

# A Dynamic Study on Demotivation in English Language Learning among English Majors in Chinese Applied Colleges

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**Abstract:** The importance of exploring English language learners' demotivating and remotivating factors has been recognized by language educators, educational researchers, curriculum developers and material designers. Currently, English majors in domestic colleges and universities have problems such as experiencing demotivation or loss of enthusiasm in English language learning. For students, English learning demotivation is a major factor affecting their performance as well as achievement in English learning. Dynamic research on students' English learning demotivation helps language educators deal with demotivated learners from various educational contexts and provide insights on how to overcome demotivation. Based on this, this paper expounds the theory of demotivation in English language learning, analyzes the factors that affect the learning demotivation of English majors, and puts forward some feasible suggestions to remotivate students, aiming to improve the effect of college English learning.

**Keywords:** English language learning; English majors; Demotivation; Dynamic research

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## Fund Project:

This study is part of the phased results of two projects, namely "Research on the Quantification of Cantonese Interrogative Words from the Perspective of Generative Linguistics" (Project No. KA202008) and "The Establishment of Guangzhou College of Technology and Business & AUSHAN VIVIIN Off-campus Teaching Base" (Project No. ZL20211107).

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background

Over the past decades, China has increasingly joined the global community of economy and culture, and established a high-profile presence in various areas of the international scene, which has foregrounded the significance of having a good command of English in the country<sup>[1]</sup> and accelerated English as a foreign language (hereafter EFL) teaching and EFL learning in an unprecedented way<sup>[2]</sup>. Therefore, in this scenario, a good proficiency in English, as stated by Wen and Zhang<sup>[3]</sup>, has been considered as a definite asset or a form of social capital with tremendous value both at an individual and a societal level, and has been associated with decent jobs with a higher salary and more opportunities for promotion.

### 1.2 Statement of Problem

Although EFL learning has been playing an essential role both for China's modernization and for individual's future prospects, language educators and researchers at home and abroad recognize a fact that there has been a decline of motivation in some students' English learning especially when they proceed to a higher grade<sup>[4-8]</sup>. What makes matter worse is that this disturbing phenomenon is not unique to primary, junior, senior or college students, to whom English is a compulsory subject, but also prevalent among English majors who are supposed to be highly motivated and have strong interest and enthusiasm in English learning<sup>[9-11]</sup>. Students experiencing less motivation or having little interest in English learning generally lack learning goals, make less efforts, and feel more anxious in English learning, thus resulting in poor performance and impeding intention to continue<sup>[12]</sup>.

## 2. Demotivation

The role played by demotivation in EFL learning is as essential as motivation. While motivation exerts positive impacts on

learning, demotivation interferes the learning process and “leads to unsuccessful mastery of English proficiency”<sup>[13]</sup>. Therefore, it is necessary for us to have a better understanding of demotivation in EFL learning.

## 2.1 Definition

Dörnyei and Ushioda<sup>[14]</sup> defined it as “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action”. From Dörnyei and Ushioda’s point of view, demotivation is caused by external forces only, while neglecting the internal forces, such as students’ willingness, enthusiasm, attitudes, and beliefs towards EFL learning. Later, many researchers cast doubt on Dörnyei and Ushioda’s definition of demotivation, and they hold that both external factors and internal factors are found to work together to contribute to the formation of demotivation<sup>[15-16]</sup>.

## 2.2 Research on Demotivation

### 2.2.1 Studies on Demotivation Abroad

As an educational psychology phenomenon, studies on demotivation were initiated by Gorham and Christophel<sup>[17]</sup>, who investigated 308 undergraduate college students’ demotivating factors by means of questionnaire and found that teacher-related factors are most influential, serving as a prelude to other researchers who are interested in studying learners’ demotivating factors.

Then, Chambers<sup>[18]</sup> introduced the term “demotivation” into the area of English education. He examined 191 students and 7 teachers in Leeds, UK by administering two questionnaires separately and the results are interesting: most students reproached their teachers and attributed their demotivation to teacher-related factors, while teachers did not perceive themselves as a demotivating factor.

Later, Dörnyei<sup>[19]</sup> gave his definition of demotivation and summarized nine demotivators in students’ English learning after investigating 50 Hungarian students by administering semi-structured interviews among them. Unlike previous studies, the participants in Dörnyei’s study are mainly those who show decreased motivation and are perceived by their teachers and classmates as demotivating students in foreign language learning. Dörnyei’s study on demotivation gives deeper and more comprehensive insights in the field of second language acquisition.

Inspired by western researchers, many Asian scholars have also devoted themselves to studying learners’ demotivation in language learning. One of the most influential studies was done by Sakai and Kikuchi<sup>[20]</sup>, who gave a detailed analysis of demotivators in the EFL classroom by investigating 656 Japanese high school students and asking them to complete a 35-item questionnaire. They found out five demotivation factors, among which learning contents and materials as well as test scores are bothering most Japanese high school students, whereas teacher-related factors are not a strong cause of demotivation. It is noticeable that teachers seem to be the most demotivating factors for western students while Asian students seldom attribute their demotivation to teachers, which is probably because of various cultural and educational backgrounds.

From the above review of demotivation studies, it is evident that demotivation is a common and prevalent phenomenon in language learning not only in western countries but also in some Asian countries.

### 2.2.2 Studies on Demotivation in Mainland China

Studies on students’ demotivation in mainland China started relatively late at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but over the past two decades, it has developed rapidly and yielded abundant results.

Li’s<sup>[21]</sup> survey on 120 non-English majors’ demotivating factors shows that teacher-related factors accounted for nearly half (40%) of all factors, the results of which are in line with that of Zhang’s<sup>[22]</sup> and Liang’s<sup>[23]</sup> research. In Zhang’s study on 316 participants, almost 2/3 of learners’ demotivating factors are associated with teachers, and the situation is similar in Liang’s study, in which teacher-related factors account for 61% of total factors.

A further review of relevant literature on students’ demotivation indicate that a large number of researches in mainland China mainly focus on college students from prestigious universities and the participants are mostly non-English majors<sup>[24]</sup>, and questionnaires, interviews or questionnaires plus interviews become the dominant research methods to investigate students’ demotivating factors. However, English majors in applied colleges in China deserve researchers’ attention because there is paucity of research in this field and they may also suffer from demotivation in English language learning, which is likely to negatively influence their attitudes and result in long-term detrimental effects<sup>[25]</sup>. It is therefore of necessity to investigate English major undergraduates’ demotivating factors systematically in order to generate new insights into this phenomenon.

## 2.3 Factors Affecting College Students’ Learning Demotivation

Previous studies have found that ever-decreasing motivation or demotivation is a common phenomenon among Chinese college

EFL learners <sup>[26-27]</sup>, and it is caused by both internal factors (e.g. attitude, beliefs, self-confidence, etc.) and external factors (e.g. teachers, teaching materials, teaching context, etc.) which are intertwined together, resulting in students being unable to concentrate on English learning, and having detrimental effects on the construction of efficient classroom and the goal to cultivate English professional talents with higher education.

One of the earlier and pioneering studies on it was conducted by Dörnyei, who summarized 9 main demotivators as (1) the teacher, (2) inadequate school facilities, (3) reduced self-confidence, (4) negative attitudes towards the L2, (5) compulsory nature of L2 study, (6) interference of another foreign language being studied, (7) negative attitudes towards the L2 community, (8) attitudes of group members and (9) coursebook. Dörnyei's (1998) study served as a prelude and reference for a growing number of researchers to develop their own dimensions of L2 demotivation.

Sakai and Kikuchi recognized six common demotivators in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context by investigating 656 Japanese high school students through questionnaires. Both internal and external factors are illustrated in Sakai and Kikuchi's study, and they are (1) teachers, (2) characteristics of classes, (3) experiences of failure, (4) class environment, (5) class materials and (6) learners' loss of interest.

Meanwhile, Li and Zhou's study also identified 8 demotivators by conducting a questionnaire among 367 university students in China. These identified demotivators are divided into two categories: internal factors (lack of intrinsic interest; experience of failure and lack of confidence; unclear study goals) and external factors (teaching material, teaching process and teaching content; significant others; teachers' teaching competence and attitude of teachers; the relationship between teachers and students; teaching facilities and teaching environment). Notably, the researchers identified an important factor in Chinese university EFL learners' English study, namely unclear study goal.

These studies mentioned above bear some similarities among these dimensions of L2 demotivation. For example, teacher-related factors are among the common dimensions of students' demotivation in learning a second/foreign language. Apart from teacher-related factors, learner-related factors are also apparent in the above studies, such as lack of self-confidence and interest as well as experience of failure. Moreover, the issue related to school facilities, class environment and coursebooks should not be ignored.

### **3. Strategies to Enhance Learning Motivation of English Majors in Colleges and Universities**

In view of the above-mentioned phenomena, in order to enhance college students' learning motivation, the following countermeasures are proposed.

#### **3.1 Enhance students' confidence, change students' learning attitude and stimulate their interest in learning**

Students' interest in learning will be stimulated to a great extent when they are confident in themselves. Teachers should try their best to choose teaching materials that are in line with students' current English level and learning ability and assign appropriate tasks correspondingly. By reasonably controlling the difficulty of tasks, it is more likely for college students with different learning abilities to have successful learning experiences and boost their confidence in English language learning. In this regard, students' interest in learning will be greatly improved if they can successfully complete their learning tasks and obtain successful experiences during the learning process.

#### **3.2 Help students set realistic goals**

Huang and Yu <sup>[28]</sup> noted that establishing a feasible learning goal is the first step of students' learning. Clear, attainable and feasible goals exert positive impacts on students' learning motivation. In teaching practice, teachers should put forward clear and easy-to-understand learning requirements for students, guide students at all levels to set medium and long-term goals in the process of learning according to their current English levels, and instruct students to conduct self-examination frequently based on the goals setting previously in the learning process, so as to promote them to be confident enough in achieving goals above their current English level.

#### **3.3 Comprehensive use of various evaluation methods**

If students' learning outcomes are affirmed by teachers and peers, students will have more confidence and devote themselves to learning with more enthusiasm <sup>[29]</sup>. In the process of English teaching, it is highly recommended for teachers to adopt a combination of evaluation methods, such as students' self-evaluation and peer evaluation. In this way, not only can students realize their shortcomings,

but also enhance their subject consciousness and stimulate their intrinsic learning motivation while they are participating in the evaluation process. Furthermore.

#### 4. Conclusion

All in all, motivation is a major factor affecting the success of college students' English learning and English learning is a long-term and complex process. During this process, there will be many factors affecting students' learning motivation, resulting in the phenomenon of students' lack of interest and loss of enthusiasm in English language learning. In this regard, teachers should correctly understand the factors that affect students' learning motivation, and help students to persevere in learning through effective and diversified teaching methods, so as to cultivate more qualified talents for the society.

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