# EAP teachers' perceptions of learner motivation

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**ABSTRACT**

This article reports on a qualitative study of four EAP teachers. The teachers perceived the major influences on their learners' motivation to be *Teacher/student relationships, Opportunities for social participation,* and *Influences on learner choice and agency*, and they are broadly sensitive to the effects of these influences. However, at times teachers may misunderstand learners' behaviour, and may simplistically regard this as evidence of motivation levels. This draws attention to the importance of strong teacher/student relations, and specifically awareness on the part of teachers about individual learners' motivation, for the quality and inclusivity of the international student experience.

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## Introduction

This study is a qualitative investigation into EAP teachers' perceptions of the influences on their learners' motivation, based and building upon my previous research into learner motivation (Harvey, 2013). In this previous research, I interviewed three learners from different cultural backgrounds and was able to specify the following four major influences on their motivation:

> 1. *Perception of choice and agency in the learning of English* – where motivation was positively related to the level of choice and agency learners felt they had exercised in their English-language learning over their lives;
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> 2. *Nature of English contact experience* – where positive contact experience in English positively affected motivation, and vice versa;
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> 3. *Perceived benefits of learning English* – where motivation was engendered by the practical gains available from learning English, such as educational, career, travel and social opportunities;
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> 4. *Wish to participate in UK social life* – where learners were motivated by this wish.

Having since taught EAP, I now wish to explore EAP teachers' understanding of their learners' motivation. Although it is outside the scope of this study to offer a full triangulation of teachers' and learners' perceptions, I identify the major overlaps and articulate a disparity between the two. This work on teacher perceptions of learner motivation addresses a significant gap in EAP research in particular and second language (L2) motivation research in general (see also Cowie and Sakui, 2011).

## Research focus and findings

I carried out two focus groups with eight UK-based EAP teachers, then analysed the data in order to generate more focused interview questions, which I conducted with two members of

each focus group – four in total. These four teachers were Howard, Jonah and Lola (male) and Guinevere (female). The teachers' names have been changed to protect their identities. From the data, I generated three conceptual themes to represent these teachers' perceptions of the major influences on their learners' motivation:

- *Teacher/student relationships*
- *Opportunities for social participation*
- *Influences on learner choice and agency*

I will now discuss their key aspects in greater depth.

## Teacher/student relationships

Howard and Lola acknowledge the importance of relationships of trust between teachers and students, as the teacher is often the first point of contact should students have any problems. Similarly, Jonah and Guinevere understand that it is important to create a 'safe', motivating environment, in which students know that their teacher understands their experience of the learning process and the pragmatic gains for which they are aiming, and that there are various influences operating in their lives. Guinevere and Howard are aware of the need to create a classroom space in which students can feel free to make mistakes, and to experiment with the new identities offered by the language learning experience. Guinevere understands motivation as fluctuating in level, dependent on students' individual historical and cultural contexts, and constructed in interaction, through a relationship of trust with the teacher, as she states:

> I think what helps to motivate students is to know that their teacher understands where they're coming from ... why they might sit at the back of the class and roll their eyes to the ceiling and not always to jump on that and attack them for it but that's a perfectly normal part of learning and being a student, any student not just a foreign student in a language classroom ... and to talk to them about it … and with the independent learning and stuff, we try together to motivate each other and get ideas from each other.

The teachers' understanding of the learning process and their awareness of the benefits learners hope to gain by studying EAP resonate with learners' *Perceived benefits of learning English*; learner and teacher perceptions of learner motivation broadly correspond here.

However, some of the teachers' understandings become more problematic when considering their perceptions of student behaviour and the influence of these perceptions on their beliefs about student motivation, as evidenced by Lola and Guinevere's contrasting approaches to the students they perceive to be more or less motivated. Guinevere leaves the students who seem to be 'happy with anything' and 'have the right attitude', whom she perceives as motivated, alone and does not worry about them, but when students are not behaving in (what she perceives as) a motivated way, with less visible signs of interest in the class, she thinks about what she calls 'the missing link' that will motivate them, and plans lessons with them in mind. Lola plans according to his perceptions of students' personalities; he understands his extrovert students to be motivated, and the quieter ones to be less so. He also knows less about the quieter students, so he chooses activities which play to more extrovert (who he perceives as more motivated) learners' strengths, as he knows what these are. Thus there is a

conflation of 'extrovert', 'talkative' (according to Lola) or apparently 'happy' (according to Guinevere) students with motivated students; students are described as 'appearing' or 'seeming' motivated, based on observations of behaviour. These different understandings of 'motivated' behaviour may create barriers to understanding motivation levels, as Lola's experience of joking with a student who was persistently absent and late illustrates – when the student did not see the joke, Lola realised there had been a mismatch between his perception of the student's level of motivation and the student's own:

> [the student] thought that he was a motivated person, and I was kind of showing him up a bit, and... it wasn't my intention, and I would never get the students to laugh at each other in a nasty way, but you know sometimes say 'oh my god is it Christmas you've turned up' and that kind of thing ... so... if he was a little bit offended, it was because he perceived it in a different way … I think if he had been [unmotivated] and he'd just turned up ... then he would have felt I had a right to say that.

While Lola inferred motivation levels from this student's behaviour, this may not have been consistent with the student's own perceptions of his behaviour. Thus, although these teachers are aware of the variety of influences operating in students' lives, it may be difficult to apply this awareness to understanding behaviour which may appear negative or disinterested. This could be conversely related to the 'narrative' of motivation, which Lola identifies in his description of Hollywood films like Dead Poets' Society (1989) and Dangerous Minds (1995):

> you get these movies ... this fabulous teacher goes in, and you have all these students who couldn't give a toss and then suddenly they're dead motivated ... and you think why can't I go in with a lesson and get that kind of response.

Therefore, in the same way as students may expect teachers to motivate them, teachers may expect students to behave in a stereotypically 'motivated' way.

**Opportunities for social participation**

All the teachers believe that students are motivated by opportunities for social participation and engagement, but both teachers and students recognise constraints on these opportunities. Teachers also recognise that it is not simply up to students to go forth and integrate - integration comes from both sides, and students' reasons for not integrating may be as much because they are denied opportunity as that they simply do not take it, as Guinevere indicates:

> a lot of the Chinese, when it comes to feedback, at the end of the course, despite having done a number of presentations both individually and as part of a group, speaking only English in class, it's one of the rules, they don't always follow... and doing loads of debates, and speaking practice, they say that speaking is the area that they haven't felt any development in... and it's probably because they go out of the school, into Chinatown, have their lunch there … they say I really want to develop my speaking skills, I want to speak to local people, I want to speak to natives, and outside, I want to speak to people... but they don't, because they don't get the chance.

Guinevere, Lola and Howard feel that students perceive a lack of opportunity to speak to 'native' British people. Guinevere and Howard describe students who have attempted to

strike up conversations in public, attempts which are often unsuccessful owing to what the students perceive as people's inability or unwillingness to understand them; and Guinevere and Howard believe students to be demotivated by these experiences. Lola and Guinevere's students have told them that British people are not interested in them, and the students feel they must therefore find their own social circles. Jonah and Guinevere suggest that the particular town or city students have chosen to come to may be an important factor – in cities students may be more likely to find others of their nationality, providing comfort and an easing-in of social integration, particularly in areas of common cultural ground available in a multicultural city, such as Chinatown or British Islam. Jonah compares his students in Manchester to his previous students in Brighton and Eastbourne in terms of their opportunities for social participation:

> I had a class last term that was a hundred per cent Saudi, at the university, and it's sort of a vicious circle really, because the more that they see it like that, the fewer opportunities there are for them to branch out and make other contacts with... I do think with the Saudis here I think there's a cultural... self-policing conformity, and I've taught Saudis in other parts of the UK, I taught in Brighton for a bit I taught in Eastbourne for a bit, and they would tend to come to study by themselves, so with no family and seemingly with not many people they knew, and they would integrate more because they would be they would be in a minority, and they would hang around with other students of other nationalities.

These teachers' awareness of the motivational impact of opportunities for participation parallels learners' own *Nature of English contact experience* and *Wish to participate in UK social life*.


**Influences on learner choice and agency**

Howard and Jonah understand students' context to be one of the foremost influences on learners' choice and agency – the context they come from, the context they are now learning in, and the intersection of the two. Students may be constrained by the wishes of their families, employers, or even their own national communities in the UK (see Jonah's comment above; see also Myles and Cheng 2003). Howard recognises that if students have made their own choices, there may be more at stake for them socially and personally than for students being coerced by employers or families, who by contrast may have more material concerns at stake:

> [there's] a social risk … they've stepped out of their stream of their peers and they've gone to another part of the world to study ... when we take a risk we don't want to be perceived to have made the wrong choices, so our motivation levels will be higher, we want to make sure that we succeed.

Howard also highlights the potential difficulties involved in students discussing their motivation with teachers. From the students' point of view, they want to join the course and seem optimistic, as though they have chosen to be here – honest acknowledgement of a possible lack of choice and agency may feel risky, students may be aware of a possible danger in letting their true motivations be perceived, and thus a relationship of trust between teacher and student is again seen to be important:

students do often give teachers the answers they expect, or they predict they want to hear... and I suppose you need a certain amount of trust between the student and the teacher to be able to overcome those kind of pre-programmed answers ... you might be finding answers to things which students could even feel difficult to talk to their parents about and their trusted family members at home which may be that they really don't want to be here in the UK they don't want to be an engineer, they wanted to be... a hairdresser or a teacher or something like that that's their passion so... it's complex really I think.

Again, this perception of the teachers corresponds to learners' own *Perception of choice and agency in the learning of English*, with both groups recognising choice and agency as having a significant impact on students' motivation.

**Conclusion**

These findings show that these teachers are generally sensitive to the influences operating on their learners' motivation, and the teachers' perceptions of their learners' motivation intersect broadly with learners' perceptions as articulated in my previous research. The teachers understand that learners' motivation fluctuates and is contingent upon individual historical and cultural contexts, which maps onto learners' *Perceived benefits of learning English*. They also have some understanding of the identity struggles students face when negotiating participation in different communities, as exemplified by *Nature of contact experience* for learners and their *Wish to participate in UK social life*. Similarly, teachers recognise the complexity of influences on learners' choice and agency, as do learners themselves in the *Perception of choice and agency*.

However, it is also clear from these findings that teachers may have particular conceptions of 'motivated' behaviour, which is perhaps understandable given that motivation, as Cowie and Sakui point out, 'is a difficult concept to witness from outside … [thus] classroom teachers may tend to consider that what students actually do matters far more than what kinds of reasons or goals students might have' (2011: 222). As a result, teachers may be likely to simplistically, and sometimes erroneously, regard behaviour as evidence of motivation levels. This reinforces the importance of good teacher/student relations, in particular the need for one-to-one time with students so that teachers can gain a measure of insight into individual students' motivations, and so that perceived misunderstandings between teacher and student can be negotiated in confidence and a supportive atmosphere. This would be of benefit to all students, regardless of motivation and level of engagement; for in the provision of such support, opportunities for communication, participation and inclusion may open up, with the potential to transform the international student experience. Admittedly this draws attention to the difficulty of offering initiatives which might be time-consuming in the increasingly corporatizing and competitive university system, which in turn highlights the importance of consciousness-raising at the institutional level about the nature of individuals' motivation. Ultimately, our aim should be to work towards negotiating ways to address learners' motivation and its implications, even within a commodified and product-focused system.

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