



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 10. Issue.4. 2023 (Oct-Dec)

ISSN
INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

DEMOTIVATING FACTORS IN ENGLISH LEARNING: THE CASE OF A CHINESE ENGLISH
MAJOR STUDENT

Yang Yue^{*1}, Du Yi²

¹Master Degree Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University,
Beijing, China.

²Lecturer and Master Degree Supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power
University, Beijing, China.

*Corresponding author: yangyuedaisy@163.com



Article information

Article Received:25/10/2023
Article Accepted:20/11/2023
Published online:22/11/2023
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.10.4.46](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.10.4.46)

ABSTRACT

Although recently there is a growing body of research on demotivation in second language learning and teaching, there are relatively few carried out in the Chinese context. This study was conducted with one Chinese English major student to explore the main demotivating factors affecting her English learning, and the data were collected through a combination of a questionnaire and an in-depth interview. The results showed that teachers, characteristics of classes, and class materials are the major demotivating factors in this participant's language learning.

Keywords: Demotivations; demotivating factors; language learning

1. Introduction

Motivation has been considered as one of the most important factors influencing second language acquisition. Demotivation, as the counterpart of motivation, can be used to explain why L2 learners lose their motivation to study the target language. Research on demotivation in L2 learning began in the science of educational communication in the United States in the early 1990s, it is defined broadly as "various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation," and more specifically as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action" (Dörnyei, 2001).

Since the 1990s, many foreign researchers have conducted empirical studies on demotivation in language learning. For example, Gorham and Christophel (1992) undertook an study that investigated the impact of teacher's inappropriate classroom behavior on learners' motivation. The experiment was conducted with 308 American college students and the results showed that most of the demotivations were related to teachers. This study laid the empirical foundation for subsequent research on demotivation. Oxford (1998) required 250 American college and high school students to review their foreign language learning experiences through writing and followed them for five years. His experiments showed that the subjects experienced varying degrees of being demotivated during the learning process, with the main reasons centering on the teacher. The results of these studies showed that most of the learners' demotivation for language learning were teacher-related. In follow-up studies, more researchers in different cultures began to focus on demotivating factors other than teachers in different contexts.

Dörnyei (2001) conducted semi-structured interviews with 50 Hungarian secondary school students studying English or German. He coded the results of the experiment and identified nine types of demotivation factors covering teachers, textbooks, faculty management, impaired self-confidence, negative attitudes toward the target foreign language, coercion to learn a foreign language, interference from the native language, negative attitudes toward the target language community, and peer assessment. Dörnyei's categorization of these factors has become a cornerstone of subsequent research on demotivation. Trang and Baldauf (2007) used the retrospective writing method to investigate the demotivation of students in a Vietnamese university. The study found that internal factors accounted for 36% of the total demotivation of Vietnamese learners, which included learners' negative attitudes towards English, past failures, and damaged self-esteem. Japanese scholars Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) and Kojima (2004) both conducted studies on secondary school students in Japan, and they both found that learning content, class material, and test scores were the major factors that caused demotivation for many Japanese secondary school students. And teachers' ability and teaching methods were not the major causes of demotivation in their studies. Chinese scholars Zhou and Wang (2012) conducted a questionnaire survey on 766 Chinese university English learners, and the results showed that the lack of effective learning strategies was the primary factor in generating demotivation, and the lack of interest in learning was also a reason for inducing demotivation among learners.

Based on the previous studies on demotivation, this paper identified six demotivating factors that may affect Chinese EFL learner' English learning (Gorham and Christophel, 1992; Oxford, 1998; Dörnyei, 2001; Kikuchi and Sakai, 2009; Kojima,2004):

1. Teachers: Teachers' attitude, teaching competence, language proficiency, personality, and teaching style.
2. Characteristics of classes: Course contents and pace, focus on difficult grammar or vocabulary, monotonous and boring lessons, a focus on university entrance exams and the memorization of the language.
3. Experiences of failure: Disappointment due to test scores, lack of acceptance by teachers and others, and feeling unable to memorize vocabulary and idioms.
4. Class environment: Attitude of classmates, compulsory nature of English study, friends' attitudes, inactive classes, inappropriate level of the lessons, and inadequate use of school facilities such as not using audio-visual materials.
5. Class materials: Not suitable or uninteresting materials.
6. Lack of interest: Sense that English used at schools is not practical and not necessary. Little admiration toward English speaking people.

This paper attempts to answer the following two questions in a case study analysis:

1. What are the possible sources of demotivation in the EFL learner's language learning?
2. How do these demotivating factors influence this EFL learner's language learning?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participant

The subject of this study was an English major student who studied in the North China Electric Power University, named Mary, female, 23 years old, and she passed TEM4 and TEM8. In this study, she was first asked to complete a questionnaire about the influence of demotivating factors on second language learning, and then she was interviewed in detail.

2.2. Questionnaire

The design of the demotivation questionnaire was based on the one put forward by Japanese scholars, Hideki Sakai and Keita Kikuchi (2009). I translated the original questionnaire into Chinese. Then, I combined the original three items "computer equipment was not used" (item 21), "the Internet was not used (item 23)", and "Language learning equipment was not used" (item 24) into one item "multimedia equipment was not used",

based on the actual teaching situation in China. As for the factor "Learning Contents and Materials", there are two items related to grammar, "Most of the lessons focused on grammar"(item 3), and "I was expected to use (or speak and write) grammatically correct English"(item 5). Because the requirement that students are expected to use grammatically correct English can be seen as the result of lessons focused on grammar, so I retained item 3, which is more comprehensive. The questionnaire consisted of 32 5-point Likert type questions about demotivation (see the Appendix). It was designed to measure six constructs derived from previous studies: teachers (items1–6), characteristics of classes (items 7–12), experiences of failure (items 13–17), class environment (items 18–22), class materials (items 23–28), and lack of interest (items 29–32). The instructions for this part were: "How much do you agree with the following statement as a demotivating factor?" The participant was required to choose one of the following options: 1: Strongly disagree; 2: Disagree; 3: Neither agree nor disagree; 4: Agree; and 5: Strongly agree. Each option corresponds to a specific score, and the demotivation index for each factor is determined by calculating the average score within its category of items.

The questionnaire also included one question about motivation to learn English: "How motivated are you to learn English?" . The participant was required to choose one of the alternatives: 1: I have almost no motivation; 2: I have a little motivation; 3: I have moderate motivation; and 4: I have high motivation. Based on the responses to this question, the participant can be judged as less motivated learner or more motivated learner. The data were collected by the "Questionnaire Star" software.

2.3. Interview

The interview lasted 34 minutes , using Tencent Conferences. The interview was conducted in Chinese and was video recorded. It includes six questions. In the interview, I first asked Mary to describe her mental process when she felt demotivated in learning English and asked her what factors she thought contributed to her demotivation. Then I took the questionnaire into account and asked her to explain the reasons why these demotivating factors would have an impact on her, and asked her to give examples of what other factors besides these would affect her motivation to learn English. Finally, she elaborated on her responses to demotivation and her expectations of English teaching.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Major Demotivating Factors on Language Learning

Figure 1 shows the ranking of the six demotivating factors influence this Chinese English major student's language learning. The average scores of each item were calculated according to the criteria mentioned in 2.2, and the following data were obtained. According to the survey, the average score of items 1-6 is 4.17, the highest one, which means the factor "Teachers" has the most significant influence on this EFL learner's demotivation. The average score of items 7-12 and items 13-17 are both 3.17, tied for second place, it means that the two demotivating factors, "Characteristics of classes" and "Class materials", play an equally important role for this EFL learner's language learning. And the scores of the other three demotivating factors are all 1, it shows that "experiences of failure" (items 13–17), "class environment" (items 18–22), and "lack of interest" (items 29–32) may not have a significant impact on this EFL learner's demotivation.

Based on the detailed analysis of the scores for each item, it can be seen that, among the six items related to "Teachers", "Teachers' pronunciation of English was poor", "Teachers ridiculed students' mistakes", and "Teachers made one-way explanations too often" have the greatest impact on the participant's demotivation. Secondly, in terms of "Characteristics of classes", "Most of the lessons were entrance examination oriented", "Most of the lessons focused on translation", "I was expected to use grammatically correct English", and "I seldom had chances to communicate in English" are most demotivating. Thirdly, in terms of "Class materials", "Topics of the English passages used in lessons were not interesting", "Topics of the English passages used in lessons were old", "English passages in the textbooks were too long", and "English sentences dealt with in the lessons were difficult to interpret" are most demotivating. The scores of 14 items in the other three factors are all 1, it shows that factors like "I got lost in how to self-study for English lessons", "Computer equipment was not used", "I lost my interest in English" and so on may not lower the participant' motivation in language learning.

In addition, in response to the third question in the interview, the participant said that the six factors listed in the questionnaire are exactly the major demotivating factors on her language learning. And entertainment activities in her daily life, such as English songs and movies, may also influence her motivation in English learning.

Overall, from the ranking of six factors and the answer of the interview, it can be concluded that teachers, characteristics of classes and class materials maybe the major influences on this Chinese English major student's demotivation.



Figure 1: Demotivating Factors on EFL Learner's language Learning

3.2. Relationships between Demotivating Factors and Language Learning

When talking about the influence of factor "Teachers" on her English learning, the participant said when a teacher mentions topics unrelated to the course, brags about his or her study abroad experience and education, and shows disdain for young people, it can cause her to become bored with the class. This is particularly true when the teacher's teaching skills are not convincing or when the teacher ignores the knowledge he/she is supposed to teach in class. The participant also added that teachers' thoughts and ideas also had a great impact on her English learning. She believes that the substance of language learning is essential and that whether a teacher's opinions and perspectives are acceptable and internalized by her greatly affects her motivation to learn. If the content taught by the teacher is far above students' current level, it can also make her demotivated. For example, the participant felt demotivated in speaking practice because she thought that the accent of the foreign teacher in the oral class was too difficult for her to understand and that the speed teacher speaks was too fast for her to keep up. This causes her to lose confidence and thus become resistant. Also, it is demotivating for her if teachers do not communicate and interact with students in class or do not end classes on time.

Regarding the influence of the "Characteristics of classes" on her language learning, the participant gave an example of her own experience. In an undergraduate course, the main part of the class is for students to read the literature material on their own for twenty minutes, and the rest of the time is spent on debriefing the content of the material. She said that such course content is mechanical, lacking in innovation, and will make students less motivated to learn foreign languages. She also added that language learning should not be uniformly measured by grades, and that foreign language curriculum should be even less grade oriented. These are demotivating. As for the "Class materials", the participant pointed out that many selected topics of the articles in the textbook are now outdated or not closely related to real life. For example, one of the articles in the Advanced English textbook is related to geography, which she thought is not very relevant to her real life, and it was reported a long time ago, so it would not be very useful to study this article, and this kind of class material is meaningless, and studying this would only make learners lose motivation.

In explaining why "Experiences of failure", "Class environment", and "Lack of interest" do not have much influence on her demotivation, the participant said that the process of language learning inevitably involves obstacles and setbacks, meaning that demotivating factors such as experiences of failure and lack of interest are bound to occur, and that learning a second language is a process of overcoming these difficulties to

improve. The participant had already psychologically accepted the fact that demotivating factors were bound to occur, so that these factors had little impact on her language learning motivation.

3.3. Implications for English Teaching

The participant believes that motivation is very important in the beginning stages of her English learning, as it gives her enthusiasm and interest in learning English. She classified herself as an extroverted learner, and most of her motivation for language learning originated externally, usually driven by external factors in the learning activity, such as wanting to get praise for good grades, gaining recognition from others, and so on. However, these external motivations are usually unsustainable because very little of the motivation actually stems from an internal desire for knowledge. Thus, if the external stimulus disappears, motivation to learn will subsequently diminish. This participant also mentioned in the interview that when she realized that she was demotivated, she would improve her motivation by changing her learning environment. For example, watching English movies, listening to TED talks and taking notes, through these ways to create a relaxed atmosphere for learning English and increase her interest. When asked what improvements she would like to see in English teaching, she suggested that the approach should be more flexible and less rigid, and it should not be solely exam-oriented. She hoped that the teaching format could be innovative and developed.

Based on the results of the research with this participant, it can be concluded that the following improvements need to be made to her English language teaching: First, teachers need to update their teaching philosophy and innovate teaching formats to stimulate students' interest in language learning as much as possible. For example, teachers can introduce students to more knowledge about British and American culture that is not covered in the textbook, rather than recounting content that is not relevant to the lessons. And teachers need to communicate more with students in class, listen more to their ideas and give feedback. Teachers can increase the frequency of teacher-student exchanges or student-to-student exchanges to provide more opportunities for students to express their own ideas, and at the same time make the right guidance for students' ideas. Secondly, English learning should not be measured only by grades, but also by students' language communicative level. Therefore, corresponding changes can be made in the assessment methods of English courses. For example, practical evaluation can be integrated into the assessment of students. Finally, English textbooks need to be updated in time, using materials that are appropriate in difficulty and more relevant to real life. Schools and relevant departments can also provide teachers and students with more room for choice in textbooks.

4. Conclusion

For the EFL learner chosen in this study, teachers, characteristics of classes, and class materials are the major influences on her language learning, whereas class environment, experiences of failure, and lack of interest do not strongly affect her motivation. A teacher's inappropriate teaching format and irresponsible attitude toward the student can lead to her boredom with the course, single course forms and test-oriented curriculum provision can cause learning pressure, and the outdated and irrelevant teaching materials can result in her loss of interest in language learning. However, failures and gradual loss of interest in learning English do not have significant influence on her English learning motivation. Therefore, in language teaching, the following points need to be considered to avoid students' demotivation: teachers' teaching level needs to be improved, teaching forms need to be innovated, and teaching materials need to be updated

References

- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Teaching and researching motivation*. Longman, Harlow.
- Gao, C. Y. & He, X. D. (2013). A Factor Analysis of Motivation Missing in College English Learning. *Foreign Languages and Literature*, 29 (S1): 69-72.
- Gorham, J. & Christophel, D. (1992). Students' perception of teacher behaviors as motivating and demotivating factors in college classes. *Communication Quarterly*, (40):239-252.

- Gorham, J. & Christophel, D. (1995). A test-retest analysis of student motivation, teacher immediacy and perceived sources of motivation and demotivation in college classes. *Communication Education*, (44):292-306.
- Hasegawa, A. (2004). Student demotivation in the foreign language classroom. *Takushoku Language Studies*, (107):119-136.
- Hideki Sakai & Keita Kikuchi (2009). An analysis of demotivators in the EFL classroom. *System*, 37(1):57-69.
- Kojima, S. (2004). English learning demotivation in Japanese EFL students: Research in demotivational patterns from the qualitative research results of three different types of high schools. Unpublished master thesis. Kwansei Gakuin University, Hyogo, Japan.
- Liu, H. G. (2014). Quantitative Research on Chinese Learners' English Learning Demotivation: Reviews and Reflections. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, 35(05): 68-72.
- Ludwig, J. (1983). Attitudes and expectations: A profile of female and male students of college France, German and Spanish. *Modern Language Journal*, (67):216-227.
- Oxford, R. L. (1998). The unravelling tapestry: Teacher and course characteristics associated with demotivation in the language classroom. Demotivation in foreign language learning. Paper presented at the TESOL' 98 Congress, Seattle, WA.
- Tang, W. L. (2012). An Analysis of Demotivators in Non-English Major College Students' English Learning. *Foreign Language Education*, 33 (1): 70-75.
- Trang, T. & R. Baldauf. (2007). Demotivation: Understanding Resistance to English Language Learning - The Case of Vietnamese Students. *The Journal Asia TEEL*, 4 (1): 79-105.
- Zhang, H. P. & Li, H. (2006). A Research on the College Students' Demotivation. *Tsinghua Journal of Education*, (S1): 58-63.
- Zhu, X. H. (2011). Studies on Lack of Learning Motivation: A Retrospective and Prospective View. *Journal of Nanjing Normal University* (Social Science Edition), (03): 126-131.
- Zhou, C. B. & Wang, W. B. (2012). Demotivators Analysis of Chinese University EFL Learners. *Foreign Languages in China*, 9(01): 48-55