

Motivation At The Heart Of Teacher Education: Revisiting Insights From Vietnamese TESL Student Teachers Post-Practicum

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Abstract:

Background: This paper revisits a previous study that examined the motivation of third-year TESL student teachers in Vietnam following their teaching practicum, using the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). Building on that original research, this paper connects the findings to two important developments in the field: Vu et al.'s (2022) model of the motivation-achievement cycle and Lamb and Wyatt's (2019) call to re-center motivation as a core concern in Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE).

Methods: The original study surveyed 167 TESL student teachers using the Academic Motivation Scale (college version), alongside demographic and practicum-related questions. It analyzed the relationships between academic motivation, practicum satisfaction, academic achievement (GPA), and the desire to pursue a teaching career.

Results: Results showed a moderate positive correlation between academic achievement and post-practicum motivation, as well as between practicum satisfaction and teaching aspiration. However, the majority of participants remained predominantly extrinsically motivated, and students with lower academic performance did not consistently experience motivational growth even after positive practicum experiences.

Conclusion: In revisiting these findings, this paper argues that motivation in teacher education must be understood not only as linked to achievement but also mediated by student teachers' developing self-efficacy and professional identity. The study supports recent calls for SLTE programs to actively nurture motivation throughout the training journey, particularly through structured reflection, targeted feedback, and identity-focused support during practicum experiences.

Key Word: Motivation; Teacher Education; Self-Determination Theory

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I. Introduction

The Overlooked Role of Motivation in Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE)

Although teacher motivation is widely acknowledged as essential to effective teaching and long-term professional commitment, it remains marginalized within the field of Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE). As Lamb and Wyatt (2019) point out, many prominent SLTE frameworks and textbooks either ignore teacher motivation altogether or treat it as a secondary outcome, rather than a core concern of teacher development. This is a critical oversight, especially when considering that a motivated teacher is more likely to design engaging lessons and foster meaningful student learning experiences.

When revisiting my own study on TESL student teachers' motivation post-practicum, I realized it speaks directly to two major concerns raised by Lamb and Wyatt: (1) the neglect of motivation in SLTE research and practice, and (2) the need to recognize motivation as a key determinant of professional development outcomes. While motivation among pre-service teachers in general has been widely researched (Lamb and Wyatt, 2019), studies focusing specifically on pre-service language teachers, particularly in non-Western contexts like Vietnam, remain limited.

A significant contribution to the field is the FIT-Choice model (Richardson & Watt, 2006), which categorizes pre-service teachers into three types: highly engaged persisters, engaged switchers, and low-engaged desisters. Their research shows that the most intrinsically motivated teachers benefit the most from training, while the least motivated often disengage, sometimes viewing teacher education negatively. Lamb and Wyatt (2019) build on this by examining how second language teachers may enter the profession for reasons other than a passion for teaching – such as a love of English, social mobility, or fallback career choices. They argue that these varying motives shape teaching identity and classroom behavior, and therefore, SLTE programs must take motivation more seriously.

My research contributes to this conversation by placing motivation at the center of teacher education research. Specifically, it investigates how academic performance, practicum satisfaction, and motivation types (intrinsic vs. extrinsic) are related to TESL student teachers' desire to pursue the profession. In doing so, it addresses the gaps raised by Lamb and Wyatt and provides empirical evidence from the Vietnamese context to support their call for a more motivation-focused approach in SLTE.

II. Core Theoretical Models

The motivation-achievement cycle

Vu et al. (2022) propose that motivation and achievement influence each other cyclically. They emphasize that this cycle can form positive or negative feedback loops over time and is influenced by personal, contextual, and behavioral factors. Students who are more motivated tend to exert more effort and hence perform better academically. Academic success boosts students' self-belief and emotional engagement, which in turn helps strengthen future motivation.

While Vu et al. suggest a full-cycle model of reciprocal influence between motivation and achievement, my study about motivation in TESL student teachers post-practicum focuses specifically on the often-overlooked second half of the cycle, that is, how achievement, both academic and experiential (via the practicum), shapes future motivation and professional commitment in TESL student teachers. My research also demonstrates how external factors such as support affects the cycle, using data analysis of the practicum satisfaction.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and SDT-based motivation construct

Vu et al. (2022), in their review of the motivation-achievement cycle, highlight SDT as one of several major theories explaining how motivation influences academic behavior and outcomes. They acknowledge that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation play distinct roles in shaping effort and learning strategies, which in turn impact achievement. They also point out that academic success can reinforce or diminish future motivation depending on how it fulfills or frustrates students' psychological needs, making SDT a key lens for understanding the cyclical nature of motivation and achievement.

Lamb and Wyatt (2022) similarly position SDT as central to rethinking Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE). They argue that SDT has been underutilized in teacher education and call for greater attention to teachers' internal psychological states – what they want, feel, and value – not just their pedagogical skills. They emphasize that when novice teachers experience autonomy, competence, and relatedness during training (especially during practicum), they are more likely to develop a sustained, internalized commitment to teaching. Conversely, SLTE programs that neglect these psychological needs risk producing demotivated teachers.

My own research aligns closely with this SDT framework by exploring the post-practicum motivation of third-year TESL student teachers in Vietnam. Using the Academic Motivation Scale (based on SDT), I found that participants were predominantly extrinsically motivated, though their desire to pursue teaching increased when practicum experiences were affirming. Furthermore, students with higher academic performance reported significantly higher levels of motivation, suggesting that feelings of competence – one of SDT core needs – may have been reinforced through achievement. These findings illustrate how SDT can help explain the relationship between educational experiences and evolving motivational orientations in pre-service teachers, especially in non-Western contexts that are underrepresented in the SLTE literature.

III. Methodology

My study (2024) focused on third-year TESL student teachers at a Vietnamese university, right after they had completed their one-month teaching practicum in public schools. The goal was to examine how their academic performance and practicum experience related to their academic motivation – particularly through the lens of Self-Determination Theory. The study was conducted in the spring semester of 2024, with the survey distributed during the third week of the semester – giving students just enough time to reflect on their practicum experience without it feeling too distant.

To collect data, I used the Academic Motivation Scale (college version), which includes 28 questions designed to measure different types of motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic. The survey also gathered demographic information, self-reported GPA, recent course grades, practicum satisfaction, and their desire to become a teacher post-practicum. In total, 167 students completed the survey out of 188 enrolled, making the sample fairly representative of the cohort.

For the analysis, I calculated each student's Self-Determination Index (SDI), a composite score that reflects the balance between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. I then used descriptive statistics to understand overall motivation levels, and correlation tests (Pearson's and Spearman's) to explore the relationships between motivation, GPA, practicum satisfaction, and students' desire to pursue a teaching career.

IV. Result

Looking at my findings through the lens of the motivation-achievement cycle, it is clear that this study captures the second half of the cycle – how achievement can influence and even reshape motivation. Statistically, both Pearson's ($r_p = 0.330$, $p = .000$) and Spearman's ($r_s = 0.344$, $p = .000$) correlation tests showed a moderate positive relationship between students' GPA and their Self-Determination Index (SDI). In other words, students who performed better academically tended to report higher motivation levels after the practicum.

This supports Vu et al.'s (2022) claim that achievement does not just result from motivation – it also feeds back into it, particularly by reinforcing students' sense of competence. However, this feedback loop did not hold true for everyone. Many students with lower GPAs – especially those in the 2.0 to 2.49 range (39.5% of the sample) – did not show the same motivational boost, even though over 70% rated their practicum experience as satisfactory or better.

This nuance reinforces a key argument by Lamb and Wyatt (2019), who points out that teacher motivation is not just about what happens during training, but how teachers interpret those experiences emotionally and psychologically. If a student feels capable and supported, they are more likely to internalize those experiences positively. But if they lack self-efficacy – something that is not automatically fixed by good feedback or a smooth practicum – they may remain disengaged or unsure about continuing in the profession.

Interestingly, while 43.7% of students said their desire to become a teacher increased after the practicum, 44.3% remained neutral, and 9.6% reported a decrease. This suggests that even when external experiences are relatively positive, motivation remains a highly personal and internal process, influenced by how students see themselves as future teachers.

Taken together, these findings support the broader motivation-achievement cycle described by Vu et al., but also underscore what Lamb and Wyatt emphasizes: motivation is not evenly activated by achievement alone. Instead, it is tied to identity, emotional investment, and perceived competence, which means teacher education programs need to support these inner dimensions – not just deliver training.

V. Discussion

My research set out to explore how academic performance and practicum experience relate to the motivation of third-year TESL student teachers after their practicum. In light of the motivation-achievement cycle proposed by Vu et al. (2022) and the focus on teacher self-efficacy and identity development highlighted by Lamb and Wyatt (2019), the findings offer several insights – and raise some important questions.

First, the positive correlation between academic achievement and motivation ($r_p = 0.330$, $r_s = 0.344$, $p = .000$) supports the idea that achievement can strengthen motivation over time. Students with higher GPAs tended to report stronger Self-Determination Index (SDI) scores. This mirrors the achievement → motivation pathway in Vu et al.'s cycle, where success is not just an end result but a reinforcing mechanism for future engagement and effort. In that sense, my findings confirm that for many students, academic success does not just validate their competence – it also sustains their commitment to the teaching profession.

However, the relationship between achievement and motivation in my study was not uniform across all students. Those with lower GPAs, especially those in the 2.0 – 2.49 range (nearly 40% of the sample), did not experience the same boost in motivation even though most of them reported being satisfied with their practicum experiences. This suggests that objective success (i.e., passing courses, completing the practicum) does not always translate into subjective feelings of competence or stronger professional identity. In some cases, achievement might not be enough if students still doubt their ability to succeed long-term or do not fully internalize their practicum experience as a sign of readiness for teaching.

This aligns with what Lamb and Wyatt (2019) emphasize: motivation in teacher education is not simply about what happens externally (like a practicum or a course grade), but about how student teachers internalize and make sense of these experiences emotionally. Lamb and Wyatt's focus on teacher self-efficacy and emerging identity helps explain why even students who "perform adequately" by external standards might still feel uncertain or disconnected internally. It also shows why motivation in teacher education must be treated as deeply personal and psychological, not just procedural or curriculum-based.

The practicum itself appears to function as an important external catalyst in the motivation-achievement cycle. Students who reported higher satisfaction with support from homeroom and English teachers were more likely to report an increased desire to become a teacher ($r_s = 0.301$, $p = .000$). However, the practicum alone did not guarantee motivational growth across the board. Only 43.7% of the students said their desire to teach increased after the practicum, while 44.3% remained neutral, and 9.6% reported a decrease. This pattern suggests that while practicum support can set the stage, students' pre-existing levels of motivation, self-efficacy, and identity clarity play a critical role in determining whether that external support truly lands.

In that sense, my findings point to a subtle but important limitation of the motivation-achievement cycle model if taken at face value: achievement and motivation are linked, but the link is mediated by the

individual's self-perception. Achievement may offer new information to students about their abilities, but whether they accept or reject that information seems to depend on how ready they are to see themselves as capable teachers. For some students, a positive practicum reinforced their emerging teacher identity; for others, it may have raised doubts or fears that had not been fully addressed.

This also has important implications for how teacher education programs are structured. If motivation truly operates through both achievement and self-perception, then it is not enough to offer well-designed practicum experiences or academic courses. What matters just as much is how students are guided to make sense of those experiences. Teacher education, in this sense, needs to move beyond simply evaluating performance to actively supporting students in interpreting their learning in empowering ways. For example, Lamb and Wyatt (2019) suggest that, rather than relying solely on end-of-practicum evaluations, programs might benefit from weaving in more regular opportunities for guided reflection – spaces where student teachers can talk through what they have learned, where they struggled, and how they are growing. The kind of feedback given during this stage is crucial too: not just what went wrong or right, but how those moments connect to students' emerging sense of competence and autonomy. For students who already feel unsure of their academic standing, these moments of support can make the difference between internalizing a setback as personal failure or recognizing it as part of the learning curve. This is especially important in helping student teachers develop a future-oriented vision of themselves in the classroom – not just imagining what they might do, but actually seeing themselves as capable of becoming the kind of teacher they admire. As Lamb and Wyatt argue, motivation is not just cognitive or behavioral; it is emotional and identity-driven. Teacher education, then, must be equally concerned with protecting and nurturing those inner beliefs and aspirations if we hope to build resilient, self-determined educators.

Another important observation is the dominance of extrinsic motivation in the sample. The intrinsic motivation mean was 4.61, while extrinsic motivation averaged 5.32, with a practically significant difference (Cohen's $d = 0.66$). This finding resonates with Lamb and Wyatt's concern that many pre-service teachers, especially in non-Western contexts, may enter teaching with strong external drivers (e.g., financial stability, social expectations) rather than purely intrinsic love for the profession. While extrinsic motivation is not necessarily bad – and can, over time, become internalized – this pattern suggests that teacher education needs to do more to cultivate intrinsic interest in teaching itself, not just in “getting through” the program.

In the end, my study affirms Vu et al.'s view that motivation and achievement are deeply interconnected, but it also supports Lamb and Wyatt's call for a more affective and identity-based approach to teacher education. Without addressing student teachers' inner perceptions of competence, autonomy, and belonging, we risk building programs that technically produce “graduates,” but fail to nurture truly motivated, self-determined educators.

VI. Implication

My study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical approaches in teacher education, especially in how we conceptualize and support student motivation in relation to academic achievement and professional identity development.

Implications for Theory

The findings offer concrete support for the motivation-achievement cycle proposed by Vu et al. (2022), especially the achievement → motivation pathway. While much of the existing literature focuses on how motivation predicts performance, this study highlights how academic success and positive practicum experiences can reinforce - or in some cases, fail to reinforce - future motivation. It also suggests that the cycle is not automatic or linear. Students interpret achievement through the lens of their self-perception, emotional state, and evolving teacher identity, echoing what Lamb and Wyatt (2019) argue about the central role of affect and self-concept in shaping teacher motivation.

This means the motivation-achievement cycle may need to be expanded to account for mediating psychological factors such as self-efficacy beliefs, identity clarity, and emotional response to feedback. Future theoretical models might benefit from incorporating elements of possible selves theory and identity frameworks to better explain why some students gain motivation from success while others do not. In doing so, we move closer to a more dynamic and individualized understanding of motivation in teacher education.

Implications for Practice

From a practical standpoint, the findings call for more holistic support systems within teacher education programs – especially during and after the practicum. First, academic success plays a key role in shaping students' post-practicum motivation, so instructors and program designers should ensure that assessments, feedback, and grading systems are not only fair but also constructive and confidence-building,

particularly for students who may be struggling. Rather than simply identifying weak areas, feedback should aim to highlight progress, effort, and potential for growth.

Second, the practicum should be more than a test of teaching ability; it should be a structured space for identity development. This means building in time for guided reflection, supportive mentoring, and conversations that help student teachers make sense of their experiences emotionally, not just technically. As Lamb and Wyatt (2019) recommend, teacher educators should help students form future-oriented visions of themselves as teachers, while also offering realistic tools for navigating challenges and setbacks. This may be especially important for students who are still developing confidence or entering the program with primarily extrinsic motivations.

Finally, programs should be mindful that not all students will benefit equally from the same experiences. Those with lower academic performance may require more intentional scaffolding, both academically and emotionally, to internalize positive experiences and build self-efficacy. This could involve differentiated mentoring and targeted interventions that help students reframe failure as part of the learning process, rather than as evidence they are not “cut out” for teaching.

In short, if teacher education is to nurture genuinely motivated, resilient educators, it must attend not only to knowledge and skills but also to the internal narratives students are building about who they are and who they can become. Motivation cannot be assumed – it must be cultivated and protected throughout the training process.

VII. Limitation And Future Research

Like any research, my study has its limitations. First, it was based on cross-sectional data, collected at a single point in time shortly after the practicum. While the correlations between academic achievement, practicum satisfaction, and motivation are informative, they fail to allow for claims about causality or long-term change. To fully capture the cyclical nature of the motivation-achievement relationship, future research would benefit from a longitudinal design, tracking student teachers across multiple semesters – or even from entry into the program through their early years of teaching.

Second, although the sample size ($n = 167$) was substantial and representative of the third-year TESL cohort at my institution, it was drawn from a single university in Vietnam. As a result, the findings may not be generalizable to other contexts – particularly those where teacher training systems, cultural expectations, or student backgrounds differ. Expanding this research to include multiple institutions or international comparisons would provide a more nuanced understanding of how contextual factors shape motivation and achievement.

Another limitation concerns the self-reported nature of the data. While the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS) has demonstrated strong reliability and validity, it still relies on participants’ own perceptions, which can be influenced by social desirability or momentary emotions. Future research could combine self-reports with qualitative interviews or reflective journals to gain deeper insight into how student teachers interpret their academic and practicum experiences, especially when it comes to identity development and motivation over time.

Lastly, while this study focused primarily on the achievement → motivation pathway, it did not explore the full loop described by Vu et al. (2022). Future studies could take a more holistic approach, examining how initial levels of motivation shape students’ academic performance and practicum outcomes, and how these in turn affect motivation moving forward. This would help to further validate or challenge the model of reciprocal influence and offer a richer picture of how student teachers evolve throughout their training.

VIII. Conclusion

My study about motivation in TESL student teachers post-practicum (2024) set out to explore how academic performance and practicum experience shape the motivation of third-year TESL student teachers in Vietnam, using the framework of Self-Determination Theory and the motivation-achievement cycle. The findings suggest that while achievement and external experiences like the practicum do play a role in strengthening motivation, the process is far from automatic. For many students, especially those with stronger academic performance and more supportive practicum environments, motivation to pursue teaching increased. However, for others – particularly those with lower academic standing – these same experiences did not translate into a clearer professional identity or stronger drive.

These results echo the broader point made by Lamb and Wyatt (2019): that motivation in teacher education is not simply about cognitive learning or technical success. It is deeply tied to how students see themselves, how supported they feel, and whether they can envision a meaningful future in the profession. The implication is clear: if we want to train not only competent teachers but motivated and self-determined ones, we must pay closer attention to how we design, scaffold, and emotionally support the entire teacher preparation journey.

By connecting the theoretical foundations laid out by Vu et al. (2022) with the lived experiences of TESL student teachers, this study offers a small but important step toward understanding how teacher motivation can be nurtured and sustained – specially during pivotal transitions like the practicum. With more research, especially in diverse cultural contexts, we can move closer to building teacher education systems that support not just academic success, but lasting, self-driven commitment to the profession.

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