# The teachers' motivation, professionalism and passion matter. How motivated, professional and passionate Austrian EFL primary and secondary teachers motivate their learners.

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- Teacher cognition research was carried out in order to examine how seven motivated, professional and passionate primary and secondary Austrian English teachers motivate their students through motivational strategies.
- According to the teachers' perceptions, motivation is the prerequisite for learning and teaching English.
- As reported by the participants, three interrelated personal characteristics of teachers, namely being motivated, professional and passionate, seem to create and increase student motivation.
- Notwithstanding the age of students, the motivational strategies named by the participants are suitable for both younger students and teenagers.

## 1. Terminology

Before describing the study conducted in more detail, some basic terminology needs to be clarified and explained:

**Motivation**: "motivation is a situationally and culturally bound conscious and fluid driving force that stimulates individuals differently to take action and to achieve previously established goals" (Loacker, 2018, p. 9)[1].

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This contribution is a summary of the author's diploma thesis. Please see "How professional and passionate teachers motivate their students: a teacher cognition research in Austrian EFL primary and secondary education" by Loacker (2018) for further information.

[1] This definition is derived from comparing definitions by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), Harmer (2001), Williams and Burden (1997), Dörnyei and Otto (1998) and Wlodkowski (2008). For details please refer to Loacker (2018, pp. 7-9).

**Motivational strategies**: motivational strategies are techniques used by teachers and/or students to motivate the learners/themselves in order to achieve goals (Dörnyei, 2001).

**Professionalism**: professionalism is the quality of a person who "has or displays the skill, knowledge, experience, standards, or expertise of a professional [and who is] competent [and] efficient" (Professional, OED Online, 2017). In more detail, Phelps (2006) describes professional teachers as having three skills: firstly, being responsible for their students; secondly, respecting students, parents and colleagues; thirdly, having the courage to take risks.

**Passion:** broadly speaking and according to Vallerand et al. (2003), "passion is defined as a strong inclination toward an activity that people like, that they find important, and in which they invest time and energy" (p. 757). With regard to teaching and put simply, passion is the emotion that motivates teachers to teach learners (Day, 2009).

## 2. Rationale

Despite the overwhelming consensus that motivation is a requirement for acquiring a foreign language successfully (Ushioda, 2016; Dresel & Hall, 2013; Wlodkowski, 2008) and the numerous studies conducted on motivational strategies (e.g. Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998; Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2007; Bernaus et al., 2009), the pivotal role of teachers as motivators has received limited attention. So far, learners have been at the center of interest, which resulted in neglecting the perspective of teachers and the importance they assume in the process of motivating their students (Cowie & Sakui, 2011). Teacher cognition studies, such as those conducted by Cowie and Sakui (2011), Hapsari (2013) and Waddington (2017), attempted to transcend these limitations; however, studies in the field of teacher cognition research on motivational strategies which teachers apply in their teaching are still limited (Waddington, 2017). Furthermore, hardly any study seems to have investigated whether the age of learners has an effect on which motivational strategies teachers utilise in their English lessons.

This study, which was conducted as part of my diploma thesis, addresses these gaps through a teacher cognition research which will aim to reveal which kind of motivational strategies professional and passionate primary and secondary EFL teachers apply to motivate their learners. In contrast to prior research which was almost exclusively based on a random selection of participant, the criteria of the participants of this study were clearly defined. In choosing motivated, professional and passionate teachers, this study does not only attempt to bridge the gap of investigating how passionate teachers motivate their learners (Lazarides et al., 2018), but it also provides evidence for the fact that the personal characteristics of teachers seem to matter a lot for successfully motivating English students of different age cohorts.

## 3. Research questions

The current study tries to link motivational strategies with personal teacher characteristics, aiming to investigate how motivated, professional and passionate English teachers motivate learners of different ages. For this purpose, the following three research questions are asked:

RQ1

How important is motivation in the context of learning and teaching English as a foreign language according to professional and passionate Austrian EFL primary and secondary teachers?

RQ2

What do the participating teachers see as features of professional and passionate teachers and to what extent do they believe that teacher motivation, teacher professionalism and teacher passion influence student motivation in EFL learning?

RQ3

What motivational strategies do professional and passionate Austrian EFL primary and secondary teachers report to employ in their lessons and how does the use of motivational strategies differ according to the age of students?

# 4. Study description

## 4.1 Methodology

The cognitions of seven participating teachers were analysed qualitatively through semi-structured interviews. For this type of interview, an interview guideline was prepared which contained rather broad questions in order to enable the interviewer to adapt the questions according to the situation and the interviewees' answers (Dörnyei, 2007). The interview guide was structured into three parts, which were based on the three research questions. For each part four questions were phrased.

## 4.2 Sampling and participants

Seven teachers participated in the study. As already indicated above, the participants were chosen based on predefined criteria, meaning that criterion sampling (Dörnyei, 2007) was applied. The participants had to fulfil two prerequisites: firstly, to teach English in either primary or secondary school; secondly, to consider themselves as motivated, professional and passionate. To validate the degree of motivation, professionalism and passion, the potential participants had to fill in a questionnaire consisting of 26 closed-ended items that described features of motivated, professional and passionate teachers. The teachers had to tick yes, no or no answer for each statement. The more statements answered with yes, the more motivated, professional and passionate I considered the teachers to be. Based on the analysis of this questionnaire, all seven participants could be seen as being highly motivated, professional and passionate: four of the seven teachers chose "yes" for all statements and the remaining three teachers only ticked "no" for one statement.

In order to introduce the seven participating teachers in more detail, Table 1 below provides a comprehensive overview:

Table 1: Data of the participating teachers (Loacker, 2018, p. 69)

| Name[2] | Gender | Age | Teaching experience | School level and type[3] |
|---------|--------|-----|---------------------|--------------------------|
| Nina | Female | 52 | 32 years | Primary school |
| Daniel | Male | 34 | 7 years | Lower and upper secondary (AHS) |
| Thomas | Male | 63 | 37 years | Upper secondary (BHS) |
| Lea | Female | 57 | 30 years | Lower secondary (NMS) |
| Christian | Male | 58 | 38 years | Lower secondary (NMS) |
| Joanna | Female | 58 | 34 years | Primary school |
| Paula | Female | 33 | 8 years | Lower and upper secondary (AHS) |

As illustrated above, four out of seven teachers are female. Two teachers, Nina and Johanna, are primary school teachers. Lea and Christian both teach in lower secondary. Daniel and Paula are AHS teachers in a grammar school and Thomas is a BHS teacher in a vocational school. The teachers are between 33 and 63 years old and their teaching experience ranges from seven to 38 years. The schools were located in two federal provinces of Austria, namely in Vorarlberg and in Vienna. For this reason, five interviews were conducted in Vorarlberg and two in Vienna. Except for two interviews, all took place at the school of the teachers. One interview lasted on average 30 minutes and all interviews were conducted in German.

## 4.3 Data analysis

All interviews were analysed through a qualitative content analysis (Saldaña, 2009, 2011; Dörnyei, 2007). The first step of this type of analysis was the transcription of the data: all interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated (if necessary) from the local dialect into standard German. After initial coding and re-coding, the data received descriptive codes. These codes were put into one of seven categories which I had defined a priori based on the research questions and the interview guideline:

1. Motivation in general
2. The students' and the teachers' motivation
3. Characteristics of professional teachers
4. Characteristics of passionate teachers

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[2] The teachers' names have been changed to guarantee anonymity.

[3] Definitions of the Austrian school types: **AHS** (Allgemeinbildende Höhere Schule): AHS is a school type of Austrian secondary education (lower and upper secondary education) emphasising academic learning in grammar schools (BMBF, AHS, 2018). **NMS** (Neue Mittelschule): NMS is a school type of Austrian lower secondary education which represents a new secondary modern school which students can attend after the fourth grade of primary school (BMBF, NMS, 2018). **BHS** (Berufsbildende Höhere Schule): BHS is a school type of Austrian upper secondary education which offers students the choice of different vocational schools and colleges (BMBF, BHS, 2018).

5. The teachers' use of motivational strategies
6. The influence of the learners' age
7. Other relevant findings

Always two categories were then analysed together to answer the three research questions. Figure 1 below illustrates the interrelation between the categories and the research questions.

Figure 1: Relation between research questions (left) and categories of the qualitative content analysis (right) (Loacker, 2018, p. 73)

| | |
|---|---|
| RQ 1: Importance of motivation for learning and teaching English? | • 1: Motivation in general<br>• 2: Students' and teachers' motivation |
| RQ 2: Features of professional and passionate teachers and interrelationship between student motivation and teacher's motivation, professionalism and passion? | • 3: Characteristics of professional teachers<br>• 4: Characteristics of passionate teachers |
| RQ 3: Use of motivational strategies in Austrian EFL education and influence of learners' age? | • 5: Use of motivational strategies<br>• 6: Influence of learners' age |

As is visible above, the 7th category is not linked to any of the three research questions. Undoubtedly, this category contains valuable insight into the teachers' cognitions; however, since they are not directly relevant for answering the research questions, the findings of this category will not be elaborated in more detail within this paper. In summarising the findings of the six categories instead, which is the purpose of the following section, the research questions will be answered.

## 5. Findings

With regard to the first research question, the analysis of the interviews revealed that all participants see motivation as a prerequisite for learning and teaching English. According to the seven teachers, particularly their own motivation is indispensable because the interviewees believe that the teachers' motivation spreads to the students' motivation. Indeed, Moè (2011) assumes that the teachers' motivation impacts the students' motivation through a phenomenon which she calls *contagion* because the teachers' motivation is seen as being contagious. Hence, it is thought that a teacher who is motivated is most likely able to motivate his/her students with notable success.

What the analysis of the interviews also revealed is that the teachers' motivation is in a clear relation with the teachers' professionalism and passion. Indeed, these three characteristics seem to be closely interrelated because the interviewees characterised a motivated teacher as being professional and passionate, a professional teacher was seen as being passionate and motivated and a passionate teacher was described as being professional and motivated.

Despite this interrelationship, some unique features of professionalism and passion could be distinguished. According to the participants' answers, being professional means having sufficient knowledge about the language and about didactics, taking part in teacher development courses, planning lessons systematically, preparing useful lesson material, establishing goals students should achieve and doing follow-up work. In addition, professional teachers were described as taking risks, changing their plans if they consider a deviation as

improvement, being authentic and being empathetic towards students. Most importantly, professional teachers were said to establish a professional atmosphere with colleagues, students and their parents and to be consistent and transparent in their grading.

As regards the teachers' passion, a passionate teacher was described by the interviewees as being determined to broaden his/her knowledge, to be authentic, energetic and motivated, to show his/her passion through effective body language, to enjoy teaching students, to be interested in his/her students, to invest time for them and to create a constructive and welcoming classroom atmosphere. In a nutshell, all respondents unequivocally agreed that all three characteristics, being motivated, professional and passionate, are according to their experience fundamental for creating a motivating learning experience.

Furthermore, the seven teachers believe that the teachers' motivation, professionalism and passion exert a profound and beneficial influence on the students' motivation for foreign language learning. However, in order to increase the learners' motivation to the fullest extent possible, teachers could make use of motivational strategies. Before listing the main motivational strategies which were identified within this study, it is important to stress that not all motivational strategies work for every teacher and that not all strategies are equally effective for all students. As Dörnyei (2001) highlights, it is the responsibility of each single teacher to develop a repertoire of strategies he/she feels comfortable with, a concept which he defines as *the good-enough motivator*.

Returning to the study's findings, one effective motivational strategy, as reported by the participants, is to establish a positive teacher-student relationship which is characterised by the so-called affiliative drive, meaning that students have developed such a positive attitude and relationship towards their teacher that they do not want to disappoint him/her (Dörnyei, 1994). Moreover, establishing a constructive and welcoming classroom atmosphere, which necessitates analysing the students' needs, asking the learners about their preferences and adapting lessons to the contexts, is another successful strategy. Furthermore, plays, books, films, media, pictures, realia, songs and apps are materials that stimulate the learners' motivation. Another effective motivational strategy is to tell students the teachers' expectations and to show them that the teacher believes in their learning success. Likewise, establishing a consistent and transparent grading system, praising students and placing more value on the students' personality rather than their scholastic achievements were reported as further successful motivational strategies.

Regarding the age of the learners, the analysis showed that younger students and teenagers can be motivated through the same motivational strategies, but that the way in which the strategy is used in the lesson has to correspond to the developmental stage of the learners. To exemplify this finding, the motivational strategy to use songs, for instance, is a suitable motivational strategy for all age cohorts. However, the choice of which song to use has to be age appropriate as learners of different age groups prefer different songs.

## 6. Conclusion

The current study investigated motivational strategies through an innovative approach by means of conducting a cognition study with seven motivated, professional and passionate primary and secondary Austrian English teachers. Although this research was entirely based on data obtained from teachers, this study illustrates the participants' strong belief that the teachers' and students' motivation are interrelated and that motivation is an integral component for teaching and acquiring English. Moreover, the findings of the teacher cognition study

revealed that the teachers' motivation seems to interrelate with the teachers' professionalism and passion. Hence, it may be concluded that a teacher with these three characteristics is perceived as a motivating teacher and a remarkably successful motivator.

In addition, the interview findings could provide valuable information about motivational strategies that motivated, professional and passionate teachers use. Despite the small scale of this study, this research could yield a stunning collection of motivational strategies which might aid future and experienced teachers to motivate their students. This collection of motivational strategies is useful for every teacher, notwithstanding the age of students, because the choice of the motivational strategy does not depend on the students' age, but rather on how the strategy is applied. This means that, according to the participants, the strategies should be adapted to the age of the learners to motivate them in the most effective way possible. Moreover, the particular choice of strategies utilised in the lessons should always depend on the individual preferences of the teachers. In this regard, I agree with what Dörnyei (2001) stated above, namely that teachers should develop their own repertoire of motivational strategies they consider to be effective and feel comfortable with; as a consequence, the teachers are motivated themselves and if this is the case, their motivation can be contagious to their students' motivation.

Undoubtedly, further research is necessary to confirm these findings because this study is based on a very limited number of teachers and because the students' cognitions could not be considered. More participants, both teachers and especially students, would be needed to broaden research in the fascinating field of cognition research about motivation and to obtain more empirical evidence about what motivates students most.

## Application Box

Since this study yielded a plethora of strategies which the seven participants successfully apply in their lessons and which I found tremendously useful for my future teaching practice, the list below provides experienced and future teachers with a useful repertoire of motivational strategies and practical advice of what might help them to motivate their students. Please note, however, that these strategies were mentioned by the seven teachers in the interviews and that there is no proof that these strategies are useful for your teaching situation and motivating to your students. See this list as a piece of advice and develop your own repertoire of strategies that work best for you and your students.

- Show your students that you are motivated and passionate about your subject: your spark will fire your learners with motivation and passion
- Stay true to yourself and discover what works best for you: you may not feel comfortable with every strategy that exists and this is perfectly fine as long as you experiment and continue to try out new methods
- Have a positive attitude towards all of your students: some of them might not expect you to like them but if you face all of your students with the same positive attitude, you can change your students' behaviour into a positive direction
- Listen to your students and cater for their needs and interests
- Provide students with real-life tasks that have a real-life purpose
- Praise, praise, praise your students if they deserve it: you can never praise enough
- Show your students that you believe in them and that you are proud of them
- Tell your students that they are allowed to make errors and that they make progress
- Have clear and realistic expectations and tell your students what you expect from them
- Develop a consistent and transparent system of grading which your students understand
- Learn from the experience of your colleagues and cooperate with each other
- Never lose your passion to broaden your knowledge

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