

# The Role of Student Perceptions on Motivation in the ESL Classroom

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## Abstract

Student motivation is of paramount importance in the ESL classroom. Students with natural ability often fail to progress in an L2 due to a loss of motivation; whereas, students with less innate ability often achieve language fluency as a result of high motivation. The purpose of this action research study is to investigate how teachers can best motivate students to learn in the ESL classroom. This paper highlights the impact teacher efficacy, motivational strategies and student-teacher rapport can have on student motivation. The study was conducted using online surveys of 10 current ESL teachers on their in-class practices and perceived student motivation. Analysis identified five main themes and have attempted to reasonably demonstrate the relationship between student motivation and teacher experience, confidence, preparation, motivational strategies, and rapport. The findings indicate that there are ways for teachers to better motivate their students, however, the best approaches are often those that work best for the individual.

## Keywords

Motivation, student-teacher rapport, self-efficacy

## 1 Introduction

Throughout my teaching career, the greatest challenge has been motivating students to engage in the lesson. As a teacher, I have had great success in my lessons reaching my students and encouraging them to learn and grow as ELLs. However, this wasn't always the case, and I often found myself needing to adjust my strategies to meet the changing needs of my students. Throughout my experiences training new teachers, I found that other teachers struggled with motivating their students, as well. Therefore, this action research project was conducted to investigate and analyze strategies that can provide insight for improving my own teaching practice, as well as, adding to the wealth of knowledge. The purpose of this study was to identify ways to better motivate my students to learn in the ESL classroom.

Motivation is a complex concept and must be assessed on an individual basis, based on each student's individual situation. It can be greatly affected, both positively and negatively, by socioeconomic status, familial pressure and involvement, school requirements, desires, goals, and culture. However, my own experiences have found that the teacher can also have a significant impact on student motivation, both in and out of the classroom. Given the breadth of studies on student motivation, I focused my attention on two aspects of motivation research, namely teachers' perceptions of effective motivational teaching strategies, and student perceptions of strategies and instructors.

The literature surrounding motivation in the ESL classroom is quite varied, albeit dominated by a few major theories, all of which have underlying assumptions. Motivation is individual, mutable, and susceptible to external factors. Gardner discusses instrumental and integrative motivation, both as internal motivations to either achieve a goal, or to integrate seamlessly into a society (Zareian & Jodaei, 2015). Dornyei discusses the role of internal motivation, but phrases it in an image of ideal L2 self, the "ought to self," and also gives credence to the learning environment (Zareian & Jodaei, 2015). Self-determination theory, as discussed by Deci and Ryan (2008), argues that intrinsic motivation, and extrinsic factors, or external goals, are the driving force behind student motivation. Rhetorical and relational goals theory (Mottet, et. al, 2006) discusses the role the teacher plays in shaping and encouraging student educational goals, and using teacher-student communication to foster student goal achievement. The ARCS motivation model,

developed by Keller (1983), provides assessment methodology to quantify motivation by addressing the need for understanding the relationship between student attention, relevance of material to student lives, student confidence and student satisfaction with student motivation to learn.

In my experience, all of these competing views of student motivation provide insight into the larger truth, much of it overlapping. Each of these models emphasizes the individual nature of motivation and the role personal desire, goals, and enjoyment can have on motivation. Furthermore, the role individual experiences, and external factors also greatly impact the motivation of individual students. My goal, in this study, was to determine, not necessarily the root of individual motivation, but the different ways in which I, as a teacher, can motivate my students, and the different strategies that are effective in motivating my classes.

## **2 Literature review**

To further investigate the subject and provide a foundation for my research project, I used articles that explored the relationship between teaching strategies, teacher perception, student perceptions, student lived-experiences, and the impact of these aspects on student motivation. Three of the studies were founded in ESL literature, with a firm grounding in ESL motivational theory. The fourth study came from a background in general education with a foundation in psychology. The one article from outside the ESL discipline helped establish some perspective to the overall discussion of student motivation, as a whole.

These four studies were all performed in different countries with different demographics, and different initial focus. However, they all reached similar conclusions, through different avenues. The studies all concluded that teacher motivational strategies have a great influence on student motivation, improve student engagement, student psychological well-being, student confidence, and student satisfaction with the lesson. Furthermore, all four studies identified the correlation between student perception of the lesson, and specifically the teacher as a major source of student motivation, emphasizing the value of student-teacher rapport to student achievement.

Bernaus and Gardner (2008) discuss how the student perception of teaching strategies considered “traditional,” decreased student engagement and motivation in the lesson. Therefore, student perception of what was happening in the class directly altered the way they engaged with the material. This was very similar to Guilloteaux and Dornyei’s (2008) discussion of how students view of the class as a whole, and the teacher specifically, altered the way students engaged with tasks assigned, regardless of the task. Thoonen et al. (2018) also reached a similar conclusion when they argued “teachers’ sense of self-efficacy has an impact on both teachers’ practices and students’ motivation to learn” (p. 12), where the teacher’s confidence alters student perceptions, increasing student motivation. Furthermore, student self-efficacy discussed in Bernaus and Gardner (2008) has a similar impact on student achievement. In all of these studies, I saw evidence that students’ perceptions of themselves, their teachers, and the lesson materials, had a significant influence on student motivation and achievement.

However, one other aspect of the studies became clear, the relationship between teacher preparedness and motivation. Yüncü Kurt and Kurt (2018) discussed the relationship between instructor behavior, e.g. being enthusiastic, energetic, and caring, as well as teacher preparation and feedback being motivating factors for university students. Whereas, these students possessed the confidence and ability to express these thoughts, younger learners may not understand the relationships, or feel comfortable expressing criticisms of teachers who fail to provide effective feedback, care, or be prepared for lessons. Bernaus and Gardner (2008) discussed this problem, when they found that teacher strategies had minimal impact, and recommended that teachers should use whatever approaches they feel comfortable using. In other words, teachers should be prepared first and foremost, for everything else in the lesson will flow from that preparation.

These four articles provided me with great insight into the subject of student motivation and the foundational theories surrounding the subject. They also provided some great examples of survey methodology and approaches to evaluating teacher performance and self-reporting. The student-centered feedback also provided me with a view from the other side of the desk, allowing me to reframe my questions to foster teacher reflection on their own teaching strategies and philosophies. Understanding that the most influential aspect of motivation rests in student perceptions, and that teacher-student rapport is the foundation upon which that perception is built, provided an excellent place to begin my research study.

## **3 Methodology**

### **3.1 Purpose**

Looking further into the literature on motivation helped to clarify my own research questions. The goal of

this action research took form, and became a search for further understanding of how teachers foster motivation in the ESL classroom. Though motivation can be an internal force that drives a student to learn another language for either its intrinsic value or for personal extrinsic goals, motivation can also be heavily influenced by external factors. In the field TESOL, and particularly TEFL in non-English speaking countries, the teacher is often the main, if not only, source of external motivation for students to learn another language. Therefore, teacher can be one of the most influential external factors for motivating or demotivating students. As teachers, one of our fundamental aims must be fostering and maintaining student motivation. To further this goal, the purpose of this action research project became investigating motivational strategies that teachers found most effective; how teaching experience and preparation impacted their lessons; and how teachers established and fostered rapport with their students.

### 3.2 Setting

This study was conducted online through a survey created via Google Forms, during the month of June, 2023. The survey was sent out on June 9th, and data collection was completed on June 16th. The survey focused on three areas of interest, namely, student-teacher rapport, teacher preparation, and motivational strategies used in the classroom. The survey was disseminated to two graduate level courses by the professor, and shared via Google link with colleagues in Japan, via email, and through the Saitama JALT group on Facebook.

### 3.3 Participants

Initially, the survey was intended for graduate students in the TESOL program at the University of Southern Maine, however, due to a lack of participants, the sample field was expanded to include colleagues in Japan. In total, ten teachers participated in the survey, five ESL teachers in the USA, and five EFL teachers in Japan. Participants were limited to those with at least one year experience teaching TESOL.

Participants ranged from new ESL teachers, with one-year experience, to highly-seasoned veterans, with more than twenty years of experience. The participants fell into two further groups, those who taught ESL, and those teaching EFL. The first group, from The University of Southern Maine, was composed of teachers who have some experience teaching ESL. The second group of participants was composed of experienced teachers, all of whom lived and worked in Japan, and had extensive EFL teaching experience. When combined, these two groups provided a wide range of perspectives on motivational strategies, teacher preparation, rapport building in the ESL classroom, and experience with different student populations.

### 3.4 Data collection

Data was collected online, through a survey with 30 questions divided into four sections including participant background, teacher preparation and classroom environment, classroom management and motivational strategies, and building rapport with students. The survey was developed by me and borrowed aspects from each of the four studies in the literature review, and used the recommendations from Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020) to further develop the questions. The survey included a collection of 30 questions using 5-point Likert scale, multiple choice, select all that apply, and short answer questions. The survey was created on Google Forms, for this study, and sent out to participants on June 9th, 2023.

The study was conducted anonymously, to ensure truthfulness in participant answers. The participating teachers were asked to be completely honest, and report on their classroom practices, self-efficacy, and use of different motivational strategies. The participants were given one week to complete the survey. After the one-week period, only five participants in the USA returned the survey, so the participant field was expanded to include five EFL teachers living in Japan. I would have liked to have a larger sample size, 20+, for this study, however the data I collected can still provide some insight on motivation.

### 3.5 Data analysis

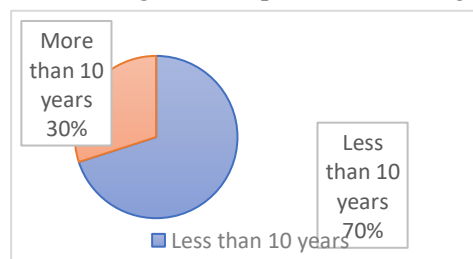
Recommendations found in Dana and Yendol-Hoppey (2020), as well as similar methods found in other studies including Thoonen et. al (2011), Guilloteaux and Dornyei's (2008), and Benaus and Gardner (2008), were used as guides for data analysis. Qualitative analysis was used to interpret the data and arrange it into themes making it easier to explain the role of teacher influence on student motivation. Through my interpretation, five overarching themes became apparent, that emphasized the importance of the teacher's role on student motivation in the ESL classroom.

## 4 Findings

In order to clearly organize and present the data, five themes were identified. These findings will be discussed in relation to current literature and my own teaching experiences. Teacher experience/background, confidence, preparation, student-teacher rapport, and the use of motivational strategies in lessons can all have significant influence on student motivation in the lesson. In this section, I will describe the findings and try to provide visual representation through data charts and participant quotes.

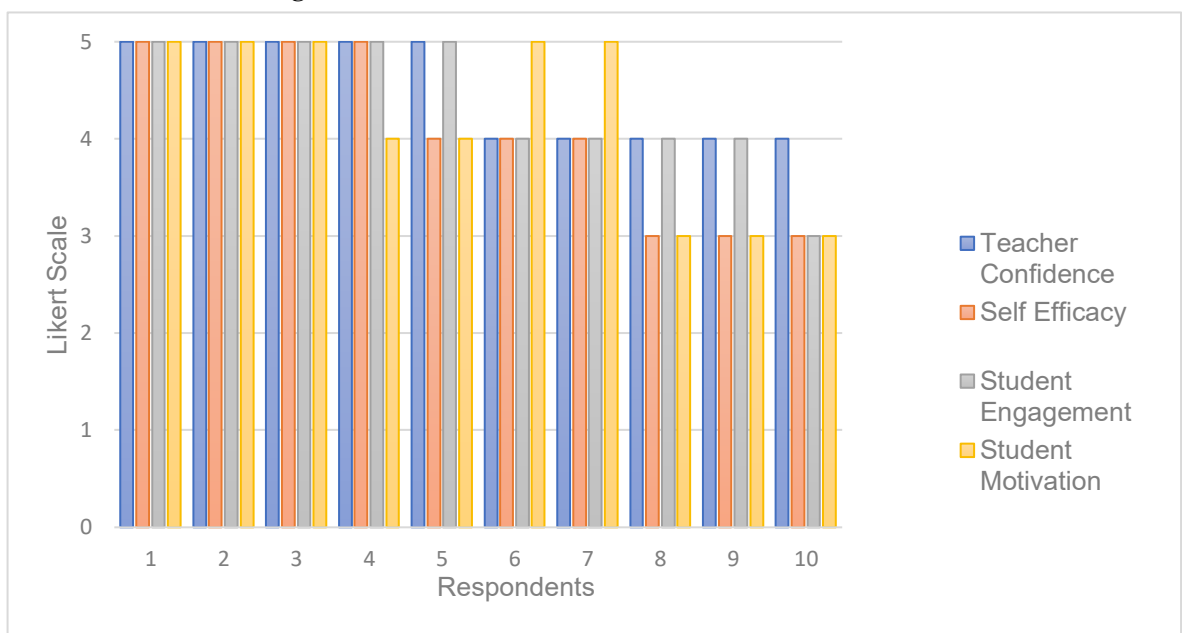
The participants fell into two broad categories: those with >10 years teaching experience, and those with <10 years teaching experience. As shown in Figure 1, 70 percent of the participants fell into the category of less than 10 years teaching experience, and three respondents had over 10 years. These two divisions will have significance later when we discuss the data. The participants also worked with students of different ages, and had different lesson focus. All three categories of background data had an influence on teacher strategies and student motivation. As teachers, we know that difference in student ages and goals can create differing needs and require adjustments in the way a teacher teaches their lesson, and also impact student reactions to the teacher.

Figure 1: Experience teaching TESOL (years)



The first theme was related to teacher confidence. The survey used a 1–5-point Likert Scale to ask respondents to rate their efficacy, confidence, and their student engagement (see Figure 2). Respondents all identified as either agree or strongly agree that they are confident in their lesson, however not all respondents felt their lessons were as effective. All of the respondents indicated that their student engagement and teacher efficacy was improved when they were confident in their lessons, and also indicated student engagement, motivation and participation declined when they were not confident.

Figure 2: Teacher confidence and related data



Teacher preparation was the next important theme. Respondents were asked to assess their own lesson preparation, how well-prepared they were for their lessons, and how their preparation affected student focus, attention, engagement, and motivation. Data indicated that teachers who were more prepared in their lessons had greater student engagement, motivation and better view of the lesson as a whole. The data also indicated that when participants were under-prepared, students were less motivated, and more difficult to manage as a class.

Our fourth finding indicated that the motivational teaching strategies, and classroom management/atmosphere play a significant role in student motivation, participation, and comfort. Respondents were asked to indicate what motivational strategies they employ in the lesson, the kind of atmosphere they try to create, and how they praise or correct students. Participants all used multiple motivational strategies, each with different frequency, and each participant found that different strategies worked better for them. One participant stated:

“I find students are more motivated when the activity is play-based in some way, such as a game, free play, or hands-on materials.”

Furthermore, all of those who took the survey indicated that creating a welcome atmosphere, and used smiling, humor, and intonation modulation as ways to create a warm, comfortable environment. A way to connect with students and create a welcoming atmosphere involved providing students agency in the lesson. One participant wrote:

“Connecting the lesson to students' lives is highly motivating for my students. I also like to have student choice in what they read and write about, as they are more engaged when they are interested in the topics.”

The majority of respondents also indicated a propensity to provide feedback and praise individually rather than in front of other students. However, all of the respondents agree that students should have some agency in the lessons, and must feel comfortable making mistakes in the lesson.

The final theme was highly significant and involved student-teacher rapport. Respondents all indicated that student teacher rapport was of utmost importance in the lesson, with one participant indicating that rapport was their main motivating technique. Short answer responses, in particular, indicated that all of the participants used multiple rapport building strategies, with a few being used universally. Teachers all discussed student lives, dreams, and interests with students, and also did so in an informal setting before and after lessons. One participant wrote about building connections throughout the school year:

“[A]t the high school level, if a student is not motivated, the best strategy for me is connection and drawing upon the student teacher rapport that had been carefully crafted throughout the year.”

Another discussed the importance of connecting to students' lives outside of school.

“This allows me to help my students make connections with their out-of-school lives, and it helps me remember details about the students' families which they appreciate.”

All of the respondents also indicated that honesty, being forthright and providing feedback using specific examples helps to foster student-teacher rapport.

## **5 Discussion**

Based on the findings of this study, I come to four main conclusions. These conclusions will be discussed as relationships between the findings in the previous section. First, the connection between teacher experience, self-efficacy and confidence was undeniable. Second, teacher preparation had a direct impact on teacher confidence, student engagement, and positive student perception of the teacher/class. Third, though motivational strategies used may differ by teacher, using multiple strategies improved teacher ability to motivate students. Finally, fostering student-teacher rapport significantly improved student motivation and engagement in the lesson.

The data suggested, teachers with more practical experience were more confident in the lesson, and

believed they were more effective teachers. The survey results showed that the teachers with the greatest number of years teaching, also had the highest reported self-efficacy, confidence and perception of student participation, motivation and engagement. This aligns with findings from Thoonen, et al. (2018), who argued that teacher perception of their own effectiveness portrays confidence, and as a result students develop confidence in the teacher's ability. In other words, with more practice, teachers come to be more comfortable in front of the class. However, the results also indicated that teachers with more experience were also less prepared than their colleagues. This result was similar to findings by Benaus and Gardner (2008), who found that teachers with more experience were less likely to try new approaches, and were more likely to be more teacher-centered in their lessons.

Teacher preparation was shown to be directly related to teacher confidence and positive student perception and engagement. The teachers who reported greater class preparation, also indicated they had better student engagement and motivation when adequately prepared; whereas, participants reported poor classroom management and less engagement when they were under-prepared for their lesson. This was very similar to findings discussed by Yüncü Kurt and Kurt (2018), when they discussed student feedback on teachers. They found that students responded better when teachers were sufficiently prepared for the lesson, and that when teachers were more prepared, student engagement and motivation greatly improved. Benaus and Gardner (2008) also found that the student perception of the teacher impacted their engagement in the lesson. Therefore, it stands to reason that teachers who are perceived as being well-prepared by students, will also have better student engagement, motivation, and performance, resulting in higher confidence.

Participants indicated that the motivational strategies they used were different, however, all of them indicated that the use of strategies improved student motivation and engagement in the lesson. Different strategies being effective for different people, in different contexts, makes sense given objectively. Given the years of experience, lesson focus, student age, and myriad other external factors, it stands to reason that what works for one teacher may not work for another. Benaus and Gardner (2008) alluded to this point when they argued that the strategies teachers utilized made little to no difference on student motivation; however, the way they were applied in the lesson, and perceived by the students, had a significant impact. The data from my study also indicated that utilizing multiple strategies was the most effective way to determine what will work for the individual teacher, as well as in the given context of a specific class. Therefore, teachers who used more strategies in their lessons were more effective teachers, as they were able to find what worked best for them, given their individual contexts.

Student-teacher rapport has long been seen as important in the lesson. It was, in fact, the only real advice I was given when I started teaching. This study was, in part, designed to identify parallels between rapport building and student motivational strategies. As the data suggested, these two are inextricably linked, especially for K-12 students. Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008) discussed this relationship and concluded that students who had a favorable opinion of their teacher, i.e., good rapport, were more willing to engage in an activity regardless of the perceived value of the activity itself. Yüncü Kurt and Kurt (2018) also discuss this relationship, when they argued that students were more apt to come to lessons, volunteer, and were more motivated when they had a positive view of their teacher. In my own experiences, I have found this to be absolutely true, and have seen the results of teachers who failed to build rapport with their classes, for example, some classes I have had great success with, have become unruly and unresponsive with other teachers, and vice versa. The data in this study supported this conclusion, with each of the participants actively engaged in rapport building, which had a direct, positive impact on their lessons.

## **6 Limitations**

This study was conducted over a short period of time and only included ten participants. I would have liked to have more, ideally fifty plus, which would help to even out any anomalies in the data, e.g., average teaching experience was skewed closer to 10 years, by two highly experienced teachers. However, due to time constraints, I was also limited to a two-week window for respondents to find participants, and for them to respond. This limited the number of participants, and also limited the methods available for data collection. The study would have greatly benefited from personal interviews and classroom observation, as well. Given that the study depended entirely upon self-reporting, the validity of teacher responses must be taken at face value. Without personal classroom observation, and follow-up interviews, the data has a high amount of trust being placed in the honesty of the self-reporting.

## 7 Implications

### 7.1 Implications for future research

This study highlighted some excellent themes for further research, which would benefit, and can be further investigated through additional data collection methods. As mentioned above, classroom observation, intake interviews and follow-up interviews would be of great value further fleshing-out teacher perceptions and provide validation to the current data. A further study, over a longer period of time, involving observation and student involvement would also be of great value to the ESL field. I would like to further investigate the role of teaching strategies, teacher efficacy, preparation and rapport from the student perspective. I believe pursuing this research project, from the other side of the classroom, would be invaluable for the field, and would be of significant value for future professional development programs.

Further research in the area of student motivation would benefit greatly from building on the conclusions generated by this study, particularly from the relationship between student perception of the teacher's efficacy, and student teacher rapport. It would be interesting to further investigate how classroom rapport influences student perception of a teacher's ability to teach. I have personally seen teachers who were unprepared, and objectively not very effective teachers of the subject matter, maintain student attention and focus throughout the year. It would also be interesting to see how situations like these impact student motivation in a longer term, and how they influence long-term student success and language development.

### 7.2 Implications for practical application

Though this study had a small sample size, and would benefit from further study, it has provided some insight into student motivation and the efficacy of teaching strategies in the ESL classroom. I have come to a few conclusions that will greatly benefit myself, and may be beneficial for other ESL teachers to incorporate into their own classrooms. I will now attempt to provide some insight for other teachers that may be worth applying to individual situations.

As teachers, experience is highly beneficial to overall efficacy in the classroom, however it can also limit our self-reflection and overall improvement. As a result of doing the lessons year after year, teachers can become stagnate in our ways, and feel that we are already prepared for the lesson we've taught a dozen times before. However, though we may be excellent at the lesson, we must also be willing to improve our practice. Even if it takes a little extra effort, taking time to prepare each time will benefit our students, and enable us to make adjustments to meet the ever-changing needs of our students. If we can demonstrate to our students that we are prepared, caring, and confident teachers, our students will be more willing to engage with the lesson and will be more motivated to learn whatever we teach. As an added benefit, through ongoing self-reflection and preparation, we can also create engaging and exciting lessons for ourselves, as well.

The data from my study also demonstrates the value of being willing to try new approaches and keeping an open-mind in the lesson. If we can engage in self-reflection and identify what strategies or approaches work best for us, or for the situation, we can improve our efficacy and subsequently provide a better environment for our students. Through ongoing personal improvement, willingness to adapt and adjust to new teaching strategies and technologies, and being flexible in the lesson, we can improve our teaching practice, and find new ways that will better motivate our students. Technological advances in education are happening daily, and we must also be willing to try new approaches to motivate students in the information era.

Finally, we have a duty to provide the best educational opportunities for our students, and this includes a safe, comfortable environment that ensures equity and compassion for all of our students. To achieve this goal, we must build trust with our students, and build a relationship that fosters encouragement, motivation, honesty, and safety. Student-teacher rapport is the foundation on which we can create this environment. My study has demonstrated the value rapport has, not only for motivating students, but in creating a connection between teacher and student. This connection can provide a support network for students who may not feel comfortable in their new environment, or may feel like an outsider in the broader school community. By forging these bonds, and fostering student motivation, we can enable students to become active participants in the society, or in the case of EFL, become members of a larger global community.

## 8 Conclusion

This study has provided a good starting point for further research, and provided a few insights into teacher perceptions of self, and the impact teachers can have on student motivation. Teachers are in the rare position to help shape the way students see the world, and in the field of ESL, teachers have the distinct privilege, and responsibility, to help shape the way they perceive a new language. Through my study, I attempted to demonstrate how teachers can motivate students to learn a new language, and came to some important conclusions. Teacher experience is highly valuable, but teachers must also be willing to adapt to new situations. Teachers must be willing to try new strategies and approaches, find what works best for them, and adjust to the needs of their students. Student perception of teacher efficacy is one of the most important factors for student motivation in the classroom, and when teachers are confident, prepared, and attentive to student needs, students respond in kind. Finally, student-teacher rapport can have a significant influence on student motivation, participation, and engagement. Though this study was limited in scope, it has provided some insight into the nature of student motivation, and the ways teachers can help their students learn. It has also provided some new directions for further study, which I plan to investigate in my own practice.

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