

Introduction to the Special Issue: Local Perspectives on Language Teacher Motivation and Engagement

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“When we look back on our schooling, we remember teachers rather than courses – we remember their manner and method, their enthusiasm and intellectual excitement, and their capacity to arouse our delight in, or curiosity about, the subject taught. (...) Sometimes a teacher’s influence is strong enough to override that of parents and peers.” (Sidney Hook, 1976, p. 426)

A NEGLECTED POPULATION IN FOCUS

Teachers are a key stakeholder group in language education characterized by vast diversity stemming from the different languages taught (including English and languages other than English); diversity in terms of their own linguistic, ethnic, and sociocultural backgrounds; those at different phases of their careers (i.e., pre-service, novice, mid-career, and late-career); those working in formal and informal settings, part-time or full-time; as well as those teaching at different educational levels (i.e., elementary, secondary, tertiary, and adult education). In addition, there is a considerable subpopulation comprised of language teacher educators (LTEs), namely, those teaching and training prospective and in-service language teachers at

higher education institutions (i.e., universities and teacher training colleges), schools, and freelance.

Despite the marked heterogeneity of the population of language teachers, they remain an extremely under-researched population in comparison to language learners in terms of their psychologies (Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). While some recent monographs and edited collections (e.g., Barkhuizen, 2022; Feryok, 2024; Ku, 2023; Sulis et al., 2023; Thompson, 2020; Wesely, 2024) are indicative of a shifting trend and a growing interest in this set of stakeholders, there still remains much work to be done. This is also true in respect to key psychological constructs, such as motivation and engagement (for exceptions, see, e.g., Kimura et al., 2022; Sadeghi & Kubanyiova, 2025; Smid, 2022; Thompson, 2021). As such, with this Special Issue (SI), our aim is to draw more attention to the motivation and engagement of this neglected population by bringing together empirical works from diverse sociocultural settings and employing diverse lenses. Our intention is to inspire more work in this area and ensure language teachers are properly understood and so can be appropriately supported.

DEFINING LANGUAGE TEACHER MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The motivation of language teachers can be understood as a psychological process that is responsible for their choices, effort investment, and persistence in their professional lives (see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). The behavioral expression of motivation is called engagement, which is essentially motivation “*realized in action*,” meaning that, “initial motivation has been successfully transformed into action despite the multitude of distractions” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, p. 100, emphasis in the original). Consequently, although there is a relationship between the two constructs, motivation is wider in scope and does not automatically lead to engagement (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020). Numerous theoretical frameworks of motivation and engagement have been utilized for the study of language teachers (for a comprehensive summary, see, e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Hiver et al., 2018). However, thus far, only Kubanyiova’s (2012) model of language teacher conceptual change, which includes the possible language teacher selves tripartite construct, remains as the sole framework explicitly developed for language teachers in our field. There are, as yet, no other domain-specific models and frameworks to understand the motivation and engagement of language teachers.

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE TEACHER MOTIVATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Language teachers’ motivation and engagement matter for several reasons. When it comes to initial or career choice motivation, for example, research on pre-service English teachers tells us that motivated and committed language teachers can serve as positive role models for future generations of teachers, and can, thus, have a tremendous impact on the language education system (Smid, 2022). In regard to language teachers’ engagement in their work, studies suggest that engaged language teachers are likely to have engaged language learners due to the spread of psychological contagion between them (Sulis & Mercer, 2025), are less likely to experience burnout and more likely to have a higher level of well-being (Khajavy et al., 2025). In educational psychology, research has also shown that there is a link between teacher motivation and job satisfaction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020), the quality of

instruction (Nalipay et al., 2023), and, in turn, students’ learning outcomes (Bardach & Klassen, 2021).

In other words, we need to understand language teachers’ motivation and engagement because as key stakeholders, they are vital to understand as individuals in their own right, but it is also important to have a better appreciation of their psychologies in light of the connection to learner psychology and the benefits for learning outcomes of teachers who are flourishing. Given also increased rates of attrition in the profession (Williams et al., 2022) and the continual stream of social threats to motivation and engagement from various socio-contextual developments, such as the rise of Artificial Intelligence, these have become a critical topic to explore to ensure a healthy and well-functioning language teaching and learning context.

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

This SI brings together six research articles drawing on empirical data from four continents to cast light on this neglected population and to hopefully trigger a further wave of scholarship to expand and build on the inspiration within the issue.

In the first paper set in Europe, **Diert-Boté** and **Moncada-Comas** explore two English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teachers’ motivation in higher education in the Catalan context by adopting a complex dynamic systems lens (Larsen-Freeman & Cameron, 2008). The authors make a compelling case for their study highlighting a number of unique professional challenges the population of ESP teachers in higher education faces. With the help of a duo-ethnographical approach and relying primarily on longitudinal journal data collected over a period of five weeks, they cast light on how their motivation interrelates with various cognitive, affective, and contextual factors in a nonlinear and dynamic fashion. Specifically, they identified both teacher-specific (e.g., anxiety, happiness) and non-specific (e.g., perfectionism, expectancies about student behavior) attractor states anchoring their motivational systems. The study generates exciting and original methodological and pedagogical insights and advocates for the adoption of reflective methodologies in examining language teacher motivation. Their study could inspire other teachers to explore their own motivation and engagement ongoing.

Another woefully neglected population, namely, LTEs or aptly referred to by the authors as the ‘invisible influencers,’ with their unique needs and characteristics are examined in **Mercer, Murillo-Miranda, and Smid’s** study. Also set in Europe, the investigation aims to explore the psychology of a group of English LTEs in Austria and Germany, specifically focusing on the interplay of their motivation, emotions, and well-being. Based on semi-structured interview data, the findings revealed diverse motivational and career trajectory profiles despite the participants’ being from similar settings and institutions, diverse triggers for their positive and negative emotional experiences, as well as challenges pertaining to their well-being. The study opens up pathways for further research on the complexity of LTE psychology generally and on LTE motivation ensuring that this overlooked but hugely influential group of teachers are brought in from the shadows (Golombek, 2017).

The third and final work from Europe is **Albert and Csizér’s** small-scale, questionnaire study examining the interplay between high school teachers’ work engagement and well-being in Hungary, a setting characterized by numerous challenges faced by educators. The paper is unique in both its attempt to compare the characteristics of language teachers (primarily English and German) with those of teachers of other subjects as well as its investigation of the individual and social aspects of teachers’ well-being. Interestingly, no significant differences were detected between the two subsamples, highlighting the truth that language teachers are also teachers conceived more broadly, and findings need not always be domain-specific as in this case. Their study opens the discussion for further work exploring domain-specific issues in the realm of teacher motivation and engagement.

In the next study situated in Africa, **Koné** seeks to understand the unique motivational flows called directed motivational currents (DMCs) (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013) of three university-level English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers from Mali during their study abroad in the United States of America (USA). The qualitative case study, adopting a retrospective technique, sheds light on the distinct features of the participants’ DMCs, as well as the associated triggers and supports, such as resilience, sense of competence, and the role of significant others. The study not only celebrates the accomplishments of these female EFL teachers in the face of diverse social–professional

challenges and conflicts, but it also lays the groundwork for future, longitudinal research on language teachers’ DMCs.

Wang, Yang, and Wang present a study situated in China. It seeks to build our knowledge of the longitudinal development of EFL teachers’ motivation within the context of online instruction from the perspective of possible language teacher selves (Kubanyiova, 2012). Drawing on interview and diary data collected from high school teachers over a period of three months, the findings highlight the developmental trajectories of the participants’ ideal, ought-to, and feared language teacher selves (Kubanyiova, 2012) and how these were linked to their motivation and agency during a transition period to online teaching, which was characterized by professional challenges and tensions. The study calls for the potential expansion and refinement of the possible language teacher selves construct (Kubanyiova, 2012) and offers valuable practical implications on how to sustain teachers’ motivation in the ever-growing sphere of online instruction.

This SI closes with **Thompson, Chalupa, and Stjepanovic’s** study set in the USA. Engaging in autoethnography, the authors, who all worked as world language educators at a state university in the USA, examine how job insecurity threatened their motivation and well-being and the role of resilience in such challenging circumstances within the framework of possible language teacher selves (Kubanyiova, 2012). Their study highlights the need for a context-sensitive approach (Ushioda, 2009) to the study of language teacher motivation and paves the way for further research in educational settings characterized by precarious conditions. It also makes visible some of the underlying damage done to teacher motivation and well-being by such precarious work conditions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In conclusion, this SI showcases different facets of language teacher motivation and engagement in diverse sociocultural contexts. As the featured empirical research attests, the study of both constructs comes with significant practical implications for teacher education programs, school principals, curriculum designers, and policymakers alike. The works highlight the use of various motivational frameworks and diverse research methods, and outline potential avenues for future research, both theoretical and

empirical. In comparison to the vast volume of scholarship on language learner motivation and engagement (e.g., Al-Hoorie & MacIntyre, 2019; Apple et al., 2013; Csizér & Kálmán, 2019; Csizér et al., 2024; Dörnyei et al., 2015, 2016; Dörnyei & Mentzelopoulos, 2022; Hennebry-Leung & Lamb, 2024; Hiver et al., 2020; Lamb et al., 2019; Takahashi, 2022; Ushioda, 2013; Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017)

and given the sheer diversity of the language teacher population as explained above, research on the topic of this SI is still in its relatively nascent stages, despite increasing interest. It is our hope that this collection of papers will help trigger more work in this vitally important area of language teacher psychology.

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