

Research on Demotivation in English Learning of Non-English Majors in Chinese Universities

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Abstract

Much research on motivation has been done in language teaching and learning, while less research on demotivation has been carried out. In the practice of teaching English to non-English majors in Chinese universities, teachers are often faced up with the phenomena of demotivation, which often hinder teachers' instruction as well as students' learning. Based on the investigation of more than one thousand university students from nine universities located in three provinces of China, it is found that most of the demotivating phenomena are mainly caused by the teachers themselves in the English classroom and they can be categorized into such three dimensions as the course, the teachers and the collective. Therefore, some strategies are proposed and adopted to curb demotivation and strengthen motivation from each of these three dimensions. Through a period of teaching practice, these demotivating phenomena are improved in effective and efficient English teaching and learning and a lot of implications can be obtained for the second language acquisition of non-English majors in Chinese universities.

Keywords

Motivation; Demotivation; English Learning; Second Language Acquisition.

1. Introduction

In the study of second language acquisition, it is found that a great number of factors, besides the characteristics of the target language itself, may have a big impact on the target language acquisition, not only from the students' perspective but also from the teachers' perspective. Among these factors, the learner's factors include cognitive style, learning ability, age, motivation, emotion, etc. And among the students' factors, the influence of motivation on foreign language learning cannot be ignored. Therefore, so many researchers have done extensive and in-depth research on motivation. However, most studies focus on the influence of positive factors on motivation, and rarely involve negative factors. Actually, negative factors do exist in language teaching and learning, and there are hard to be avoided. Under such a circumstance, this study explores the phenomenon of motivation weakening (demotivation) in university English classrooms from the perspective of negative factors.

2. Theoretical Background

The term motivation in the field of language learning refers to the combination of desire and effort to achieve language learning goals (1). Regarding motivation topic, there are two main aspects in the study of motivation often discussed until now. One is to discuss the components of motivation from the theoretical perspective, and the other is to explore the internal structure of motivation with empirical methods (2).

Theoretically, motivation can be classified into overall motivation, situational motivation, and task motivation (3). A large amount of research on motivation around the world is mainly concerned with motivation types. According to a Chinese scholar Hu Jian, the most influential motivation researchers are Gardner and Lambert, who are collectively known as the Lambert-

Gardner School, and they propose the Society-education Model which is most influential and representative for a long time. Gardner and Lambert summarize motivation into comprehensive motivation and instrumental motivation, and put forward a social-educational model of motivation. Since the 1960s, motivation research has basically focused on this model. With the development of motivation research, Hungarian scholar Z. Dörnyei also proposes a three-tier model of motivation in the 1990s, which includes language level, learner level and situation level and attracts a lot of attention. His model not only inherits Gardner's comprehension-tool dichotomy but also adds the definition and measurement of motivation factors related to foreign language learning situations, which makes it more meaningful in language education (4).

According to the Chinese scholar, Dörnyei pointed out in his work that students' performance is usually affected by two kinds of forces, one is positive, and the other is negative. The positive force is "motive", while the negative force can be called "demotivation"(4). In the past study, more research is focused on the study of positive forces, while less study of negative forces is carried out. But in the teaching and learning practice, negative forces do exist in language learning classrooms and weaken students' learning motivation over and again. Therefore, the study of motivation should not only pay attention to the enhancement of motivation from the perspective of positive forces but also engage in the weakening of motivation from the perspective of negative forces. The weakening of motivation is called demotivation, referring to the environmental stimuli and classroom events that cancel out existing motivation in the students, and some specific external forces that reduce or direct the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action (5). This definition makes it clear that demotivation refers to the weakening of motivation occurring in the learning environment and it is caused by external factors, not by other situations. Unfortunately, the related research on demotivation is not very much, and only four relevant case studies are mentioned in Dörnyei's work, which were conducted by Chambers, Oxford, Ushioda and Dörnyei (6, 7, 8, 9). Based on these studies, it is found that the factors that weaken motivation not only exist universally but also have a greater impact on learners, and the majority of the factors are directly related to teachers or even caused by them.

While in China, the dominant research related to motivation is to explore the positive factors to enhance students' motivation (10, 11, 12), fewer studies is done on the negative factor to weaken motivation (demotivation). To improve the current situation, the present study is carried out in the English classroom for non-English majors from several universities located in three different provinces of China. This study aims to find whether there are demotivation phenomena in the English classroom for non-English majors in Chinese universities, what are the negative external factors generating the demotivation phenomena, and what strategies can be proposed to get out of demotivation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Subject

In the present study, there are 1080 non-English major students chosen as the research subject from nine universities located in three different provinces of China. These students are all first-year students in their university and their English proficiency is on the same level based on China's English testing standard. These three provinces belong to the west, the center and the east part of China. In each province, three different universities are chosen. There are nine universities in total standing for the overall condition of Chinese universities and the students from them can also reveal the overall condition of the majority of Chinese university students, which can ensure the result is valid and convincing.

3.2. Research Instruments

The main research tool used in this study is a questionnaire, in which three questions are asked. The first question is about what are some reasons that drive you not to learn it even when you really wanted to learn something in your English class. The second question continues the first one and asks the students to put them down and make a specific description if there are some reasons. The third question continues the second one, asking students to rank the reasons in descending order of negative influence. Based on the data from questionnaires, online interviews with some students may be carried out to testify to the data and get some complementary information. In addition, some Chinese teachers and scholars in language teaching and learning will be invited to present their views on demotivation phenomena they encounter in the English classroom.

3.3. Data Analysis

In this study, both qualitative and quantitative research methods are employed to classify and summarize the students' questionnaires, and basic data analyses are carried out.

4. Results and Discussion

All questionnaires are collected in this survey, and 21 of them offered a negative answer to the first question, indicating that external factors did not affect these students' motivation, so these 21 students were not included in the later classification. The other 1059 students answer the first question positively, indicating that all of these students were or are demotivated learners, so they are kind of the students who were once motivated but have lost their commitment or interest for some reason (13). According to the statistics, these students account for 98% of the 1080 students, a very high proportion. This result shows that motivation weakening does not only exist in English classrooms but also is quite common for non-English major students in Chinese universities.

After classifying the data from the 1059 questionnaires, it is found that seven factors weaken motivation in the English classroom. The names of these factors and their proportions are listed in the following table, see [Table 1](#).

Table 1. External Factors for Demotivation

Number	External Factors	Proportion
1	Teaching Methods	26%
2	Teachers' Quality	20%
3	Learning Tasks	16%
4	Teacher-Student Relationship	15%
5	Learning Environment	11%
6	Relationship Between Students	8%
7	Other Factors	4%
Total		100%

In the table, there are seven categories of factors that are summarized with their corresponding proportions. The following is a detailed summary of these factors based on the students' questionnaires.

For the teaching methods that may weaken the learning motivation, the students describe them as follows: the teaching procedure is so fixed, starting from reading the text to explaining grammar, proposing key points, then asking the students to read words and expressions and texts, and finally do exercises, that no new measures are taken to make a change to the old

fashioned procedure; teachers just read the lines in their textbook to the class without offering any explanation or adding any extra-curricular knowledge; teachers come to give their lectures just like completing their assigned task in a hurry, just for the completion, without taking the effect into their consideration; teachers exert too much pressure on students with continuously asking questions and asking for immediate answers; teachers only teach grammar rules without offering any other activities, which makes their class boring; teachers only present the answers to the homework without adding more explanation in class; more Chinese is spoken and less English is practiced in class; only one standard answer is allowed and students are not allowed to offer freely more than that; teachers always ask students to take many notes; teachers themselves give their lectures on their own and no students are allowed to express their views; teachers ask students to dictate many words and recite more texts.

For the quality of teachers who may weaken the motivation of learning, students describe it as follows: sometimes teachers behave unfairly, favoring good students, belittling poor students in both performance and families; some teachers are lazy without a sense of responsibility, and they are not serious with teaching in class; some teachers are conservative and old fashioned like an antique with a closed mind; some teachers are easy to be impatient; some teachers are prim and don't like to challenge their absolute authority, so no different opinions are allowed; some teachers speak English with terrible pronunciation and intonation; some teachers speak English so fast that students are not able to hear there clearly, and sometimes some teachers are verbose, or chatter constantly in front of the students; some teachers never smile and always criticize students with a heavy look; some teachers dress in an untidy way, and they don't pay attention to their public image.

For the learning tasks that may weaken the learning motivation, the students' description is as follows: many learning tasks often fail to attract the students' interest; sometimes the learning tasks are so heavy that they make people feel too nervous; students sometimes have to be faced up with the homework and the more teachers assign, the less they want to do it; the learning tasks are always copying words and reciting texts that make them feel boring; sometimes the profound and unnecessary new words make them uninterested; the learning task is often assigned in the form of written practice and no other alternative forms can be allowed; there is no need to speak English at all, and what the students need to do is just sitting and listening like a log in English classroom.

For the teacher-student relationship that may weaken the learning motivation, students describe it as follows: teachers and students often oppose each other like enemies; there is always a gap between teachers and students, and they are not honest with each other; the teacher does not communicate with the students off and on, and just follows his own way; the teacher looks like a teacher when he is in class, but he has no contact with the students after class; some teachers are likely to control their students like their parents everywhere; some teachers distrust their students and the students don't like their teachers.

For the learning environment that may weaken the learning motivation, students describe it as follows: there is no fun in the class, and everything is too serious and lifeless; the teacher gives his/her lecture in his/her own way while the students whisper with each other and there is no interaction between the two parties in the English teaching and learning; competition atmosphere is not formed; less discussion is allowed in the English class; there is no enough proper equipment for students to learn English; English is not encouraged and much Chinese is used in the English class; the discipline in the class is lax, and students follow their own rules no matter how they like or dislike to learn English.

For the relationship between classmates that may weaken their learning motivation, the students describe it as follows: quarreling with classmates may deteriorate their relationship; some students may report to the teachers about something bad they did behind their back of

you; some classmates do not cooperate with learning activities; some students look down on you; some students are unwilling to offer help.

In addition to the factors discussed above, there are still other factors that may weaken learning motivation. Among these factors, the students mainly mention the negative influence of peers or friends, some activities held in schools that have nothing to do with learning, and too much social work, which may distract the students from their learning.

The students' description above shows that the factors directly related to teachers are teaching methods, teachers' quality, and teacher-student relationship, accounting for 61% of the total, while the factors such as learning tasks and classroom environment are also indirectly related to teachers, accounting for 27% of the total. This result conforms basically with that of Dörnyei et al., indicating that most of the motivation impairments in second or foreign language learning are caused by teachers, which shows that teachers should undertake great responsibility. Many scholars have caught this point. Therefore, a lot of scholars shift their perspective and come to realize the importance of the influencing factor from the teachers as well as the students.

The present study discusses the factors that weaken motivation. Although the perspective is different from that of the factors that enhance motivation, the purposes of the two kinds of studies are the same, both of which are to better stimulate and maintain students' motivation to learn English. Therefore, teachers who are closely related to the weakening of motivation should make clear the reasons for the weakening of students' motivation and actively seek countermeasures to curb the weakening of motivation.

Based on the analysis above, teachers should reflect on what they usually do in English class and analyze the hidden reasons behind their bad performance. To improve the current situation, many corresponding strategies can be proposed by these English teachers from three dimensions. These three dimensions are in line with the three components of the scenario level in Dörnyei's motivation model.

On the first dimension, four strategies can be proposed from the perspective of teachers' components.

Strategy 1 is that teachers should try their utmost to display their good performance. Teachers should constantly improve their self-cultivation because excellent teacher performance can help them attract students to participate in classroom teaching and learning activities and help to establish a harmonious relationship between teachers and students.

Strategy 2 is that teachers should fill their work with enthusiasm. The teachers who are enthusiastic about teaching not only have a sense of responsibility but also convey to students an invisible hint: fill English learning with a lot of enthusiasm as their teachers do.

Strategy 3 is that teachers should establish a harmonious teacher-student relationship of mutual trust and mutual respect. They should learn to listen to students' opinions and conduct dialogues between teachers and students on an equal level.

Strategy 4 is that teachers should learn to evaluate students in the right way. Teachers should be good at finding the progress of students and offer them corresponding praise in time. Even when some criticism is needed for students, teachers should express the criticism without hurting students' self-esteem.

In addition to the strategies on the teachers' dimension, some other strategies can be proposed on the second dimension, and five strategies can be employed from the perspective of curriculum components.

Strategy 1 is that teachers should set develop appropriate learning objectives that students can reach. In a certain class, if many students do not understand the teaching activities to be carried out, the problem may be probably that the goals set by the teacher or the syllabus far exceed the students' acceptable level. Therefore, both teachers and students should actively negotiate to reach an agreed goal.

Strategy 2 is that teachers should adopt teaching methods that can be accepted by students. Teachers should catch up with the frontier in the field of language teaching and learning, constantly receive new information, learn new methods, and try these in teaching practice. After the class, teachers should listen to the students' feedback for further improvement in the future.

Strategy 3 is that teachers should try to use a variety of teaching equipment. In the current information age, students are no longer satisfied with a single learning tool, so teachers should learn from the new technology and arouse students' interest in the classroom through various audio-visual media, including the Internet.

Strategy 4 is that teachers should try to reduce the students' learning burden in the curriculum design. Appropriate amount of homework is assigned to the students and forms of assignments should be diversified. In the teaching course, teachers should reduce the number of tests as possible as they can, and should not frequently compare students' scores.

Strategy 5 is that teachers should create more opportunities to help students experience more success. Teachers should first hold the belief that students' ability is constantly developing and changing; Secondly, teachers should design more tasks to ensure that every student can participate in, and avoid the activities that may undermine students' self-confidence.

The third dimension is about collective components. Teachers can adopt 4 strategies to improve the current situation from the collective perspective.

Strategy 1 is that teachers should organize and manage the classroom well. Students need enough learning opportunities and continuous encouragement and support, and an unordered classroom cannot provide a guarantee for these things. Therefore, it is very significant for teachers to make the classroom an effective learning environment.

Strategy 2 is to help students establish an environment in which students can study in a relatively comfortable atmosphere. Because many studies have shown that excessive anxiety can also lead to a decline in students' motivation levels, teachers should not make the classroom become a place that poses a threat to students.

Strategy 3 is that teachers should try to construct a collection of solidarity and cooperation. For this target, teachers should formulate universally-recognized collective guidelines, increase more time for group activities, organize students to share their learning experiences and jointly solve problems, and promote fair and reasonable competition among groups.

Strategy 4 is that teachers should encourage students to carry out positive mutual evaluation and self-evaluation. Teachers should teach students to see more of the other's strengths and let students learn to measure how much effort they have made as well as how much ability they have.

Conforming with Dörnyei's motivation model, all of these coping strategies are proposed from the teachers' perspective based on the three dimensions as teachers' components, curriculum components and collective components. But in the practice of English teaching and learning, some factors that seem to be only caused by teachers, are actually made by both participating parties in the class activities. In other words, many factors are related to both teachers and students. So a good solution can be presented from the perspectives of both teachers and students to overcome the negative influences of these factors.

Realizing this point, some scholars adopt a mixed perspective to investigate the interrelationship of various factors caused by both the teacher and students. Miao Yee Clare Chong and his collaborators (14) analyze the related factors that diminish the learners' motivation and categorize them into external factors and internal ones. They hold that the external factors of learner demotivation are caused by their teachers and the internal factors are mainly produced by themselves. As for the external factors, coping strategies can be adopted to develop teachers' professional qualifications from the perspectives of teacher

quality, teaching methodology, text, task and test. As for the internal factors, students ought to regulate themselves in a proper state to improve their self-esteem and inside worth.

In line with them, Albalawi & Al-Hoorie (15) also explore the complicated factors leading to demotivation through a couple of mix-method experiments based on the structural equation modeling, with an attempt to find a way to remove demotivation and start the remotivation. In addition to the general research on demotivation, some scholars discuss the phenomena in a specific country. Chili Li & Ting Zhou (16) questionnaire 367 college students from one local university in China and analyze the college students' demotivation factors, but these students are from the same university, which can not stand for the general condition in the whole country. Although they propose some suggestions to cope with the demotivation problems, not all of them can be applied to the whole country because there are about 2000 universities with a mill in China and they are much different from one another. The number of 367 research objects from the same university cannot represent the total of tens of millions of university students in the whole country. Therefore, their research findings and proposed strategies are just applicable to the university where the students come from.

Similar research is also carried out in other countries around the world. Barın, Han & Sarı (17) discuss the demotivation situation based on a qualitative single-case study in a secondary school in Turkey. They find the internal factor of demotivation is a lack of self-motivation and the external factors include school administration in addition to the frequently-mentioned curriculum, course texts and teaching facilities. The single-case study is performed in one school based on the interview with an experienced female teacher, her self-reflection paper and her teaching diary. Such a single-case study may prove something in a single teacher from a single school, but it cannot display most or all of the problems in all institutions. Nigel Gearing (18) and Kang (19) analyze the demotivating phenomena in South Korean universities. Kang (19) even classifies the demotivation factors into five types, based on which how these demotivating factors affect students with different achievement levels are also analyzed and the relieving measures are also proposed. Keita Kikuchi (20) tracks the motivation and demotivation changes of 4 university students in Japan over two years, and Keita Kikuchi finds that these changes may vary differently depending on the different individual, so a specific measure should be proposed for the peculiar individual.

While more and more demotivating factors are found and classified, demotivation-related research goes deeper and deeper. Out of the general summarization of demotivation in language learning, some research goes into the specific part of language learning. Muñoz & Valenzuela (21) investigate 785 elementary preservice teachers from seven universities in Chile and find their demotivating factors in the process of academic reading based on the Academic Reading Motivation Scale. Ghaith (22) discusses the interactive influence of such demotivation determinants as learning difficulties, threats to self-esteem, monotonous teaching, bad student-teacher relationships, and learners' proficiency in critical reading and writing. In the study, some internal factors, like threats to self-worth and learning difficulties, are a positive correlation with proficiency in critical reading and writing, while proficiency and writing are not positively correlated with the external factor-monotonous teaching. However, it is also found that the bad external relationship between the students and teachers often directly affect such internal factors as perceptions of learning difficulties, threats to self-worth, and learning difficulties. In English writing, Wu et al. (23) investigate 48 second-year English majors in a Taiwan university paired with American college peers with the help of online flipped writing instruction. And they find it is the peculiar characteristics of online flipped writing instruction that help get rid of the demotivating factors caused by traditional writing teaching and learning. Therefore, more and more innovative pedagogies should be integrated into the traditional language classroom to fit the increasing needs and interests of young students.

In addition to the frequently-discussed external demotivating factors, there occur from time to time some unexpected events that may diminish learners' motivation. Occurring at the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic is such an external factor, which has greatly changed people's way of life including their way of learning. and severely affected students Elmas & Öztüfekçi (24) prove that the COVID-19 pandemic exerts a negative influence on students' learning as an external demotivation factor.

5. Conclusion

Demotivation is the reduction of motivation level caused by negative external factors. The present study finds that motivation weakening is mainly related to the teaching party through a survey of English classes for non-English major students in nine universities from three different provinces located in three sections of the Chinese mainland. These English teachers should understand the causes of motivation weakening in the specific context and actively seek countermeasures to minimize motivation weakening. As Oxford (7) says, teachers should listen to the voice of their students, and they ought to think about their appeal, then start to solve the specific problems mentioned by students or related to the teachers, based on which the English courses are designed to spur the students' learning motivation. As the organizer in the teaching activity, teachers should hold responsible for the demotivation factors in language teaching and learning. But the case is more than that, because the students are the true player in the language acquisition and language can be learned only when the students want to ignite their own learning motivation for it. Therefore, motivating suggestions should be proposed for both teachers and students.

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