

A Questionnaire-based Study on Chinese University Students' Demotivation to Learn English

Chili Li¹ & Ting Zhou²

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei, China

² School of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University of Technology, Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China

Correspondence: Chili Li, School of Foreign Languages, Hubei University of Technology, 28#, Nanli Road, Hongshan District, Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. E-mail: sundaylcl@126.com

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Abstract

This paper, adopting questionnaire survey method, investigated 367 non-key local university English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' demotivation to learn English. The collected data revealed that there were two main categories of demotivators: internal factors (*lack of intrinsic interest, experience of failure and lack of confidence, and unclear study goal*) 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*). External factors are found to be more influential than internal ones in the participants' demotivation to learn English. The current study adds to the literature in that *unclear study goal* is an important demotivator in Chinese local non-key university EFL students' English study. The findings of this study will enrich the research of demotivation to learn English, and to provide an empirical basis for the needs analysis in English class and curriculum reform, as well as to provide reference for implementing central and local education policies.

Keywords: Chinese university students, demotivation to learn English, questionnaire

1. Introduction

Research on demotivation has been the foci in second language acquisition in recent decades. Researchers from the west (i.e., Chambers, 1993; Dornyei, 2001; Oxford, 1998) and Asia (i.e., Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Trang & Baldauf, 2007) have shown great interest in this topic. Compared to studies on demotivation abroad, research in China started a bit late, but developed fast (i.e., Hu & Cai, 2010; Zhou & Wang, 2012). These studies have generated deep insight into demotivation to learn English. However, they mainly focused on the demotivation of students from the key universities. Little is known about those students studying English at non-key local universities. Compared with those key universities who enjoy better financial support from government at all levels with more expertise teachers and better teaching resources, non-key local universities in Mainland China, while in their effort to transforming themselves into application-oriented higher education institutions, are confronted with such constraints as teaching hours for College English programmes being dramatically reduced, limited expertise of English teachers, and others. Students at local universities thus are more likely to be demotivated in their English study. Therefore, this paper aims to investigate the factors that might have caused demotivation to learn English among local university students. The findings will be implicative for teachers to take remedial measures to reduce the detrimental effects of demotivation in English class.

2. Research Background

Demotivation is the external force, which may make people reduce or lose a certain behavior tendency or the conduct of behavior (Dornyei, 2001). This definition focused on the external factors and was criticized for failing to take into account the internal factors. However, later empirical studies showed that, in addition to the external factors, the internal factors might also cause motivation recession (Zhou & Wang, 2012). This paper holds that demotivation is a phenomenon of students' lack of motivation to study English as a result of both external and internal factors.

Empirical studies in the West initiated in early 1990s. Gorham and Christophel (1992) conducted a questionnaire survey on 308 students to identify the factors that might have brought about demotivation. They discovered three

demotivators: context, structure, and teachers. Among the three factors, teacher-related reasons were found to be the most influential demotivator. Chambers (1993) conducted a questionnaire survey on 191 students and 7 teachers in four middle schools in the UK for identifying the reasons for the students' demotivation to learn English. The results suggested that some teacher behaviors such as unclear lecture and sarcastic language used by teachers in class might have caused demotivation among the students.

Oxford (1998) asked 250 university students in the United States to look back to their English learning experiences by writing a retrospective journal, and paid special attention to the role of teachers. The results showed that the demotivation factors mainly centred on four aspects: (1) inharmonious relationship between teachers and students; (2) the negative attitude of the teachers towards the curriculum and the teaching materials; (3) incompatibility of the styles between teachers and students; (4) the unreasonableness in designing and using the class activities. This study identified teacher-related demotivators, but paid little attention to other demotivational factors.

Dornyei (2001) summed up nine demotivating factors by coding the results of semi-structured interviews: teachers, the incompleteness of the school educational administration, the recession of self-confidence, the negative attitudes towards the second language, the coerciveness of the second language course, negative transfer in the second language acquisition, negative attitude toward learning the second language, the attitude towards other students, and teaching materials. The teacher factor accounts for 40% of the overall demotivating factors. These nine demotivators laid a solid foundation for later studies on demotivation. This study examined demotivators from the perspective demotivated students, which might generate a misunderstanding that demotivation only belongs to the demotivated learners. In fact, demotivation has been found to be prevalent among all learners.

Demotivation in foreign language classroom has also recently drawn attention from Asian researchers. Trang & Baldauf (2007) investigated the demotivators in Vietnamese students' English study. They found that 88% of the surveyed students had or were experiencing a weakening of the learning motivation; and that the factors resulting in demotivation can be divided into internal factors (36%) and external factors (64%). Sakai & Kikuchi (2009) reported a survey on demotivation among 656 Japanese high school students. They found out five demotivation factors: learning content and materials, teachers' competence and teaching style, inadequate school facilities, lack of intrinsic motivation, and test scores. Kim (2015) interviewed 29 Korean college students to identify the demotivators in their study of English and obtained three demotivational factors including lack of meaningful purpose, lack of improvement and success experiences, and lack of self-determination. Hassaskhah, Zafarghandi & Fazeli (2015) administered a questionnaire survey to 308 Iranian English major students and found that the demotivators are at such levels as institution, important others, and self.

Compared to research on demotivation in the west, studies on this phenomenon in China started a bit late after 2000. Hu and Cai (2010) first interviewed some students who had demotivation in English learning and conducted a questionnaire survey for 16 English teachers and 170 non-English majors. They identified six demotivators (learning interest, learning goal, valence, anxiety, attribution, learning environment). Zhou and Wang (2012) made a questionnaire survey for 766 College English learners. They found that the main factors affecting the learning motivation could be divided into five major categories, including 2 internal factors (lack of intrinsic interest, lack of effective learning strategy) and 3 external factors (teachers' competence and teaching style, curriculum and learning material, defective teaching attachments). Li (2013) investigated the internal factors triggering Chinese college EFL learners' demotivation and identified the following demotivators such as decrease in self confidence, insufficiency in affective cognition, learning strategies deficiency, and lack of intrinsic interest. Sun & Lei (2013) found teacher-related factors, teaching contents, student-related factors, and teaching environment are the four major demotivators in Chinese EFL classrooms, among which teacher-related factors are the most influential.

A further examination over the relevant literature reveals that present studies on demotivation in China mainly focused on students from key universities, and that there is paucity of research on demotivation among students from non-key local institutions. It is therefore necessary to further study demotivation among students from these local universities (Li, 2014).

3. Research Design

3.1 Research Questions

- 1) Do the students from local non-key universities experience demotivation?
- 2) What factors might have caused demotivation?

3.2 Participants

The participants were 367 students from a non-key local university. Of these participants, there were 182 male students and 185 female students. 223 of the participants were freshmen, 66 sophomores, 70 juniors and 8 seniors respectively. They were majoring in *English, Material Science, Financial Management, Urban Design, Electrical Engineering, Law*, and so on.

3.3 Research Instrument

The questionnaire used for this study is composed of two parts. The first part was to investigate the participants' background information including grade, major, gender, hometown, and English learning enthusiasm. The second part was designed based on previous studies. This section has 46 items of statement, taking the form of Five-Likert scale. The numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 represent “*strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, and strongly agree*” respectively. The Cronbach α of the questionnaire is 0.948, which indicates that the questionnaire has a high reliability.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Before the questionnaire survey was administered, the participants were told about the research purposes of this investigation. 378 copies of the questionnaires were collected, of which 11 ones were invalid and thus were excluded. That is, 367 questionnaires were valid for the current study. The collected questionnaires were first computed into SPSS 22.0 and then processed by means of descriptive analysis. In order to identify the demotivators, factor analysis was conducted.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Answers to Research Question 1

The first research question asks whether the students from local non-key universities experience demotivation in their English study.

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of the questionnaire data (N=367)

Item	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Item	Min	Max	Mean	SD
29	1.00	5.00	3.36	1.105	1	1.00	5.00	2.62	1.165
27	1.00	5.00	3.28	1.108	14	1.00	5.00	2.59	1.137
9	1.00	5.00	3.25	1.197	20	1.00	5.00	2.59	1.100
45	1.00	5.00	3.17	1.261	39	1.00	5.00	2.59	1.028
8	1.00	5.00	3.16	1.134	11	1.00	5.00	2.57	1.246
2	1.00	5.00	3.13	1.113	15	1.00	5.00	2.52	1.111
5	1.00	5.00	3.07	1.078	33	1.00	5.00	2.50	1.029
4	1.00	5.00	3.04	1.081	21	1.00	5.00	2.49	1.063
28	1.00	5.00	3.01	1.053	23	1.00	5.00	2.47	1.042
26	1.00	5.00	2.96	1.090	24	1.00	5.00	2.46	1.023
7	1.00	5.00	2.95	1.101	38	1.00	5.00	2.44	1.022
13	1.00	5.00	2.95	1.109	12	1.00	5.00	2.43	1.035
25	1.00	5.00	2.92	1.066	41	1.00	5.00	2.42	1.076
34	1.00	5.00	2.91	1.130	44	1.00	5.00	2.42	1.135
6	1.00	5.00	2.89	1.083	40	1.00	5.00	2.38	1.048
46	1.00	5.00	2.88	1.172	22	1.00	5.00	2.34	1.040
31	1.00	5.00	2.78	1.069	42	1.00	5.00	2.33	1.102
19	1.00	5.00	2.74	1.138	43	1.00	5.00	2.32	1.066
32	1.00	5.00	2.74	1.103	16	1.00	5.00	2.30	1.037
10	1.00	5.00	2.67	1.210	18	1.00	5.00	2.30	1.010
35	1.00	5.00	2.67	1.131	30	1.00	5.00	2.30	1.085
17	1.00	5.00	2.66	1.130	37	1.00	5.00	2.30	1.159
36	1.00	5.00	2.66	1.061	3	1.00	5.00	2.27	1.021

The collected data showed that 87 (23.7%) and 222 (60.5%) of the 367 participants clearly expressed that they had little or moderate enthusiasm for learning English respectively, while only 58 (15.8%) had a high enthusiasm for English learning. In order to further understand the features of these participants' demotivation, the collected data were further analyzed through descriptive means (Table 1). The data show that there are 31 items whose mean values are above 2.5 while there are only 15 items whose mean values are less than 2.5. This finding indicates that the participants were influenced by these demotivators in their English study. According to Li (2013) and Zhou & Wang (2012), the above result suggests that demotivation is a common phenomenon among students in local universities. This finding is consistent with the relevant literature that demotivation is prevalent among Chinese EFL learners.

4.2 Answers to Research Question 2

The second research question examines the factors that might lead to demotivation among the participants. To answer this question, factor analysis was performed. The questionnaire analysis reveals that the questionnaire data are suitable for factor analysis (chi-square = 9201.837; $P=0.000$; $KMO=0.934$, close to 1.0). By using Principal Component Analysis and setting the factor loadings and communalities lower than .400, the factor analysis with varimax rotation produced 8 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 (Table 2), which explained 61.695% of the total variance. The coefficients of the 8 factors are among the range of 0.657 - 0.882.

Table 2. Analysis of variance and reliability of all factors explained

Factor	Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings			coefficient
	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	
1	4.866	10.814	10.814	.870
2	4.697	10.438	21.252	.882
3	4.426	9.835	31.088	.856
4	3.351	7.447	38.534	.875
5	3.091	6.869	45.404	.825
6	2.817	6.261	51.664	.842
7	2.312	5.138	56.802	.657
8	2.202	4.893	61.695	.705

Table 3 reports the loadings of the first five factors. Factor 1 contains 9 variables (Item 2, 4, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 45), involving the curriculum evaluation means, teaching content and teaching materials, etc. It shows that the difficulty of teaching materials and the monotonous teaching method might have made students lose passion for learning English. In addition, the traditional teaching mode applied during teaching failed to generate students' interest in English class and thus might lead to demotivation among them. Therefore, Factor 1 is named as "*teaching material, teaching content and teaching process*". This echoes Kikuchi (2009) that the teaching mode is the inducement of demotivation.

Factor 2 involves 8 variables (Item 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 46). These items reveal that, due to the negative influence of those people with limited English proficiency, the participants might be reluctant to try their best to learn English. Besides, with the over-emphasis of the importance of English from parents and/or teachers, students might also be unwilling to learn English. Therefore, Factor 2 was named as "*significant others*". This verifies Kim & Seo (2012) that the over-emphasis of the importance of English learning from other people around will induce demotivation among students.

Factor 3 encompasses 5 variables (Item 15, 16, 17, 18, 19), involving teaching methods, teaching experience, teachers' lesson preparation before class. So, it is named as "*teaching competence and attitude of teachers*". This result echoes Liang (2008) that inappropriate teaching method might make students lose interest in learning English. Factor 4 contains 5 variables (Item 20, 21, 22, 23, 24). These items indicate that the way teachers interact with students might exert a great impact on students' English learning. It is thus named as "*the relationship between teachers and students*". Factor 3 and Factor 4 suggest that teacher-related factors might be responsible for EFL learners' demotivation in learning English, which is in line with Gorham & Christophel (1992) and Dornyei (2001).

Table 3. Rotated factor loadings of the external factors

Item	Factor load
Factor 1: teaching material, teaching process and teaching content	
27. It is boring to test students only by exam.	.789
30. It is boring to only listen to teachers in class.	.651
28. English teaching pays too much attention to grammar.	.642
29. It is boring for us to remember so many words.	.626
45. We are only taught dumb English in universities.	.624
25. Teaching materials are not close to our life.	.621
26. There are too many new words in our textbooks.	.599
4. Exercises are not interesting.	.499
2. It is boring that teachers only focus on the textbook.	.488
Factor 2: significant others	
43. That people with a poor command of English still achieve success negatively affects me.	.814
42. I do not want to learn English because it makes little help for my future career.	.765
41. English becomes less important because of the reform of the National Matriculation English.	.748
44. It is rare to use English in our daily life so that English is not so important.	.740
40. My parents and families often tell me how important English is, which makes me frustrated.	.599
39. I lost my confidence by being compared with other peers.	.596
38. My parents do not give me praise when I make progress.	.475
46. English is not paid with due attention in technological universities.	.468
Factor 3: teaching competence and attitude of teachers	
17. Teaching method is outdated and cannot satisfy the needs of students.	.772
16. Teachers are inexperienced in teaching.	.743
18. Teachers are not well prepared for their class.	.714
19. Teachers have little interaction with students in class.	.631
15. The high frequency to change teachers makes students uncomfortable.	.543
Factor 4: the relationship between teachers and students	
24. My English teacher criticized me when I did not well in the study.	.745
22. There is not a harmonious relationship between teachers and students.	.670
23. My English teacher do not give me some good suggestions.	.594
20. Teachers show preferences to those who are good at learning English.	.593
21. Teachers are not easy going.	.575
Factor 5: teaching facilities and teaching environment	
35. I am frustrated to be placed into different classes according to my English scores.	.625
32. The overcrowded classroom made me less interested in learning English.	.620
36. I am frustrated when my English scores are posted in public.	.564
34. Teachers cannot take all students into consideration in the large class.	.555
37. English class is often shifted due to conflicts with other courses.	.543
31. The out of dated facilities in the class are not good for learning English.	.477
33. Multimedia resources are seldom used in our class.	.473

Factor 5 contains seven variables (Item 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37), involving teaching equipment, large class teaching, etc. It is named as "*teaching facilities and teaching environment*". This shows that the quality of teaching environment might affect students' learning attitude and enthusiasm towards English study. A good environment and atmosphere might make one feel more pleasant both in mind and in body. Therefore, the allocation of teaching facilities and continuous improvement of the teaching environment are the primary matter that the relevant departments and agencies should actively deal with. These above 5 factors belong to the external influence factors.

Table 4 presents the loadings of the last three factors. Factor 6 includes 4 variables (Item 1, 10, 11, 14). These four items are related with the participants' interest in learning English. They suggested that a lack of interest in English study might lead to demotivation. Therefore, Factor 6 is named as "*lack of intrinsic interest*". This factor is implicative for educators and teachers in that they should first cultivate students' interest. Only when students have the interest in learning, can they have strong motivation to learn English.

Factor 7 contains 4 variables (Item 3, 5, 6, 12), involving the students' experiences and confidence in learning English. It is thus named as "*experiences of failure and lack of confidence*". This shows that the difficulties in learning English may result in students' failure in achieving success which may reduce their confidence in learning it well and thus trigger demotivation. It is consistent with the findings of the research conducted by Hamada (2011).

Factor 8 contains 3 variables, including Item 7, 8, 9, which are associated with students' unclear learning objectives. Thus, this factor is named as "*unclear study goal*". It is worth attention that if students do not have a clear goal in their English study, their energies would be likely dispersed due to the temptation of the surroundings. Therefore, it is important for educators to make the students clear about their study goal. For learners, the goal is not only to play a leading role, but also to promote learning.

These three factors (Factor 6, 7, 8) are related to the participants themselves. Thus, they are categorized as the internal factors. Based on the results of the study, the external factors account for 62.5% of the demotivators identified, while the internal factors only occupy 37.5%. This result is consistent with previous research (Gorham & Christophel, 1992; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). It might be concluded that the Chinese EFL learners tend to be more strongly motivated by external factors in their English study.

Table 4. Rotated factor loadings of the internal factors

Item	Factor load
Factor 6: lack of intrinsic interest	
11. I am not interested in English.	.822
10. I learn English because it is required by our school but not because of my interest.	.733
14. English learning is a burden to me.	.705
1. My poor English made me demotivated to learn it.	.450
Factor 7: experiences of failure and lack of confidence	
5. It is difficult to understand some long and difficult sentences.	.650
12. I have made so many efforts to learn English but actually it doesn't make senses.	.587
3. It is difficult for me to understand some learning content.	.575
6. I cannot achieve an ideal mark in tests.	.558
Factor 8: unclear study goal	
7. Too many extracurricular activities influenced my English study.	.725
8. I am inclined to be influenced by peers when they do not study hard.	.695
9. I am not motivated to learning English well because of unclear study target.	.587

5. Conclusion

This study investigated the demotivators among Chinese EFL students from local non-key universities by using questionnaires. It found two types of factors which include eight demotivators: 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) and internal factors (lack of intrinsic interest, experience of failure and lack of confidence, and unclear study goal). External factors are found to be more influential than internal ones in the participants' demotivation to learn English. What makes this study distinctive from previous studies is in that unclear study goal is found to be an important demotivator.

The findings of this study are implicative for English language teaching. For example, teachers need to pay attention to the teaching methods they apply into their English class so that students could be motivated. In addition, as unclear study goal is found to be an important demotivator, it is necessary for teachers to cultivate students' belief about the benefit of participating in extracurricular activities for English study so that the students come to generate interest in English learning (Li & Ruan, 2015). An interest in English and English class would help students become clear about their goal and maintain their efforts in learning English.

Although this research has identified eight factors of English learning demotivation, there are some deficiencies. It is cautioned to generalize the results of this study because only questionnaire alone is used. Other methods like interviews and journals are recommended for triangulation in future research.

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