

Demotivating Factors of English Learning for Chinese Middle-school Learners

Ziqi Zhang^{1,a,*}

¹*University of Nottingham, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, United Kingdom*

a. 18229026603@163.com

** corresponding author*

Abstract: Demotivation has not been extensively researched in the second language study compared with a well-investigated field on learning motivation. Motivation is significant to influence learning performance of language that students will gain. According to the reviews on many previous research solving demotivated English learners' issues, the study specifically pays attention to Chinese younger middle school ESL (English as a second language) learners, as analysis of learners' learning experiences in public education might promote findings on influencing factors of demotivation. In this research, it focuses on the demotivated English learners, and explores the main factors for deficiency of motivation. The instrument applied in this study is a questionnaire modified from Sakai and Kikuchi's [20] and focusing on 6 possible demotivating factors from literature review, which includes 28 items and has been tested on 197 Chinese ESL younger students. The results in this paper illustrate that students might be positively influenced by teachers. However, features of classes and students' English learning experiences are considered as the most demotivation items by Chinese younger learners of English study.

Keywords: Demotivation, English learning, middle-school learners, Chinese.

1. Introduction

Motivation has been widely discussed in academic research for many decades, especially in the field of second language acquisition [2] [7]. Lightbown and Spada define motivation from two perspectives: 'Learners' communicative needs' and 'learners' attitudes towards the second language community' [18]. Notably, from 2005 to 2014, more than 70% of motivation research conducted in an English learning context has focused primarily on the positive influence of motivation. Although being motivated is believed to play an important role in language learning processes, learners also need to understand their demotivation and ascertain which are their main demotivating factors in L2 language acquisition.

Learning a foreign language can be difficult for any learner. Students may face difficulties and become discouraged as they attempt to improve their language proficiency due to a variety of internal and external forces. Hence, understanding what demotivates L2 learners may help students develop higher language proficiency. As aforementioned, there is a paucity of research into language learning demotivation and even less relating to middle-school English learners in a specific Chinese context. It is significant to investigate the key influential factors which may lead to students' demotivation in language learning. Bell suggests that data collection methods are frequently closely related to the

actual investigation context and type of information [1]. According to Dörnyei, this modified questionnaire as a qualitative methodological approach may provide more support and evidence to increase the reliability and validity of the results [8].

Consequently, this research aims to bridge this gap in the literature by exploring the main reasons for students' negative responses to their English learning processes and by analyzing previous experiences in order to effectively support students in avoiding demotivation. Having introduced the background of this research, this paper further discusses in brief the key theoretical basis underpinning the study. Then, research design and methodology are demonstrated specifically. After data analysis and critical discussion, the study seeks to make potential contributions.

2. Literature review

2.1. Historical overview and types of motivation

Motivation is generally explained as the willingness or reasons for someone to achieve something. However, defining motivation in L2 learning has proven complex [14]. Brown proposes that motivation is most frequently used to explain the success or failure of learning, and plays an important role in second language acquisition [3]. Gardner and Lambert suggest that positively communicating with the learning community may motivate language learners, alongside the desire to gain knowledge and develop understanding [13]. Furthermore, Dörnyei and Ushioda conclude that motivation may reflect why learners decide to learn a foreign language, how long they maintain their positive motivation for study, and how hard they are willing to work towards achieving their learning goals [11]. L2 motivation has long since been a focus of research. The historical development of L2 motivation can be briefly divided into four main periods: the Social-Psychological period; the Cognitive-Situated period; the Process-Oriented Approach period and the Socio-Dynamic period [11]. Various definitions of L2 motivation as well as L2 motivation development have encouraged more in-depth investigations into specific aspects of motivation, such as types of motivation.

Four main categories of motivation are widely discussed in L2 learning: integrative and instrumental motivation, as well as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation [4] [5] [11] [13]. Dörnyei and Ushioda suggest a model of integrative motivation in which the learner engages positively in the learning process with a desire to become a part of the L2 community [11]. In contrast, instrumentally motivated learners focus on their practical needs, such as seeking good employment and obtaining a decent salary [13]. In addition, Deci and Ryan use their theory on intrinsic and extrinsic motivations as a rationale for their self-determination theory [5] [4]. Intrinsically motivated students usually learn knowledge out of their inherent interest and enjoyment in the learning process, while extrinsically motivated learners study to avoid punishment or achieve outside of the task performance, such as a decent job and a great salary [4].

2.2. L2 Demotivation

Demotivation is the opposite of motivation. Since motivation positively promotes learners studying toward their aims, demotivation has an adverse effect on learning progression and may hinder learners in the study process [16]. Dörnyei and Ushioda conclude that demotivation is the 'dark side' of motivation [11]. Actually, demotivated learners usually had motivation previously. However, due to certain influencing factors such as a non-inspirational teacher or a poor test score, their motivation may decrease or even disappear [11]. Unlike well-researched L2 motivation, L2 demotivation has not been extensively studied. This study essentially investigates the demotivation of English language learning in a Chinese middle-school specific context, which may provide learners with a better understanding of L2 learning, as well as draw teachers' attention to the causes of students' demotivation in the L2 learning process.

Dörnyei offers a clear definition on demotivation as when certain external factors have negative influences on motivated actions [7]. In contrast, Kikuchi disagrees with Dörnyei's argument, suggesting instead that any discussion of demotivation may also need to take internal forces into consideration [16]. Several studies focusing on demotivation in L2 education present not only external forces such as instructors and teaching materials but also internal factors such as lack of confidence and negative attitudes [16]. Thus, both internal and external forces may reduce or diminish the foundation of originally motivated learning plans or the foundation of motivated learning actions [16].

To understand demotivation comprehensively, attention to amotivation should be given, as this closely connects with demotivation [11]. In Deci and Ryan's research, amotivation is used to define learners who have no motivation in any learning process [4]. As a result of some negative learning experiences, an apathetic learner often feels they are incompetent and helpless, which may lead to a lack of interest and a negative attitude from the beginning [4]. Hence, it is necessary to distinguish between the students' types of demotivation and amotivation. There is still hope for demotivated learners, as supported by Dörnyei in that strong negative effects occurring in the learning process may obstruct or cause learning motivation to stop for the current time [7]. However, there may still be positive forces within students. When these positive motives are reactivated, the learner may revert to being motivated [7]. As a result, a demotivated learner may be changed into a motivated learner, representing a significant improvement in L2 teaching pedagogy. Some conducted studies focusing on L2 demotivation make indispensable contributions to L2 education, and these will be reviewed in the next section.

2.3. Research into L2 Demotivation

Dörnyei presents the influencing factors of L2 demotivation based on his own research with 50 European students learning German or English [7] [6]. The study illustrates that 40 percent of participants' answers are directly related to students' own issues, such as reducing self-confidence as a result of their unsuccessful learning experiences and negative attitude toward foreign language study, as well as aspects related to their instructors, such as teachers' personalities, abilities and teaching methods [7]. Furthermore, school facilities account for 10 percent of participants' replies [7]. Participating students provided detailed examples of inadequate school facilities, such as large-sized classes, one level of classes taught to different levels of students and unstable teaching staff [7]. Textbooks were also found to adversely affect learners' L2 motivation [7]. Moreover, Sakai and Kikuchi, investigating the context of Japanese students learning English, found possible demotivating factors [20]. After qualitative and quantitative studies, five common factors of demotivation were identified: teaching content and materials, teachers' abilities and teaching styles; lack of school facilities; low level of intrinsic motivation, and grades [20].

In contrast with the last two studies, Zhang's research concludes that teacher incompetence is not a popular reason for students' L2 demotivation in the Chinese educational context [23]. Zhang conducted cross-cultural research among participants from China, Japan, the United States, and Germany paying attention to the influence of the teacher on learners' motivation [23]. The common reason given for learners' demotivation from the four different contexts is similarly linked with instructor incompetence. However, China represents the lowest number of participants blaming demotivation on their teachers. Zhang further suggests that Chinese parents are more engaged in their children's education and take great responsibility for their children's learning performance [23]. Therefore, demotivation of Chinese students may originate more from themselves and their parents than teachers.

Though demotivation studies have been carried out in many regions with various cultures and at different educational levels, there is little research focused on the English learning demotivation of

middle-school students in China. According to the arguments reviewed above, it is therefore reasonable to hypothesize that demotivated L2 learners may be affected by features of classes, experiences of failure, teachers, class materials, learning environment, and insufficient interest [7] [15] [20] [23]. The present study therefore aims to investigate two research questions:

- What are the main demotivating forces influencing Chinese middle-school English learners?
- How might such demotivating forces be overcome?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants and research methods

This study will be conducted in a middle-school located in Shaanxi, China. The key textbook is published by the Department of Education. This study will involve over 200 Participants, all of whom are students at the aforementioned school. The number of male and female students involved in this research will be equal. Participants are aged 12 to 17, are non-native English speakers and use the same L1 (Chinese). Participants taking part in this research will do so voluntarily. Furthermore, 30 participants, 15 females and 15 males will be randomly selected for questionnaires with a pilot study, to form a representative sample of all participants for increasing the validity and reliability of the study as well as the questionnaire can be amended before the formal investigation if necessary. The modified questionnaire applied in this research focused on a range of possible demotivating factors (such as teachers, students' learning experiences, learning interests, school facilities, teaching materials, and classes).

3.2. Data collection

Closed-question questionnaires are seen as a quantitative method aimed at acquiring basic data, analyzed through numbers and percentages [8]. Dörnyei further states that this measurement is objective and persuasive, thus, may gain more accurate and reliable results [8]. The researcher of the study teaches students in both 10th and 11th grades, which is convenient to hand out the modified questionnaires to these two grade students. For others grades, questionnaires were issued to class teachers for each grade in order to ensure the final data would be composed by six grades (from 7th grade to 12th grade) of middle-school students. Sixty questionnaires were given to each grade.

The questionnaire investigates six demotivating causes: features of classes, experiences of failure, teachers, class materials, learning environment and insufficient interest. A 5-point Likert scale was adopted to collect responses: 1 = Strongly Agree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree. All participants were informed to take the ethics forms home and review them with their parents.

Dörnyei and Taguchi suggest that problems involving in questionnaires for younger students are expected to be short and simple in order to avoid misunderstanding the wording of items [10]. This paper agrees that participants might be confused by complex or compound sentences in question stems. It therefore is important to express questions clearly and directly. Making a clear and concise questionnaire could help greatly with gaining accurate and conclusive data. The pilot study was conducted with 30 target students, and all questions were modified according to the students' feedback in order to make sure that all items could be easily and completely understood.

All participants were informed to hand in the questionnaires within three days. However, nearly 45% of questionnaire was discarded as unreliable. 19 copies were lost or forgotten to bring by students; 14 copies were not completed in section of personal information (name; gender; grade) as well as 32 participants left some blanks among items. The biggest problem causing invalid data was no sign of the consent form (98 copies). The left 197 questionnaires met all requirements and the data were

adopted into following steps for analysis. Additionally, to be surprised, 197 returned copies presented a balance in the aspect of gender (102 Girls; 95 Boys).

This paper mainly adopts Windows Excel to analyze the data collected from the questionnaires. Meanwhile in order to provide a visual presentation, all data is presented in clear and accurate figures as well as tables as follows. Based on the collected data, formulas could be used to calculate the percentage of the 5-point Likert scale for each item in the questionnaire and also the 6 influencing demotivation factors studied in this research. The mean of each 5-point Likert scale answer for individual items and every influencing factor was calculated by formula as well in Windows Excel. To reveal the variability of findings, the standard deviation of answers was also figured out.

The paper aims to explore demotivating factors affecting Chinese middle-school students in English study. Six demotivating factors are discussed in the research: respectively Features of Classes (Factor 1) from item 1 to item 5; Experiences of Failure (Factor 2) from item 6 to item 10; Teachers (Factor 3) from item 11 to item 15; Class Materials (Factor 4) from item 16 to item 20; Learning Environment (Factor 5) from item 21 to item 24, and Insufficient Interest (Factor 6) from item 25 to item 28.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 1 presents all the data collected from 197 participants for 28 items in the questionnaire. There is an obvious feature that the means of six items show higher than 2.00. Item 3, 4 and 5 all relate to demotivating Factor 1; item 6 connects with demotivating Factor 2; item 17 is involved in demotivating Factor 4 and item 24 is involved in demotivating Factor 5, and all present means greater than 2.00. Demotivating Factor 1 has the most items (items 3, 4 and 5) presenting a mean above 2.00. Of these six items, item 5 shows the greatest mean at 2.80, and item 17 presents the lowest mean at 2.03. In addition, item 12 has the lowest mean (=1.30) among all items for demotivating Factor 3. Participants' answers for each item include (1) to (5) on the Likert scale, except item 18 and 23, which show the answer (4) as the highest.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for Chinese middle-school students' demotivation questionnaire responses (N=197).

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	Mean	Min	Max	1	2	3	4	5
1	1.88	1	5	43%	33%	19%	4%	1%
2	1.82	1	5	46%	36%	32%	3%	2%
3	2.04	1	5	40%	31%	18%	8%	4%
4	2.34	1	5	32%	28%	23%	8%	9%
5	2.80	1	5	27%	20%	19%	14%	20%
6	2.23	1	5	37%	24%	2%	5%	8%
7	1.94	1	5	42%	30%	22%	6%	0%
8	1.95	1	5	48%	25%	21%	4%	2%
9	1.88	1	5	42%	34%	18%	5%	0%
10	1.38	1	5	74%	17%	6%	2%	1%
11	1.55	1	5	61%	26%	10%	3%	0%
12	1.30	1	5	80%	13%	5%	2%	1%
13	1.42	1	5	77%	12%	6%	3%	2%
14	1.60	1	5	59%	24%	15%	0%	1%
15	1.74	1	5	54%	25%	15%	3%	3%
16	1.93	1	5	44%	28%	22%	4%	3%
17	2.03	1	5	40%	30%	19%	9%	2%
18	1.76	1	4	45%	36%	18%	2%	0%
19	1.80	1	5	50%	28%	14%	7%	1%
20	1.67	1	5	55%	28%	13%	3%	2%
21	1.76	1	5	59%	18%	14%	4%	5%
22	1.78	1	5	59%	18%	15%	3%	5%
23	1.53	1	4	64%	21%	13%	2%	0%
24	2.10	1	5	37%	23%	24%	10%	6%
25	1.78	1	5	51%	27%	15%	4%	2%
26	1.56	1	5	62%	23%	11%	2%	1%
27	1.55	1	5	59%	30%	8%	2%	1%
28	1.52	1	5	69%	21%	5%	2%	4%

Table 2 demonstrates percentages of participants' answers for six demotivating factors. The highest percentage of positive answers (answer (4) = Agree and answer (5)= Strongly Agree) is in Factor 1 'Features of Classes' with answers (4) at 7% and answers (5) at 7% (14% in total). Other five factors all present percentages of positive answers ((4)+(5)) lower than 10%, especially the demotivating Factor 3 'Teachers' has the lowest combined percentage of answers (4) and (5) at 3% in total. While Factor 3 'Teachers' shows the greatest percentage of negative answers (answer (1) = Strongly Disagree and answer (2) = Disagree) at 86% in total ((1) =66%; (2) = 20%). Factor 6 'Insufficient Interest' presents a similar feature having the second highest combined percentage of answers (1) and (2) at 85%. The data in Figure 1 states that the highest mean answers of questionnaire is in Factor 1 'Features of Classes' (Mean= 2.18) and the lowest one is in Factor 3 'Teachers' (Mean= 1.52).

Table 2: Percentages of items tested for each demotivating factor.

6 Demotivating Factors	Total	1	2	3	4	5
Factor 1- Features of Classes: 5(items) × 197(participants)	985	368	288	187	72	70
		37%	29%	19%	7%	7%
Factor 2- Experiences of Failure: 5(items) × 197(participants)	985	478	258	184	42	23
		49%	26%	19%	4%	2%
Factor 3- Teachers: 5(items) × 197(participants)	985	652	199	99	21	14
		66%	20%	10%	2%	1%
Factor 4- Classe Materials: 5(items) × 197(participants)	985	461	297	168	46	13
		47%	30%	17%	5%	1%
Factor 5- Learning Environment: 5(items) × 197(participants)	788	432	159	130	37	30
		55%	20%	16%	5%	4%
Factor 6- Insufficient Interest: 5(items) × 197(participants)	788	476	200	77	19	16
		60%	25%	10%	2%	2%

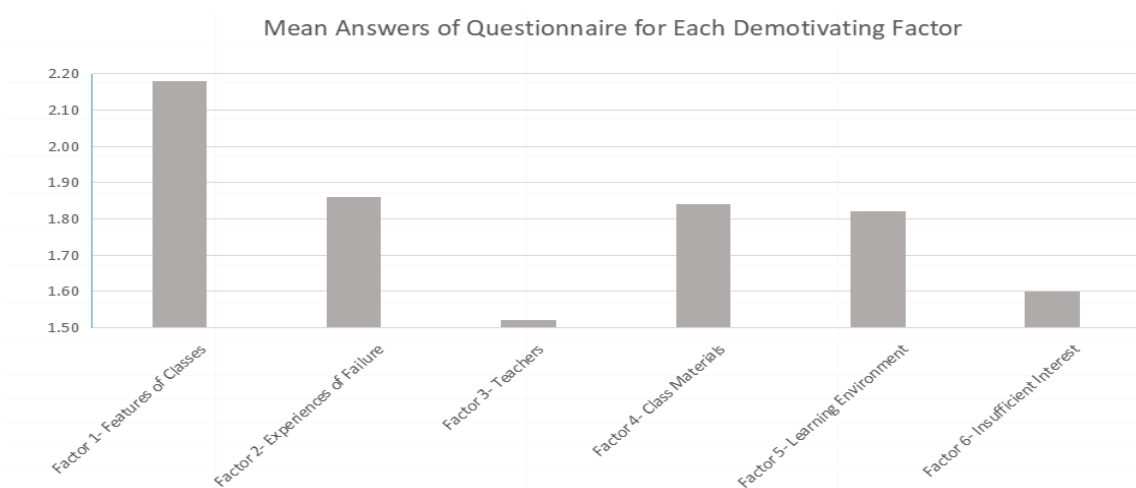


Figure 1: Mean answers of questionnaire for each demotivating factor.

The questionnaire reflects six demotivating factors influencing Chinese middle-school students' English study in a quantitative way. All items involved in the questionnaire have been taken positive answer (4) or answer (5), which shows that six factors all have at least some demotivation for some participants. Two demotivating factors present considerably high mean which could not be neglected in Figure 1, Factor 1 'Features of Classes' (Mean=2.18), and Factor 2 'Experiences of Failure' (Mean=1.86). Based on the data, students might be mostly positive with their English study experiences. The demotivation reflected from Factor 1 and 2 would be attributed to extrinsically influencing factors [3], such as curriculum design, school evaluation criteria, teaching objectives, competitions among classmates, parental expectation, and failure English learning results [22]. Some negative factors involved in instrumental motivations would also be demonstrated in Factor 1 and Factor 2 in the research, such as future expectation and employment deficiency [13]. Though demotivation Factor 4 'Class Materials' and Factor 5 'Learning Environment' both achieve similar means (Factor 4, Mean=1.84; Factor 5, Mean=1.82) with the second highest Mean of Factor 2 (Mean=1.86), they are not seen as essentially demotivating items of English learning.

The finding of Factor 6 ‘Insufficient Interest’ is inconsistent with previous suppose as the data of Factor 6 dose not indicate an obviously high mean answer (Mean=1.60, see in Figure 1). It might have straight connection with the students’ intrinsic and integrative motivations showing from their English learning process. According to participants’ answers for Factor 6, the whole attitude tend to be positive due to more intrinsic motivation on English study and optimistic views on students’ career development. Results of the questionnaire provide Deci and Ryan’s [4] self-determination theory with supportive evidences. Additionally, there are some studies state similar arguments that integrative-motivated students would be willing to use English language in communication and expect to contact with cultures of English-speaking countries [11] [13]. It is demonstrated by participants in the study marking positive answers for Factor 6.

5. Conclusions

The overall finding of the research is that the most demotivating factors are ‘Features of Classes’ and ‘experiences of Failure’. According to collected data and overall analysis, these two influencing factors are more significant than other investigated factors. Meanwhile, two main factors would reflect specific issues with the Chinese English education system. Grammar-translation method (GTM) is a traditional pedagogy for English classes in China [19]. Up until now, GTM has been widely adopted in most Chinese middle-schools as it might be suitable to prepare for Gaokao as well as English tests focusing on receptive or translation abilities [21]. The findings of the research would emphasize students’ negative emotions from teaching methods, the significance of exam results, and the need to attend a lot of tests, which all have no direct connection with teachers. In general, Factor 3 for teachers has gained the most positive student answers in the questionnaire. As noted by Dörnyei and You, most classes are dominated by teachers, and these teacher-centered classes reveal a stably hierarchical Chinese teacher-student relationship as well as Chinese teachers have ‘unquestioned authority’ in this social context [12]. Due to fears of teachers or failing to meet parents’ expectations, students would rather show their respect and admiration to their teachers than turn against them in negative ways.

The main limitation in this study is that the research was merely implemented in a public middle-school in Xi’ an, so the data could not represent the comprehensive situation of English study in various types of schools, such as private schools and international schools in China. Besides, only one pilot study has been developed with 30 participants, which is not adequate. According to deeper reflection, the study relates to six grades, therefore it is more accurate and convincing to conduct at least one pilot study for each grade. The modified item 20 is evidence to prove the necessity of piloting study, as confusing statements are able to be revised into clear and precise descriptions in order to lead students to easily understand. Therefore, more piloting should have been developed before the formal test, aiming to have a full and specific exploration of research. Items included in the questionnaire are expected to be more representative and try to avoid participants’ negative emotions when faced with a large number of questions [17]. Meanwhile, as for small-sample research, it would pay attention to 3 or 4 influencing factors rather than identify the 6 demotivating factors in the study. In spite of 197 participants as a sound size, Dörnyer and Taguchi indicate that a self-report questionnaire would be limited by participants’ simple and superficial answers, unreliable and demotivated replies, mistakes by participants, etc., [10].

The study limits to focusing on six demotivating factors, and it is obvious that there would be not only other vital factors but also practical research methods. Dörnyei suggests that influencing items would be more accurate and representative if they are identified by participants [6]. The questionnaire might be recommended to be revised with extra structured-interviews before implementation of questionnaire for it might be helpful to collect more specific students' opinions on narrowing down

the scale of influencing factors. Additionally, the study involving six demotivating factors is suggested to be expanded with structured or unstructured interview sections as written answer questions can provide participants with more opportunities and time to fully express their views. Class observation is also an efficient research method for further finding out students' perspectives and possible reasons. It would be useful to specifically know the real situation about participants, especially what and why for their demotivation on English study as well as their views or suggestions on figuring out demotivating factors. An investigation into students' feelings and personal views would be encouraged to develop in educational research to collect accurate and overall information for concluding practical education applications.

Nevertheless, there are some points in this field in need of a further improvement in the future studies. The number of subjects (N=197) taking part in the research has a convictive size for identifying demotivating factors on Chinese students in middle-school English study. The modified questionnaire stresses issues from Chinese English education for younger students but also the Chinese education system in a general public school. Younger Chinese students might be demotivated by the features of English classes and their learning experiences. In order to provide Chinese younger learners with a better and advanced English education, it is necessary to develop further research into specific demotivation factors with profound discussion and come up with efficient English teaching pedagogies.

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