

UNDERSTANDING ENGLISH TEACHER'S EXPERIENCES IN TEACHING LOW-MOTIVATION STUDENTS IN VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL: A NARRATIVE INQUIRY

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Abstract

In the context of English language teaching (ELT), students' low-motivation is one of the significant challenges that need to be studied. In Indonesian vocational high school context, the general curriculum is designed to prepare students for specific future career by emphasising practical skills. As a result, academic subject, such as English, is perceived as less relevant and that influences students' motivation in learning English. This study aims to uncover the interpretation of teacher's perception and experiences in teaching low-motivation students, particularly in vocational high school context. This study employs a qualitative research approach adopting a narrative inquiry design to explore teacher's experiences and perception in teaching low-motivation students. The design focuses on the individual's story as the source of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participant is a teacher in vocational high school selected by purposive sampling. The data were collected through in-depth interviews to elicit teacher's personal stories and experiences. The study highlights that teaching low-motivation students is an emotionally demanding experience in both emotional and professional areas. The challenges result to the belief shift from an idealistic mindset to the realistic perspective. This study reveals that there are several factors influencing students with low-motivation, such as have job-oriented mindset, the excessive use of gadget, peer influence, unsupportive school environment, and lack of perceived relevance of English.

Keywords – teacher's experience, low-motivation, vocational, narrative inquiry

Introduction

Students' motivation is considered as one of the most important things in general education. In language learning, students' motivation affects the learning outcome as well as their performance in teaching and learning process. Gardner (1985) argues that motivation is an important contributor to language achievement in terms of linguistic outcomes.

In the context of English language teaching (ELT), students' low-motivation is one of the significant challenges that need to be studied. Attitude, orientations, anxiety, and motivation, have been shown to be at least as important as language aptitude for predicting L2 achievement (Gardner, 1985). Meanwhile in the vocational high school context, the general curriculum is design to prepare students for specific future career by emphasising practical skills. As a result,

academic subject such as English is perceived as less relevant and it influences students' motivation in learning English.

According to self-determination theory, there are two general types of motivation, the first one based on intrinsic interest in the activity per se and the other one based on rewards extrinsic to the activity itself (Noels et al., 2000). Motivation is crucial to be explored because it highly affects classroom dynamics, instructional effectiveness, and teacher morale. Teachers often face negative attitude toward English learning, disengagement, and students' low effort in the learning process. They hold direct and rich experience and understanding because they encounter low-motivation students in daily practice in classrooms. Their perception is an essential part to be explored as the foundation of ELT.

Several studies have already shown that students' motivation is a crucial factor that influences students' success in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Dornyei (2001) argues that motivation significantly students' engagement and willingness to have the effort of learning a language. Alizadeh (2016) provides several literature reviews (Gardner, 1985; Huitt, 2001; Crookes and Schmidt, 1991) which present the result that motivation has a very important role in learning English as a second or foreign language successfully. A study conducted by Julian & Dauba (2020) also revealed that there is a significant relationship between students' language learning motivation and their language performance. When students have low-motivation in the learning process, it becomes a challenge especially for the teachers who must manage the classroom interaction, maintain the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process, as well as make sure the learning objectives are achieved.

Despite many research on students' motivation, fewer studies explore the issue from the perspective of the teachers using narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry which focuses on the lived experiences and meaning-making processes of individual is a suitable methodology for this research (Creswell, 2013). Narrative inquiry offers a way to capture teachers' experience, understanding, emotions, and reflection on their personal as well as professional journeys (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). It allows teachers to recount their critical incidents, dilemmas, and articulate the emotions, interpretations, and strategies that influence their work with low-motivated students.

Thus, this study aims to uncover the interpretation of teacher's perception and experiences in teaching students with low-motivation, how teacher perceives the factors that contribute to low-motivation students, and how teachers describe their

strategies used to engage with low-motivation students, particularly in vocational high school context.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach specifically adopting narrative inquiry design to explore teacher's experiences and perception in teaching low-motivation students. The design focuses on the individual's story as the source of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The research procedure generally consists of four stages: a) the researcher identifies research problems and selects narrative inquiry design as the methodological framework or design, b) the researcher select the participant purposively based on the focus of this study, c) the researcher collects the data through in-depth interview, d) the researcher analyses the data thematically, interpret, and present the result of the study in the finding and discussion.

Participant is a teacher in vocational high school selected by purposive sampling. He has been a teacher since 2014. Firstly, he taught English in Junior high school. He became a teacher in vocational high school since early 2025. He has a bachelor degree in English Education and a master degree in Islamic Education Management. He teaches students from various vocational majors who show low-motivation toward learning English.

The research was conducted at one of vocational high schools in Central Java, Indonesia. The school was selected due to its relevance of this study. To maintain confidentiality, the name of the participant and the school were anonymized.

The data were collected through in-depth interviews to elicit teacher's personal stories and experiences. The participant attended semi-structured storytelling with the duration of 45 minutes. The

participant was guided toward sharing about various aspects of experience in teaching students with low motivation.

The first section obtains stories about the experiences with low-motivation students. The second section brings out the stories about the perception of teaching low-motivation students. The third section evokes the stories about the strategies and respond of teaching low-motivation students. The last section elicits stories about the belief, identity, and personal growth as an English teacher. With the participant's consent, all interview were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for the analysis purpose.

The data analysis followed a thematic approach using five main stages: transcribing interview data, constructing narrative text, sending stories to the participant for the comments, coding individual stories and grouping codes into categories, and conducting cross-story analysis and identifying themes, and doing interpretation (Murray, 2009). The construction of the narrative text follows Clandinin and Connelly's three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The data were analysed using thematic analysis by firstly conducting initial open coding to identify meaningful units from the transcripts of interview. After that, the codes were later grouped through axial coding into broader categories. Finally, the researcher constructs and interprets the theme to represent teacher's experiences, perception, and strategies in teaching low-motivation students. The final themes were presented in the findings and later interpreted fully in the discussion section.

Finding and Discussion

Finding

Teacher's Experience with Low-Motivation Students

From the interview data, participant revealed that he is aware that a lot of his students have low-motivation in learning English. He admitted that it is quite easy to detect their motivation, especially by looking at students' attention in the learning process in the classrooms.

Excerpt 1

For me, it was easy to detect students' motivation. I am interested in psychology too so it's not hard to know their motivation. I can see their learning motivation by the way they pay attention. If they really pay attention, I can easily know.

Participant can recognize students' motivation easily. The students' facial expression becomes the point to investigate their learning motivation.

Excerpt 2

It is very clear from their facial expression. Sometimes it seems like they pay attention, but actually their gaze is blank and if they're asked questions, they don't understand it at all

Participant experienced several emotions regarding to teaching English to those who have low-motivation. He admitted that sometimes he is angry and cannot resist the feeling. Additionally, he felt sad and worried. It is narrated that the biggest emotion he has is the "worry" compared to other feelings.

Excerpt 3

At first, sometimes it feels like I am angry. I can resist that. Secondly, I feel bad or worried for them. But if it's sad, I don't think I am sad, I just feel bad and worried.

From the interview, the participant shows some emotional challenges. He narrated that it is easy to detect students' learning

motivation. He also stated that teaching students with low-motivation is generally challenging and requires patience. Participant also explained that he experiences the belief shift, from being an idealistic teacher to someone who is more realistic. He explains that his perception of teaching changes after he teaches students with low-motivation in the vocational high school.

Excerpt 4

I used to be very idealistic. But after I teach here and see the reality, I start to question myself "What am I doing?" I used to be very happy and had a positive mindset that I could teach my students English. But in here, it feels like, my perception changing from idealistic to just normal.

In light of these points, although teacher admits that it is considerably easy to detect the students' motivation in the classroom. He also experiences emotional challenges when teaching low-motivation students. It is also narrated that he also experiences a slow belief shift from having an *idealistic* view to having a *realistic* view in teaching.

Perceived Factors Contributing to Students' Low Motivation

Firstly, participant narrated that students with low-motivation are not unintelligent. They are just not aware yet that English skill will be useful in their future career. The participant perceived that the students just need to be encouraged to learn English and convince them that English is important.

Excerpt 1

They are just not aware that English will be useful in their future career.

Participant confessed that the school he is working at does not really provide the supportive environment to learn English. The school does not have a strict rule to develop students' ability, especially in speaking. It does not yet have a community to support or encourage students to be able to speak English confidently.

Excerpt 2

There is no community to support the students to learn English. The right environment will make our students able to speak English. For example, sometimes we have to force our students to use English in the canteen or in our daily conversation at school. That's what I mean by the right environment at school.

Participant confessed that the books provided by the government are not suitable for the students with low proficiency level. They are considered too hard for them. Students do not have experience nor understand the basic material from the first level of English yet they are expected to understand the higher level of English. Participant also acknowledged that students in vocational school are unique. They are likely different from non-vocational high school students. Participant realized that most of the students have job-oriented mindset. Participant is well aware and not surprised by the fact that one of the strong reasons of students coming to school is to get the "certificate" rather than actually learning something.

Excerpt 3

In here, the most prominent reason for their low motivation is they are job oriented. They come to school just to kill the time and then they work after they graduate. They don't realize that working requires skills.

Notably, participant also perceived the reason of students' low-motivation is also gadget. Materials now are easily accessed by smartphone. Almost everything is now available online and students tend not to care about what the teacher says in classroom because they can always google it when they are required to do the homework.

Excerpt 4

The third factor is gadget. They always think and act like the material that will be learned is all available on gadget.

Participant observed that peer influence also becomes the reason students get lower-motivation. Participant acknowledged that some students are not interested at all with English material and they have the ability to provoke other students to be lazy and resulting to have low-motivation in learning English.

Excerpt 5

I can see that they are not interested at all with learning English. Secondly, oftentimes, there are also 2 or 3 students who provoke their friends.

To sum up, participant perceives several reasons to cause students to have low-motivation in learning English. Students in vocational high school have job-oriented mindset. Students also lack of perceived relevance in learning English, have gadget dependency, and unsupportive school environment. Lastly, peer influence also counts as one of the reasons to cause low-motivation.

Teacher's Strategies to Engage with Low-Motivation Students

Participant described the moments when he realized he teaches actual human beings who have different characteristics.

He then tried to make a strategy to engage them. The strategy he uses is differentiated learning.

Excerpt 1

I remember the most important thing that when I teach, I am actually teaching human being. I have to understand that they have different characteristics, so I have to teach with different method or approaches. We call it differentiated learning.

This narrative indicates that the teacher always tries to solve the problem of low-motivation. The participant uses instructional strategies with differentiated learning method to meet the students' specific condition.

Excerpt 2

When I see them unmotivated in class, sometimes I approach them in person and then I ask a little bit personal but caring questions such as: "*whom are you living with at home?*" I always try to use soft tone with those who seems like unmotivated.

From *excerpt 2*, it indicates that participant chooses the humanistic relational approach as a strategy to engage to the students. Participant in this study also narrated that he tries to accept small success as the meaningful progress in his learning method. He confessed that instead of using sophisticated strategy, he uses simple instructional method to small scale students when it feels hard to implement to all students in the classroom.

Excerpt 3

I suggest them to watch a film without Indonesian subtitles. Later on, they come back to me and tell me that they are more interested in learning English.

Even though there are only 2-3 students in one class. But at least, I succeed to make them interested.

To sum up, participant uses several methods to engage with low-motivation students in learning English. He uses humanistic relational strategies, differentiated learning method, and small success acceptance method to meet the students' situation.

Discussion

Teaching Low Motivation Students as Emotional and Professional Challenges

The findings of this study indicate that teacher faces emotional challenges when teaching students with low motivation. The findings also demonstrates that low motivation shown by students cause teacher's professional fatigue. Even though the teacher reported that knowing students' motivation levels was relatively easy, teacher's experiences of teaching unmotivated students lead to the emotional strain.

Teacher shows his worriedness when teaching low motivation students. He starts to question himself and tries to solve the low-motivation problems. Those repeated efforts cause the teacher to get exhaustion and it leads to the emotional frustration in both personal and professional areas.

The findings also reflect that teacher experiences pedagogical belief shift. Teaching low motivation students gives realization that teacher's perception of himself changes from an idealistic into more pragmatic one. The teacher used to have an idealistic mindset that he would teach nicely according to the lesson plan and expected most students to fully pay attention as well as grasp all material without serious problem. However, the teacher narration reveals that the

expectation does not happen. Thus, it indicates that the teacher's belief slowly changes.

This finding aligns with the concept that teacher's perceptions are influenced by their belief and students themselves (Borg, 2003). It also emphasizes how teacher's belief and interpretation shape their emotional and pedagogical responses. This study suggests that teacher's perception of low-motivation students influence his emotional and professional action in classrooms. As his teaching efforts do not result in students' improvement, the teacher experiences shift in his pedagogical responses which cause less expectation and then less best-practices delivered to the students.

The emotional challenges described in this study are in line with previous researches that indicates teacher who teach low-motivation students experience emotional exhaustion such as anger and frustration (Tran & Moskovsky, 2022).

The highlighted aspect of this study is the narration of teacher's professional belief shift from idealistic to realistic view. The belief shows a process of professional adaptation to the contextual situation. While previous studies reveal students' emotional challenges, fewer studies highlight the teacher's identity shift through personal narratives. The context of vocational high school also plays a critical role in shaping the shift as students' less participation and low motivation in classroom may influence teacher's pedagogical mindset.

By using narrative inquiry, this study reveals explicitly how emotional challenges and the belief shift are both appeared in teacher's lived experiences. This interpretation provides the additional references to the existing studies which suggests how teacher negotiate their pedagogical or professional identity in the

motivational challenged situation in the context of teaching English for vocational high school students.

Low-Motivation as a Result of Context and Environment Factor

The findings of this study shows that the teacher perceives students' low-motivation as influenced by contextual and environmental factors. Through the teacher's narrative, low-motivation is perceived as the result of multiple layered and correlated factors including job-oriented mindset, limited perceived relevance of English, the excessive use of gadget, unsupportive school environment, and also peer influence.

From the motivational theory context, the findings can be interpreted through self-determination theory as proposed by Deci & Ryan (1985). The teacher's narration reflects that students do not have either intrinsic or extrinsic motivation to learn English as they are not yet aware that English skill will be useful in their future career. When student see English as less relevant to their future goal, the motivation in learning English also becomes lower. This explanation aligns with teacher's perception that students more prioritize the job-related skills over others subjects such as English materials.

Furthermore, teacher's perception of low-motivation students also emphasizes the importance of three psychological needs namely competence, autonomy, and relatedness in keeping the learning motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). From the teacher's narrative, it can be highlighted that students' learning environment does not support the psychological needs. The school environment does not reflect the supportiveness of learning English by providing adequate community and rules to improve student's English skill.

Additionally, the peer influence in the classroom may also reduce the relatedness and the engagement in the classroom. Students with low-motivation have the chance to influence other students. Therefore, students' engagement in doing learning activities may be reduced as a result of unfulfilled needs.

The findings also extend the previous studies that identify contextual factors as significant contributor to students' low-motivation learning. Skarpaas (2024) showed that perceived relevance is the main contributing factor of vocational students' engagement in learning English. It implies that when students perceive English as irrelevant to their future career path, it tends to affect their learning motivation. Similarly, Martin et al. (2025) shows that digital distraction may cause ineffective classroom instruction that may impact to the students' disengagement. From the teacher's narrative, this study reveals that those factors interrelated with each other in everyday teaching practice.

Unlike the previous studies that investigate the factors of low-motivation students as an isolating factor, this study emphasizes the narrative of how teacher perceive the factors contextually and how it is perceived that low-motivation is a product of interrelated factors shaped by environment, peer culture, the use of technology, and lack of perceived relevance. The interpretation highlights the complexity of motivation in the context of vocational high school in EFL learning. Additionally, it also suggests the consideration of contextual and environmental dimension when addressing challenge of motivation in vocational EFL classroom settings.

Strategies to Engage Low-Motivation Students

The findings of this study reveal that even though the teacher experiences emotional

and professional challenges, he actively adapts. Participant uses various strategies to engage with low motivation students in learning English. The teacher uses humanistic and flexible approach which emphasizes relational engagement to the students. Teacher also uses the method of recognizing students' small success and differentiated learning to engage with the students. These strategies highlights teacher's effort to respond to students' motivation conditions while still also meet the professional demand.

Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the teacher's strategy to use humanistic and relational approach is in line with the sense of one of the psychological needs, "relatedness", as an essential way to develop students' learning motivation. Teacher's strategy to use differentiated learning also supports students in the "competence" sense by adjusting the task according to the students' needs, ability, and condition. Additionally, acknowledging and celebrating students' small achievement plays a significant role in encouraging students' continuous and active participation in the classroom.

The findings are in line with the previous studies indicating that blend structure and encouragement can help enhancing students' motivation particularly in vocational classrooms settings (Nguyen & Tran, 2025). It reflects that when teacher uses humanistic approach and positive encouragement, such as acknowledging small success, it can develop classroom participation and motivation may also slowly get higher.

The highlighted aspect from this finding is how teacher's strategies do not only function as a professional and pedagogical tools but also as a coping mechanism for the teacher when facing with low-motivation students and emotional challenges. By using narrative inquiry, it

can be reflected that the teacher sustains motivation despite students' disengagement. The interpretation also reveals how teacher's strategies support both students' engagement and teacher's personal and emotional aspect in facing challenges in the context of EFL learning in vocational high school.

Conclusions

This study aims to understand teacher's experiences and perception in teaching low-motivation students in vocational high school context. It aims to explore teacher's lived experiences in the dimension of emotional, contextual, and pedagogical of teaching English to low-motivational students.

The study highlights that teaching low motivation students is an emotionally and professionally demanding experience. The teacher experiences both emotional and professional challenges that results to the belief shift from idealistic mindset to realistic perspective. The shift reflects the adaptation of how teacher negotiates his identity in response of the students and classroom condition.

This study reveals that there are several factors contributing to students with low motivation. The factors are more contextual and environmental situation, such as job-oriented mindset, the excessive use of gadget, peer influence, unsupportive school environment, and lack of perceived relevance of English. The findings show the complexity of motivation in Indonesian vocational high school context.

The study also suggests that despite the motivational challenges, the teacher demonstrates the strategies to engage with low motivation students. The teacher uses humanistic approach, differentiated learning, and the acknowledgement of small learning achievement. The strategies function not only to support students' motivational challenges, but

also function as teacher's coping mechanism in both personal and professional area.

This study is small-scale narrative inquiry research which only involves one participant, so the findings are not intended be generalized to all context. Secondly, the study only relies to the teacher's narratives, so the findings may be influenced by personal reason or subjectivity. Future studies may involve larger participant from different vocational schools to understand the experience and perception for the richer context and findings. Future studies may also involve students' perspective to get more understanding of motivation in vocational EFL classroom settings.

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