

English Language Teacher Motivation and Turnover in a Private Language Institution in China

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the influences and relative importance of different motivation and hygiene factors with regards to teachers' decisions to either renew their teaching contracts or resign at a private language institution in China. Data was collected from a survey of 278 teachers between October 2014 and April 2015. Findings indicate that teachers were primarily motivated to renew their contracts by career opportunities, enjoyment of the work itself and growth. Teachers were primarily motivated to leave their positions due to dissatisfaction with company policies and poor relationships with their managers. Teachers commonly cited "China" as a reason for both renewing their contracts and for resigning.

摘要

本项研究的目的是调查当在中国的教师需要做出续约或辞职的决定时，哪些是相关和重要的影响因素，以及积极推动和消极维持的因素。从2014年10月至2015年4月，在针对278教师的问卷调查数据显示，最主要影响教师选择续约的原因有职业发展，对工作本身的喜爱以及在工作当中的成长；同样，最主要影响教师选择离开的原因有对公司制度的不满意，以及和直属主管之间的不良关系。大部分教师也会引用“中国”作为续约或辞职的同等因素。

Introduction

This article will review issues related to teacher turnover with a specific focus on China, review relevant literature on the subject, consider data from several hundred teachers at a private language institution in China, attempt to explain the results and consider the implications for other language teaching institutions in China.

Teacher turnover is a challenge across the world. In mainstream education, approximately half of all teachers leave the teaching profession within five

years of joining (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003). This creates a problem. Even during a time when there is a perceived move towards a reliance on technology in education, teacher effectiveness remains the most important in-school factor affecting student learning (Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain, 2005). Teachers who remain in the profession improve in effectiveness in their first few years (Henry, Bastian & Fortner, 2011). In short, teacher turnover harms student learning.

In China the problem is arguably even greater. Teacher turnover in China is so high that approximately 100,000 foreign teachers and experts are recruited each year to work in mainland China (Swanson, 2013). If we accept that effective teachers are a key factor in student learning; that the longer teachers work as teachers the more effective they become; and that there are around 300 million English learners in China (Swanson, 2013) then the issue of teacher turnover in China is one of the more important contemporary issues in the language teaching industry and one which deserves our attention.

Motivation

Motivation plays a key role in employee turnover. The more satisfied employees are in their jobs, the less likely they are to leave (Heskett, Jones, Loveman, Sasser & Schlesinger, 1994). The corollary to this is that employees who are demotivated, for example as a result of perceived inequities in the workplace, will take action to respond to their demotivation, including the possibility of resignation (Robbins, 2011).

In Herzberg's (1987) influential work on motivation, he hypothesized that there were two forms of motivation. These were termed "motivators" and "hygiene factors". Herzberg found the presence of motivators generally resulted in job satisfaction. Motivators included achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, career advancement and growth. The absence of hygiene factors generally caused dissatisfaction at work. Hygiene factors included company policies, supervision, relationships with supervisors and peers, work conditions and salary.

More recently, Groysberg, Nohria & Lee (2008) have hypothesized that humans are motivated by four main drives:

- The drive to acquire (salary, status)
- The drive to bond (relationships with peers and the organization)
- The drive to comprehend (contributing, doing meaningful, interesting and challenging work)
- The drive to defend (security, "organizations...which have clear goals and intentions, and that allow people to express their ideas and opinions" (p. 3)).

Much has been written about the importance of salary in job satisfaction and employee motivation. Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw & Rich (2010) argue that while pay is motivating for many individuals, high salaries do not result in a satisfied workforce. Deci & Ryan (1985) suggest that extrinsic rewards cause demotivation and dissatisfaction to individuals. Employees are more likely to enjoy their jobs if they focus on the work itself, and less likely to enjoy their jobs if they are focused on money (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2013). Furthermore, offering bonuses or pay increases is an inefficient method of decreasing employee turnover (Allen, 2008).

Motivations are also believed to vary from one generation to another. Generation Y employees (born between 1980 and 1994) are thought to be more motivated by advancement and free time and less motivated by responsibility and compensation compared with their Generation X counterparts (born between 1965 and 1979) (Barford & Hester, 2011).

Hockley (2006) conducted research with language teachers with the aim of identifying which motivational factors were most important to teachers of English as a second or foreign language. 105 teachers located in 12 different countries working in 91 different schools (many of which were based in the Middle East) were surveyed using factors derived from a survey by Montana & Charnov (as cited in Hockley, 2006). Hockley found that the following factors were the most important in motivating language teachers:

- Respect for me as a person
- Good pay
- Getting along well with others on the job
- Opportunity to do interesting work
- Feeling my job is important
- Opportunity for self-development and improvement (p. 11).

Aim

This research set out to discover the main reasons which caused teachers to renew their annual contract or resign and compare these with motivations factors found by Herzberg (1987), Hockley (2006) and Groyberg et al. (2008). Reasons for similarities and differences between their results and those obtained in this research will be subsequently discussed as will the implications for language schools in China.

Method

Sample and procedures

Between October 2014 and April 2015, 278 completed responses were received from teachers and Directors of Studies in 16 cities in China working for one private

language teaching institution with over one hundred schools throughout China. Teachers in this institution had average age of 29, with 83% of teachers born post 1980 (Generation Y) and 17% born between 1965 and 1979 (Generation X). 50% of the respondents taught young learners, 50% taught adults, 93% were expatriate teachers (most commonly from the USA, UK, Canada and Australia) and 7% were Chinese teachers of English. All teachers were offered a bonus and/or a salary increase to encourage them to renew their contracts. Completed surveys were received from teachers who had:

- renewed their contract (188 responses – 60% response rate)
- resigned (90 responses – 30% response rate).

Surveys were emailed to teachers within one week of their announcing their decision to renew their contract or resign. Teachers selected the 'primary reason' for making their decision to either renew their contract or resign from a multiple choice list of 13 options. Open-ended responses were invited using a space for "additional comments". Teachers were asked if they would recommend their friends to work at this school on a scale of 1-5 and how long they initially intended to work at this school for. Teachers who resigned were also asked about their future career plans.

Data Analysis

For ease of analysis and comparison, similar factors were used in this survey as were used by Herzberg (1987) as Herzberg's theory is still considered to be valid more than 50 years after it was first proposed (Jones & Lloyd, 2005). Three options were added to the survey. These were "the schedule" (combined with "company policies" in the results section), "training & development," (combined with "growth" in the results section) and "the desire to stay in / leave China" (as Herzberg's original research was carried out with domestic, not expatriate workers).

From the results of these surveys, it is possible to determine the most important factors for EFL teachers in China in relation to renewing a contract and resigning. It is also possible to make recommendations to language schools in China on factors which will help to reduce teacher turnover.

Results

Motivators

The most common reasons teachers chose as reasons for renewing their contracts were:

- Career opportunities
- Growth, training & development

- The work itself
- Wanting to stay in China.

Hygiene Factors

The most common reasons teachers chose as the primary reason they resigned were:

- Company policies (including “schedule”)
- Relationships with managers
- Wanting to leave China.

These are illustrated in Figure 1.

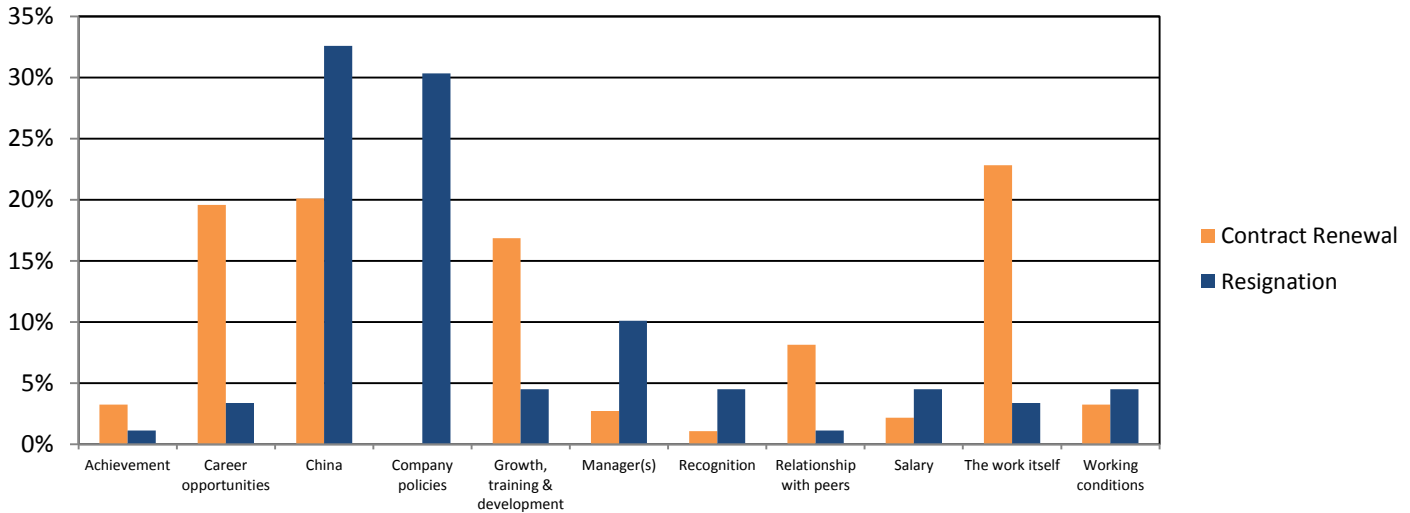


Figure 1: Primary reasons teachers cited for contract renewal / resigning

Discussion & Implications

The most commonly chosen motivation and hygiene factors will be discussed.

China

Perhaps unsurprisingly, China was the only factor significant in teachers’ decisions for both renewing their contracts and resigning. Indeed, “the desire to travel and live and work in different countries and cultures is often a strong motivating force [for teachers]” (Hockley, 2006, p. 5). However, the uncertainty and ambiguity of living and working abroad can also cause stress (Mezias & Scandura, 2005) which among other factors leads to between 20% and 40% of expatriate workers returning home before completing their expected tenure abroad (Black & Mendenhall, 1989; Kim & Slocum, 2008; Mendenhall, Dunbar & Oddou, 1987).

In this study, several teachers commented negatively about air pollution in China, saying “Beijing has been difficult to live in. I am constantly coughing and often feel sick.” “I suffer from asthma and Beijing’s air quality has made me very sick over the past couple

of months.” Other teachers appeared to have difficulty adapting to living abroad, commenting, “China is very difficult to navigate as a foreigner” and “I felt completely helpless in China. I wish there had been someone who was there to help us along the way to offer advice.” Some teachers who cited China as a reason for resigning were doing so as part of a plan to return home, for example “I’m leaving because China cannot offer me what I need in this stage of my life.”

Many of the comments related to China were positive. Teachers who renewed their contracts commented “Living in China is a fun experience” and “I

enjoy the opportunity to enhance my knowledge of China and its people.”

These results suggest that adapting to living in a new country is an important factor in foreign teacher turnover. Helping employees engage in the host culture, providing training on overcoming culture shock, allowing extended time off to facilitate travel home, providing language lessons and assistance in apartment hunting or providing housing to teachers are all steps which schools may take to help teachers overcome the challenges of moving to a new country.

Growth, Training & Development

Over 40% of the respondents who renewed their contracts were found to have undertaken a training course within the past year compared with just 12% of teachers who resigned. In recent research conducted by Universum, a Swedish consultancy which specializes in talent acquisition and brand building, 45% of Generation Y respondents emphasized the importance of learning and developing new skills (Dill, 2014). The results here reflect the importance of teacher development in retaining teachers.

Teachers who chose “growth, training and development” gave high Employee Net Promoter Scores

(eNPS), a popular method used by employers to evaluate employee satisfaction (Reichheld, 2003) compared with other teachers. This was true for both expatriate and Chinese teachers. Thus, teachers who are primarily motivated by their own professional growth are more likely to be loyal employees, stay longer and promote their place of work to their friends (Kaufman, Markey, Burton & Azzarello, 2013).

This option was chosen more frequently by Chinese teachers than by their expatriate counterparts as a reason for choosing to renew their contracts. This factor may have been more commonly selected by Chinese staff as they intended to stay in the teaching profession for longer than their expatriate counterparts. 67% of the Chinese teachers who renewed their contracts said they initially planned to work at this private language institution for more than one year when they started compared with just 35% of expatriate teachers. It also could be argued that as none of the Chinese teachers surveyed were motivated by working in China, other motivators took on greater relative importance.

Career opportunities

Previous research by Hockley (2006) suggested “career opportunities” were not important to language teachers, going so far as to say “most teachers I have talked to have no great interest in becoming managers” (p. 3). The results here are quite different: career opportunities being the primary reason one in five teachers renewed their contracts. This may be a result of Generation Y employees placing more importance on personal growth than the Generation X employees surveyed by Hockley a decade ago. Recent research conducted by Universum showed that 40% Generation Y respondents “list their biggest fear as becoming trapped in a job with no chance for development” (Dill, 2014, p. 2). “Forty-one percent of respondents said taking on a leadership or management role was ‘very important to them’” (Dill, 2014, p. 2).

Career opportunities are common in some privately owned language schools in China, where teachers can find themselves in management positions within a relatively short space of time, often as a result of teacher turnover. This contrasts with language schools in other countries, where “in most cases there exists neither the opportunity nor the desire for promotion in the traditional hierarchical sense of the word” (Hockley, 2006, p. 3).

Groysberg et al. (2008) included improving one’s social status as part of the drive to acquire and Herzberg (1987) found “advancement” to be the fifth

most important motivation factor which is consistent with the findings in this study.

Company policies

Herzberg found “company policy and administration” to be the main source of “extreme dissatisfaction” in his research. For English teachers in China, the company policies which caused dissatisfaction were generally related to scheduling. Teachers who selected this as their reason for leaving said “I didn’t want to work weekends anymore,” “[I have] unsocial working hours” and “I hope we could take unpaid leave for attending training sessions instead of using our annual leave.” This issue may be particularly prevalent in private education companies in China where the majority of classes take place during evenings and weekends. These teachers’ attitudes reflect the importance of free-time for Generation Y employees (Barford & Hester, 2011).

The other company policies referred to were related to the for-profit nature of the business, with teachers commenting “policies are driven by the need for more profits rather than what is good for the employees or students” and “there is too much focus on money and not enough on academic integrity.” Realistic job previews can decrease turnover over of employees by up to 50% (Suszko & Breagh, 1986). In this case, setting clearer expectations during the recruitment process regarding the profit-driven nature of privately owned language schools in China and emphasizing the unsociable working hours of teachers in private language institutions may have helped to avoid dissatisfaction with these policies.

The Work Itself

Hockley (2006), Herzberg (1987) and Groysberg et al. (2008) all previously identified “the work itself” (or “the opportunity to do interesting work” or jobs which are “meaningful, interesting and challenging”) as a motivator. Here, this was the most common reason teachers cited for renewing their contracts. Teachers of adults chose this option three times as often as teachers of young learners did. It is possible that working with young learners and coping with behavior problems is often overwhelming for new teachers and prevented them from choosing this reason.

Chinese teachers were twice as likely to choose “the work itself” as a reason for renewing their contracts as expatriates were. Twice as many Chinese teachers who renewed their contracts initially planned to stay with the company for more than one year compared with the expatriate teachers surveyed. This suggests that these teachers were more confident in teaching as a longer-term career option compared with the expatriates surveyed. It is therefore not surprising

that these teachers were also motivated to renew their contracts by their enjoyment of teaching. However, that Chinese teachers cited this factor more than expatriate teachers may also indicate that other options which were important to expatriate teachers, such as career opportunities, may be perceived to be less easily obtainable for Chinese staff. While 22% of the expatriate teachers cited “career opportunities” as their primary reason for renewing their contracts, the same was true for merely 9% of Chinese teachers.

Relationships with managers

Herzberg (1987) also found relationships with managers (or “supervisors”) and “supervision” to be two of the main hygiene factors identified in his research. Groysberg et al. (2008) acknowledged that direct managers were as important as organizational policies in employee motivation.

Teachers who selected their manager as the main reason they left the company were less likely to recommend the school to a friend compared with teachers who cited wanting to leave China as their primary reason for resignation. Negative relationships between managers and teachers can therefore potentially harm recruitment initiatives by speaking negatively about the company in future. The majority of the teachers who cited their managers as the reason they left indicated that they intended to remain as teachers in China.

In the multinational and multicultural work context, trained, competent managers are essential. Training for managers on employee motivation, intercultural communication as well as stressing the importance of open dialogue with employees can all help to decrease teacher turnover.

Salary

Salary did not appear to be a major contributing factor in teachers’ decision making and motivation in this study. This contrasts with other findings in literature. In Hockley’s (2006) research salary was the second most important factor in teacher motivation. Herzberg (1987) found salary was the eight most common factor leading to dissatisfaction at work. Groysberg et al. (2008) recommend satisfying the drive to acquire through a reward system which included salary.

However, the results do agree with Judge et al., who recently reviewed 120 years of research on the subject and found minimal correlation between pay and job satisfaction noting, “relatively well-paid samples of individuals are only trivially more satisfied than relatively poorly paid samples” (2010, p. 162). Other research has shown that intrinsic job characteristics are

a better predictor of job satisfaction than salary (Judge & Church, 2000).

It is possible that teachers who are primarily motivated by salary choose to work for companies or in countries with higher starting salaries, for example in the Middle East. Demographics may again partially explain these differences; the majority of participants in Hockley’s (2006) study were more experienced, more highly paid and older than the teachers surveyed here. Generation Y employees are believed to be less motivated by compensation than their Generation X counterparts.

Conclusions

For the teachers surveyed, career opportunities and growth, training & development were the main drivers for over one third of the teachers to renew their contracts. Investing in training and development to help teachers grow professionally is clearly vital for Generation Y English language teachers and a more effective retention tool than salary increases or renewal bonuses. Language schools in China should ensure organizational rewards based on performance are factors which motivate teachers, i.e. access to and sponsorship for training and career advancement and not simply performance related pay.

Little seems to have changed in terms of what demotivates since Herzberg’s (1987) research was conducted. Supervision and company policy both featured prominently in Herzberg’s research and these factors also feature prominently here. There are implications for schools in terms of job design (sociable working hours, unpaid leave to allow longer vacations and visits home) and the selection and training of interculturally competent managers, the absence of which not only results in teacher turnover, but also in ex-employees who will be likely to speak negatively about their former school and thus harm future teacher recruitment. Setting clear expectations as part of the recruitment process about unsociable working hours and other company policies could also help avoid unnecessary dissatisfaction and decrease turnover.

China was the single most important factor in teachers’ decision to either renew their contract or resign. Meeting teachers’ most basic needs when moving to a new country, providing assistance to them in finding an apartment, overcoming culture shock, learning the local language and assisting them in building a social network when they arrive could all contribute to decreasing teacher turnover.

The English language teaching industry in China is worth \$2.1 billion a year (Swanson, 2013). Investing more in teachers’ growth, development and general

wellbeing will pay dividends not only for individual schools but for the 300 million English learners in China.

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