What Retains Experienced Middle School EFL Teachers Who Work Outside the Public Educational System in Guangzhou, China

FENG Liujin

South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

This study reports the findings of an investigation into the factors that initially motivate and ultimately retain experienced middle-school EFL teachers working outside the public educational system in Guangzhou. A qualitative approach was adopted and semi-structured interviews were conducted on six deliberately selected in-service teachers. The findings suggest that participants entered the teaching profession for both extrinsic and intrinsic (altruistic) reasons with a wide variety of motives mentioned, such as seeing teaching as a backup job, positive influence of former teachers, perceived teaching abilities, the subject of English, time for family, and job security. However, their job commitment seems to be generally enhanced by intrinsic factors like recognition of the significance of working as a teacher and the sense of achievement achieved during teaching even though hygiene factors like salary, workload, leadership, and lack of support mainly serve as unsatisfactory factors. At the same time, teacher's morale is affected by interpersonal relationship, institutional culture, transfer to new institution, and change in perceived justice and life stage, as is suggested by Hagedorn (2000).

Keywords: teacher motivation, job satisfaction, teacher retention

Introduction

The Rationale for the Study

Understanding the circumstances of non-governmental teachers in China is of utmost importance since the private educational sector in China is almost as large as the public one, and its proportion is likely to increase in the coming years. After the abolition of the One Child Policy, public schools struggle to enroll the rapidly growing number of students. Non-governmental teachers play a crucial role in shaping the future of the younger generation and the country, yet they are rarely addressed in existing research.

As an English teacher with over 10 years of experience in Guangzhou, I have chosen a career path outside the public-school system due to personal reasons. During my career, I have met many fellow teachers who, like me, are passionate about teaching. Despite facing numerous challenges and unfair treatment associated with working outside the public educational system, their enthusiasm for teaching has remained strong, and they have dedicated over a decade to the profession. Their perseverance has intrigued me, and I am eager to explore their stories and discover the factors that have sustained their love for teaching.

FENG Liujin, School of English Language and Culture, South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of researching teacher motivation and job satisfaction for teacher retention (Sinclair, 2008; Robinson & Yi, 2008). Additionally, it is essential for teachers' voices to be heard. This research aims to investigate what attracts teachers to non-governmental sectors and what keeps them there. The findings are expected to help teachers reflect on and adjust their careers, enabling them to be more committed to their jobs and make better career plans. Moreover, the research hopes to offer new perspectives for educational administration and policy-making.

Literature Review

Definitions and Significance of Teacher Motivation

Sinclair (2008) defines teacher motivation by what attracts people to teaching, their duration in education courses and the profession, and their engagement level. In essence, it concerns what draws individuals to language teaching and what keeps them there. Research on teacher motivation links entry-related factors with job-related issues like satisfaction, stress, and burnout (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Motivated teachers are more committed, and unmet initial motivations can lead to negative outcomes (Richardson & Watt, 2014). Understanding work attitudes helps reveal motivation (Herzberg, Mausner, & Snyderman, 1959) and can reduce teacher attrition by improving job satisfaction. According to Ingersoll (2001, cited in Arnup & Bowels, 2016), teacher shortages in the US stem from job dissatisfaction-driven departures rather than insufficient supply.

Studies of Teacher Motivation

Reasons for entering teaching can be categorized into altruistic, intrinsic, and extrinsic motives (Kyriacou & Kobori, 1998). Western studies show that motives like working with children, social contribution, and intellectual fulfillment are common (OECD, 2005). US studies, from early works to recent ones, highlight altruistic and intrinsic factors. Australian and European research also finds similar patterns (Watt & Richardson, 2007; 2012).

However, in China and Ghana, extrinsic motives like salary and job security play a more significant role (Richardson & Watt, 2014). Chinese studies show diverse motives: Some are similar to Western ones, but many are unique, such as lower test scores, financial considerations, and social mobility (Su, Hawkins, Huang, & Zhao, 2001; Gu & Lai, 2012). Cross-cultural studies between China and the US reveal that Chinese candidates are more driven by extrinsic factors and less committed to teaching as a lifelong career (Watt & Richardson, 2012). English as a subject attracts Chinese teachers, while poor language proficiency can demotivate them (Gu & Lai, 2012). Some Chinese teachers view teaching as a backup or a means of upward mobility, though some may develop altruistic values later (Lin et al., 2012).

In conclusion, teacher motivation is complex and context-dependent (McDonough, 2007; Richardson & Watt, 2014). This justifies exploring teacher motivation in non-governmental institutions, an under-researched area.

Context

To understand teachers outside the government-run framework, it's crucial to introduce China's educational system context and three common types of non-governmental institutions.

Macro Context of China's Educational System

There are two main educational systems in China: public and private. Public-system teachers, hired and paid by local governments, have "iron—rice—bowl" jobs (Gao, 2010), with good salaries, free medical care, and

pensions, enjoying higher social status.

Competition for public positions is intense, attracting 300-700 applicants per vacancy, with recruitment twice a year. Fresh graduates are favored; in-service teachers face strict criteria on teaching certificates, education, and age. In Guangzhou, bachelors over 35, masters over 40, and those without government-issued certificates are usually rejected. These certificates are hard to obtain due to limited quotas and strict requirements like years of class-teacher experience and published papers.

Micro Contexts of Non-governmental Educational Institutions

For those not in the public system, there are three main options:

• Traditional private schools: Run by companies, they follow the national syllabus for the College Entrance Exam. Unlike public-school teachers, private-school teachers are paid as regular employees, and private-school compulsory education is not free. Substitute teachers in public schools have the same duties but without extra benefits.

• International private schools: They do not follow the national syllabus or target the College Entrance Exam. Students study international courses for future overseas study. Most courses are taught by native English speakers, with Chinese EFL teachers as assistants. These schools have tighter schedules and more activities, with tuition ranging from 30,000-200,000 RMB annually, which makes them a privilege for the middle class and families with high incoming.

• Training centers: Offering tutoring for schoolwork, competitions, and tests like IELTS/TOEFL, they're booming, especially in big cities. Teachers meet students infrequently, usually working at night, on weekends, or during holidays.

Methodology

Research Questions

This study investigates the initial motivations of long-serving teachers in non-governmental sectors and the factors that retain them. Four core questions guide the research:

1. What leads them to choose teaching initially, and do they have any regrets?

2. How satisfied are they with their current work, and what influences this satisfaction?

3. What teaching challenges do they encounter?

4. What keeps them committed to their teaching career?

Qualitative Research

Given the subjective nature of the research, a qualitative approach is employed. Semi-structured interviews are used as they allow for in-depth exploration while giving participants the freedom to lead the conversation. This method helps to understand teachers' personal feelings and perspectives.

Participants

Six female teachers, aged in their thirties with over 10 years of teaching experience, are selected from traditional private schools, international private schools, and training centers. Their friendship with the researcher and shared experiences outside the public education system are key selection criteria, aiming to enhance data reliability. Basic information of the six teachers is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Information

Participants	Age	Gender	Years of teaching	Institutions
Isabella	36	Female	10	Traditional private school
Colleen	35	Female	11	Public school (substitute teacher)
Sophie	37	Female	13	International private school
Winnie	33	Female	10	International private school
Felicity	35	Female	11	Training center
Molly	35	Female	14	Training center

Ethical Issues and Validity

Ethical standards are maintained throughout. Participants are informed of the research details and their rights, and confidentiality is ensured through the use of pseudonyms. To enhance validity, the researcher reduces personal bias, applies translation strategies, and has participants review transcripts for accuracy.

Data Collection

Participants opt for phone interviews for convenience and receive questions in advance. The researcher uses a professional approach, taking notes and encouraging free-flowing sharing. The interview consists of two sessions (90 minutes + 30 minutes) to cover all aspects.

Data Analysis

The analysis has three stages: gaining a general understanding, coding data into themes, and integrating findings to answer the research questions.

Findings

There are issues these six teachers share in common.

1. Initial interest or motivation in teaching: Most teachers show certain interest or motivation in teaching. Isabella, despite dissatisfaction with her school, "enjoys being with the kids" and "would like to help them". Colleen "maintained great passion for teaching and was rewarded with a strong sense of achievement". Molly "loved tutoring classmates and could explain things in a logical way" and felt proud when students learned phonics, stating, "I feel so proud when they are able to pronounce and spell words according to the phonetic rules". Felicity was inspired by her middle-school English teacher and found fulfillment in helping students progress, saying, "I feel proud of myself that I am trusted by students and parents and can actually help them to make progress in English". Even Sophie, who disliked teaching initially, discovered its fun later.

2. Facing work challenges: All encounter work-related challenges. For example, heavy workloads are common. Isabella "usually works from 7 am. to 9 pm. and feels under great pressure", and Winnie "works a two-men job" with huge stress. Student-related issues also trouble many. Isabella's students are "disrespectful", "naughty", and weak in English. Sophie's students are poor at English, disrespectful, and lack motivation, as are Winnie's.

3. Hopes for work: Each has expectations for their work, such as desiring better development or pay. Isabella "will keep trying to enter a public school or a better private one". Colleen "feels under huge financial pressure" due to low pay. Winnie "is ambitious to set up a big department". Molly and Felicity hope to balance work and family.

However, differences are still found among them.

1. Workplace types and natures: Isabella is at a small, new private school with chaotic management. Colleen works in a district-key public school but as a substitute teacher. Sophie is in a well-known international middle school, while Winnie is in a smaller, mismanaged international school. Molly runs a training center with her husband, and Felicity is a part-time teacher at a training center.

2. Salaries and benefits: Colleen's pay is about half of that of public-system teachers, with no government-provided housing, medical, or pension benefits. Sophie earns "nearly as twice as the average amount of private middle school teachers". Winnie "works a two-men job but gets half paid", and Molly has "a much better income than working in schools". Felicity's part-time status may limit her earnings, though details are not given.

3. Work freedom: Sophie, as the only Chinese English teacher in her school, "is granted with full authority in choices related to teaching". Molly and Felicity have significant flexibility in teaching and scheduling. Molly "manages the school well and enjoys much free time", and Felicity can "decide when to schedule class or what students to teach". In contrast, Isabella, Colleen, and Winnie have less freedom.

4. Student performance and attitudes: Colleen's students "have better academic performance", "good study habits", and respect for teachers. However, Isabella, Sophie, and Winnie's students are disrespectful, unmotivated, and have poor academic performance. Molly and Felicity's students, after screening, are more motivated to study.

Discussion

Key Findings and Implications

Why they became teachers. This research confirms that participants entered teaching for both extrinsic and intrinsic/altruistic reasons, aligning with previous studies (Gu & Lai, 2012; Zhang, Yu, & Liu, 2019). Reasons included viewing teaching as a backup job, influence of former teachers (Su et al., 2001), love for children, passion for English, time for family (Gao, 2010), and job security (Watt & Richardson, 2012).

Sophie and Isabella initially saw teaching as a backup but later embraced it as a lifelong career, differing from past research where similar decisions were due to limited career options. Colleen and Winnie were drawn by their perceived teaching abilities, while Molly and Felicity were inspired by their past academic experiences. The six cases highlight the complex and evolving nature of teacher motivation (McDonough, 2007). Some, like Isabella and Colleen, regret not planning better to enter the public system earlier.

Challenges they meet in their teaching. Teachers face various challenges. In traditional middle schools, large class sizes and mixed-level students make individual attention difficult and increase workloads (Isabella, Colleen). Students' low motivation in English learning is an issue in private schools, stemming from CEE pressure in traditional schools and lack of interest in international schools. All teachers are stressed by students with psychological problems. A lack of professional training is a common concern, with limited support from schools and governments, forcing teachers to self-study.

Job satisfaction and contributing factors. Four teachers (Colleen, Sophie, Molly, Felicity) are generally satisfied, while Isabella and Winnie are less so. The study validates Herzberg et al.'s (1959) two-factor theory: Intrinsic factors (recognition, achievement) boost satisfaction, and hygiene factors (salary, workload) cause dissatisfaction.

Intrinsic factors such as respect and recognition motivate Sophie and Colleen, while Molly and Felicity find fulfillment in students' progress. Conversely, Isabella, Winnie, and Sophie suffer from low achievement feelings. Hygiene factors like heavy workloads stress school teachers, but Molly and Felicity in training centers have more

manageable loads. Salary affects motivation differently; Sophie is content with her pay, while Isabella, Winnie, and Colleen are disappointed. Leadership motivates in some cases but demotivates in others, and lack of support frustrates Winnie. Interpersonal relationships and institutional culture also impact satisfaction, with positive interactions boosting morale and negative ones, especially student disrespect, demotivating teachers.

Implications of the Study

    For the government and educational institutions. Recognition and respect for teachers enhance motivation, as shown by Sophie and Colleen's cases. Creating a friendly atmosphere where teachers are respected by all parties can retain talent. Providing training and support directly impacts teaching efficacy, as seen in Sophie's positive and Winnie's negative experiences. Improving salaries and reducing workloads also help, especially as unfair financial treatment between public and private sectors demotivates some teachers.

    For teachers. Career planning is crucial. Most participants in this study did not plan to become teachers initially, leading to missed opportunities. Student and novice teachers, in particular, should create clear career plans to make the most of their professional lives.

Conclusion

    This research enriches the existing literature on teacher motivation and satisfaction, offering valuable insights for researchers. It validates that teacher motivation and satisfaction are complex and multi-faceted, in line with prior studies (McDonough, 2007; Hagedorn, 2000). Initial motivations uncovered include teaching as a backup job, influence of past teachers, love for children, perceived teaching skills, passion for English, family-related factors, and job security. The study also supports Herzberg et al.'s (1959) two-factor theory, showing that motivators are often job-related or intrinsic, while demotivators are contextual and extrinsic. Moreover, intrinsic elements like recognition and achievement boost job satisfaction, whereas hygiene factors such as salary, workload, and leadership quality diminish it. Interpersonal relationships, institutional culture, and life-stage changes also mediate teacher satisfaction (Hagedorn, 2000).

    Nevertheless, the research has limitations. Interviews, being highly subjective, pose a risk of bias (Bell & Waters, 2014). As an EFL teacher, personal experiences might have influenced data interpretation. Close relationships with participants, while aiding data collection, could have compromised objectivity. Additionally, the small data scale is a drawback. However, the research aimed to spotlight the experiences of non-governmental teachers in Guangzhou, an under-explored area. Future studies should expand to other regions in China, especially less developed cities, for a more comprehensive understanding.

References

Arnup, J., & Bowles, T. (2016). Should I stay or should I go? Resilience as a protective factor for teachers' intention to leave the teaching profession. *The Australian Journal of Education, 60*(3), 229-244. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1177/0004944116667620

Bell, J., & Waters, S. (2014). *Doing your research project: A guide for first-time researchers* (6th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Dornyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and researching motivation*. Harlow: Pearson Education.

Gao, X. (2010). To be or not to be: Shifting motivations in Chinese secondary school English teachers' career narratives. *Teacher Development, 14*(3), 321-334. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2010.504013

Gu, M., & Lai, C. (2012). Motivation and commitment: Pre-service teachers from Hong Kong and mainland China at a training institute in Hong Kong (report). *Teacher Education Quarterly, 39*(3), 45-61.

Herzberg, F., Mausner, B., & Snyderman, B. (1959). *The motivation to work* (2nd ed.). Hoboken: Wiley.

Hagedorn, L. (2000). Conceptualizing faculty job satisfaction: components, theories, and outcomes. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2000*(105), 5-20. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1002/ir.10501

Kyriacou, C., & Kobori, M. (1998). Motivation to learn and teach English in Slovenia. *Educational Studies, 24*(3), 345-351. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/0305569980240307

Lin, E., Shi, Q., Wang, J., Zhang, S., & Hui, L. (2012). Initial motivations for teaching: Comparison between preservice teachers in the United States and China. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 40*(3), 227-248. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866x.2012.700047

McDonough, S. (2007). Motivation in ELT. *ELT Journal, 61*(4), 369-371. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccm056

OECD. (2005). *Teachers matter: Attracting, developing and retaining effective teachers*. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264018044-en

Richardson, P. W., & Watt, H. M. G. (2014). Why people choose teaching as a career: An expectancy-value approach to understanding teacher motivation. In P. W. Richardson, S. A. Karabenick, and H. M. G. Watt (Eds.), *Teacher motivation* (pp. 3-19). New York: Routledge.

Robinson, B., & Yi, W. (2008). The role and status of non-governmental ("daike") teachers in China's rural education. *International Journal of Educational Development, 28*(1), 35-54. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2007.02.004

Sinclair, C. (2008). Initial and changing student teacher motivation and commitment to teaching. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education, 36*(2), 79-104. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/13598660801971658

Su, Z., Hawkins, J., Huang, T., & Zhao, Z. (2001). Choices and commitment: A comparison of teacher candidates' profiles and perspectives in China and the United States. *International Review of Education, 47*(6), 611-635. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1013184026015

Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2007). Motivational factors influencing teaching as a career choice: Development and validation of the FIT-Choice Scale. *The Journal of Experimental Education, 75*(3), 167-202. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.3200/JEXE.75.3.167-202

Watt, H., & Richardson, P. (2012). An introduction to teaching motivations in different countries: Comparisons using the FIT-Choice scale. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education: Teaching Motivations in Different Countries: Comparisons Using the FIT-Choice Scale, 40*(3), 185-197. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1080/1359866X.2012.700049

Zhang, L., Yu, S., & Liu, H. (2019). Understanding teachers' motivation for and commitment to teaching: Profiles of Chinese early career, early childhood teachers. *Teachers and Teaching, Theory and Practice, 25*(7), 1-25.