



Teacher (de)motivation from an Activity Theory perspective: Cases of two experienced EFL teachers in South Korea



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we explore the teaching motivation of two experienced South Korean teachers of English from an Activity Theory perspective. In the fall semester of 2013, we interviewed two female teachers with a similar amount of teaching experience in comparable school districts as study participants in an in-depth qualitative inquiry. Our findings indicated that teachers' beliefs about effective teaching methods functioned as a crucial mediational tool for their teaching motivation, and that the two teachers' motivation levels progressed differently depending on how each of them exercised agency as a teacher. This study implies that, like L2 learning motivation, L2 teacher motivation also changes over time via dynamic interactions between the agents and contextual factors in an activity system. Pedagogically, the implication is that school administrators should be required to help teachers adjust to students' differing needs by providing a supportive learning environment.

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1. Introduction

Like the motivation of teachers in other school subjects, second language (L2) teacher motivation has been considered strongly related to student motivation and L2 achievement (Bernaus, Wilson, & Gardner, 2009); however, to date, there are relatively few studies that have investigated motivational changes among second or foreign language teachers (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Igawa, 2009; Sugino, 2010; Zhao, 2008). Furthermore, most studies related to L2 teacher motivation have focused on the identification of factors influencing teachers' job satisfaction or initial career motivation (Kim & Kim, 2015). Given that both individual and contextual elements influence teacher motivation, a more comprehensive framework is necessary to completely understand the motivational dynamics affecting L2 teachers. On this basis, the present study investigates the motivational changes of South Korean (henceforth, Korean) English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers by adopting a Vygotskian Activity Theory (AT) perspective.

EFL teachers in Korea are facing an ongoing conundrum. In Korea, English language education “has been highly controlled by the government” (Choi, 2006, p. 20). The South Korean Ministry of Education requires virtually all college-bound high school students to take the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), whose scores are a major component of entry into Korean

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universities. English is one of the mandatory subjects on the CSAT, and the test mostly comprises reading comprehension questions. Thus, in order to increase the students' CSAT scores, many EFL teachers working in college-bound high schools have relied on the traditional grammar translation method (GTM), which focuses on improving students' grammar and reading abilities. In addition, school administrators often require teachers to stay at school until late in the evening to monitor and advise students on their self-study, because they believe that longer study hours at night will lead to an improvement in CSAT scores.

However, the mandated role of EFL teachers has changed since the implementation of the 6th National Curriculum, in which the communicative language teaching method was officially introduced (Ministry of Education, Science & Technology, 2011). The national curriculum has been reformed to develop students' English communication competence (Kwon, 2015; Kwon & Kim, 2010); but this curriculum change has not been fully actualized in everyday teaching practice because some teachers are more accustomed to the GTM. As a consequence, an increasing number of students who are disappointed with the GTM and yearn to improve their oral/aural English skills have gone abroad to study English, many of them at a young age (Korean Education Development Institute, 2011). It is within this situation that Korean EFL teachers have been experiencing the heavy burden of needing to both effectively teach their students English content oriented toward CSAT preparation and improve their students' English communication skills. Moreover, the exam-oriented, rigid education system in most college-bound humanities high schools in Korea prevents EFL teachers from implementing communicative teaching comprehensively. This lack of school autonomy and the gap between communication ideals and CSAT-focused realities have resulted in a lack of self-confidence among EFL teachers regarding their classroom teaching practice (Han, 2005), eventually leading to teaching demotivation among them (Kim, Kim, & Zhang, 2014).

Given the rarity of research on EFL teacher demotivation and the context of Korean English education, we undertook this study to investigate motivation levels among Korean EFL teachers. We focused on experienced teachers who were over 40 years old, assuming that they had experienced more fluctuations in motivation level due to the various changes in English education policy. In the next section, we briefly review teacher (de)motivation research and then discuss how AT can function as a sound theoretical framework in teacher motivation studies. The administration of semi-structured life-story interviews and the nature of our qualitative data analyses are explained in the [Methods](#) section. In the [Results](#) section, we discuss the stories of two teachers, Anna and Bona, focusing on similarities and differences between their motivational trajectories. In the [Discussion](#), we examine how the findings of this study differ from those of previous research and how the AT approach can correctly describe and coherently explain issues in L2 teacher (de)motivation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Different perspectives on teacher (de)motivation research

Second and foreign language teachers' teaching (de)motivation has been long neglected as a research topic, and only in recent years has it begun to be conducted in earnest. One early study, [Kassabgy, Boraie, and Schmidt \(2001\)](#), explored the factors associated with job satisfaction, reward, and motivation in teaching among 107 experienced EFL teachers in Egypt and English as a second language (ESL) teachers in Hawai'i. The study showed that teachers' job satisfaction was highly correlated with job rewards, among which internal rewards (e.g., performing to the best of one's ability, having good relationships with others) were stressed over extrinsic rewards (e.g., salary, title, opportunities for promotion). [Igawa \(2009\)](#) investigated why Japanese, Cambodian, and American groups of in-service English teachers chose to teach English and showed that the more popular reasons were related to internal aspects of teaching, such as preference for English and desire to contribute to society. [Zhao \(2008\)](#) similarly studied the motivation of 17 EFL teachers in China on the basis of their narratives about their teaching history, and found that both social and psychological factors affected their motivation to become a teacher and maintain a career.

Recently, the research on teacher motivation has started to focus on its fluctuation over time. Studies have found that teacher motivation also increases or decreases due to influences of teaching context, policy change, or curriculum change at a national level. For example, [Sugino \(2010\)](#) demonstrated the existence of teacher demotivation among L2 teachers in Japanese universities, caused by students' attitudes, class facilities, teaching materials, curriculum, working conditions, and human relationships. Among these factors, negative student attitudes in class played the most detrimental role in demotivating teachers. Similarly, [Kumazawa \(2013\)](#) investigated the teaching motivation levels of four novice high school EFL teachers in Japan and revealed that their motivation decreased due to conflicts among their ideal self (ideal future self-image), ought-to self (future self-image influenced by external pressures), and actual self (what they actually were or perceived themselves to be) ([Markus & Nurius, 1986](#)).

Despite these insightful findings, however, the previous studies have limitations: they have only concentrated on internal or external factors affecting teacher motivation. [Ushioda \(2009\)](#) states that motivation emerges from "relations between real persons, with particular social identities, and the unfolding cultural context of activity" (p. 215) and that it is hence necessary to use a theoretical framework that is adequately sensitive to both individual uniqueness and contextual influences. In addition, [Kim \(2009, 2013\)](#) states that motivation is a multidimensional, dynamic psychological construct, and advocates a more interdisciplinary paradigm to study motivation. In this paper, we propose the use of activity theory (AT) as a holistic system for assessing L2 teacher motivation and investigate the role of contextual specifics for motivation as well as the evolving nature of motivation as a whole.

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