

Teachers' pedagogical intentions while using motivational strategies

Zening Yang and Hugo Santiago Sanchez[®]

Teaching in a way that motivates students to learn and grow is a ubiquitous goal in language teaching and language teacher education. Although the existing literature has looked into various motivational strategies that can enhance or maintain L2 students' motivation, there is currently little research on teachers' mental lives behind their motivational teaching practices. This qualitative case study thus explored teachers' pedagogical intentions while implementing motivational strategies. Drawing on data from semi-structured background interviews, classroom observations, and post-lesson stimulated recall interviews, this study shows that teachers' enactment of motivational strategies was influenced by their awareness of the intentions to motivate as well as the intentions to facilitate student learning. Furthermore, the study provides evidence of the potential of stimulated recall for awareness-raising. Based on these findings, we provide practical recommendations for using stimulated recall for maximising the pedagogical potential of motivational strategies in the language classroom.

Key words: motivational strategies, teacher intentions, stimulated recall, teacher awareness

Introduction

In the second language acquisition literature, motivation is generally used to refer to what drives a learner to initiate and sustain efforts in L2 learning (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011). Being a crucial factor for any meaningful teaching-learning process, L2 motivation has attracted considerable attention among educational researchers who have made major contributions to our understanding of the nature of this elusive construct. As synthesised by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), existing motivational theories and frameworks can be categorised into four main types: social psychological, cognitive-situated, process-oriented, and social-dynamic. Collectively, they describe motivation as a complex and multifaced construct with different motivational orientations. For example, an instrumentally motivated learner may be driven by the desire to pass a language requirement, while an integratively motivated learner may be interested in knowing the culture associated with English.

An array of psychological variables have also been used to describe motivation, including self-efficacy (i.e. the belief in one's ability to learn the language) and expectancy (i.e. the perceived possibility that efforts will lead to language learning).

Recent decades have witnessed growing scholarly attempts to draw pedagogical implications from the increasingly sophisticated understandings of L2 motivation. A wide range of theory-based, yet classroom-friendly, motivational strategies, defined as instructional techniques that teachers can deploy to generate and enhance student motivation and maintain their motivated behaviours (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011), have been recommended in the literature. Dörnyei's (2001) taxonomy is perhaps the most comprehensive summary of these strategies. It provides a checklist of more than one hundred motivational strategies organised according to when in the teaching process they would be deployed, moving from strategies for creating a basic motivational state (e.g. discussing group norms with learners), through to those that facilitate initial motivation (e.g. raising learners' awareness of the values of L2 learning) and sustain motivation (e.g. encouraging learners to set achievable goals), and those that can encourage learners' positive self-evaluation (e.g. offering rewards).

Subsequent empirical studies have enhanced Dörnyei's (2001) framework by adding further strategies reported by teachers. Lee and Lin (2019), for example, identified two additional strategies (using direct English instruction and providing authentic teaching materials) that were used by teachers in Hong Kong. Attempts have also been made to validate the effectiveness of Dörnyei's (2001) motivational strategies on student motivation. Moskovsky *et al.* (2013) conducted a quasi-experimental study and found that when teachers were specifically trained in using motivational strategies, they were able to produce positive changes in their learners' level of motivation. Other studies have investigated the cross-cultural differences in the use of motivational strategies. Guilloteaux (2013), for example, reports that some motivational strategies, such as demonstrating enthusiasm for teaching and building good student–teacher relationships, may be universally used by teachers across different sociocultural contexts. However, she also found that, compared to teachers in Hungary, teachers in Taiwan employed strategies to promote learner autonomy significantly less frequently.

These works documenting and evaluating teachers' observable motivational teaching behaviours are certainly valuable, as they provide teachers and teacher educators with a rigorously tested knowledge base of motivational teaching. However, little attention has been paid to online learning environments, which are becoming crucial learning sites under the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, as observed by Lamb (2017), there is paucity of research on teachers' moment-to-moment thinking underlying the selection and enactment of motivational strategies. Exploring the unobservable dimension of motivational teaching practices is particularly significant, as its process (stimulated recall in this study) may provide teachers and teacher educators with an effective tool for developing meaningful pedagogies which respond to the 'local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities and exigencies of their classrooms' (Kumaravadivelu 2006: 37).

Adapting motivational teaching strategies to specific classroom situations is clearly far more complex than copying strategies from ready-made lists. L2 teachers often need to address multiple concerns when choosing teaching strategies in their classrooms, including non-motivational considerations that may compromise the adoption of motivational strategies. For example, [Muñoz and Ramirez \(2015\)](#) reported that concerns over complying with the curriculum and testing standards prevented teachers from using motivational strategies to promote learner autonomy. However, there is also evidence that teachers may manage to combine multiple pedagogical purposes. Though not focusing specifically on motivational strategies, [Sanchez and Borg \(2014\)](#) show that one teacher used personalised examples about students to explain the meaning of present perfect continuous and to maintain students' interest in learning grammar. Similarly, [Feryok and Oranje \(2015\)](#) illustrate how one teacher used a passport as realia to promote learners' intercultural awareness while maintaining their classroom engagement. These findings suggest that conceptualising motivational strategies as serving only motivational purposes may be underestimating the scope of their pedagogical impact and ignoring the complex role that they play in real-life classroom teaching practices.

This study addressed the paucity of research on teachers' cognitive processes underlying their use of motivational strategies by investigating specifically teachers' intentions, conceptualised here as the psychological state of being purposeful ([Malle, Moses and Baldwin 2001](#)). The following research question was explored in this project:

- What are teachers' pedagogical intentions when selecting and enacting motivational strategies?

The study

This article draws on data from a qualitative case study that followed a within-site, multiple-case design to explore the motivational practices and pedagogical rationales of two individual cases of IELTS teachers at a private language school in China. While the case study explored a full range of factors that influenced the teachers' use of motivational strategies, this article focuses on the data that are related specifically to the teachers' intentions.

Participants and context

The two participants, Lydia and Susan (pseudonyms), were selected through convenience sampling and provided voluntary informed consent to participate and for their data to be used for and beyond the immediate purposes of the study. Both were qualified teachers who spoke English as a second language and were proficient English users (CEFR level C1). Lydia was in her late 20s and had four years of English teaching experience. Susan was in her late 30s and had been teaching for seven years. At the time of data collection, Lydia taught beginner level IELTS listening and speaking, while Susan was responsible for intermediate level IELTS writing and reading classes at the language school.

Most of the students were local high school and university/college students who needed IELTS for further studies, though there were also adult learners who needed IELTS for work purposes. The classes were

delivered via Tencent QQ, an instant messaging software. The language school had been offering online classes since 2015 and both teachers were familiar with online teaching. Each class was two hours long, delivered mainly in Mandarin on a one-to-one basis.

Data collection and analysis

Multiple sources of data were collected in order to provide rich insights into the participants' practices and rationales, and to provide methodological triangulation. Here is a summary of the data collection methods and procedures employed:

- A semi-structured individual background interview (40–45 minutes each) was conducted at the beginning of the project to establish a profile of the teachers' educational and professional background and their general reflections on their motivational practices.
- Four two-hour class observations per teacher (16 hours in total) were conducted within the period of a month to identify critical incidents illustrating the enactment of motivational strategies. The observations were guided primarily by the observation scheme 'Motivation Orientation of Language Teaching' (MOLT) (Guilloteaux and Dörnyei 2008), although attention was also paid to potentially motivating teaching acts beyond the scheme, especially those related to teachers' comments made in their background interviews. The researcher switched off the camera and microphone during the observations to minimise the influence on naturally occurring teaching and learning.
- Each class observation was followed by a stimulated recall interview (eight interviews in total, 30–65 minutes each). In these interviews, audio-only recordings of classroom observations were employed as stimuli to elicit the teachers' rationales regarding their use of observed motivational strategies. Most of the critical incidents explored had been selected by the teachers themselves, which helped to promote participant agency and satisfaction (Sanchez and Grimshaw 2020). The interviews were conducted in Mandarin, though both participants occasionally used English expressions.

Inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was employed to analyse the data based on the research question. The analysis began with reading and re-reading the transcripts to understand the teachers' overall experiences related to motivational teaching. This was followed by initial coding where extracts indicating the teachers' pedagogical intentions were codified. Finally, these codes were compared across the two cases to identify commonly occurring themes.

Findings

The findings from the cross-case analysis show that the teachers had both motivational and non-motivational intentions while selecting and enacting motivational strategies (see Table 1). These intentions are presented below according to how they were combined in teachers' individual rationales. Each section discusses illustrative examples of observed motivational strategies with reference to the teachers' analytic commentaries. The following conventions are used to locate participant quotes within the data set: background interviews (BI), class observation (CO), and stimulated recall interviews (SRI).

Purely motivational intentions

Both teachers used strategies that were driven purely by motivational intentions. Lydia, for example, varied her pitch, tone and volume in

| Teacher intentions | Description Teacher rationale includes considerations for: |
|--------------------------------|---|
| To increase student motivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing stimulating learning experiences • Maintaining positive self-evaluation • Promoting positive attitudes towards English • Fostering feelings of achievement and being respected • Building a positive student–teacher relationship • Maintaining in-class student attention and engagement (motivated behaviours) |
| To facilitate student learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting the memorisation of vocabulary • Facilitating language comprehension • Encouraging adoption of learning strategies • Maximising learning opportunities |

TABLE 1
Overview of teacher intentions

an enthusiastic manner in all her observed lessons. She believed that ‘enthusiasm is contagious’ and that she ‘can instil a positive feeling for English in my students by demonstrating that enthusiasm myself’ (SRI1). She found the use of an enthusiastic voice especially helpful in online environments:

In those online classes I always vary my volume and tone particularly obviously, because it’s already very easy to be distracted when the teacher is not physically present, and we all know a flat voice makes it worse. (SRI1)

Lydia’s use of this strategy was, therefore, not a random choice, but was driven by her conscious intention to increase both the socio-emotional (‘a positive feeling for English’) and behavioural (i.e. preventing the student from being distracted) dimensions of student motivation in an online context.

Another example of purely motivational intentions was observed in Susan’s use of social chatting. In CO3, her student initiated a conversation about an American TV series that he had recently watched. Susan responded eagerly by engaging in an active discussion of the programme’s characters and plot. This response was deliberate and was motivated by her perception of the student’s personality, preferences, and needs:

There are students like him, really extroverted students. They prefer a more casual and personal relationship. A close personal relationship is really motivating for this type of student. I always try to accommodate to their needs in order to motivate. (SRI3)

Primarily motivational intentions

There were incidents in which the teacher’s actions appeared to be driven primarily by the intention to motivate, though peripherally they were also intended to facilitate learning. Like Susan, Lydia appreciated the motivational impact of social chatting and was observed to use this strategy in her practice. In CO1, after explaining the synonyms and collocations associated with ‘heat’, Lydia initiated a chat about Miami Heat, an American basketball team that she knew was the student’s

favourite team. Lydia's choice of strategy was motivated by signs of unmotivated behaviour that she perceived from the student:

He had been really quiet for a while. Even when he occasionally responded, it was meaningless ... Apparently, his mind was not with me. So I had to do something interesting to pull him back to my class. (SRI1)

While the teacher's action was aiming to regain the student's attention and keep him engaged, Lydia then explained that she had deliberately used 'Miami Heat', rather than the Chinese version 'rehuodui', so as to reinforce learned vocabulary and support the memorisation of key IELTS terms:

I personally think, when [...] we use the word in context, I can help him better memorise the word – 'heat' is a high frequency word in IELTS so it's worthwhile spending time emphasising it. (SRI1)

Another example of motivational strategy use driven primarily, yet not exclusively, by motivational intensions concerns error correction. In CO4, after providing oral feedback on the student's writing exercise, Susan encouraged the student to keep a list of commonly made grammar mistakes with a view to avoiding similar mistakes in the future. This action was a situated response to the perceived threat of corrective feedback to student motivation, with the primary intention of sustaining the student's motivation while additionally promoting learning strategy use:

You see? [name of the student] did show frustration. She sighed and asked me 'why are there so many mistakes' [...] But I thought by teaching [her] how to learn from mistakes, I can keep [her] motivated. [...] I think [she] can also benefit from this ... [inaudible], most of my previous students found that keeping a 'mistakes notebook' is a helpful learning strategy. (SRI4)

Primarily non-motivational intentions

Teachers were observed to adopt teaching strategies that they argued served primarily non-motivational pedagogical purposes, though they were also aware of their potential for motivating students. Susan, for example, used elicitation mainly to encourage 'the student to think deeper and remember better' (SRI2), and to address her feelings of detachment: '[The online environment creates] feelings of ... distant. But constantly having interactions with the student makes me feel closer to him.' However, she believed that, in addition to its impact on students' higher order thinking, memorisation and classroom interaction, elicitation had a motivational impact as 'it gives students feelings of small achievements' (SRI2). Therefore, she implemented it in a way that maximised its potential motivational effects. For instance, in CO2, Susan used American presidential elections and university debating societies as meaningful prompts to elicit the meaning of 'debate':

Talking about things on the news, talking about things like university debates, things that the student is familiar with, that's important for the student to be able to give the desired answer. (SRI2)

Likewise, Lydia's use of authentic materials was driven primarily by non-motivational pedagogical intentions, though she was cognizant of their motivational impact ('they make the class more interesting and attractive', BI). She employed real-life materials normally to provide contextual information and facilitate language comprehension. For example, in a warm-up activity for a listening task about a business meeting (CO₂), Lydia was observed to use an authentic company brochure to introduce the business units within a company:

High school girls like [name of student] usually have no work experience in companies. One of my previous students, a very bright student from [name of school] high school [...] really struggled with this listening exercise [...] because she did not understand company structure. So, I used the brochure from my husband's company in today's warm-up activity to help [her] understand the conversation context. (SRI₂)

Purely non-motivational intentions

Teachers were also observed to use motivational strategies that were documented in the literature, but were unaware of their motivational effects. Their use of these strategies was purely driven by non-motivational pedagogical intentions.

At the beginning of a listening class (CO₃), Lydia involved her student in organising the learning process, asking her to choose the listening exercises and their sequence in the lesson. This teaching technique matches the description of 'promoting autonomy' in [Guilloteaux and Dörnyei's \(2008\)](#) MOLT observational scheme. Lydia, however, did not refer to this incident while discussing her motivational strategies during that class and, when asked to provide a rationale for it, she displayed no awareness of its motivational implications:

L (Lydia): You mean this is a motivational strategy?

I (Interviewer): What do you think?

L: Um, No, I think it's not.

I: Why not?

L: Because [...] I let her decide because she might not find '2+1' [a routine of doing listening exercises set by the institution] helpful for IELTS listening task 1. [...] I know she is already very familiar with task 1; what she was not confident about was vocabulary. [...] she could learn more from the lesson if I let her decide. [...] I was just trying to use class time more efficiently. So you mean this was motivating for her? (SRI₃)

Lydia's teaching strategy was intended to maximise the learning opportunities ('I was just trying to use class time more efficiently') by making the learning process more meaningful to the student ('she might not find '2+1' helpful'; 'she is already very familiar with task 1', 'she could learn more from the lesson if I let her decide'). As the interview progressed and the incident was analysed in more depth, Lydia started to appreciate the motivational impact of her strategy: 'I think, actually, [this was motivating for her]. In a sense that she feels the teacher's respect on her choices and that builds up her motivation' (SRI₃). This redefined perception of her teaching action shows that the SRI either

raised the teacher's awareness of a tacitly held intention that she was not conscious of, or helped her construct a new intention about the motivational implications of this strategy. By the end of the interview, Lydia spontaneously commented that she would more frequently involve students in organising the learning process in the future in order to motivate them, particularly those who she perceived had good self-regulation skills. Although the limited observations of this study did not enable us to see the influence of this reflection on Lydia's subsequent teaching practices, her comment shows the potential of SRIs for supporting teachers' awareness raising of the motivational aspects of their teaching and promoting the intentional use of motivational strategies.

Discussion and implications

All the motivational strategies found in this study were similar or identical to the strategies in [Dörnyei's \(2001\)](#) taxonomy. This alignment seems to show that the online medium did not make fundamental changes to the types of motivational strategies that teachers value. However, both teachers perceived the online medium in a rather negative manner (i.e. making students more easily distracted and creating feelings of 'distance'), and they seemed to be motivated by such negative perceptions to favour strategies that had implications for students' classroom engagement and interaction (i.e. using an enthusiastic voice and elicitation).

The findings in this study reveal multiple pedagogical intentions, both motivational and non-motivational, behind teachers' choice and use of motivational strategies. These findings corroborate previous literature which suggests that teachers' classroom actions are often guided by multiple pedagogical intentions ([Feryok and Oranje 2015](#); [Sanchez and Borg 2014](#)), and provide further empirical evidence, with specific reference to motivation teaching, of the multifunctionality of language teaching techniques. The study hence moves beyond the often-restricted analysis of the motivational implications of motivational strategies, providing a more realistic and holistic understanding of teachers' pedagogical intentions and the pedagogical potentials of motivational strategies.

Furthermore, the findings show that teachers' awareness of motivational and non-motivational implications influenced the ways in which the strategies were applied in practice. For example, Susan, aware only of the motivational implications of social chatting, used it in a way that purely served motivational purposes. On the other hand, Lydia, aware of social chatting's potential for both raising motivation and facilitating memorisation, deliberately switched between English and Chinese while chatting to realise both functions in one single teaching act. This comparison vividly illustrates the importance of raising teachers' awareness of both the motivational and learning implications of motivational strategies, in order to maximise their pedagogical potential in the L2 classroom.

There is evidence from this study that shows that stimulated recall may be a useful reflection tool for raising teachers' awareness. In Lydia's reflections on involving the student in organising the learning process, SRI helped her realise the motivational potential of this teaching practice. Considering this empirical evidence and the acknowledged role of stimulated recall as a data-led reflection tool ([Walsh and Mann 2015](#)), it

seems reasonable to suggest that stimulated recall procedures be included in teacher development initiatives that target motivational teaching.

Guidance on how to conduct stimulated recall interviews in research may offer helpful suggestions for implementation (e.g. see [Sanchez and Grimshaw 2020](#)). For example, the time interval between class observations and stimulated recall interviews needs to be minimised in order to avoid participants' possible memory decay or post hoc rationalisations. Likewise, teachers may be encouraged to choose critical incidents themselves and thus develop their agency and achieve a sense of empowerment. Teachers and teacher educators may also tailor stimulated recall procedures to respond to specific situations and individual needs. For example, teachers may choose video, audio or teaching material as stimuli, depending on their individual learning preferences and the resources available in their contexts.

In particular, based on the findings and limitations of using stimulated recall in this study, we recommend several possible ways of using this tool with a view to maximising the pedagogical potential of motivational strategies in the language classroom:

- Similar to the procedures adopted in this study, teachers may be invited to reflect upon the pedagogical intentions behind their existing motivational teaching behaviours, so that they may fine-tune these practices in ways that their motivational effects become intentional rather than incidental (thus potentially moving from 'purely non-motivational intentions' to 'primarily non-motivational intentions').
- Teachers may be invited to reflect upon their existing non-motivational teaching intentions and their alignment with catalogued motivational strategies in the literature, so that rather than using motivational strategies as an add-on item, they may incorporate them as an integral aspect of teaching (thus potentially moving from 'purely motivational intentions' to 'primarily motivational intentions').
- Teachers may be invited to reflect upon moments when their motivational and non-motivational intentions come into tension, which might serve as a source for stimulating change. The possibilities of conflicting intentions have been illustrated in previous literature (e.g. [Muñoz and Ramirez 2015](#)). Yet, possibly because the teachers in this study were asked to identify their perceived successful motivating teaching behaviours, there was no evidence of such tensions in teachers' rationales or SRIs.
- Students may be included in the process of identifying motivating/demotivating incidents and work alongside the teacher in stimulated recall interviews to analyse what happened. In this study, though stimulated recall helped to raise teachers' awareness of their own pedagogical intentions, these interviews provided no evidence of whether the motivational strategies adopted by the teachers achieved their intended purposes. The involvement of students in stimulated recall may address such limitations, providing teachers with chances of developing shared intentions with students.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to explore teachers' pedagogical intentions when implementing motivational strategies. The findings show that, while the

teachers adopted motivational strategies purely out of motivational intentions, they also used these strategies for simultaneously facilitating motivation and learning. Moreover, there is evidence that teachers may use motivational strategies purely for their impact on student learning, without being cognizant of their potential motivational effects. These findings highlight the need to understand motivational strategies as pedagogically holistic in order to maximise their pedagogical potential. These results have clear implications for teacher development initiatives, especially regarding using stimulated recall procedures to raise teachers' awareness of not only what motivational strategies they used, but also why they used them and their effects on students.

The contributions above must be interpreted with caution, as they are grounded in a small-scale study conducted over a relatively short period of time. We acknowledge that the convenience sample in this study may not be representative of all English teachers in diverse contexts. Future studies that take a similar holistic approach would help to verify whether similar pedagogical intentions are recognised by teachers in different contexts, and the commonality of them in teachers' rationales. Studies that focus on comparing motivational strategies and pedagogical intentions in different contexts (e.g. online vs. offline; one-to-one vs. one-to-many) may also generate valuable insights. Future research that follows a longitudinal design would also allow for the appraisal of the long-term impact of stimulated recall on teachers' thinking and practices.

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The authors

Zening Yang earned her BA Education with Psychology and MA TESOL from the University of Bath, UK. Her main research interests include L2 motivation, teacher agency and social justice research.

Email: zening.yang@bath.edu

Hugo Santiago Sanchez is Associate Professor at the University of Bath, UK. He has been involved

in English language teaching for 25 years, working originally as an EFL teacher in Argentina, and then as a teacher educator, lecturer and researcher in Argentina, Brazil and the UK. He specialises in teacher cognition, teacher education and teacher development. His current research projects investigate critical pedagogy and social justice education.

Email: h.s.sanchez@bath.ac.uk