

The Other Side of Motivation: Learner Demotivation

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This paper identifies the common factors that demotivate Japanese learners of English as a foreign language through a survey of current literature. New to the area of motivational studies is a discussion on the effects of demotivation, particularly a *reduced self-confidence*, an *affective cycle*, and the *longevity of demotivation*. The paper then describes how demotivated learners can get out of the affective cycle, and their *reactions* to demotivation.

本稿は近年発表されたさまざまな研究を基に日本人英語学習者の学習意欲を減退、喪失させる共通要因を明らかにし、その結果生じる自信の低下、情意の変化、demotivationの長期間にわたる影響を分析し、更に学習者のdemotivationへの対応方法、ネガティブな情意の悪循環からの脱出方法を論じる。

If motivation pushes learning for life, demotivation cuts learning short. “Demotivation trumps motivation,” claimed Michael Rost in a talk about generating student motivation (Rost, 2004). He warned, one demotivating act can negate or “wipe out” the positive effects of ten motivating acts. Yet in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) studies on motivation, an area as rich as it is, there waits a scant source of research on the subject of demotivation. An even meager share examines learning here in Japan, with a few fledging studies having emerged just this year (Arai, 2004; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Miyata et al., 2004). But the findings so far are corroborative, informing educators about reducing and eliminating learner demotivation.

What Demotivates Learners?

Many teachers are looking for the best ways to motivate their students. Ironically, one study suggests it is not what teachers *do*, but what they *don't do*. Christophel & Gorham (1995) found the strongest influence on motivation was not the presence of motivators in the classroom, but the *absence of demotivators*. At the beginning of the semester, the absence of *context demotivators* and the absence of *teacher behavior demotivators* positively affected motivation. Context demotivators refer to the *antecedent conditions* of the learner, which involve general achievement orientation, self-concept, attitude toward the subject and learning environment, desire to become proficient, and expectations of success (Gorham & Millete, 1997). By the end of the semester, the negative antecedent conditions improved somewhat, apparently because

of motivators from course structure and teacher behavior. But the most positive influence on learner motivation remained the absence of teacher behaviors that served to demotivate.

Demotivation concerns external forces that reduce motivation. It does not result from (1) powerful distractions of a more attractive option, (2) a gradual loss of interest, nor (3) an internal process without any external trigger (Dornyei, 2001). This last qualification concedes demotivation as a product of cognitive processes, but specifies that such processes must start as a reaction to external stimuli, or the phenomenal world. By following this definition, researchers are limited to observable, controllable factors. No study in SLA research has critically examined this definition, however, or redefined it.

Teachers

In one study by Gorham & Millette, (1997), teachers were asked to rate the level of their own motivation as teachers, as well as their students' motivation. Teachers who were less motivated tended to rate their students as less motivated, and they attributed their students' demotivation to factors beyond the teacher's control, particularly to the antecedent conditions of the learners. Teachers who were more motivated tended to rate their students as more motivated, and they attributed their students' demotivation to the negative behavior of other students. On the whole, the teachers attributed decreases in student motivation to a lack of knowledge or skill, evidenced by the lack of success on graded work, and to demands outside of the teacher's classes, such as heavy curricular course load.

These findings left the authors to conclude that the teachers—especially those with lower motivation—were unaware of the effects of their behavior. Gorham & Millette (1997) compared these attributions of learner demotivation by teachers with those by students from an earlier study (Christophel & Gorham, 1995). Students mentioned most frequently that the cause of their demotivation was the lack of their teachers' enthusiasm and ability to present. Gorham & Millette found that teachers did not perceive students' beliefs about motivation, either. Students reported learner motivation as a personally-owned state, and demotivation as a teacher-owned problem.

Every study on L2 learner demotivation indicts teachers as a major source of demotivation; most claim teachers as the primary cause. Oxford (1998; reported in Dornyei, 2001) found students were demotivated directly by teachers in three out of four total factors—*relationship with students*, *attitude toward material*, and *pedagogy*—and indirectly in the fourth factor, *nature of activities* in the classroom. From a study on students identified as demotivated by teachers and peers, Dornyei (1998; reported in Dornyei, 2001) claimed 40% of the attributed demotives came from the teacher directly—*personality*, *commitment*, *competence*, and *teaching method*—and another 15% indirectly through something in the classroom within the teacher's control that resulted in the learner's *reduced self-confidence*. From a study on learners majoring in the second language (L2), Arai (2004) reported 47% of the attributed demotives pointed to teachers in *disagreeable personality* and *pedagogy*. Echoing these results, Miyata et al. (2004) had 53% of the total complaints of worst classes pointing to teacher pedagogy

and personality; 47% fell into the three most common categories: *teacher-centered classes*, *classes focusing only on translation*, and *inconsiderate and poor quality teachers*.

Teacher traits or personalities that demotivate seem to be both universal and culture-specific. The studies from Europe and North America distinctively include favoritism (Dornyei, 1998; reported in Dornyei, 2001; Oxford, 1998; reported in Dornyei, 2001), while studies from Japan note nitpicking, autocracy, anger at questions (Arai, 2004; Falout & Maruyama, 2004), and public acts of humiliation by laughing at students (Arai, 2004), making them stand up (Miyata et al., 2004), or otherwise blaming them for lack of understanding (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). Universally, teachers demotivate students by belligerence, by following narrow interpretations of the L2; by lack of competence, preparation, enthusiasm; by not being approachable, not giving clear explanations, nor having physical appeal.

As a factor of demotivation, *teachers* measured with the highest reliability ($\alpha \geq .80$ meets reliability) for two sets of learners, lower proficient (LP) and higher proficient (HP), in our study (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). However, the demotivational strength of the factor fell somewhere in the middle of the five other factors (*reduced self-confidence*, *attitude toward the L2 itself*, *courses*, *attitude of group members*, *attitude toward the L2 community*); listed by order of strength from strongest at the top in Figure 1). Furthermore, the factor did not receive the highest attributions (see Figure 2). Yet students did show the most negative emotion when they wrote about past teachers. The HP students in particular were critical and specific. Likewise, from another study in Japan (Miyata et al., 2004),

self-reported higher proficient students, the *tokui* set, were also more dissatisfied with teachers than their counterparts, the *futokui* set. The LP students in our study more often internalized their attributions of demotivation. They may by nature blame themselves more, or they may not be as aware how negatively their teachers are affecting them. But the reliability shows that *teachers* remains a factor of demotivation that most consistently affects learners across individual differences. We trust that the behavior of a teacher has, more than any other element in the classroom, the greatest potential to counteract the motivation of learners.

Demotivation factors (6-point Likert scale)

	mean		sd		skew		alpha	
self-conf.	4.3	3.9	1.3	1.3	-0.5	-0.3	.67	.66
att. L2 itself	3.9	3.5	1.2	1.4	-0.1	0.0	.85	.86
courses	3.9	3.5	1.1	1.3	-0.1	0.1	.83	.78
teachers	3.9	3.5	1.2	1.3	0.1	0.1	.90	.88
att. group	3.6	3.5	1.3	1.4	0.1	0.2	.57	.48
att. L2 com.	3.0	3.1	1.2	1.3	0.5	0.1	.87	.91
	LP	HP	LP	HP	LP	HP	LP	HP

Figure 1. Lower-proficient learners compared against higher-proficient learners. The higher the number, the higher the demotivation.

Attributions of demotivation — factors

External	Course contents & pace	30%	27%
	Teacher	16%	20%
	L2 itself	7%	8%
	Grades / scores	4%	3%
Int.	Disappointment in performance	39%	32%
	Preparation	4%	2%
Locus		LP	HP

Figure 2. Learner attributions of demotivation from open-ended prompts.

Attributions of demotivation — crossover factors

Ext. & Int.	Vocabulary	24%	13%
	Grammar	18%	8%
Locus		LP	HP

Figure 3. Crossover factors were calculated from the factors highlighted in pink in Figure 2.

Courses

The differences in the demotives of the factor courses, as the three studies in Japan have identified them, may be accounted for by the individual differences of the students. The different findings relate the differences in the ways the studies were conducted, though there were two fundamental similarities. These three studies used college freshmen as subjects, and all the students were asked to focus their answers on past experiences. However, Arai's (2004) subjects were English majors. These students wanted more explanations about what they were doing in class, and about the English, and they were disappointed when they did not receive feedback from their teachers.

The science students in our study (Falout & Maruyama, 2004) most often felt demotivated when having to memorize huge volumes of vocabulary by rote, and they disliked grammar (see Figure 3). The English majors from Murphey's (2002) study complained most about grammar. They were 100 second semester college freshmen writing letters of advice to groups of English teachers from junior high school and high school. They believed their grammar study prior to college was boring, and that knowing it was not useful for speaking in their college classes. These students also disliked studying for the college entrance examinations, their textbooks, and classes that were unpractical, passive, and boring.

Although the study by Miyata et al. (2004) does not disclose the academic majors of its subjects, of all the studies it best represents a cross-section of the college student population, as it surveyed 480 students from 12 departments of 9 universities. Using this study as a base while looking at the other two studies, we can infer the common demotivating

factors of course format and contents in Japan: (1) Courses oriented on only one aspect of learning English; *sticking too much to any one thing*, such as translation, or learning only from the textbook; lack of dynamic elements and variety; (2) Classes steeped in grammar; *focusing on abstractions without usage, context, application*—without reference to “real life” situations; (3) *incomprehensible activities*; lack of clear explanations about what students should do or why; (4) *inappropriate level or pace*; too easy or too difficult.

What are the Effects of Demotivation?

However close Dornyei holds his conception of demotivation to observable, controllable factors, he did choose a rather internal element, *reduced self-confidence*, as a factor of demotivation. He meant the reduction of self-confidence that is felt when faced with a bad score or grade—external evidence of ability. We found evidence that reduced self-confidence is a component of demotivation, an affective cycle, and the longevity of demotivation.

Reduced self-confidence

From our study (Falout & Maruyama, 2004), HP students kept the same level of self-confidence as when they started learning English; LPs did not. LP students experienced a reduction of self-confidence (see Figure 4). Dornyei specified that it is the *reduction* of self-confidence that causes demotivation, not simply a low self-confidence (Dornyei, 2001). Perhaps this factor relates to the one identified by Ushioda (2001), the *pressure of setting standards too high for oneself*. With the LP students in our study, their self-confidence started off

higher than the HP set, and ended up lower. It is conceivable that unrealistically high standards come from a high self-confidence, and a loss of self-confidence results from not meeting those standards. Such seems to be the case for the LP set.

The LP set may have had a self-confidence that was too high for their learning situations, but we question any situation where 3.5 on a 6-point Likert scale—the LP set average for self-confidence at the start of their studies, compared to the HP at 4.1—would be *unrealistically* high. The LP students may have been overconfident at the beginning, but 3.5 should certainly not be unrealistic. Again, it seems that the level of the course contents and pace asked too much from them. It did enough to reduce their present self-confidence to 5.1, where this high negative affect means a low self-confidence.

Reduction in self confidence

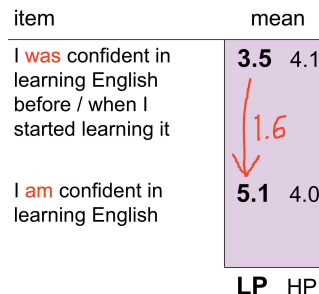


Figure 4. Lower-proficient students end up with a high negative affect, or a low self-confidence.

Affective cycle

Ushioda (1998) says that learners need to control their affective states to cope with the inevitable counter forces to motivation. She believes, once learners start blaming themselves for the negative affect that they have, not only do they lose motivation, but also their belief in being able to motivate themselves again. We see this pattern of self-defeat in the attributions from our study (Falout & Maruyama, 2004).

The LP students are more apt than the HP set to attribute their demotivation internally. Their attributions were stable, internal, and uncontrollable, centering mostly on their inability to perform well. They were also less likely than the HP set to elaborate upon or have diverse attributes, which shows a lack of control over their affective states. We envision this pattern as a downward spiral—the more they blame themselves, the worse they perform; the worse they perform, the more they blame themselves. It is an affective cycle that probably—like breaking undesirable beliefs or habits—requires educated help.

Longevity of demotivation

Evidence that demotives can spur an affective cycle comes from the longevity of demotivation, checked once in SLA and proven (Falout & Maruyama, 2004), presented here in two steps. First, LP and HP sets were asked whether they had been demotivated and whether they liked studying English. Both sets experienced the same incidence of demotivation, but the LP set disliked English twice as much. A chi-square analysis was then performed between the incidence of demotivation and state of negative affect. There was a

correlation only for the LP set (see Figures 5, 6, and 7). We found that the present state of negative affect correlates to demotivation from the past, but only for the LP students, not the HP set.

Been Demotivated? “Yes”

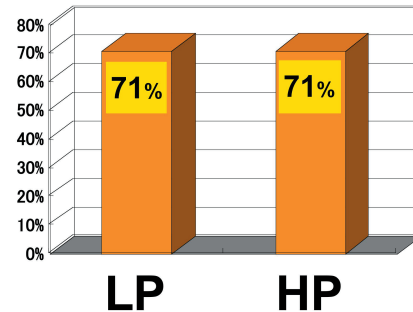


Figure 5. Same incidence of demotivation for LP and HP students.

Do you like studying English? “No”

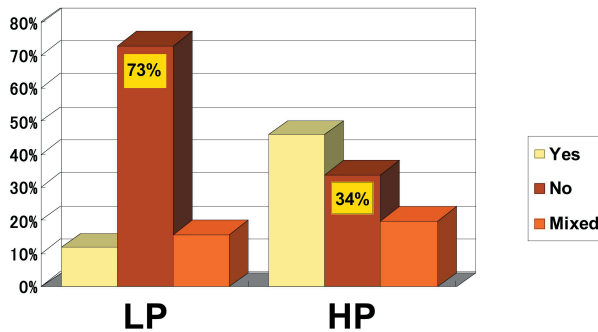


Figure 6. Present state of negative affect.

In the second step, the students who hated studying English were asked when they started hating it. 73% of those LP students who hated English (53% of the whole LP set) said it started in junior high school, but only 30% of those HP students who hated English (10% of the whole HP set) went that far back. Furthermore, the LP students were more specific than the HP students. 27% pinpointed the second year (20% of the whole LP set), and 16% pinpointed the first year of junior high school (12% of the whole LP set); compare to the HP set at 4% and 0% (1% and 0% of the whole HP set), respectively (see Figures 8 and 9). We concluded that LP learner demotivation goes back further than HP demotivation, lasts longer, and correlates to present state negative affect.

Chi-square analysis ($p < .0001$)

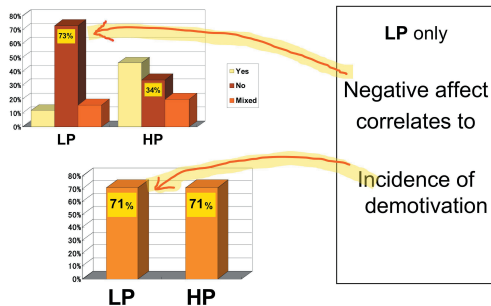


Figure 7. Correlation between state of negative affect and demotivation.

When did you start hating it? “Since Jr. High”

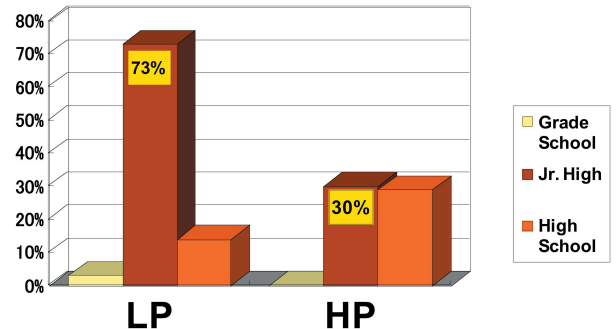


Figure 8. For those who hated studying English, seen as the “No” respondents in Figure 6.

Since Jr. High . . . “2nd year”

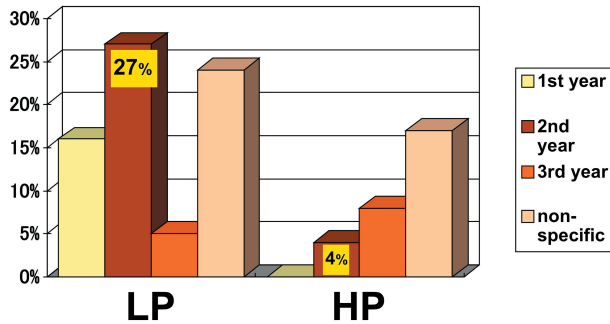


Figure 9. Breakdown from Figure 8—LP totals 73%, HP totals 30%.

Our results suggest that students who are subjected to demotives early in their learning are not able to control their affective states; and students not subjected to demotives early in their learning are able to control their affective states. Both the LP and the HP sets claimed to have been demotivated at some time in the past. It looks as though over half the LP set could not get over the early hurdle of the first two years of junior high school. Maybe the HP set also faced the same hurdles—were subjected to the same demotives at the same time—but the time they felt difficult came later. And from their lower present state of negative affect, it looks as if they were able to cope better than the LP set.

Data from other studies indicate that there are more demotives, or stronger demotives, in high school. When drawing “lifelines” of positive and negative affect, students in one study (Kowalski, 2002), college freshmen in one class, mostly from the humanities and social sciences, showed the first decline of positive affect across the first and second years of junior high school, and a second, deeper decline during the first year of high school. When the English majors from Murphey’s study (2002) were giving advice to English teachers, 51% of the total comments were about negative high school experiences, and 27% were about negative junior high school experiences. From the English majors in Arai’s study (2004), more students said they had been demotivated in high school. There seems to be a consensus that high school English was tougher. So possibly a large portion of the LP students from our study lost control over their affective states, starting sometime during the first two years of junior high school, while the HP students were more able to control their affective states during that time, and even through the more difficult years in high school.

Reactions to Demotivation

Self-blame is the mechanism for the affective cycle previously described as a downward spiral. To avoid this affective cycle, or to get out of it, learners need to control their affective states, as proposed by Ushioda (1998, 2001), which can be done in two basic ways: (1) To *dissociate demotivating experiences* by placing blame on external factors, which protects beliefs learners have of themselves; and (2) To *believe in self-motivation* through a process where learners affirm the ability to motivate themselves. Once

demotivated learners can control their affective states, they can continue learning.

Ushioda (2001) found that learners who had been demotivated were able to continue their learning by bypassing the demotives and pursuing motivational strategies which got their motivation “on line again.” Common strategies in her study were *focusing on incentives/pressures*, such as the reward of traveling abroad after exams, the dread of failure, the thrill of good assessment, the guilt of wasting money; *focusing on L2 study*, such as setting goals, doing work regularly, doing whatever you can; *seeking temporary relief from L2 study*, such as avoiding certain tasks, taking a break from study, doing anything enjoyable in the L2 that does not relate to coursework—such as watching L2 movies, listening to music, talking to an L2 speaker; *talking over motivational problems*, such as asking other students how they feel, reminding yourself what you like about the L2, and talking to encourage yourself. The best method for these learners was to engage in the L2 in a way that was meaningful and relevant to them, free from the pressures and expectations in the institutional context.

Arai (2004) is skeptical whether most learners are able to continue learning in the face of demotivating experiences. The subjects from her study were relatively proficient, highly motivated, successful L2 learners. Most of them claimed to have experienced demotivation—31 out of 33 students. Yet 27% of their reactions to demotivation were not helpful to their learning, and 36% of the reactions were *debilitating* to learning, such as sleeping or doing other work in class, totaling 64%. Reactions that *facilitated* learning stood at 36%. These facilitating reactions were similar to those found

most effective in Ushioda’s study, but also included writing a letter to the teacher, changing classes, going to another school, and even leaving the country.

Conclusions

In this survey we have shown that *teacher behavior* as a factor has the most damaging effect on learner motivation. Also we assembled the common demotivating factors in the Japanese classroom: *sticking too much to any one thing; focusing on abstractions without usage, context, application; incomprehensible activities; inappropriate level or pace*. Exposing learners to these factors reduces self-confidence and increases self-blame, perpetuating an affective cycle that eventually cuts lifelong learning short.

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