

Perceptions on Effectiveness and Teacher Motivation in ELT

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Abstract

Based on a qualitative research study, this article discusses language teaching professionals' perceptions of effectiveness and motivation in a variety of ELT contexts across the world. It explores factors that appear to influence how effectiveness is perceived in different areas and discusses data obtained from 290 ELT professionals in 51 countries. While language teaching methodology and ELT overall were perceived among the top three areas in terms of effectiveness both at the country level and in the work contexts, the findings seem to suggest a need for considerable improvement in the areas of academic management and fostering teacher motivation.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, perceptions, effectiveness, academic management, teacher motivation

1. Introduction

Thinking is like the weather: in itself it is neither good nor bad. However, when people project their own needs and feelings on to the weather, then the weather can become 'good' to one person and 'bad' to another: a farmer who is crying out for rain will see the persistent sunshine as 'bad', while the holidaymaker will see the same sunshine as 'glorious' and the dark clouds as 'bad'. Similarly, thoughts in themselves have little power to influence how people feel about themselves, or others, or life; it is the emotions which infuse them that are powerful. (Humphreys, 1996: 27)

What is the weather like in English Language Teaching (ELT) today? What atmospheric patterns can we observe in ELT professionals' perceptions on effectiveness in key areas in the field: methodology, research, curriculum, assessment, technology, learner motivation, learner development, teacher training and development, management, and professional networking? What low and high pressures exist in our professional contexts? What about teacher motivation? We know our well-being matters, that it affects all aspects of our lives, and that our health, energy, happiness and inner peace are prerequisites for greater effectiveness in our professional work. So how are we doing on the motivational front in our work places?

Over the last decades, there have been several rapid changes, particularly in the area of technology and communications that affect our everyday lives (Van Olphen, 2008: 2). Such changes have led to new and exciting opportunities yet also created an ever-growing challenge in the field of education in general as well as in all areas of language teaching such as curriculum design and development, teacher education, assessment of learning, academic management and so on. While there have been numerous attempts and research studies to evaluate the effectiveness of these specific areas in ELT, there appear to be no studies at a more holistic and all-encompassing level, of the assessment of ELT practices across the world. As we strive to meet the ever-growing challenges in language teaching, we also need to devote some of our energies to reflect on our work and to create space and time to carefully assess the effectiveness of our practices.

This qualitative research study explores perceptions of effectiveness and motivation in a variety of ELT contexts across the world and how ELT professionals perceive 'the weather' (c.f. extract from Humphreys above) in terms of effectiveness in different professional areas; discusses patterns that seem to emerge with respect to our understanding and expectations of teacher motivation and presents findings on what the ELT forecast seems to call for in the near future.

2. Background and Research

The research was carried out through an on-line survey sent out to a wide range of networks across the world in January 2013, e.g. International Association for Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) associate members, members of Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services (EAQUALS), members of various other language associations, European language project networks, various professional networks, etc. and was also promoted through several social media networks. The survey consisted of two demographic, two Likert scale and six open-ended questions focusing on participants' perceptions on the effectiveness of ELT in a variety of professional areas in the countries and contexts where they worked as well as their views on personal and professional development and teacher motivation.

A total of 290 responses were received from language professionals in 51 different countries. Table 1 below presents the top 5 countries according to the number and percentage of respondents who completed the survey.

Table 1: The top 5 Countries with Highest Survey Response Rates

Country	#	%
Turkey	54	18.62
The UK (England 24, Scotland 11)	35	12.07
The UAE	28	9.66
Argentina	23	7.93
Spain	15	5.17

The remaining 46.55% of the responses were from the following countries listed according to response rates from high to low: Austria, Malta, Hong Kong, Ireland, Japan, Switzerland, Greece, Estonia, Italy, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Oman, Serbia, the USA, China, Pakistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Czech Republic, India, KSA, Kuwait, Nepal, Romania, TRNC, Uganda, Algeria, Belgium, Colombia, Honduras, Iceland, Israel, Korea, Macedonia, Namibia, Poland, Qatar, Russia, Senegal, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and Tunisia.

In terms of educational context, 56.90% of the respondents were from higher education; 22.41% from language schools, language institutes or adult education; and 20.69% from primary and/or secondary education. With respect to teaching experience, 47.93% of the respondents had over 15 years of teaching experience; 19.31% between 11 and 15 years; 17.93% between 6 and 10 years; and 14.83% with up to 5 years' teaching experience. Finally, Table 2 below presents respondents' involvement in teaching and other professional responsibilities, in response to the question regarding what their 'current' work *mainly* involved at the time of the research.

Table 2: Respondents' Main Areas of Involvement

Teaching	TTD	Management	Curriculum	Assessment	Other
60.34%	11.38%	15.17%	1.72%	0.34%	11.03%

What follows is a discussion of the findings based on the survey data, analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics and qualitative analysis based on description, exemplification and cross data analysis.

3. The Findings

3.1. A closer look at the respondents

[I am like] a tree - over the years developing strong roots and solid branches as well as lush leaves to provide a safe place for students to learn, rest and develop.

The demographic and factual information presented above is useful in terms of a general understanding of the respondents' backgrounds, but what are much more revealing is the qualitative data obtained through respondents' perceptions of where/how they see themselves with respect to their personal and professional development as revealed through their responses to the question: 'If you were to choose a metaphor for where/how you see yourself with respect to your personal and professional development, how would you describe it; what metaphor would you choose and why?'

In this respect, although this section attempts to present in-depth data on the self-perceptions of survey respondents, it also acts as a bridge between the factual information and the findings, which the survey data reveal. It was gratifying to see that although the question was an optional one, 81.4% of the respondents chose to answer it. It was even more gratifying to observe the wealth of metaphors used, as is revealed in the graphic representation in Figure 1 below attempting to highlight the most common concepts that were referred to in the 236 metaphors used.

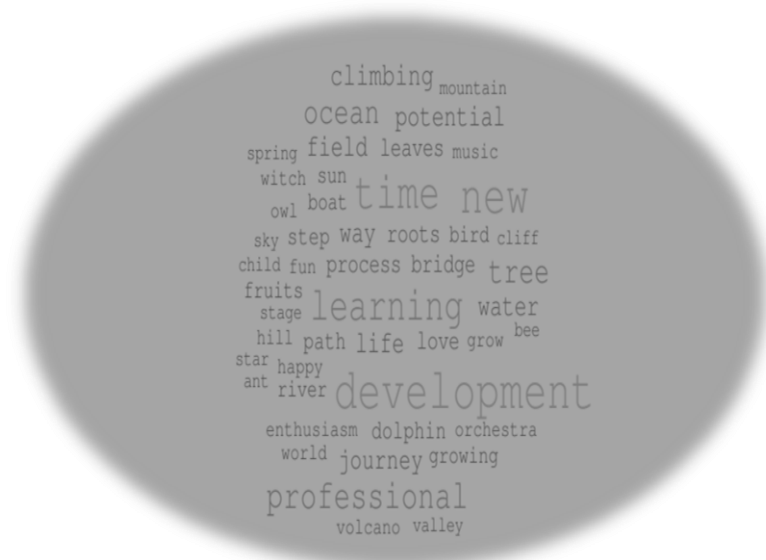


Figure 1: Metaphors for Personal and Professional Development

Despite some highly positive metaphors related to respondents' perceptions of their own personal and professional development such as those involving concepts of growth (*see extract of the tree metaphor in the introduction to this section*), journey, progression, exploration and hard work, an overwhelming majority of the metaphors used involved concepts of challenge, struggle, mismatch in aims/expectations, frustration/helplessness, multitasking and untapped/unfulfilled potential. These metaphors are exemplified in Table 3 below along with several key concepts that each one appears to relate to.

Table 3: Metaphors for Personal and Professional Development

Metaphor	Key concept(s)
I always think of myself as a plate spinner, trying to keep a number of plates spinning without letting any of them fall. The plates are my numerous roles - wife, mother, teacher, examiner, writer, researcher, and presenter.	multitasking frustration/helplessness
"A glorified secretary" - as the Director of the department, I seem to spend most of my days sitting in front of a PC or running around preparing ISO documentation for my teachers to use. I have very little/no time to teach or develop my own career.	frustration/helplessness
I see myself as continuously grasping for the apple on the tree - I can't always see it, I know it is there, but I just don't seem to be able to pick it. This is because ELT is continuously developing and it is challenging to keep up with all the new ideas and research. There's never enough time.	frustration/helplessness challenge/struggle
I see myself as the turtle in the race against the hare. A turtle has a protective shell, which is needed as the academic environment can be sharply critical. At the same time, real scholarship and teaching development is a slow process by which results are not immediately seen. There are many hares leaping ahead but then they get complacent and rest which is when the turtles manage to win the race...	challenge/struggle untapped/ unfulfilled potential
I am a caged bird. I want to soar in the open sky; I want to taste with newness. But I am compelled to follow what my masters - school, curriculum, textbooks, assessment system, etc. order me to do. I know the outside is open; I know I can grow...when I go out of this cage...I am confident I can travel far (give better results), but am helpless. I have no power...to go out of this cage.	mismatch in aims/expectations untapped/ unfulfilled potential frustration/ helplessness
The only description, and my colleagues would agree, would be that of slaves with no faces that can be thrown around like puppets, used and thrown at the bosses' convenience. Gaining more qualifications, or expressing a desire to improve in terms of professional development, would be thwarted, boycotted...not acknowledged either in terms of responsibilities in the school or in terms of pay.	frustration/helplessness
I am an anchor on a lifeboat. The boat is desperately trying to flow with the current in the hopes of colliding with an inhabited island. The anchor is there waiting to be used and thirsty to catch onto something with strength, but no one wants to release it. They would rather float aimlessly in a vast ocean of ideas and theories.	mismatch in aims/ expectations untapped/unfulfilled potential frustration/ helplessness

3.2. Perceptions on effectiveness in ELT

Respondents were asked to comment on their perceptions of the overall effectiveness of 12 different areas in ELT in two separate questions based on a four-point Likert scale (4 = highly effective, 1 = not effective) as well as a 'not applicable' option:

- What is your perception of the *overall* effectiveness of the following areas in *the country where you work*?
- What is your perception of the *overall* effectiveness of the following areas in *your current work context*?

The 12 areas were as follows: language teaching methodology; curriculum development; language testing and assessment; technology-supported teaching and learning; learner development; fostering student motivation; teacher training and development; fostering teacher motivation; professional networking; research in language teaching and learning; academic management; English language teaching overall. One of the questions focused on how respondents perceived effectiveness in a given area in the country where they worked while the second question focused on their current work context.

Figure 2 presents a comparative analysis of respondents' perceptions on effectiveness with respect to the 12 areas above, in the countries where they work and in their work contexts.

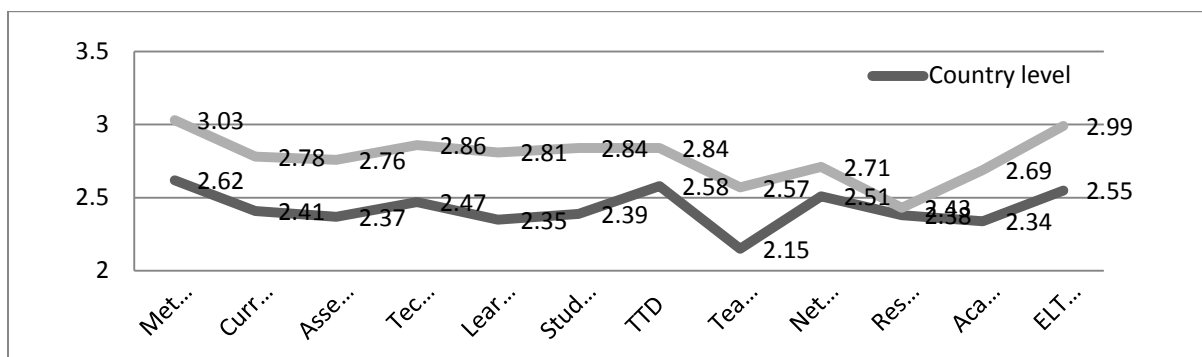


Figure 2: Perceptions of Effectiveness in Countries and Work Contexts in the Given 12 Areas in ELT

The areas of language teaching methodology and ELT overall were perceived among the top three areas in terms of effectiveness both at the country level and in terms of effectiveness in the work contexts. Although in differing orders of effectiveness, the same applied to the areas of teacher training and development and technology-supported teaching and learning. It is worth mentioning at this stage that despite the fact that both areas were in the top five in terms of perceived effectiveness, fewer comments were provided by the respondents in terms of technology-supported teaching and learning than were for teacher training and development. The former focused on key factors such as, the provision of technological equipment; budget and investment issues; access and software; training opportunities and integration into the curriculum. Whereas with the latter i.e. teacher training and development, respondents appeared to express varying, yet greater degrees of satisfaction – i.e. than they did for technology-supported teaching and learning - with what they appreciated the most in their countries and/or their work contexts:

- in-service training and staff development opportunities: INSETs, developmental sessions, workshops, visiting speakers/guests, induction programs
- teacher training courses (e.g. CELTA, DELTA, post-DELTA/post-MA opportunities, other training courses)
- Special Interest Groups (SIGs), teacher forums
- research groups, institutional research projects
- opportunities for lesson observation and feedback
- professional networking opportunities

For greater effectiveness, what appeared to be common concerns in the area of teacher training and development were related to the frequency and practical applications of the opportunities provided as well as to the provision of funding opportunities.

Professional networking, fostering student motivation, curriculum development, learner development, language testing and assessment, and research in language teaching and learning were perceived to be effective in the work contexts but much less effective at the country level. In fact this seemed to be a common pattern in all the data received on the two Likert-scale questions on effectiveness (see Table 4 below); respondents almost unanimously expressed a (much) higher degree of effectiveness in their perceptions of effectiveness in all 12 areas at the work context level and a lesser degree of effectiveness at the country level.

Table 4: Perceptions of Effectiveness in Countries and Work Contexts in the Given 12 Areas in ELT

Area	Country	Area	Work Context (4-point Likert scale)
Methodology	2.62	Methodology	3.03
TTD	2.58	ELT overall	2.99
ELT overall	2.55	Technology	2.86
Networking	2.51	Student motivation	2.84
Technology	2.47	TTD	2.84
Curriculum	2.41	Learner development	2.81
Student motivation	2.39	Curriculum	2.78
Research	2.38	Assessment	2.76
Assessment	2.37	Networking	2.71
Learner development	2.35	Academic management	2.69
Academic management	2.34	Teacher motivation	2.57
Teacher motivation	2.15	Research	2.43

The qualitative data obtained through the comments sections in both questions reveal a variety of factors that may have influenced the difference in respondents' perceptions in these two categories i.e. the country level and the work context level:

- differences in educational settings within the country
- too many changes and/or experimentation with little time to observe the results
- ad hoc policies and (rushed) decisions
- high student population, class sizes and limited educational resources
- differences in the way teachers are trained
- public/state and private sector divide in education
- involvement of persons with no ELT background or training in policy-making and educational design
- time restrictions/constraints in implementation
- poor management of human and academic resources

It is clear from the data that the above factors changed from country to country and from context to context. Yet, along with other factors that are discussed in the following sections, such factors also seemed to affect respondents' perceptions of the areas they perceived as the least effective at both the country level and in their work contexts.

Respondents were also asked the question, 'If you have rated any of the areas as *not (very) effective*, what do you believe is needed the most to make it/them more effective in your current work context?' However, for the purposes of this paper and due to space limitations, we will only be focusing on respondents' comments in the two areas of fostering teacher motivation and academic management which were rated as the least effective at the work context level and much less effective at the country level (see Table 4 above).

3.3. Feedback to managers

[What is needed are] highly qualified, flexible and adaptable managers who can manage talent and different types of personality...This mainly requires a strong personality; [being] at peace with oneself, a facilitative and solution-oriented approach, willingness to share responsibility...and respect for initiative

The findings in this section are a synthesis of the data obtained from the answers given by respondents on what they believe is needed most in the area of academic management to make it more effective as well as responses to a separate question in the survey, seeking respondents' views on what feedback they may wish to share with the relevant group of professionals i.e. academic managers.

A detailed analysis of the qualitative data reveals that respondents' needs and feedback in terms of (greater) effectiveness in academic management centre around the key sub-areas presented below with sample extracts from the data:

- listening to teachers [more], e.g. 'Seek feedback from your staff; listen to their feedback without offence.'
- trusting teachers, e.g. 'Trust teachers more and interfere less. Realize that teaching is a creative act, the results of which are not always quantifiable. What counts cannot be counted.' and, 'Treat teachers as professionals not as skilled workers in need of constant supervision.'
- having a flexible and open-minded approach, e.g. 'Please don't let technology become the be all and end all of ELT because it is not. Language is firstly communication, but using technology all the time is making the students passive and uncommunicative.'
- involving teachers in decision-making, e.g. 'Involve your teachers in decision making; do not make unilateral decisions that affect the whole staff and learners.'
- observing fairness, e.g. 'The school leadership should be chosen based on academic and leadership efficiency, not on age and tenure basis.'
- having a less top down approach e.g. 'No or less hierarchy please!'
- encouraging people to work as a team, e.g. 'Teachers need to communicate more and collaborate instead of self promotion and back-stabbing.'
- a supportive not authoritarian approach, e.g. 'Communicate more and better; smiling does not harm; be responsive and constructive; your positive attitude matters to us.'
- balancing work and life e.g. 'I love my work, but am also a mother, spouse and daughter, if not more...' and, 'Help teachers to develop and grow both personally & professionally.'
- stronger and more decisive action, e.g. 'Just say it or do it when we [teachers] cannot decide or it just takes too long and everyone has something different to say!'

The above data and extracts clearly reveal that an effective manager is someone who trusts and listens to his/her teachers, involving them in decision-making processes; a manager who has a flexible and open-minded approach, observing fairness and equality as best as possible; someone who does not have a top-down approach, but is supportive and encourages teachers to work as a team, helping them to maintain a balance between their work and life; and does not shy away from putting his/her foot down in cases of group/team indecision.

3.4. Fostering teacher motivation

I am based in a large school and am just another number. More feedback and motivation needed.

Another survey question sought to receive qualitative data on key areas of teacher motivation and - if existed within the context - on teacher demotivation. Figure 2 below is an attempt to capture a synthesis of the data on the former area, using 'tagxedo.com' to create a visual word cloud where words are individually sized appropriately to highlight the frequencies of occurrence within the body of text.

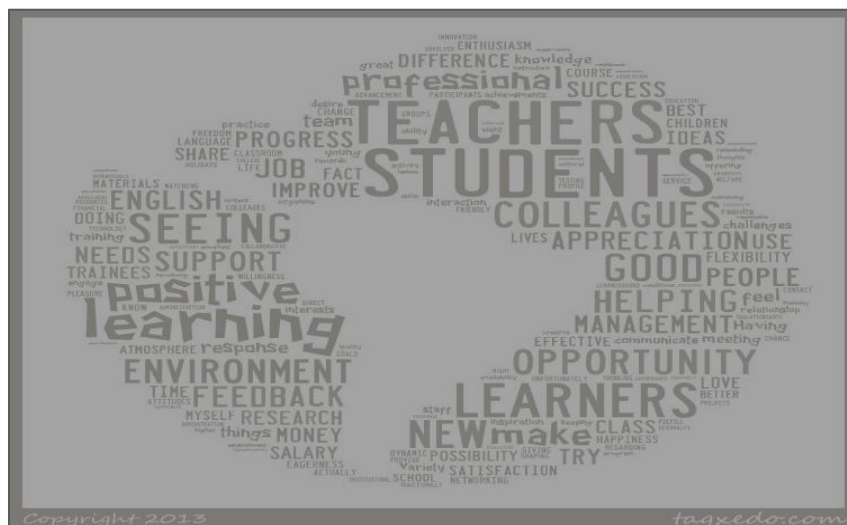


Figure 2: A Data Word Cloud on What Seems to Motivate Teachers the Most in Their Profession

Data obtained from the non-compulsory and open-ended responses to the questions, ‘What motivates you most in your current work context?’ reveal that students or learners themselves are one of the biggest sources of motivation along with teachers or colleagues who are ready and willing to support mutual learning processes through various forms of help, support, feedback and ‘new’ or different learning opportunities within the work environment. However, most of the qualitative comments in the data obtained also additionally refer to management support and appreciation as is discussed in the previous section.



Figure 3: A Data Word Cloud on What Seems to Demotivate Teachers the Most in Their Profession

Similarly, data obtained from the second part of the same question, ‘What - if anything – demotivates you in your current work context?’ seemed to reveal that ‘students’ can also be a source of demotivation for the teacher if students themselves are lacking in motivation towards language learning in particular. Alongside this data, however, are factors such as those discussed in the management-related issues in the previous section, expressed maybe even more intensely through data such as:

- *Teacher motivation is sadly not part of the agenda in my context.*
- *Being considered like human beings instead of 24-hour working machines would be nice.*

Less frequent in the data, yet additionally importantly, appear to be factors related to rewards (e.g. better pay, financial rewards); better policies and approach; balance in workload; recognition, appreciation and praise; opportunities for promotion and advancement; encouragement of creativity and experimentation.

4. Conclusion

The weather metaphor used by a research informant in terms of how s/he perceives her/his personal and professional development also appears to neatly summarize the findings of this research study with respect to effectiveness in different areas in ELT:

A partly-cloudy sky with the sun shining from behind the clouds; this metaphor describes how I see myself with respect to both my personal and professional development quite well because while I feel I can bring sunshine to the lives of others as well as to myself there are too many dense clouds sometimes in my way.

As the data suggests, we seem to be doing well in a wide range of areas despite inevitable differences in the degree of effectiveness at the country level and in terms of our different work contexts. To use ‘sunshine’ in a positive perception, we can conclude that the sun *is* shining, yet there appear to be two ‘dense clouds’ which need our greater attention and thinking: academic management practices and fostering teacher motivation. This is also supported by research on effective exemplary schools where strong educational leadership stands out as a key area of need along with, professional autonomy, a clear intention to get the best out of every learner, a safe and orderly environment, and a healthy school climate (Scheerens, 2000: 52).

The effectiveness of our school practices clearly depends on staff effectiveness, but this is not possible to achieve without a motivated group of individuals who approach their work in a positive frame of mind, knowing that their efforts and work are recognized. A frustrated teacher asks: Do you feel the frustration I feel because almost all we are talking about is "how to be better teachers" like everything else were just fine?

Teachers are our most important assets. We cannot have true development, enrichment and advancement without an investment in teacher motivation and teachers' personal professional development. A manager or school director clearly plays the biggest role in promoting and sustaining a positive and constructive work environment and an ethos of participation, engagement and responsibility. This, however, cannot be the responsibility of the manager or director alone; 'the sand of an entire shore is indivisible' (McTaggart, 2002: 214) and every individual member of staff needs to be encouraged to contribute towards such a positive ethos and synthesis of energy:

Nothing is meaningful as long as we perceive only separate fragments. But as soon as the fragments come together into a synthesis, a new entity emerges, whose nature we could not have foreseen by considering the fragments alone. (Ferucci, 2004: 22)

Examples of motivational strategies that can usefully be practised by all parties include the following:

- Learning to thank ourselves and others; appreciating positive developments no matter how 'small' they may appear to be; 'little things' do matter and make a difference.
- Looking for progress rather than perfection in ourselves and others
- Practising acts of kindness and learning to apologize to others
- Adopting a label and category-free mindset; avoiding social comparison; using constructive language and feedback with our colleagues (not only with our students)
- Developing collaborative strategies for coping with challenges and teacher burnout
- Rather than dismissing ideas, embracing choices, alternatives, elements of surprise and some ambiguity in the work context
- Looking after one's 'space'; creating opportunities for personal development (in addition to professional development) within the work context where individuals voluntarily offer sessions in an area of expertise or interest e.g. jewellery making, dance routines, how to do self and other massage, the Tarot, chess or backgammon tournaments, effective breathing techniques, cooking, etc.

Finally and maybe most importantly schools can benefit from engaging in ongoing institutional research and development, seeking ways to enhance staff morale and motivation (Whitaker, T. et al., 2009) and exploring perceptions of individuals in their own work contexts e.g. by discussing perception-based questions such as, *If you became your (own) manager for 6 months what would you do?*

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