

# What Demotivates EFL Learners

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## Abstract

70 university EFL learners of low proficiency were surveyed to investigate the demotivating factors in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in China, and the ebb and flow of enthusiasm towards English experienced by EFL learners of low proficiency. Findings from this study indicate that less-proficient EFL learners might go through four stages of emotion, from motivated to demotivated, to remotivated, and lastly to relinquish. Burdensome coursework, persistent negative feedback, and disagreeable teachers are the three main factors that affect students' enthusiasm for learning English. The implications of this study are that it complements the studies of demotivators by examining the causes of less proficient students' fluctuation of enthusiasm for English in the Chinese context, and further explores the processes by which learners' enthusiasm for English changes, so that policymakers and administrators can identify and address problematic aspects of educational policies and classroom practices.

**Keywords:** Demotivation, Language teaching, EFL learner, Factors

## 1. Introduction

Motivation has been found to be an essential element in foreign language learning. Researchers in different contexts have devoted much attention to motivational factors and how they affect academic performance, the intensity of study and length of sustained study, etc. (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Yashima, Nishida, & Mizumoto, 2017; You, Dörnyei, & Csizér, 2016). Demotivation, however, is rarely studied, which is by no means the antithesis

of motivation, nor is it a parallel construct, for the absence of demotivators might not necessarily be a motivational trigger, and vice versa (Albalawi & Al-Hoorie, 2021). For example, a student may detach from foreign language learning due to a dismal and passive L2 learning environment, yet he may not necessarily be motivated to learn without this negative presence around him. Demotivation, therefore, warrants exclusive study. Previous research has shown that a large proportion of learners are disengaged with all subjects they are taking and demotivation has been a perennial issue for many practitioners in various contexts, especially in terms of English learning given that it is a universal language required to learn in most of the countries (Yanai et al., 2003; Falouta, Elwoodb & Hoodc, 2009).

Given the considerable effort required to learn a second language, commitment to learning can easily be swayed, rendering them susceptible to negative external factors. Without motivation, learners might be able to struggle onward, however, when afflicted by negativity, they might be overwhelmed by attendant negative sentiments such as resentment and aversion which threaten to derail students from learning. Many teachers in a variety of contexts have complained about the frequent decline in students' motivation in daily classrooms (Ghadirzadeh, 2012). Gorham and Christophe (1992) argued that the maintenance or enhancement of motivation should be achieved by eliminating demotivators from daily classrooms. Moskovsky (2011) also drew a consistent conclusion. Many researchers have begun to voice the need for more attention to the study of demotivation (e.g. Dörnyei, 2001; Falout and Maruyama, 2004).

Previous research indicated learners in distinctive contexts reported different negative variables discouraging them in foreign language learning, hence the necessity of investigating demotivational factors of Chinese L2 learners who are understudied. In addition, it is of great significance to study L2 learners' past learning experiences from primary school to university, since a majority of students with poor language proficiency begin to demonstrate a decline in motivation in the second year of junior high school and continue through high school and university (Falout and Falout, 2005; Falout and Maruyama, 2004). Studying the past learning experiences of second language learners is in accordance with the ethos of dynamic systems theory (DST) which highlights the importance of investigating the process or how learners interact with external and internal informational signals (Turner and Waugh, 2007). As studies on demotivation are very scarce, and most of them only examined the process of demotivation over a short period of time which though can capture a snapshot of the learners' demotivation, examining demotivational trajectories spanning a relatively long time frame is also necessary. This study aims to fill this research niche by identifying how Chinese low-level second language learners' enthusiasm for learning English changes over a nine-year period, from which what demotivators and how these demotivators dissipate their enthusiasm for learning English are explored. The research questions are as follows:

1. What changes in enthusiasm for learning English have occurred from the first contact with English to the present according to the recollections of low-level learners?
2. What factors demotivate English language learners? To what extent do they demotivate English language learners?

## 2. Literature Review

Demotivation, as defined by Dörnyei (2001), refers to a decline in motivation caused by a range of external variables. The positive factors previously provoking motivation do not vanish but are overridden and stunted by powerful negative external influences. However, some researchers do not subscribe to the view that demotivation is solely the result of adverse external factors. Falout and Maruyama (2004), and Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) contend that internal factors are also integral to the elicitation of demotivation. One implicit internal factor is learners' perceptions of their own learning abilities, intelligence, and talents, or in another word, language learning mindset (Dweck, 1999). The way people with different mindsets view the same demotivating events varies, even in an identical context. Fixed-minded learners perceive competencies as innate and immutable, whereas people with growth mindsets believe that abilities can be cultivated through effort. (Lou & Noels, 2019; Yeager et al., 2019, Albalawi, Al-Hoorie, 2021). It is to be noted that demotivation is distinct from amotivation, which is marked by passivity and abstention from the effort, usually due to chronic frustration and failure (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002; Deci & Ryan, 2017). People suffering from amotivation experience no motivation and take things as they are. Nakata (2006) suggests that learners who suffer from a sense of disappointment and frustration in second language learning may go through three stages, in which, in the first stage, the learner is demotivated by some adverse experience, such as disappointing grades or arduous workloads. however, demotivated learners' desire for language learning may be aroused by some positive aspects in this stage. Alternatively, if the first stage of demotivation persists, the learner will enter the second stage, namely amotivation, and when the status of amotivation still remains unresolved, the learner will eventually fall into learned helplessness.

Most studies on demotivation investigated factors that demotivate EFL learners in the form of questionnaires. To investigate which demotivational factors most affect students' second language learning and the relationship between past demotivational experience and current learning outcomes, Falout (2009) asked 900 Japanese students to recall their experiences of learning English over the past nine years and to complete a questionnaire consisting of 52 items, of which Nine factors leading to demotivation were extracted and grouped into three external, three internal and three reactive factors. The results showed that the grammar and translation-oriented approach to teaching was the most demotivating factor, while most people had a positive view of their previous teachers. When faced with a demotivational situation, students with higher levels of language proficiency tended to regulate their affective state through enjoyment-seeking, such as watching English movies and listening to English songs, to reinforce their participation in the language learning activity and rebuild their confidence in the process. less-proficient learners were inclined to seek help from their friends, teachers, or parents when they encountered discouraging events, failed to cope with their emotions, and often fell into self-denegation. Similarly, Falout and Maruyama (2004) found that higher-level students tended to attribute demotivation to external factors while lower-level students to internal factors. It is likely that lower-level students are weaker in controlling their emotions and are often caught in a vicious cycle of poor performance, insecurity, and self-blame. (Ushioda, 1998) However, another study targeting Korean junior

high school students came to a different conclusion and showed that both low and high-level students ascribed the reduction in motivation to external causes, but for different reasons, namely the difficulty of learning English and the characteristics of English classes respectively. (Kim, 2009b) Differences in attributions of demotivation were found not only among learners of different language levels but also among other groups, such as junior and senior high school students (Kim, 2009a), less motivated and more motivated students (Kang, 2012; Kikuchi, 2009). It seems that demotivational factors are quite diverse for learners in a variety of contexts, which displayed learners' socially and historically constructed relationships with the language. (Norton, 1995) Learners' perceptions of the most demotivational factors seem to vary across wide contexts. Coursebook (Hamada, 2008; Kikuchi, 2009), grammar and Confidence (Hamada, 2008), lesson style and the nature of English (Hamada, 2011; Kikuchi, 2009; Lee & Lee, 2011), test score (Hasegawa, 2004; Lee & Lee, 2011), difficulty in language learning (Lee and Lee, 2011), simultaneous learning of other languages, failure, environment (Parviz & Reza, 2012), extensive English classes, lack of practical usage were respectively identified as the most demotivating source in a range of studies undertaken in an extensive context including Japan, Korean, Iranian, etc. However, teacher-related factors such as teaching methods, teaching style, teacher behavior, and personality were almost consistently considered the greatest culprit, although several studies have pointed out that teacher competence and teaching style were relatively weak demotivational factors compared to other factors. (Hamada, 2008; Kikuchi and Sakai, 2009a; Hamada, 2011) One of the reasons for the inconsistency in the results of this study may be that the closed-ended questionnaire meant that students were restricted to selecting the most demotivating factors from the pre-set ones, which varied from researcher to researcher, and therefore some variation in the results may have occurred. Also significant is the fact that particular cognition and beliefs formulated in different contexts may also play a role in learners' idiosyncratic perception of comparable demotivating events. This explains the importance of studying the demotivation of second language learners in varying contexts. In China, there is a paucity of research on learners' demotivation which constitutes a very large hindrance to second language learning, making it imperative to examine what factors in the Chinese context significantly influence Chinese EFL learners.

It seems that most previous research has examined the causes of demotivation and scant attention has been directed to the dynamic nature of demotivation. Demotivation is to some extent inextricably related to motivation and learners' enthusiasm for language learning is likely to go through a process of ups and downs rather than remain static. Many researchers consider motivation to be "a fluid play, an ever-changing one that emerges from the processes of interaction of many agents, internal and external, in the ever-changing complex world of the learner" (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006). Kim (2011) observed demotivation by examining changes in motivation and used a closed-ended questionnaire to investigate trends in learning motivation and whether prior learning experience in private schools had an impact on students' motivation among 6301 Korean students from Grade 3 to Grade 6, revealing that although private learning experience led to a significantly higher emphasis on the importance of EFL learning than students without private instruction, primary school students were experiencing increasing dissatisfaction with both state and private English education and their

motivation to learn English was consistently on the decline. This study reveals trends in students' motivation to learn, but unfortunately, the limitations of the quantitative research method prevented a deeper dive into the details of the specific process of demotivation. This study aims to fill this gap by using qualitative research methods to dig deeper into the specific process of demotivation.

### 3. Method

The participants are 70 first-year EFL learners in a higher vocational college in Guangdong province of China, who have a relatively low level of language proficiency. They are not English majors and all of them have studied English for at least 9 years as a compulsory subject. In this study, retrospective data were collected by a stimulated recall methodology. The participants were required to describe their English learning experience as an assignment. The description can be based on the following questions: 1. How did your enthusiasm for learning English change from elementary school to now? 2. what reasons affected your enthusiasm for language learning or make you want to give up language learning? The task was explained in Chinese, and the participants finish the task in Chinese correspondingly. This ensured that students could express their experiences clearly and accurately. Data were read and re-read and coded in Nvivo.

### 4. Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1 The Ebb and Flow of Enthusiasm Towards English Learning Experienced by EFL Learners

62 out of 70 EFL learners reported they experienced complex emotions toward English mixed with confusion, disappointment, helplessness, hope, contentness, pride and etc. From the qualitative data, a major finding of this study was that this group of learners might go through four stages of emotional fluctuation on the whole, from motivated to demotivated, to remotivated, and eventually to relinquishment, which echoed the findings of Nakata(2006). The difference is that a large majority of EFL learners with a baseline foundation in the Chinese context usually would be remotivated by such factors as the pressure of college entrance examination, job requirements, the eagerness to communicate with foreigners, etc. If learners fail to receive any positive feedback in this stage, learners might resign themselves to reality and descend into learned helplessness or a state of relinquishment. Once learners degenerate into the fourth stage of relinquishment, it would be far more difficult to remotivate them in English learning, what's worse, a fixed language learning mindset (Lou & Noels, 2019; Yeager et al., 2019) might be formed by perceiving themselves incompetent, lacking talent or intelligence in language learning. As one of the learners reported:

(LYT): I tried to re-learn English, but because my English foundation is really poor, again I failed. Perhaps because I do not have a language talent.

##### 4.1.1 The Initial Stage of EFL Learners' Attitude Toward Language Learning

Most of them initially get involved with English learning in the third year of primary school when language learning is relatively elementary with simple and comprehensible vocabulary

and grammar. A total of 66 subjects indicated a profoundly intriguing English learning experience at the beginning, for a variety of incentives like curiosity, entertaining pedagogical method, and favorable scores which were most frequently mentioned. Other factors such as unoppressive tasks, high regard for teachers' glibly fluent spoken English, teachers' attitude towards learners, the glamour of English songs and films, interest in L2 community, and positive attitudes towards native speakers of English also play a critical role. The stimuli cited above are uncannily consistent with the results obtained in a wide range of literature examining motivation (see e.g. Falout and Maruyama, 2004; Falout et al., 2008; Miyata et al., 2004; Potee, 2002). Most EFL learners in this period which can be considered the stage of motivation are at their highest level of enthusiasm for English learning,

#### 4.1.2 The Struggling Stage With a Variety of Demotivators Emerged

However, upon entering the second year of junior high school when the linguistic constructs become more involved, the vocabulary more complex, and the workload more demanding, learners' enthusiasm begins to dwindle. From the learners' descriptions of their learning outcomes at primary school, the researcher categorized the participants into two distinct types, those who achieved better results at primary school and those who suffered from unfavorable learning outcomes at primary school. It seems that the way they perceive the demotivating events varies. These two groups resort to different strategies of self-regulation when faced with the demotivators as they enter junior high school and the degree to which their enthusiasm for learning English wanes is also different. Learners with outstanding achievements in primary school were inclined to respond resiliently and be more tolerant when confronted with unpleasant stimuli, therefore, given impetus, their enthusiasm for English learning would be rekindled with ease. In contrast, if they are subjected to long-term negative stimuli such as falling grades, disagreeable teachers, a dull and depressing learning environment, decadent peers, etc., their passion for learning English will eventually wear out. In the other group, poor learning outcomes in primary school did not seem to affect their eagerness to learn English in a primary school context to any great extent. A number of subjects (30/70) mentioned that they enjoy lenient evaluation, a vivid and vibrant classroom environment, and little academic pressure, learning English mostly out of novelty and curiosity, despite poor grades. In junior high school, however, the enormous pressure of further education, intensive coursework, tedious and boring classes, and the failure to make progress in their grades have led to resistance and even aversion to English. In such an environment, without the self-confidence bolstered by previous favorable learning outcomes, they are highly susceptible to negative external influences. When exposed to passive stimuli, their enthusiasm for learning English will instantly collapse and they tend to adopt very extreme ways to deal with negative stimuli, such as sleeping in class, disrupting the class, refusing to do homework, etc. When negative stimuli remain unresolved, both groups lapsed into a demotivated state, hence the second stage, which can last any length of time and varies among individuals.

#### 4.1.3 The Final Stage-to Thrive or Relinquish?

Those whose desire to learn English has been rekindled for some reason will go through a

third stage. The majority of people are re-motivated to learn English by a perception of the necessity of learning English for further education and work, or by the charisma of English as a result of English music, films and TV shows, or occasional contact with native English speakers. Typically, the passion aroused by these two causes lasts longer and makes the learner more resistant to frustration and setbacks. In the third stage, learners are remotivated resulting from cognitive and conceptual transformations and are therefore more sensible about the negative effects, however, high expectations of learning outcomes might predispose them to a fourth stage, namely, relinquishment or helplessness, once they continue to suffer from invisible progress or inferior performance. Confused and overwhelmed by the complexity of grammar and a large number of words, learners at this stage would struggle to source the proper approach to learning, consider it too late to remedy the situation, and finally succumb to the fact owing to the constant absence of positive feedback. Passive and insecure, they are hardly remotivated. But it is surprising how few learners who face failure at this stage will attribute it to talent or inability, but rather that they have fallen too far behind in their previous studies to remedy the situation, and that they do not have enough patience to start all over again. The majority of learners believed that progress would still be made if they were willing to persevere, a finding that is less consistent with previous research. (Albalawi and Al-Hoorie, 2021)

#### *4.2 The Main Factors Lead to Demotivation. How Did They Influence EFL Learners' Enthusiasm Toward English?*

##### 4.2.1 Strenuous Learning Task

More than a third of learners (31/70) described their interest in learning English beginning to decline due to the increasing number of tasks, such as a large number of difficult words to memorize and the complex and convoluted grammar rules. As the level of complexity increases, their attitudes toward learning English gradually deteriorated from indifference to aversion or even resentment. In addition, their attitude toward learning English is further dampened by the fact that new content is being poured in before the past knowledge has been internalized, resulting in what is learned merely scratching the surface. Gradually, they were unable to stay abreast of the course and their enthusiasm for learning English was further sapped by their inability to understand the content of the lessons. As several of these students complained:

(DYY): For me, spelling words was a problem. I often couldn't remember the spelling of a word, although I could read it when I saw it and I knew what it meant. I didn't study grammar seriously so my English became very poor from junior high school onwards, but the bigger reason was that I couldn't spell the words and it's still a problem for me today.

(WAX): English is a bit annoying when you have to memorize a lot of things, so I simply didn't do it. I always preferred the science subjects because they could be memorized by doing exercises, but English had to memorize texts, which was a pain and I started to lose interest in English.

(WWM): English words in junior high school are hard to remember and hard to read, and plus we have to write compositions, and also need to focus on composition format. what's worse, some grammar sentences are to be memorized, and then I am too lazy to do it.

(HZH): It wasn't until the fifth grade that English gradually became more difficult, with several letters comprising a long word that had to be memorized, in that my enthusiasm for English slowly dwindled. I was reluctant to memorize words, and I did all the tests and quizzes in the future in a haphazard manner, not bothering to take English seriously.

The motivation of most lower proficiency learners begins to diminish in the second year of middle school and continues to drop through high school and college. (Falout and Falout, 2005; Falout and Maruyama, 2004). This beginning point of decline coincides with the point at which the English curriculum in junior high schools in China begins to deepen in difficulty. Most EFL learners in the Chinese context begin their exposure to English in the third year of the primary school, with the curriculum overlapping considerably with that of the first year of junior high school so that while they are still relatively well adjusted to learning in the first year of junior high school, many students' attitudes towards English begin to change significantly from the second year onwards when they are presented with more new knowledge and heavy tasks. The moderate load of learning tasks, therefore, plays a crucial role in maintaining learners' motivation for English.

#### 4.2.2 Negative Results

Another factor that affects EFL students' motivation is the long-term negative results. characterized by poor and falling grades or futile endeavors, many students expressed that the complexity of English simply made them disengage from their affinity for English and that what devastates them most and forces them to give up is the fact that the results do not match the effort they have put in. Despite the amount of time and effort devoted, they were stuck in a vicious cycle of memorizing and forgetting. This, coupled with the fact that their grades keep deteriorating without progress, makes them even wearier of English. The following examples illustrate this point:

(CZH): When I got to junior high school, my enthusiasm was gone and my grades slowly declined, so I went from loving English to hating it. It was still the same in high school and my English just got worse and worse.

(HLY): In addition, there was a lot of work in various subjects in high school, and I put little effort into English, so my marks dropped over time and I did not feel the pleasure of learning English.

(RZX): I tried hard to learn, but I couldn't seem to get it right and then I didn't really want to learn English anymore.

Initial failures and setbacks can have a huge and long-term impact on the self-confidence of EFL learners, making it difficult for them to regain interest in English (Falout and Falout, 2005; Falout and Maruyama, 2004). Students who had achieved outstanding results would

initially attempt to reverse the situation, but cannot endure the constant negative feedback over time and eventually adopt a negative attitude towards learning English.

#### 4.2.3 Disagreeable Teachers

A teacher is the third most important factor in dampening students' enthusiasm for learning English. The qualitative data shows that teachers' conduct, personality, and instructional style have a huge impact on students. Several students state that the experience of changing teachers frequently has made it challenging for them to adapt to different instructional styles. Some students are comfortable with a lenient teacher, while others prefer a rigorous instructor to supervise their studies. The following examples illustrate this point:

(WWM): When I reached junior high school, my interest in learning English slowly dropped, because our new teacher was not as strict as that in primary school.

(QXX): I didn't like the way she taught me, and she wasn't as strict as the teachers in primary school, which gave us the opportunity not to study. In addition, because we changed English teachers frequently, I slowly began to stop listening to the lessons, so my English had not improved since primary school, and my English grades were falling and getting worse, so bad that I was unable to save the situation

(LYT): I have already had three new English teachers in the first month of school, so I think I am doomed. I had just tried to learn English properly, but I failed again due to the frequent teacher changes

As Chinese classes are conducted on a class basis, the lecture-based approach cannot guarantee that a teacher will be liked by every student, but the cultivation of a mentoring relationship can counteract some prejudice against the teacher. Regular changes of teachers preclude an in-depth interaction between students and their teachers and profound rapport. Alternatively, when students have cultivated a cordial relationship with their teachers, replacement with a new teacher can also affect students' enthusiasm for learning English, especially for learners with low language proficiency. Other aspects regarding teachers' behavior and personality can also be fatal to students' motivation to learn English, such as partiality, snobbery, autocracy, etc. However, previous research has found that teachers are not conscious of their own undesirable behavior. (Potee, 2002)

### 5. Conclusion

Demotivation can negatively influence the learner's attitudes and behaviors, degrade classroom group dynamics and teachers' motivation, and result in long-term and widespread negative learning outcomes. 70 university EFL learners of low proficiency were surveyed to investigate the demotivating factors in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in China, and the ebb and flow of enthusiasm towards English experienced by EFL learners of low proficiency. Findings from this study indicate that less-proficient EFL learners might go through four stages of emotion, from motivated to demotivated, to remotivated, and lastly to relinquish. Burdensome coursework, persistent negative feedback, and disagreeable teachers are the three main factors that affect students' enthusiasm for learning English. The

implications of this study are that it complements the studies of demotivators by examining the causes of less proficient students' fluctuation of enthusiasm for English in the Chinese context, and further explores the processes by which learners' enthusiasm for English changes, so that policymakers and administrators can identify and address problematic aspects of educational policies and classroom practices. However, the study is not without limitations. First, further insights can be gained through interviews with participants based on the information they provide in their compositions. Second, qualitative research used in this study should be complemented by quantitative research to overcome subjectivity. These concerns should surely be considered in future investigations of demotivational factors in foreign language learning.

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