

Motivations and rewards in teaching English overseas: A portrait of expatriate TEFL teachers in South- East Asia

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ABSTRACT

Teacher motivation and occupational satisfaction have been subjects of much research in general education. In Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), although the area of student motivation has received much attention from researchers, the area of teacher motivation and satisfaction has been largely neglected. In one of the few papers on the subject, Kassabgy, Boraie and Schmidt (2001: 227) decry 'the general lack of information in the applied linguistics literature concerning what makes English language teachers tick – their motivations, goals, and their views on what teaching does and should offer to people who make a career of it'. This study reports on what expatriate teachers working in South-East Asia construed as their initial motivations for entering the field, and the satisfactions and dissatisfactions they derive from TESOL. The results show that a complex variety of motives lay behind the teachers' entry into TESOL, and that their major sources of satisfaction lay in factors intrinsic to teaching. Their major sources of dissatisfaction were factors extrinsic to the act of teaching.

Introduction

In the teaching field in general, the importance of teachers' motivations, aspirations and satisfactions has been the focus of attention from researchers for a considerable time, especially in recent years with increasing concerns over teacher retention rates, teacher shortages and teacher quality. A study by the Centre for British Teachers (CfBT 1989) speculated that 50–70% of RSA Certificate (now CELTA) graduates leave the TESOL field within three to four years. Other studies also suggest that the turnover of TESOL teachers is rapid (McKnight 1992; Johnston 1997). In the light of these workforce issues, there is an increasing need for TESOL teacher educators, teacher employers and policy makers to understand why teachers choose to enter language teaching, what factors keep them in the field and why they may consider leaving it.

Surprisingly little attention has been paid to teacher motivation and teacher satisfaction in TESOL or, indeed, to the working lives of TESOL teachers in general (Johnston 1997). This paper, which is part of a larger study of the lives of expatriate teachers of English working in South-East Asia, attempts to shed some light on teachers' initial motivations for entering TESOL, and the ensuing satisfactions and dissatisfactions they obtain from it. It is exploratory in nature, and attempts to re-open discussion of this overlooked area.

Review of the literature

In what follows, I consider the findings of research into teacher motivation and teacher satisfaction. Relevant findings from general education are considered first, followed by findings from TESOL.

The impetus for the project, of which this paper is a part, was Huberman's (1993) study of the professional life trajectories of 160 Swiss secondary school teachers. As part of this study, Huberman and Grounauer (1993) considered teachers' initial motivations for entering teaching, why they had stayed in teaching and whether they would choose teaching again if they could relive their careers. The most frequently stated motive for being a teacher was found to be the pleasure and satisfaction of contact with young people, followed by love of the subject matter and success with initial experiences of substitute teaching. The type of early motivation that teachers reported did not reliably predict ensuing or even ultimate satisfaction or dissatisfaction with teaching as a career, though those whose choice to enter

teaching was deliberate and unequivocal tended to have more harmonious, satisfactory careers. On the other hand, those who entered teaching for purely material motives, such as those who saw teaching primarily as a way to earn a living, providing good working conditions, and/or as allowing a parallel family life, were more likely to face crises later on. Those who experienced one or several periods of serious doubt about the pursuit of their career were less inclined to choose teaching again. The inverse was also true: those who had not experienced serious doubts were more likely to choose teaching again as a career.¹

A great deal of research on teacher motivation has been conducted with pre-service teachers, and the general finding is that the major reasons underlying the decision to teach can be classified as intrinsic, altruistic and extrinsic motivations (see, for example, Brookhart and Freeman 1992; Kyriacou and Coulthard 2000). The literature suggests that in developed-country contexts, intrinsic and altruistic motivations (such as the motives of making a difference, enhancing the lives of children, contributing to the greater social good of society and helping to shape the future) are crucial for a satisfying and enduring career in the classroom (Cochran-Smith 2003; Rhodes, Neville and Allen 2004; Hammerness 2006; Manuel and Hughes 2006; Richardson and Watt 2006; Kyriacou and Kunc 2007; Morgan, Kitching and O'Leary 2007; Teven 2007; Alexander 2008). The research strongly suggests that the majority of teachers who enter and remain in the field are those who have always wanted to be teachers.

Within the Australian context, Richardson and Watt's (2006) study of the motivations of teacher education students identified the strongest motivations for entering teaching to be perceived teaching abilities, the intrinsic value of teaching and social utility values (such as the desire to make a social contribution, shape the future and work with children/adolescents). Middle-ranked motives included positive prior teaching and learning experiences, and personal utility values (job security, time for family, job transferability). The lowest ranked motives were the negative motivations of having chosen teaching as a *fallback* career, and social influences. Participants also reported strong social dissuasion from a teaching career (from family and friends), on the grounds that teaching was low in social status, emotionally taxing and paid a low salary. Nonetheless, on entering teacher education, participants rated their satisfaction for having chosen a teaching career as high. Manuel and Hughes (2006) show similar findings. As Alexander (2008) observes, those who chose teaching do so because their desire to make a difference and to contribute to society overpowers the myriad of dissuasive factors.

However, teaching and learning occur within socially and culturally constructed contexts, and the major motives for choosing teaching in North American, British, Northern European and Australasian contexts (ie the desire to work with young people, the potential for the job to provide intellectual fulfilment and the means by which to make a social contribution) are not universal. In other sociocultural contexts, extrinsic motivations, such as salary, job security, holidays and career status, can assume greater importance for choosing teaching as a career (Chivore 1988; Yong 1995; Zembylas and Papanastasiou 2004).

Research demonstrates that motivation at the pre-service stage is not always maintained in the initial years of employment (see especially Huberman 1993; Hargreaves 2005). Although the career entry stage of a teacher's professional life cycle can be easy, it is frequently painful, or even traumatic. Novice teachers are not always well prepared for what Hoy (2008: 497) terms 'the tensions between serving and surviving, between caring and control, between deep investment and protective distance', and are often not provided with sufficient mentoring in their first teaching posts. In Australia, despite recent initiatives to provide high-quality induction for beginning teachers, persistent problems with teaching processes (especially classroom management and discipline) and socialisation within the school context remain (see, for example, Manuel 2003; McCormack and Thomas 2003). Recent evidence shows that teacher attrition rates are high: in the United States as many as 50% of teachers leave within the first three years of teaching (National Commission on Teaching and American's Future 2003) and 40% leave after five years in the United Kingdom (Kyriacou and Kunc 2007). In Australia figures are similar (Manuel 2003), and Watt and Richardson (2008) found around 56% of soon-to-be teacher graduates planned to teach for only a very short time, if at all.

A number of general education studies over the past two or three decades have explored the factors that contribute to teacher satisfaction/dissatisfaction and that discourage teachers from staying in the profession (for useful reviews of the literature, see Scott, Cox and Dinham 1999; Dinham and Scott

2000; Kyriacou and Kunc 2007). In general, studies show that the major sources of satisfaction tend to be intrinsic factors – those directly related to the actual task of teaching and working with young people (such as facilitating pupil learning and achievement), professional self-growth (including the mastery of subject matter and teaching skills), and recognition from parents, peers or superiors. Autonomy, professional freedom and supportive colleagues have also been found to be positive aspects of the job. Sources of dissatisfaction include administrative workload, low salary, poor promotional prospects and pupils' behavioural problems. More recently, in addition to structural and administrative factors, societal factors have been identified as major sources of dissatisfaction. The status of teachers, the pace of educational change and the increase in workload associated with it, societal expectations of schools and, particularly, the negative portrayal of teachers and teaching in the media are now major dissatisfiers. On the other hand, factors such as school leadership, decision making and communication, school resources and community relations can be either neutral or moderately satisfying/dissatisfying, depending on school context and leadership factors (Dinham and Scott 1996; Scott, Cox and Dinham 1999; Dinham and Scott 2000).

Despite the existence of considerable literature on teacher motivation in general education, there are few studies that deal directly with initial teacher motivation in TESOL, though studies such as Tsui (2003) and Senior (2006) touch on the topic indirectly. One study that deals directly with teacher motivation is Johnston's (1997) interview study of five expatriate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and 12 local teachers in Poland. Johnston found that the teachers presented their entry into teaching as an accident or a second choice, and, unlike the general education studies cited above, none spoke of TESOL in terms of a *calling*. Expressions of altruism were tempered with looking after their own personal interests. Johnston observes that leaving the field was a constant possibility, even for those who had made a substantial investment in TESOL.

Senior (2006), using a grounded theory approach, provides a brief, generalised account of the motivations of people undertaking an English-language teaching qualification in Australia and the United Kingdom. These motivations included having no particular career direction, wanting to travel and have 'a bit of fun and adventure before settling down' (Senior 2006: 37), seeking a career change and being able to combine raising a family with part-time work.

In relation to career satisfaction in TESOL, the literature is more extensive. The most common finding in the TESOL literature is that teachers generally find the intrinsic aspects of teaching satisfying and fulfilling, but that they experience dissatisfaction with extrinsic factors in working conditions such as pay, job security and opportunities for promotion (CfBT 1989; Pennington 1991; Pennington and Riley 1991; McKnight 1992; Pennington and Ho 1995; Johnston 1997; Waites 1999; Kassabgy, Boraie and Schmidt 2001; Senior 2006). Johnston (1997) and Senior (2006) report that teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the low status of TESOL. Senior (2006) notes that TESOL practitioners were particularly dissatisfied, both with the public perception that anyone who can speak English can also teach it and with the ease with which individuals could complete a four-week training course and find a job as a teacher.

Another source of dissatisfaction identified by Johnston (1997) was marginalisation, and Johnston, Pawan and Mahan-Taylor (2005) present a case study where the marginalisation felt by an American EFL teacher in Japan was shown to be both cultural and professional in nature. Not only was the teacher regarded by the local population as an outsider, no matter how much she tried to fit in, but she was also unable to secure a tenured position because of her 'identity as a non-Japanese' (Johnston, Pawan and Mahan-Taylor 2005: 61). The authors ponder the extent to which expatriate teachers actively seek out and embrace marginality. A lack of professional recognition was also a serious cause of dissatisfaction for English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in school-level ESL contexts (McKnight 1992; Bascia and Jacka 2001; Edstam 2001; Senior 2006).

Kassabgy, Boraie and Schmidt (2001) questionnaire study of the job satisfaction of 70 Egyptian and 37 North American TESOL teachers confirmed general education findings that higher value is placed on intrinsic aspects than extrinsic aspects. Job security, fringe benefits or prospects for promotion were less important to the teachers than good relationships with their students, colleagues and supervisors. However, a major factor contributing to job satisfaction was quality of educational leadership, especially support, supervision, and the encouragement of staff development and participation. Pennington (1991) reports similar findings.

In Tsui's (2003) study of four teachers of English in Hong Kong secondary schools, which explores the critical differences between expert, experienced and novice teachers, strong correlations are drawn between satisfaction and expertise in teaching. The four teachers had different initial motivations for entering the field, and ultimately different levels of satisfaction (cf Huberman and Grounauer 1993). The first teacher had always wanted to be a teacher; for the second, teaching was her second choice; the third chose teaching through a process of elimination; and the fourth fell into the profession. The first and second teachers, who had been teaching for more than five years, appeared to derive more satisfaction from their work than the other two teachers, who were both novices and who both had a problematic relationship with teaching.

Like Johnston (1997), Kassabgy, Boraie and Schmidt (2001: 227) highlight 'the general lack of information in the applied linguistics literature concerning what makes English language teachers tick – their motivations, goals, and their views on what teaching does and should offer to people who make a career of it'. The current paper aims to make a contribution to our understanding of this area. It presents a portrait of expatriate TESOL teachers working in South-East Asia by reporting on findings to the following research questions.

- 1 What factors motivated these teachers to join the field of TESOL?
- 2 What satisfactions/dissatisfactions do they receive from TESOL?
- 3 How satisfied are they in their choice of career?

Method

As stated above, the current study was part of a larger qualitative research project on the lives of expatriates engaged in teaching English in South-East Asia (Mullock under review), with data being collected from semi-structured interviews. The major questions used to address the issues of initial and later motivations and satisfactions were similar to those used in Huberman (1993). Interviewees were asked how they became TESOL teachers, and the reasons and hesitations for that choice. Later in the interview, they were asked about the rewards they got from TESOL, the rewards they did not get and whether they had ever thought about leaving the field. Finally, they were asked whether they would choose TESOL if they could live their lives over again.

The interviews were conducted in hotels, in universities and schools, and in restaurants and bars, wherever suited the interviewees. The interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed, and an interpretive comparative qualitative analysis was performed using content analysis and a broad discourse analysis approach. After transcription, data were analysed using a spreadsheet, and rank orders of facets attracting the most to least responses were created. The interview transcripts and data file entries were re-read and checked several times to ensure the fidelity of the interpretation, and to avoid distortion of data. They were also checked against other data produced elsewhere in the interview. This process was vital, as some data contained conflicting elements and the broad thrust of participants' responses needed to be preserved. Categories were identified through frequency of occurrence of particular themes, and were formulated to 'capture relevant characteristics' of the content (Merriam 1998: 160). Transcripts of the interviews and a copy of the current paper were sent to informants, where possible, for comment and possible amendment.

The participants

The participants were 23 TESOL teachers working in Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia and Laos in 2004–06. All participants were self-selected volunteers, recruited through personal contacts and through notices placed on noticeboards in language schools, English departments in universities, and at a TESOL conference. Eight participants were female. Three participants were non-native English-speaking teachers from France and India. The participants' ages ranged between 26 and 56, with a mean age of 44. Their nationalities were American (n = 8), British (n = 7), Australian (n = 3), New Zealander (n = 2), French (n = 2) and Indian-Thai (n = 1). Their teaching experiences ranged from less than one year to more

than 25 years, with a mean of 12 years. They were working at primary and/or secondary level ($n = 10$), university level ($n = 7$) and adult level ($n = 6$). Most had taught at all age levels.

The mean age of beginning TESOL teaching was 31, with 11 participants beginning in their 20s, and seven beginning in their 40s. The oldest starting age was 47 ($n = 2$). This situation, where more than half the participants are late starters, is somewhat different from the typical profile in general education, where the majority of teachers begin in their early 20s.² In regard to professional preparation, 17 participants had received accredited TESOL training, eight had Master's degrees (TESOL/Applied Linguistics) and one had a PhD in Applied Linguistics. One was a trained primary teacher. Five had no formal teaching qualifications, though three had previous teaching or training experience, mostly in business or law.

The sample differs from those of the TESOL studies previously cited in a number of respects. First, it deals with teachers working exclusively in countries with educational cultures different from their home countries. Second, it has a far larger proportion of male respondents than females in what is a very female-dominated field. Third, the sample includes untrained teachers.

Results

Initial motivations and paths into TESOL

Paths into TESOL for the participants were varied. Although 22 of the 23 participants in the current study had completed undergraduate degrees, only two had taken TESOL or linguistics courses during their studies. Nine participants entered TESOL shortly after completing their university studies, though two of these graduated as mature-age students. The remainder ($n = 14$) entered TESOL after careers in other areas.

TESOL was not the first choice of career for any of the participants, though some participants had long been attracted to the field of teaching and said they had always wanted to be teachers. TESOL, then, was a discovery, rather than a first choice. In fact, a number of participants first heard about the field through friends, as these excerpts show:

I finished my [Bachelor of Arts and] I just went travelling, you know, all through South-East Asia, and North Africa and Europe, and then when I got to Mexico, I thought, 'Oh, I haven't got much money', so everyone said, 'Be an English teacher, be an English teacher'. So that's, you know, how I got into it. From being in Mexico and thinking, 'That's not a bad lifestyle'. (T2, Myanmar)

It was something I became interested in my home town because I had a friend who was a teacher, and he invited me along to watch a few of his classes, and I just thought that it looked like a lot of fun, it looked quite a good way to make a living ... And also he invited me to do a class, and that was the first time I'd ever taught, and he said, 'Would you like to do a two-hour lesson?' And I prepared a lesson, and the class was mixed level, and it was really challenging. And it was really fun, and I thought there's more to this teaching than meets the eye ... And, er, he wrote down a critique of things I could improve, and I just felt the bug. (T20, Thailand)

For most participants, the reasons for entering TESOL were complex, multi-layered and varied. Numerous motives were put forward (a total of 105 responses), with each participant giving, on average, around four motives (see Table 1). The most frequently mentioned motivation was positive prior teaching experience, so that TESOL was a relatively easy side-step into an already familiar role. The second most common motivation was 'falling into' TESOL, and the third a desire for a change of career or because of boredom or dissatisfaction with the previous career. Other common reasons were travel, and circumstantial factors (coming across a job opportunity in TESOL).

Table 1: Most frequently mentioned motivations for choosing TESOL (n = 23)

Motivation and example of response	Number of respondents*	Percentage of cohort
1 Previous successful experience as a teacher or trainer – 'I was tutoring in mathematics and science' (T1)	12	52
2 Fell into teaching – 'Well, I sort of fell into it because I really didn't have a first choice' (T1)	10	43
3 Change – 'I was in hospitality, was sick of it, I just wanted, I suppose, a different career path' (T3)	8	35
4 Job opportunity presented itself – 'I was doing substitute work, then the principal asked if I wanted to take on ESL immigrant students' (T6)	7	30
5 Travel – 'I wanted to travel and be able to work' (T2)	7	30
6 Chose TESOL – 'It was my first choice of profession. I found that this is what I want to do. And I've never regretted it' (T16)	5	22
7 Love of subject matter – 'I loved learning English in [the United Kingdom], loved languages, I love English' (T14)	5	22
8 Natural inclination – 'I always thought about being a teacher' (T6)	5	22
9 Perceived teaching ability – 'When I was a senior student, they said, 'Oh, you explain to us so well' (T16)	5	22
10 Social influence – 'Someone recommended that I consider teaching' (T13)	5	22
11 Influence of having parents who were teachers, or of a particularly inspiring teacher – 'I come from a family of teachers, almost everyone in my family is [a] teacher' (T17)	4	17
12 Sharing knowledge – 'In my previous job, it was all for myself, but I wanted to give something back' (T7)	4	17
13 Lifestyle – 'It looked like a lot of fun, it looked quite a good way to make a living' (T20)	4	17
14 Service – 'you show people how to use their minds, and empower them' (T6)	3	13
15 Easy to get a job – 'Other backpackers told me it was enough if you could speak English to teach it' (T8)	3	13

*Multiple responses from participants

The finding that 43% of the respondents reported that they 'fell into TESOL' requires further comment. Huberman and Grounauer (1993: 122) classify 'falling into' teaching as a passive motivation, indicating the lack of something better to do, or as the result of a process of elimination, and suggest that, as such, it is a 'slightly less "honourable" motivation'. However, falling into TESOL may be different from falling into teaching, in that very few participants in the current study appeared to have considered TESOL as a possible teaching specialisation, perhaps because it is not as well known as, say, science, mathematics or history. CfBT (1989) and Johnston (1997) both suggest that falling into TESOL is the norm rather than the exception. Falling into the field, as the excerpts below suggest, in some cases means that most participants discovered TESOL by accident:

A principal that I knew said, 'Would you be interested in teaching these two Turkish girls that had just shown up in our town, and we don't know what to do with them?' and I said, 'Okay'. And that was my first job ... So I fell into TESOL but teaching was a conscious choice. (T6, Myanmar, italics added)

At that time the Peace Corps was a very generalist organisation – it's far more specialised now – and when I looked at programs that I thought I'd be interested in, it was English teaching ... I think I DID just sort of fall into it. I had intended, I think, at some point to be a lawyer, and then I sort of floundered

around in graduate schools for a while and, as I say, I was in Chicago and I just got bored with graduate school and wanted, and basically, I think, I wanted to travel, I think that's what I wanted to do, I wanted to travel, and Peace Corps sort of popped up as a way to do it. And then after that, after going through it, I got into teaching English, I really enjoyed it, and thought, 'Hmm, maybe I'll do, you know, maybe I'll do my graduate work in that'. So, in a way, you know, I completely changed, changed my idea of what field I wanted to be in. (T5, Myanmar)

I fell into it in the sense that I had not taught English before. (T13, Thailand)

But while participants may have stumbled across TESOL, their choice to take it up was generally a conscious choice. An example is the case of T7, a former hotelier, who was approached on the street in a Thai holiday resort by a language school needing an English teacher for several high-end hotels:

I would say I fell into it, yeah, yeah, yeah, there was a door open, and it was up to me to go in. (T7, Thailand)

Huberman and Grounauer (1993) divided their respondents' motivations into active motivations (those that suggested a deliberate choice), material motivations and a smaller percentage of passive motivations. The motives given in the current study do not fall into such clear categories. Circumstantial and/or strategic factors appeared to play a significant part in respondents' accounts of their motivations. The majority of the participants were interested in staying and working in Asia, and perhaps the most accessible form of work that many foreigners could undertake legally if they wanted to stay in a particular South-East Asian country was English-language teaching, as the following example illustrates:

Interviewer: So what led you to become an English teacher?

T11: Necessity, really. Um, because I tried to find jobs in the business environment, in my field, but you had to be able to read and speak Thai, (a), and (b) you had to be Thai ... So the only thing I could do was training. I couldn't do the actual managing. So I came, sort of, four weeks after arriving in Thailand, I came to the university to see what they had in training, and they said, well, to start with, I'd have to begin as an English teacher, and so I went into the English teaching. (T11, Thailand)

Another important factor, for around half the participants, was that of joining a spouse or partner who was working or living in the country in which they were interviewed. Thus strategic motives may underlie the decision to enter the field, and may be responsible for continuation in it. One participant put it like this:

The teachers that I know here are here for various reasons. They're not here to be advancing some career that you call TESOL, that's not what it's about. They're here for personal reasons. Most of them are here for love. I'm here for love. I love my wife. She's Thai. Most of the guys here are here for love. They are. They have a girlfriend, they have a wife, they want a Thai girlfriend or they want Thai wife, whatever. They're here for love. Bottom line. First priority. (T15, Thailand)

A further strong motive was travel (cf Senior 2006), a motive that participants often mentioned in combination with lifestyle.

Lifestyle was number one, erm, no, I thought it was great ... good for travel, great lifestyle, travelling around the world, easy to get qualifications. (T2, Myanmar)

I had to spend a year in France teaching English as part of my degree, and so that was like my first taster, if you like, of TEFL ... but I did enjoy it, and then when I finished my degree, I still had no idea what I wanted to do, but I just wanted to travel. So I sort of was putting those two things together, with that short experience of teaching ... It was mainly to travel, that was the reason I did it. (T23, Thailand)

Participants were asked if there were any hesitations about entering TESOL. Fourteen participants had no hesitations:

Absolutely not. None at all. I was chomping at the bit to go. (T5, Myanmar)

There weren't really [any hesitations], that time of my life, it was quite adventurous. (T18, Cambodia)

Of the seven participants who admitted to hesitations about entering TESOL,³ major reasons were dissuasion from parents and being unsure what they wanted to do.

When asked about the rewards and satisfactions⁴ they had received from TESOL, participants gave 126 responses, an average of six per person. The responses were sorted into the categories of intrinsic/altruistic, extrinsic and other. As Table 2 shows, intrinsic/altruistic rewards were the most frequent, by a very considerable margin.

Table 2: The rewards and satisfactions of TESOL (126 responses)*

Reward type	Example	Number of responses	Percentage of total
Intrinsic/ altruistic	'You see people developing, regardless of who they are, for the better' (T3); 'It's kind of a diluted way of giving something back' (T14)	105	84
Extrinsic	'Living abroad, living in different countries, the travelling and going to different places' (T23)	19	8
Other	'For me, personally, I can't really think of any' (T20)	2	2

*Multiple responses from participants.

Within the category of intrinsic satisfactions, three major themes were identified: positive experiences of student learning, positive personal feelings and altruistic rewards. As regards the former, the metaphor of a light coming on above the student's head was commonly mentioned as a reward (a similar metaphor is found in Dinham and Scott 2000):

When the light suddenly comes on, when they suddenly get it. (T3, Myanmar)

Suddenly the light bulb goes on and 'I understand now', the ah-hah moment. (T21, Thailand)

Positive personal feelings related to what Huberman (1993: 152) calls the joy of teaching:

[Monetary reward] has nothing to do with my motivation at all. [It's] intrinsic, it's strictly seeing those lights come on and having these students, er, I'm selfish, remembering me as good teacher, a person that cared ... Changing somebody's life, I've touched somebody's soul. Isn't that what it's all about? (T15, Thailand)

I do get a kick out of being able to convey an idea, and help someone learn. (T17, Thailand)

Also in this category, a very considerable number of participants mentioned the rewards of personal and professional self-growth, a source of satisfaction also found in general education literature (see Dinham and Scott 2000, for example):

You find yourself. And that's the highest reward. You find yourself. You learn about the people, you learn about yourself, you learn, you change. You change, and you receive a lot from them [ie the students], but if, er, how can I say ... yeah, it's about yourself, you find yourself doing something new, and you feel happy when you give something. Because everything which is not given is lost, so you give something, so you feel happy. (T8, Thailand)

I think I'm more effective as a person using English now than I was before. (T18, Cambodia)

I learn a lot from the different cultural environments, that's what keeps me doing it. (T12, Thailand)

Other factors leading to positive feelings included the social aspects ('I enjoy the opportunities – it gets me to interact with people and with other teachers' (T22), the opportunity for creativity ('it's a very creative profession' (T18), and a feeling of comfort with the role and identity of the teacher ('it's something I feel comfortable, like I know what I'm doing, I feel it's my field' (T12).

Altruistic rewards included those related to local, national and global dimensions (cf Morgan, Kitching and O'Leary 2007):

[Students] can develop not just their workplace and themselves, but, you know, ultimately that will contribute in a small part to the development of their country. (T1, Myanmar)

I was always involved in the hospitality industry in England, running my own hotel for ten years. I was offered various positions, you know, along the way, but there was nothing, it was all for myself. But I wanted to give something BACK. Yeah, and I thought, how can I give something back? I could give them back my knowledge, and help them, so teaching English, yeah, so that's what I did. (T7, Thailand)

You're giving someone a very quantifiable skill that can change their life. (T4, Myanmar)

However, for some participants there was a tension between the type of teaching they did and the type of teaching they would like to do:

Sometimes I just feel like I'm teaching rich girls, and I would like, like I said, I would like more to teach monks and novices and hill tribe people who really desperately need that kind of thing. (T12, Thailand)

Extrinsic rewards included travel (the most frequently mentioned reward in this category), pay (surprisingly, though see below for a different view), flexibility and transferability:

It can be financial if you've got the right job at an international school. (T17, Thailand)

In a more selfish way, I've seen the world first class, I've been treated VERY well. (T4, Myanmar)

Mobility. I can actually move from one job to another, that's nice. (T1, Myanmar)

Some teachers had 'parallel careers' (Nias 1989). One teacher, for example, was a professional musician. Another was a collector of Asian antiques, and TESOL had strategic benefits for this:

[TESOL] keeps me near the kinds of things that I'm interested in. (T5, Myanmar)

Three other teachers were involved in activities such as child-raising, refugee work and journalism. Nias (1989), writing in the context of primary education, notes that parallel careers can mean teachers transfer attention away from the classroom and school. This may not necessarily be the case for TESOL, as it can be argued that TESOL contexts such as teaching adults afford teachers greater flexibility than is the case in traditional mainstream teaching. It should also be pointed out that in the current study, none of the teachers presented as being anything other than professional in their teaching duties. Those with parallel careers appeared to have just as much commitment to their teaching work as those who did not.

In relation to rewards and satisfactions they did not receive from TESOL, a good salary was the most frequently mentioned ($n = 17$), followed by employment benefits (such as social security, sick leave, retirement) ($n = 8$). Another reward not received was promotion, and many saw the field as having no career structure, a finding common in TESOL literature. Some participants expressed a concern at a perceived lack of recognition, appreciation, or even feedback from school management and local colleagues. Eisenberger, Fasolo and Davis-LaMastro (1990) point out that the attitude of administrators and colleagues towards employees can significantly affect performance. For some teachers new to Thailand or new to a school, especially those who were working in high schools, there could be significant tensions with local colleagues:

Sometimes in the beginning it's difficult because sometimes [local colleagues] don't want to recognise your work, because there is some jealousy also, sorry to say that, but there is jealousy about your diploma, about your pay, about how the Director speaks to you, and maybe you're a foreigner so she's trying just to be more polite, and you get some jealousy from other teachers who just think something else, you know. So it's very hard in the beginning to get through this, just to make your place somewhere. (T9, Thailand)

Senior (2006) mentions similar tensions with local colleagues in developing-country contexts, pointing out that young, newly qualified teachers may know little about local conditions and the type of teaching required to prepare students to pass local examinations. She comments that, for local language teachers, the fact that these 'bouncy young native speakers of English ... may speak English more fluently than they do – while apparently knowing far less grammar – can be particularly irritating' (Senior 2006: 58).

On the other hand, in other contexts in the current study, participants, such as T7 (Thailand), found that school management 'can't do enough for you' and were 'very, very supportive'. Such dissatisfactions, then, appeared to be context-based.

Disruptive pupil behaviour and discipline problems – a significant source of dissatisfaction, stress and burnout for mainstream teachers – were seldom mentioned by participants, though some did mention, with satisfaction, the amount of respect they received from their students and from the host society.

Satisfaction with choice of career

In order to determine how satisfied participants were overall with their choice of career, they were asked two questions: whether they had ever considered leaving TESOL, and whether they would select TESOL again if they had the opportunity. Only seven teachers (30%) said they had never thought about leaving ('No. Never, never for a moment' (T16, Thailand); 'No. Never. If I've considered it, it's completely gone, quickly, in a minute' (T10, Thailand)). However, two out of three teachers said they had seriously thought about leaving, and two further teachers gave a qualified response. Six teachers (one in four) had actually left TESOL to work in another area, but had later returned to it. Two teachers were in the process of leaving, and two remained in the field reluctantly, with the thought of leaving always present (cf Johnston 1997).

Overall, the most common reason given for thinking about leaving was the temptation of other more interesting and perhaps more lucrative employment opportunities. Low salary was the second most common reason for considering leaving, and other reasons pertained to personal circumstances. Teachers in some provincial areas appeared to face severe problems with attracting a salary sufficient for their needs, and reported excessive workloads of up to 30 hours per week ('I feel like I work every night and every weekend, I've never worked more hours in my entire life, and my salary is \$600 a month, and I BARELY make it' (T12, Thailand)). Promotion was seldom mentioned as a reason for leaving, but this may have been because it was extremely difficult to obtain promotion, let alone tenure, in the universities (cf Johnston, Pawan and Mahan-Taylor 2005), and in private language schools opportunities were limited and could result in decreased salary levels (see below).

For the four teachers on the brink of leaving, their reasons for wanting to leave were primarily extrinsic, although the intrinsic factors of student behaviour and achievement were also mentioned. One participant was getting married, and said that his salary in his current position could not support a family. However, he was also facing a difficult teaching situation, with a class of special-needs primary students (some apparently autistic, some with possible attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) for which he was neither trained nor receiving professional or administrative support. He was careful to emphasise, though, that it was not general intrinsic factors that were unsatisfactory ('You know, the actual teaching side of it I'm not really dissatisfied with' (T3, Myanmar)).

Another participant, T18, who had been in the field only 21 months, was leaving largely for health reasons, though he had also been regularly teaching up to 30 hours per week ('I felt really burnt out after that term' (T18, Cambodia)), and so burnout may have been present.⁵ Interestingly, although T18 had spoken at length about the very considerable self-growth and professional learning he had experienced in becoming a TESOL teacher, ('I feel that my experience in Cambodia has given me so much'), he was not confident that TESOL would continue to offer sufficient opportunities for further intellectual development:

I've had health complications, like I said ... I don't want to be an English teacher for the next ten years. Or even for the next five years. I see English teaching as a learning experience, as well as a teaching experience, and I think I'd get to the point where I just wouldn't be learning any more. (T18, Cambodia)

Of the two other teachers, one reported diminished levels of satisfaction with student learning and achievement, which is also a source of major discontent among teachers in general education (Van Houtte 2006; Grayson and Alvarez 2008):

There have been too many times in my TESOL career where I thought, 'This isn't as rewarding as I would like it to be'. I was getting bored with it. You do become bored with it. I don't think it's a job you can do forever, unless you ABSOLUTELY LOVE TEACHING KIDS or whatever. I've always shied away from kids, I've NEVER taught kids, not my thing, you see, I've always taught adults, er, sometimes I'll go down as low as teenagers. You just get tired of teaching people at the basic or basic to pre-intermediate level. And you also get tired of teaching at the advanced level to people who aren't motivated, and teaching in

Thailand's tough. Thais are tough. Don't let anyone kid you that Thais are easy to teach, they are absolutely not, they are very, very difficult. (T20, Thailand)

On close examination of this teacher's account, it is possible to detect what Palmer (1998: 17) refers to as 'losing the heart to teach': diminishing intellectual and professional returns, together with increasing routine and frustration. With more than 18 years of experience, much of it in private language schools, this teacher had experienced almost all the variety that TESOL had to offer in Thailand. A further factor contributing to his dissatisfaction, and this was particularly prevalent in teachers in their 40s and 50s, was the importance of preparing for the future, particularly in regards to retirement ('I'm TOTALLY driven by money because ... I don't want to do this a day past 55' (T20, Thailand)). In this regard, his salary and conditions were a major source of dissatisfaction. Although administrative roles had their attraction, T20 found that teaching, ultimately, paid better:

You can get to academic director level or head teacher level, but then when you get there, you find that certainly financially you're not ANY better off. You're WORSE off than the teachers who work below you, because you're on a fixed salary, and they're on an hourly rate, especially in the private language sector, and they're earning more than you are. And you think that you've got ten times the stress ... I know I always seem to bring it back to money but ... I got to that level, and thought, 'Well, actually I'm better off being a teacher, aren't I? I'm not proud.' But ... I'm not interested in having 'Academic Director' on my business card, I'm interested in the pounds in my pocket at the end of the month. (T20, Thailand)

When asked whether they would reselect TESOL, 13 participants (53%) said that they would choose it again (including one who gave a conditional response, saying he would rather teach his area of specialisation, environmental science). Three participants did not give a definite answer ('things led one to the other, so that's a difficult question for me to answer' (T15, Thailand) and one was unsure. Six participants (one in four), however, said they would not reselect TESOL, for various reasons. The most common reason was that their interests had changed during the course of their TESOL careers, and they had discovered other interests and abilities ('if I knew what I knew today, I'd get into development work ... *but I'm reasonably happy doing what I do*' (T2, Myanmar, italics added)). Ironically, though, it was through TESOL that some discovered other interests and abilities that they now wished to pursue, as the following excerpt shows:

Probably not, and I'll tell you why ... I have discovered that my interests and abilities, maybe even my talents, are in other areas. They're really in things, probably, like some aspects of design, some aspects of, I hope my friends aren't listening, interior decorating, things like that, that I've only discovered later in my life ... That's where my real passion is, but I didn't know that, *BUT because of TESOL, that's how I discovered antiques.* (T5, Myanmar, italics added)

Other common reasons given were low salaries, regret at not having stayed with an earlier career choice and the socio-political circumstances of being forced into TESOL (ie because they were unable to work in their preferred careers).

Of those participants who had always wanted to be teachers, four out of five were adamant they would reselect TESOL, and similar trends are found in the general education literature: these teachers are the most satisfied with their choice of career. One participant, however, was not satisfied:

I think as we grow up we realise how capable we are or aren't in terms of others, and I could have accomplished much more, you know, think this is a 56 year old looking backwards, but I could have done MUCH, much more, and I think for the world, for myself, you know, for, you know, all the nice clichés, but I think that there's only so much that can be accomplished as a TESOL teacher, and I think I could have added much more, you know, maybe in medicine, in law. (T4, Myanmar)

Three of these five participants had previously left TESOL to work in other areas. However, of the five teachers who made a conscious choice to enter the field, as opposed to falling into it, all said they would reselect TESOL.

What of teachers who entered TESOL solely for material reasons or because of lack of other alternatives? Huberman (1993) reported that such teachers tended to pay the price later in their careers. In the current study, the two teachers who failed to give active motivations for entering TESOL both said they would not reselect it, though one 'was reasonably happy' with TESOL and had remained in it for more than 20 years.

Discussion and conclusion

In the main, teachers in the current study chose to work overseas because of a desire to travel, a desire for variety and change (after some crisis in their previous careers or personal lives) and/or because of a personal relationship/family reasons. Some had 'fallen into' TESOL after hearing about it from friends and acquaintances, or because a job opportunity unexpectedly presented itself. In a number of cases, teaching English was one of the few forms of employment open to them if they wanted to remain abroad, making their choice to enter TESOL strategic. In some cases the choice to enter TESOL was a conscious one, usually after some other previous positive experience with teaching, because of a perceived teaching ability and/or because of a realisation that they could 'make a difference' (T15, Thailand) or 'give something back' (T7, Thailand). In other cases, they stumbled into it, and found the experience of teaching to be positive and rewarding.

The typical teacher in this study, then, discovered TESOL by accident, entered it with few hesitations and, once in it, discovered it was enjoyable, though he or she may not have had a lifelong ambition to teach. This latter characteristic differentiates these teachers from the typical general education teacher (Scott, Cox and Dinham 1999; Dinham and Scott 2000; Manuel and Hughes 2006). We might wonder whether these TESOL teachers possess what might be regarded as the typical kind of values and sense of vocation traditionally associated with teaching in general. We might also wonder whether they have the same commitment to their students and the teaching profession. In considering answers to these questions, it is important to keep in mind that, in the current study, the greatest source of satisfaction for the vast majority of teachers was the 'core business' of teaching (Scott et al 1999). The vast majority of participants valued what we would hope them to value – working with students and seeing students achieve, and developing their own professional knowledge and skills. And there is little doubt that most participants were committed to teaching, and to education in general. This includes those who initially took up TESOL as a form of *stop-gap* employment. However, for one or two others, TESOL was, or may have become, a form of *paid employment*⁶ that allowed them to pursue other interests and agendas. But, in spite of this, as stated above, all participants appeared to be professional in their attitudes, in the sense of striving to do the best job they could, and for the most part being committed to the welfare of their students.

Another question connected to those raised in the previous paragraph is whether there are any critical differences between TESOL teachers and teachers in mainstream education. Full discussion of this issue is beyond the scope of this paper, for reasons of space and the need for further research. However, on one level it is helpful to keep in mind Palmer's (1998) observation that good teaching, at its core, is about identity, integrity and seeking connectedness (between one's students, oneself and one's subject matter), and, in this, teachers at all levels of education have more in common than might be supposed.

In the main, the teachers in the current study said they were satisfied with their choice of career, but two out of three teachers admitted to entertaining thoughts about leaving TESOL, and, indeed, one in four had left to work in other areas for varying periods of time, before returning. Reasons for this were mainly extrinsic. They included the lure of work that promised a change from the classroom routine of TESOL and a higher salary. For the teachers in the study, variety in types of classes, types of students, and locations or contexts were factors crucial to remaining engaged and challenged in their work (see Mullock, under review, for a discussion of this issue).

Although just over half the participants said they would choose TESOL if they could live their lives over again, around a quarter said they would not, mainly because they had developed other interests or realised they had other abilities. Low salaries were a common reason for not reselecting TESOL. Compared with general education teachers in developed countries (and also many TESOL teachers of adults in Australia, such as those working in the AMEP), teachers in the current study were working in vulnerable employment contexts. None had tenure, and most were employed on short-term contracts, often on a part-time basis, with low salaries, and at the mercy of political whim (such as changes in immigration laws), with little chance of supporting a family on their wages. Only two had been working in the same institution for more than seven years, and only five had been in the same job for more than two years. While this may reinforce the gypsy-like reputation of EFL teachers, in some cases their job mobility was not of their own choice. This lack of employment stability in the cohort is in direct contrast to mainstream teaching, where teachers can stay in teaching institutions for far longer periods of time.

Thus, in the words of T12 (Thailand), teaching English in South-East Asia can be ‘sweet and sour’.⁷ The intrinsic aspects of teaching remain satisfying, but there are downsides to the apparently exotic lifestyle of the wandering English teacher. It is also questionable whether the teachers in the current study can sustain a long-term commitment to EFL in the face of extrinsic factors such as lack of employment stability, salary, benefits and promotion, all of which were found to be dissatisfying, particularly for teachers in their 40s and beyond. A further factor that dissatisfied some teachers was the lack of support and recognition from their superiors and local colleagues. Teachers in the current study also expressed serious concerns about the status of TESOL, and the devaluing of TESOL because of the employment of *backpacker* teachers, though space does not allow this issue to be explored (see Mullock forthcoming).

Implications

The current study has implications for TESOL employers and administrators, especially in relation to retaining skilled and valued teaching staff. The literature strongly suggests that by increasing factors that promote job satisfaction, teacher employers can reduce the corrosive effects of high staff turnover, and at the same time increase teachers’ positive attitudes towards their work. Clearly, the major factors for the attention of teacher employers are the extrinsic factors of employment stability, salary, health and retirement benefits, and opportunities for promotion. Attention, too, should be given to promoting positive teacher–administrator relationships, and providing a supportive school climate, especially for beginning teachers, as these have been shown to be important factors in maintaining teacher motivation and performance, and in avoiding teacher burnout (Manuel 2003; McCormack and Thomas 2003; Kyriacou and Kunc 2007; Teven 2007; Grayson and Alvarez 2008). Teaching is a challenging, often stressful occupation (Teven 2007; Alexander 2008) and, given its horizontal nature (Hammerness 2006), it is important for teacher employers to develop a school climate that provides logistical, collegial and intellectual support for teachers in order to encourage self-growth and to increase occupational satisfaction, and, hopefully, to increase retention rates.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study is an attempt to understand the motivations and occupational satisfactions of being a TESOL teacher, but concentrates only on expatriate teachers in South-East Asia. Caution should, therefore, be exercised when interpreting the findings of the study beyond its contexts. The study contains a number of limitations. One limitation stems from the small and restricted sample, and the fact that it may not be a representative sample. The teachers in this study are more likely to be representative of ‘high involvement teachers’ (Yee 1990). Anecdotal evidence suggests that low involvement, uncommitted, backpacker teachers are prevalent in South-East Asia, but I was unable to entice such teachers to participate in the study. Such teachers should be included in future research samples. Another limitation is the number of research sites: only four Asian countries were included in the study. It is possible that TESOL teachers in other sociocultural contexts might provide different perspectives on teacher motivations and occupational satisfactions/dissatisfactions. A further limitation is the reliance on interviews. Further research is needed to test and quantify the results of the current study. In particular, quantitative studies are urgently needed, particularly large-scale studies using recognised instruments that can measure the strength and degree of motivation and satisfaction. Future research could also attempt to examine the link between teacher effectiveness and motivation/satisfaction. In addition, a study that investigates the initial expectations of teaching held by beginning teachers during their training and that then monitors these expectations into their first year or two on the job would be helpful. Further, a longitudinal study of how teacher motivation and job satisfaction change over time is important.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the 23 participants who gave so generously of their time, knowledge and experience, and whose words were often deeply inspiring. Without them, this study would not have been possible. Thanks are also due to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of the paper.

Notes

- 1 The term *career* is used here to mean an occupation that is pursued for a prolonged period of time. The term *profession* to describe teaching in general is a matter of some debate in the literature, and discussion about whether it can be used to describe TESOL is beyond the scope of this paper.
- 2 Manuel and Hughes (2006), for example, report that 17% of their pre-service teachers were mature-entry students.
- 3 Data are missing for one participant.
- 4 Satisfaction is generally defined in the education literature as an individual's personal affective response to a particular situation or condition (Grayson and Alvarez 2008).
- 5 Reports of burnout were quite common among informants who had worked in Cambodia.
- 6 My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out this term.
- 7 T12's description of teaching as 'sweet and sour' can perhaps be extended to all TESOL teaching, and even teaching in general, with wide variations in the degree and blend of sweetness and sourness.

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