.56	1.74
10. If students don't see the point of learning, then they aren't motivated to learn it.	4.81	1.69
11. Most often, if students aren't engaged in my class, it's because they don't see the relevance of the content in their world.	4.72	1.55
Aspirations scale (future utility)	3.11	1.48
9. If students aren't motivated to learn in my class, it is often because they don't have aspirations that connect to education, like plans to go further study.	4.56	1.72
12. Some of my students aren't motivated to work in school because education has no place in the futures they see for themselves.	3.63	1.54
14. Most often, if students aren't working in my class, it's because they don't see how useful this information can be.	4.44	1.46
Peer factors scale (negative)	4.03	1.23
13. Generally, the students in my class who are not interested in learning are that way because of peer pressure to devalue school.	2.81	1.51
15. Negative peer pressure is one big reason why some of my students are not motivated to learn in school.	3.41	1.78
Personal factors scale (lazy, don't care)	4.66	1.57
16. Some students are not motivated to learn because they are just lazy.	4.66	1.84
17. Some students in my class just don't care about learning-period.	4.66	1.79

Table 5

*Correlations for Reasons Scales*

Measure	Aspirations	Peer Factors
Relevance	.790**	.490**
	.000	.004
Aspirations		.602**
		.000

A further examination of the correlations among these factors was carried out (Table 5). Relevance is significantly correlated with Aspirations ( $r= 0.79$ ,  $p<0.001$ ) and Peer Factors ( $r=$

0.49,  $p < 0.01$ ), whereas Aspirations is found significantly correlated with Peer Factors ( $r = 0.60$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Interestingly, the results find no difference in terms of teachers' background. That is to say, this seems to be a common distribution among university students in Taiwan.

### Discussion

The data collected from the participants present an overall picture of Taiwanese EFL teachers' understanding of student motivation as well as the reasons why students lack motivation in English classes. English is a popular global language; students in Taiwan are required to study this foreign language as a compulsory subject beginning in primary school. However, the results indicate that many teachers perceive their students to have relatively low or no motivation in terms of English learning in university English classes. The results also show that there are no differences in perceptions according to teachers' age, gender, and educational background. This suggests that in many universities, EFL teachers still need to teach a variety of low or unmotivated students. Though it is believed that student motivation can be managed (Al Kaboody, 2013; Dörnyei, 2001) through a variety of methods and techniques, however, teachers in this study deem that students should make more efforts in their English learning. This also implies that students should be more responsible for learning the language. Unlike learning in high schools, university students are assumed to be autonomous and responsible for their learning behaviors and outcomes. Yet, this result reveals the problem of why students are not interested or unwilling to be active in learning English.

Accordingly, from teachers' perspectives, the dominant reasons for students' lack of motivation are the lack of relevant learning content together with laziness and negative peer pressure. However, learning English for future career prospects seems to have less likely to cause students to be low or no motivation in class. This does not mean that students are unaware of the importance of English for their future. English is a compulsory subject in schools from the primary to university level. However, as English is a foreign language in Taiwan, not many people have immediate necessity to use the language. Some may even have few or no opportunity to use English in their future career, as they do not consider working for an international company or even abroad. Thus, although teachers have deemed that students need

to recognize the value of learning, the relevance and utility of the language are important factors related to motivation. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies. As teachers perceived that content relevance is one of the crucial factors to students' motivation, it is important to get students interested in learning content before carrying out further teaching. As suggested, interest-based learning is a powerful motivational teaching strategy which can contribute to better learning outcomes (Hardré, Sullivan & Roberts, 2008; Mayer, 1998). This is in line with the correlation result of this study that learning task triggers students' interest and allows active classroom participation. Consequently, connecting task content with students' interests and lives to make English learning become genuine and fun is hoped to transfer their interests to intrinsic motivated learning behavior (Wong, 2014).

In many cases, within Taiwanese culture English learning has become test-oriented, and the pressures of examinations and society may have changed the core value of foreign language learning. Even at the university level, students still need to pass a certain level of English proficiency as a graduation threshold, and it can sometimes be difficult for university EFL teachers to meet students' needs. Understanding such circumstances, students' personal traits play an important role in terms of self-study. Nevertheless, teachers report overwhelming disappointment in relation to the efforts of students. Students adopt careless learning attitudes towards English classes, and some are simply being lazy. This also discourages teachers from making efforts to promote student motivation.

Though this study did not measure teachers' motivational practices, understanding student motivation can be viewed as the first step to effective teaching (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). In the meantime, students need the opportunities to be understood their needs and the criteria for their success (McCombs & Whisler, 1997). Classroom teachers may define conceptions of motivated behavior differently, and motivation can be difficult to observe. As a result, teachers may consider what students really matters rather than what reasons and goals that students have (Cowie & Sakui, 2011). Although student motivated behavior may not directly related to teachers' motivational practice (Ellis, 2009), it can still be seen that teachers responded positively to keeping students' attention in class.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study is to assess university EFL teachers' perceptions of student motivation and the reasons for a lack of student motivation in EFL learning in Taiwan. Findings of this study present that teachers are sensitive to student motivation displayed during their English classes. Teachers perceive low motivation for English learning among some students which seems to show that in some teaching curricula in universities there is a gap between students' needs and the relevance of the teaching materials. Teachers' perceptions can affect their teaching practice, and that teaching practice may affect students' learning experiences. Thus, it is important to understand teachers' perceptions in relation to teaching. When teachers understand and are able to identify the reasons that students become unmotivated or under-motivated, such understandings should direct them to potential strategies to enhance student motivation. Nevertheless, understanding student motivation helps teachers to conceptualize knowledge and relate it to their classroom practices. That is, they need to depend on their knowledge while dealing with motivational issues and to make appropriate instructional decisions.

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