An Exploration of Motivational Strategies and Factors That Affect Strategies: A Case of Chinese EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Based on Self-determination theory, learners' motivation can be enhanced when the psychological needs—competence, autonomy, and relatedness—are satisfied (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In English as a second language classrooms, teachers can play an important role in this; however, their motivational strategies may be influenced by their beliefs and contextual factors (Hornstra, Mansfield, van der Veen, Peetsma, & Volman, 2015). In this case study, six EFL classrooms in a public school in Northwest China were observed over the period of five weeks. The teachers were interviewed after each observation and at the end of the observation period to explore the relationships among factors that may affect the teachers' use of motivational strategies, namely teacher beliefs and pressure from "above" and from "below". The data were analyzed qualitatively using the coding method. The findings revealed a discrepancy between teacher beliefs and motivational practices. All of the teachers regularly exercised controlling strategies regardless of their beliefs in the value of motivation. Nevertheless, relationships between motivational practices and contextual factors were found. These findings suggest the needs for effective teacher professional development on the use of motivational strategies to enhance intrinsic motivation.

Keywords: English learning motivation, self-determination theory, motivational strategies, teacher beliefs, contextual factors

1. Introduction

1.1 Significance of the Problem and Research Questions

In English as a second language learning, motivation has been found to play a key role in engaging learners in activities inside and outside the classroom and promoting achievements (e.g. Bernaus, Wilson, & Gardner, 2009; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Ng & Ng, 2015). This case study was therefore conducted to explore how English teachers motivated students in Northwest China region, where English language teaching development was slower (Jun, 2016) and student motivational level was relatively lower (You & Dörnyei, 2014) than some other areas in People's Republic of China. The factors that might have affected the teachers' choices in how to motivate the students, i.e. teacher beliefs and contextual factors were examined (Hornstra et al., 2015; Yu, Chen, Levesque-Bristol, & Vansteenkiste, 2018).Two research questions were explored in this article:

1) What motivational strategies are applied by EFL teachers in Northwest China?

2) What factors affect teachers' motivational strategies in the classroom?

1.2 Review of the Literature

1.2.1 Motivation and Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

Motivation, a reason that pushes people to behave in a certain way, has been widely studied in the education field. Previous studies have found that learner's motivation facilitates academic performance and has a positive relationship with learning engagement and achievement (Ryan & Deci, 2000b; Shin, Kim, Hwang, & Lee, 2018). According to SDT, people are born with inherent or innate curiosity and interests in learning (Deci & Ryan, 1987; Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2017). This innate motive for learning is referred to as intrinsic motivation (Reeve, 1996). Apart from intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation—learning for external reasons, such as incentives and scores—and a motivation—feeling unworthy to make an effort to learn—exist as well in any learning

process (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Reeve (1996) indicated that intrinsic motivation can promote learning and development without any external force. It has also been found to enhance learners' lifelong learning (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). On the other hand, extrinsic motivation drives the learner using some external sources. Once the external source disappears, the level of motivation would decrease. Thus, enhancing learners' intrinsic motivation is indispensable (Reeve, 1998; Reeve, Bolt, & Cai, 1999; M. Zhou, Ma, & Deci, 2009). Based on SDT, the learners' intrinsic motivation and involvement in classroom activities will be increased when their psychological needs, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, are fulfilled (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000b, 2017) and teachers can play a key role in this (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Guilloteaux, 2008; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014, 2016; Reeve, 2006, 2009; Reeve & Cheon, 2016; Urhahne, 2015; Vibulphol, 2016).

1.2.2 Motivational Strategies

Teachers are placed as one of the top factors that contribute to learners' positive or negative evaluation of second language learning experiences (Chambers, 1999). Specifically, teachers' practices or motivational strategies have been found to impact students' English learning motivation (Dörnyei, 2001; Dörnyei & Guilloteaux, 2008; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014, 2016; Urhahne, 2015; Vibulphol, 2016). According to Reeve et al. (1999), teachers motivate students in two styles: autonomy supportive style and controlling style. The use of these two different styles of motivational strategies have been found to enhance learners' motivation and learning, but in different ways. Students in autonomy supportive classrooms were found to engage in activities as a part of self-development, learning, and psychological well-being while those in controlling style classrooms performed in class feeling pressured or obligated (Reeve, 2006, 2009).

According to Reeve (2016, see also Reeve & Jang, 2006), autonomy supportive teachers attempt to respond to the students' autonomy, competence, and relatedness, so their practice may include considering students' point of view when planning and preparing lessons, providing opportunities for students to make choices and initiate ideas, rationalizing their actions and practices, allowing students to express their negative feelings, keeping students informed, and providing constant feedback to students. On the other hand, controlling style teachers rely solely on their own perspective when making instructional decisions, use incentives to take control over the class, refuse to give explanation about their action, use language that creates pressure on students, and do not cope with students' negative affections with patience (Reeve, 2016).

Even though autonomy supportive style teachers are preferred, teachers exercising external forces to direct students' learning and behaviors are commonly found in English classrooms in various contexts (Hornstra et al., 2015; Loima & Vibulphol, 2014, 2016; Muñoz & Ramirez, 2015; Nra & Vibulphol, 2019; Vibulphol, 2016; Yang, 2015).

1.2.3 Factors Affecting Motivational Strategies

The mismatch between teachers' motivational theories and practices has been found to be the effect of a number of factors including teachers' personal beliefs or perception (Hornstra et al., 2015; Yang, 2015), culture (i.e. collectivism-individualism) (Reeve et al., 2014), teachers' own motivation (Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, & Legault, 2002), and contextual factors (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017; Hornstra et al., 2015; Pelletier & Sharp, 2009; Sarrazin, Tessier, Pelletier, Trouilloud, & Chanal, 2006). These factors vary in different classroom context and may have different effects on the teachers' instructional practices, which was thus suggested to be investigated further in different cultures (e.g. Dörnyei, 2001; Hornstra et al., 2015). The present study therefore investigated the effects of two factors, teacher beliefs and contextual factors.

Borg (2003) suggested that understanding teacher beliefs could help to comprehend teachers' perspective of their work and the effects of their beliefs on their practices (see also Richards, Gallo, & Renandya, 2001). However, discrepancy between teacher beliefs and practices has been found (e.g. Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017; Lou & Liao, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009; Vibulphol, 2004; Yang, 2015; Zheng, 2004). This relationship suggests that teachers' stated beliefs and motivational practices might not align as well (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017).

Differently, contextual factors have been found to pressure teachers to act in a certain way regardless of what they believe in (Borg & Alshumaimeri, 2017; Hornstra et al., 2015; Muñoz & Ramirez, 2015; Yang, 2015). To elaborate, Pelletier, Séguin-Lévesque, and Legault (2002) argued that teachers tended to be controlling because of the pressures they got from "above"—having to comply with a curriculum, colleagues, or performance standards, and "below"—perceiving their students to be non-self-determined (see also Pelletier & Sharp, 2009). Considering the context of China in which Confucianism has governed people's frame of mind for thousands of years, teachers are viewed as the person in charge in the classroom and held responsible for the students' learning achievement (Edwards & Li, 2011; N. Zhou, Lam, & Chan, 2012), this cultural background may create another kind of pressure for Chinese teachers.

2. Method

2.1 Setting and Participants

This case study examined the use of motivational strategies in English classrooms of six Chinese teachers of English in one public upper secondary school in Northwest China. The school offered education from tenth to twelfth grade. It was located in a county administered by the provincial capital. Tenth grade classes were chosen as the subject of this study because tenth graders were new to the school and had to adapt to the new learning environment and started preparing for the national examination; teachers' motivational practice would be vital to the development of this group of students.

The participants were purposively selected from forty English teachers at the school. To ensure that the participants have enough knowledge of the school and the classes, the tenth-grade teachers who had taught more than five years were selected. The final list of the participants included four female teachers and two male teachers. They were informed the objectives and scope of the study as well as the confidential issues before giving their consent to participate in the study. To protect the participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant based on his or her most impressive character; for example, Hui (慧) referred to an intelligent teacher and Rui (睿) represented a teacher who was very sagacious. The pseudonyms were used to refer to each participant instead of the real name in the data files as well as in this article. One English classroom that each teacher taught during the time of the study (November to December, 2017) was chosen for the observations, depending on the feasibility of the schedule.

As shown in Table 1, the teaching experiences of the six participants varied. The number of years teaching English at the school ranges from 9 to 21. The six classes could be categorized into two, regular and high ability, based on the average score the class obtained from the English examination they took when entering the school. The number of students in the four regular classes was a little smaller than that in the two high ability classes.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants and the context of the observed classes

Teachers			Contexts of the Classes		
Teachers	Gender	Teaching Experiences at the School	Number of Students	Mean of English score in the School Entrance Examination (Total score 150 points)	Type of Class
Hui	Female	9 years	65	95	Regular
Ling	Female	10 years	65	94.6	Regular
Xian	Female	13 years	65	97.2	Regular
Wan	Female	17 years	62	93.1	Regular
Hao	Male	18 years	78	123.6	High Ability
Rui	Male	21 years	78	110	High Ability

2.2 Instruments

2.2.1 Classroom Observations

The main source of data was obtained using non-participatory classroom observation. The researcher, the first author, sat at the back of the classroom and observed the class without interrupting the learning and teaching activities. The observations aimed at investigating the teachers' motivational strategies under varying conditions in the classroom. Field notes, covering the description of the setting, teacher-student interactions, teaching activities, direct quotations of some statements, and concurrent comments of teachers' behaviors, were taken during the observations.

The observation time was arranged with each participant separately. Over the period of five weeks, each participant was observed five times. Each class period was 45-minute long.

2.2.2 Interviews

Two sets of semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant. The questions were adapted, mainly from Hornstra et al. (2015) with reference to the framework of the questions designed by Vural (2007) and Alshehri (2014). In order to minimize response biases, words like "motivation" or "motivational" were avoided and used "engaged" or "involved" instead. All the interviews were audio recorded for further transcribing and coding.

The first set was post-observation interview. Each participant was interviewed right after the class for approximately 40 minutes. The post-observation interviews focused on the clarification of the instructional behaviors observed during the class and also on the exploration of any potential factors that might have influenced the teacher's choice of motivational strategies in that period. During the interview, the teacher was first asked to recall what happened in the class, i.e. a general evaluation of the observed class "How was the class today?", students' participation "Please describe how the students involved in your class today," the use of motivational strategies "What did you do to keep the students' attention in the lesson?" "How often do you …? Why?" and influential factors "Why did/ didn't you use… in this lesson?" In total, five post-observation interviews were conducted with each participant.

The second set of interviews was used to elicit the teachers' beliefs about motivation, beliefs about the students' motivation, beliefs about the effective motivational strategies, and the factors that seemed to have an impact on their instructional behaviors. The final interview was scheduled with each participant within two to three days after the last observation.

2.3 Coding and Analyzing

The field notes from all observations were reviewed and rewritten to have as complete details about the class as possible. The interviews were transcribed in either Chinese or English, depending on the language used during the session with each teacher.

The data from the observations and interviews were analyzed separately using inductive coding method suggested by Saldaña (2014). The data were read several times to identify codes, form patterns or categories, and finally the data were clustered to build themes. The emerging themes are shown in Table 2. Since the present study focused on what strategies the teachers used and the influence of teacher beliefs and contextual factors, the frequency of the use of motivational strategies was irrelevant.

The trustworthiness of the findings was assured by using repeated reading of the content and refining the categories. In addition, the analysis was sent to the participants for confirmation. No disagreements were obtained.

Table 2. Emerging themes from the observation and interview data

Categories	Themes
Observed motivational strategies	Autonomy-supportive strategies
	Controlling strategies
Self-reported motivational strategies	Autonomy-supportive strategies
	Controlling strategies
Personal beliefs about motivation	About students' motivation
	About the effectiveness of the motivational strategies
	About the reasons for using motivational strategies
Factors from "above"	National College Entrance Examination
	Administration of the school
Factors from "below"	Student motivation
	Student competence
	Student learning habits

3. Results

3.1 The Use of Motivational Strategies of EFL Teachers in Northwest China

Overall, most of the classrooms could be described as teacher-centered classrooms. Most of the class time was spent on whole-class activities with the teacher taking the main role. Although the students were given opportunities to work individually or in groups during the class, the proportion of time for student-led activities was relatively low. The teachers were the "main character" in the classroom.

As for the motivational strategies, the strategies observed in the six classes were similar to those found in English classrooms elsewhere (Chang, Fukuda, Durham, & Little, 2017; Nra & Vibulphol, 2019; Reeve, 2016; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Vibulphol, 2016). A variety of motivational strategies, both autonomy supportive and controlling strategies, was observed in all classes (See Appendix A); nevertheless, the controlling strategies outnumbered the others. The top two controlling strategies found in almost all classes were exercising authority

(A) and giving answers directly (D) while enhancing students' understanding (E) was the autonomy supportive strategies found in almost all classes. A few unique strategies observed were inspecting students, enhancing students' understanding, and decreasing difficulty of the lesson.

Based on the findings, four of the teachers tended towards the autonomy supportive style while the other two were strongly controlling. To illustrate, two teachers representing the two styles are presented. Hui, who was identified as an autonomy supportive teacher, often started motivating her students by supporting their autonomy, but then changed her strategies as the class progressed. Ling, on the other hand, representing a controlling style teacher, often pushed her students to behave in class in a certain way using her authority, but sometimes she built rapport with them by showing her warmness.

Hui—An Autonomy Supportive Teacher

Hui began teaching English right after graduating from the university. Her undergraduate study was in English teaching. Her enthusiasm for teaching was evident during our talks. She shared how she enjoyed trying out new approaches or activities to increase students' involvement in her class.

In her class, Hui was observed to employ a number of motivational strategies that could nurture students' autonomy, including enhancing students' understanding by informing objectives, leading students to review, arousing student interests in classes, leaving time for the students to work independently, and asking thought-provoking questions.

Consistently, Hui showed effort in planning out the class to ensure that the students could work on the assigned tasks and achieve the learning outcomes. Before beginning each lesson, she informed the students the objectives of the lesson. This could help them set a clear goal and choose how to approach the task effectively (Chang et al., 2017). She explained,

> *This is very important when having class, especially when at the beginning of the class. I should give them instructions, [and] they should know "Ah, what I should learn in this class is ... [a topic]." (Hui, Interview)*

To help aid students' understanding, Hui used examples to help students relate the 'new' to the 'known'. When assigning reading and grammar tasks, she made sure the students had enough time to work at their own pace. Providing time is one of the important factors to promote independent learning (Reeve & Jang, 2006).

Hui seemed to be fully aware of catering to students' interests. She commented that designing interesting activities was her most effective strategy. She tried to design a fun activity for the students even in the period that she simply needed to explain a test paper.

> *Though it is an exercise class, can I design it to make students feel very interesting?... I am always considering how to adjust [the content in the textbook] to interest students, and they can easily understand it... They will like [English] when they feel relax (Hui, Interview).*

She further elaborated that she thought music, clips, songs, movies, and game could help attract students; however, these activities were not observed in her classes.

When she was asked to assess the motivation of her students, she commented that her students were moderately motivated. That was the reason why Hui preferred to attract students and then involve them.

> *Not to make all the students take part in the class actively, I want them to pay attention to my class and learn something. ... so firstly... what I should do is to let them participate in the class (Hui, Interview).*

On the other hand, she was also observed using controlling strategies in all lessons; for example, supplying answers to her own questions when there was no voluntary response from the class, inspecting students by circling around the class, and uttering directives like "Listen!" and "Write it down!" when she found the whole class was "not in the state". Hui thought that those controlling strategies were applicable under such circumstances.

Ling—A Controlling Teacher

Ling had taught at this school for more than ten years. She taught one high-ability class and one regular class. The class observed was the regular class.

In her class, Ling was observed to employ all four controlling strategies found in this study including exercising teachers' authority (A), relying on external sources (B), evoking tense feelings (C), and giving answers directly (D) (see Appendix A).

Ling showed efforts in motivating the students as well, using external sources. She was the only one who often rewarded the students with prizes to engage students in competitions.

You are divided into two groups… who asks good questions will get 5 points, who answers questions will be given 2 points. The winner will receive prizes (Ling, Field note).

Additionally, she tended to use punishment and criticizing to motivate students, especially when the students did not perform well in the monthly or weekly test or when they could not answer her questions.

You have written it. Why cannot you read? Which one cannot you read?... You have studied English for years. How come cannot you read a sentence? Terrible… (Ling, Field note).

Nevertheless, she was not pessimistic about the students. She commented that her class performed better and better. She attributed that to the good relationship between her and her students.

Even with the strong tendency towards the controlling style, Ling was observed to use some autonomy supportive strategies. She always encouraged students and also enhanced students' understanding by giving examples related to life. Most importantly, she valued the close relationship between her and students, and tried to maintain that relationship.

3.2 Factors Affecting Motivational Strategies

Overall, the data suggested that the teachers' motivational style was influenced by the contextual factors, but not teacher beliefs.

3.2.1 Teacher Beliefs

The results about teacher beliefs of the six participants reveal some similarities and differences. As shown in Table 3, the six participants only shared the same belief in one aspect, belief about the importance of motivation, while their beliefs in the other two regards varied.

Table 3. Teacher beliefs

Teachers	Teacher beliefs		
	Importance of Motivation	Students' motivation	Most effective motivational strategies
Hui	Important	Not specified	Interesting activities
Ling	Important	Low	Good relationship with students
Xian	Important	Varied	Simplifying difficulties
Wan	Important	Moderate	Any activities involving students
Hao	Important	Varied	Scores
Rui	Important	High	Controlling

For the belief about the importance of motivation, all participants agreed that motivation was important for English learning. The interview data showed that they believed motivation determined the teaching outcomes, enhanced the students' learning, and contributed to the dynamic in the classrooms. For example, Hui and Rui believed that motivation indicated the effectiveness of the teaching.

I think the motivation in the class decides the effectiveness (Hui, Interview).

…If they don't have motivation, maybe the study efficiency is not very good (Rui, Interview).

Differently, their beliefs about the students' motivation were not aligned. Xian and Hao viewed their classes as diverse groups of learners, commenting that the students' motivation was varied. Ling, Wan, Rui gauged their students' motivation very differently from one another, ranging from low, moderate, to high, respectively, while Hui did not specify the students' motivational level. Inquiring about the type of motivation, the data tend to suggest that the participants believed their students' motivation are both intrinsic and extrinsic. Hao's comment on his class can illustrate this result clearly.

I felt that most of them like English. They are eager to learn English to know more about English countries. Of course,… some of them learn for entering the university. They are forced to learn (Hao, Interview).

Lastly, for beliefs about what motivational strategy is the most effective, the six participants also had different opinions. Four female teachers believed in autonomy supportive strategies, while both of the two male teachers adhered to controlling strategies.

Based on these findings, it should be noted that the perceived most effective motivational strategies did not reflect the teacher's beliefs about the students' motivation level. Neither did the link between the beliefs about the effective motivational strategies and the actual motivational practice. All in all, these findings suggest a

discrepancy between teacher beliefs and knowledge of how to nurture students' intrinsic motivation. What most teachers in this study regularly exercised in their classrooms were controlling style regardless of their beliefs.

3.2.2 Contextual Factors

The observation and interview data revealed the influence of two types of contextual factors, which referred to the factors outside and students inside the classrooms respectively, on the teachers' choices of motivational strategies.

Pressures from "Above"

The tendency towards the controlling style of the English teachers in this study seemed to be influenced by two sources of pressures from 'above', namely the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), and school policies.

The most influential pressure from "above" was the high-stakes test, NCEE. All teachers believed that at least half of their students set NCEE as the goal for their English study (cf. Zhang, 2016). Some teachers thought that most of their teaching behaviors aimed at NCEE. When being asked why she had to "direct/command" students to write, and whether she would do the same if they were not to prepare NCEE, Xian explained,

> *Because we are in senior middle school, we have to prepare for the final examination—Gao Kao, the national college entrance examination. They should do so. They have to do so. ... I will use other ways (if we would not prepare for NCEE). I will do some interesting things, not just memorize the important phrases or so (Xian, Interview).*

In the same vein, teachers expressed their concern about the school policies regarding the school's mission and teacher performance evaluation system.

It was evident that the school gave high importance to students' performance in examinations among other things. Even though the national education reform has attempted to drive schools toward competence-based education, Hui and Xian described that the school was still examination-oriented. Hui said she had to compromise under such situation. Hui did not achieve the goal to raise the students' scores in the month of the observation, which caused her being criticized in school conference. She expressed her difficult situation in balancing 'interests' and 'scores'.

> *I don't like this way of teaching and learning, but I have no choice. I will try my best to make our classes interesting and effective. At the same time, I hope students can get high score. So, I will try my best to get the balance between them (Hui, Interview).*

Furthermore, students' scores did not only determine the students' fate, but also that of the teachers. At this school, teachers' performance was evaluated based on their students' score. This policy seemed to create concerns among the participating teachers. Ling thought it restrained teachers. She illustrated,

> *You should do everything to excel your class... [and] to improve the average score, target score, and contribution rate (Ling, Interview).*

If the scores from the English subject were lower than the other two subjects on the test, the English teachers would be responsible for it. And in the worst case, they may be fined, not being able to raise students' scores.

Pressures from "below"

The pressures from "below" that affected the teachers in this study to be more controlling seemed to relate to the students' academic performance in the class and their nature.

The teachers were observed to change their motivational strategies in the classroom in response to their perception of the students' performance. They became more controlling when their students failed to meet their requirements or when they perceived their students have poor academic performance or competence. Wan frequently rushed her 'low' performing students by emphasizing the time. She explained,

> *I think the students in my class would take longer time to finish a task than students in superb [high ability] class (Wan, Interview).*

This was also observed in the classrooms of Hui and Ling. Hui was observed to change her class activity from student-centered style to teacher-centered style, leading students to repeat her answers when the students were unable to finish the assigned task by themselves.

Similarly, students' nature in the classroom seemed to affect the teachers to be more controlling. Many participants felt that their students did not have good learning habits which should be developed in junior high school. Students were expected to be more active in the classroom, but the observed classes did not reflect this and teachers also agreed with that. Additionally, students were described in the quality of "*lazy*" in learning and were used to being

controlling by teachers. Rui cited what he happened on hearing from students—"*if my teacher did not punish me, criticize me, or even beat me, I would not study.*" It was pity to hear that some students had become accustomed to being controlled. Then, it made sense: Rui expressed that he would consider arousing students' interests if he found the students could be motivated with interests. But, if they were not, he would control and force them to learn.

4. Discussion

The key findings revealed that most EFL teachers in the present study were aware of their role in motivating the students and thus employed a variety of motivational strategies. However, their motivational strategies showed the tendency towards the controlling style; nevertheless, they were also observed to use some autonomy supportive motivational strategies. These findings are consistent with a number of studies in similar contexts, for instance China (Li, 2005; Wu, 2002) and Thailand (Loima & Vibulphol, 2014; Vibulphol, 2016). In addition, the motivational strategies observed in the six EFL classes in the present study were also found in previous studies, e.g. Reeve (2009, 2016) and Reeve and Jang (2006). Among those, a few common strategies included offering incentives, uttering commands, allocating time for students' independent work.

Considering the factors that might have influenced the Chinese EFL teachers' motivational style, teacher beliefs did not seem to have much impact but contextual factors and the Chinese culture did.

To elaborate, the teachers' motivational practices and beliefs were not consistent (see also other studies in China such as Lou and Liao (2005), Yang (2015), and Zheng (2004) and elsewhere, e.g., Hornstra et al. (2015), Muñoz and Ramirez (2015), and Vibulphol (2004)). The motivational strategies commonly found in all six classes in the present study were controlling strategies—teachers relied on external sources of motivation; however, teacher beliefs did not show the same trend. The beliefs about the value of motivation of all teachers were aligned but not all of them identified controlling style strategies as effective motivational strategies. Some teachers who were observed to use controlling strategies even reported favoring autonomy supportive strategies. Could this indicate the lack of knowledge of appropriate motivational strategies, as discussed in Vibulphol (2016)?

For contextual factors, both the pressures from "above" and the pressures from "below", seemed to direct the teachers' motivational practices in a similar fashion as in some previous studies (e.g. Hornstra et al., 2015; Pelletier et al., 2002; Pelletier & Sharp, 2009; Reeve, 2009). Two sources of pressures from "above"—the national examination, NCEE, and the school policies regarding teacher performance evaluation—seemed to pressure the EFL teachers in the present study to exercise their authority to 'control' the students to participate in class activities to ensure that their students would be 'well prepared' and would perform well in the NCEE. Considering the pressures from "below", the teachers' perception of students' academic performance and natures seemed to influence them to be controlling but their estimation of students' motivational level did not always matter (cf. Pelletier et al., 2002; Pelletier & Sharp, 2009; Pelletier & Vallerand, 1996). In Pelletier's studies, the teachers became controlling only when they saw the lack of motivation in their students.

Last but not least, the use of two top motivational strategies, namely enhancing students' understanding and exercising teacher's authority, reflected the traditional view of a teacher in Confucian-influenced Chinese culture. In *Shi Shuo*, teachers are defined as those who propagate the doctrine, impart professional knowledge, and resolve doubts (Han, 802). The roles described here have become a gospel for Chinese teachers and seemed to have driven the teachers in this study to employ controlling strategies and support the hierarchical structure of relationships between teacher and students, as indicated by Edwards and Li (2011).

5. Implication and Suggestions for Further Study

Despite the limitation of a case study, the findings in this study provide insights into the situation of EFL classrooms in one region of China and suggest further actions as follows. First, since the six teachers tended towards the controlling style regardless of their beliefs and reported attempts, this finding suggests a lack of understanding of motivational strategies—what they are, how to implement them in class, and how they impact the students; therefore, clarification of the concept is needed. As suggested in previous studies, teachers' understanding affect their instructional practices (e.g. Pelletier & Sharp, 2009; Reeve, 1998). It is essential for teachers to have a clear understanding so that they would be able to nurture the students' intrinsic motivation effectively. Second, as revealed in this study, the teachers were pressured by both the factors from "above" and "below". It is important to raise their awareness of these effects, so that they could sort out how to mitigate the impact on their instructional practice. Third, the motivational strategies observed in this study seemed to be simple and limited, effective motivational strategies that can be used in EFL classrooms to nurture students' intrinsic motivation and autonomy should be introduced. Last but not least, most of the classes were observed to be teacher-centered, up-to-date pedagogy trainings are needed.

For further studies, to gain more in-depth understanding of the situation, a longitudinal study that observes teachers for a long period of time is recommended. Also, since this study described the effects of each motivational strategy based on the literature only, further studies may include the analysis of how the different motivational strategies actually affect the students' intrinsic motivation.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A

Teachers' use of motivational strategies from observation

Teacher	Week					Trend
	1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
Hui	A D E H	A D E F H	A B D F G	A B D E F H	A B C D F	A. D. F
Ling	A B C D E F H I	A B C D E F	A B C E	A B C E I G	A B D G H	A. B. C. E
Xian	A E F H I	A C D H	A B D E	A D E H	A D E H	A. D. E. H
Hao	A D E	A B C D E G	A D	A B D E	A D E G H	A. D. E
Rui	A B C D E G I	A B C D I	A C D E G	A B C E F H	A E F G H J	A. C. E
Wan	--	A D E F I	A B C D E F	A D	A B D F	A. D. F

Notes: Letters A–I refer to different motivational strategies as follows.

A=Exercising the teachers' authority (picking students directly, inspecting students, uttering directives)

B=Relying on external sources (introducing incentives, punishment, praising)

C=Evoking tense feelings (organizing competitions, criticizing, rushing students)

D=Giving answers directly

E=Enhancing students' understanding (informing objectives, decreasing difficulty, review)

F=Arousing students interests in the class (relating to the real life, organizing activities)

G=Asking thought-provoking questions

H=Leaving time for the students to work independently

I=Providing encouragement