

A comparative study of proficiency and learner demotivation

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Among growing concerns about nationwide reports of a decline in academic performance over the preceding decade, the National Center for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE) administered a survey to 361 national universities in Japan. A surprising 84.8% of the teachers accounted for this “serious problem” by the following explanation, which consequently topped the list: *Motivation to tackle assignments voluntarily and willingly is lacking.* This malaise permeates all subjects. The NCUEE also found that teachers—especially those at colleges of science, engineering, and pharmacy—discredited their students’ knowledge of English and other foreign languages (Suzuki, Arai, & Yanai, 1999).

The next logical step is to ask the students if something detracted from their motivation. We report which students felt demotivation, what made them feel it, and when it happened.

Background

In measuring motivation, Dörnyei (2001) says it is important to figure how much demotives subtract from the positive variables. He questions the validity of tests that focus largely on positive motivational inducements, emphasizing that demotivation affects learner motivation. He identified an independent factor, *bad learning experiences*, based on Weiner’s (1986) attributional concepts, which correlates to proficiency (Dörnyei, 1990). Bacon & Finnemann (1990) were able to construct two reliable, separate factors, *negative affect/frustration*, and *unwillingness to participate*—this latter one emerging from an open-ended questionnaire. Similarly with open-ended questions, Christophel & Gorham (1995) found *teacher behavior factors* and *structure/format factors* of course design as sources of demotivation. Ushioda (1998) simply asked learners what they thought demotivating in their learning experience. She reports demotives in *teaching methods, learning tasks, and coursework pressures*.

Dörnyei (2001) first broadly states that demotivation “concerns various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation,” but excludes affect as a stimulus by narrowing

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his definition to “*specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action*” (p. 143). He clarifies that *demotivation does not result from* (1) powerful distractions or a more attractive option; (2) gradual loss of interest; and (3) an *internal* process of deliberation without any specific external trigger.

Purpose

Dörnyei’s definition of demotivation as an external force poses an inherent, theoretical contradiction to his work on two of the main demotivating factors he identified: *reduced self-confidence* and *negative attitude towards L2 community*. To encompass these factors, our research questions had to deviate from his definition. Therefore we included negative affect as a component of demotivation; we assumed any disruptive influence should be scrutinized as a possible demotive, and wanted to identify what factors contribute to the counter forces upon motivation. We asked

1. To what extent do experiences and negative affect diminish the motivational basis of an intention or action in the EFL context?
2. What contributes to the demotivation of learners prior to entering college?

Participants

We collected the anonymous responses of 164 Japanese freshmen, from two consecutive years, attending a private science college on a campus just outside Tokyo. We asked them to limit their responses to before entering college. The lower-proficient (LP) students belong to two science departments: Electronics and Computer Science, and Civil Engineering, and represent roughly the lower third of their respective departments in English proficiency as determined by a test that was a replication of a typical college entrance exam, administered by the college before the first semester began. LP students were voluntarily attending a non-credit supplementary English course taught by one of us authors. The English department offers these classes to help these students and to protect curricular standards. These optional, non-credit classes are geared toward raising all four basic language skills: reading, listening, speaking, and writing. During the first class of the semester, we administered the surveys. If time was not sufficient, we asked students to take them home for completion. LP students returned 86 (return rate of 78.2%). Representing the top

third in proficiency, high-proficient (HP) students from the department of Electronics and Computer Science were individually tracked down by their department and asked to complete the surveys at home, returning 78 (return rate of 86.7%). On the proficiency test of 100 possible points, LP and HP averages were 49 and 78 points respectively, with corresponding TOEIC score averages at 300 and 347.

Instrument

From a study of secondary students in Budapest who were identified as demotivated, Dörnyei (2001) categorized nine demotivating factors in order of most common to least: (1) *the teacher*—personality, commitment, competence, teaching method; (2) *inadequate school facilities*—group is too big or not the right level; frequent change of teachers; (3) *reduced self-confidence*—experience of failure or lack of success; (4) *negative attitude towards the L2*; (5) *compulsory nature of L2 study*; (6) *interference of another foreign language being studied*; (7) *negative attitude towards L2 community*; (8) *attitude of group members*; (9) *coursebook*.

We adjusted Dörnyei’s factors to make them appropriate for Japanese secondary education. In the case of *inadequate school facilities*, we assumed a uniformity of education and educational facilities, and that teachers rarely change, so we dropped it. As for the “group is too big or not at the right level,” and for *compulsory nature of L2 study*, and *coursebook*, for simplicity we incorporated these into one factor, *courses*. Most of the L2 learning for these students is English, and very few are studying an L3, so we dropped *interference of another foreign language being studied*. The final, pared list of factors we looked at were: (1) *teachers*; (2) *courses*; (3) *attitude toward L2 community*; (4) *attitude toward L2 itself*; (5) *self-confidence*; and (6) *attitude of group members*.

For these factors we developed a 49-item questionnaire, inspired by, modified, and otherwise sampled from the work of Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope (1986), Bacon & Finneman (1990), Dörnyei (1990), Aida (1994), Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret (1997), MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998), and Yamashiro & McLaughlin (2000). All questions were positively worded. Items were mixed. A 6-point Likert scale was then applied with values of 1 = “I strongly agree” to 6 = “I strongly disagree”; the greater the number, the more likely the incidence of a demotivating force.

Keeping plenty of space open for response, we added open-ended prompts on the last page of the survey: *Do you like studying English? If you don't, when did you start hating it? Were there any specific experiences or incidents which demotivated you?* All items and prompts were represented in both English and Japanese.

From the responses, we determined whether the students liked studying English unequivocally *yes* or *no*, and performed a chi-square test to check for significance between demotivation and dislike of English study. We unitized the attributions of demotivation, one unit per each distinct concept. Without preconceptions or external scheme, we connected each singular concept by affiliation of topic or function. In this process, the language readily indicated an internal or an external locus; e.g., compare “I couldn’t memorize new words,” with “There were too many words to memorize.” From the number of units, we calculated the resulting groupings, or factors, in percentage of the total units.

Discussion

For almost all factors of the survey, we attained reliability ($\alpha > .80$). LP students indicated demotivation in five of six factors, in descending order: *self-confidence*, *attitude toward L2 itself*, *courses*, *teachers*, and *attitude of group members*. HP students shared an indication of demotivation in the *self-confidence* factor. But comparing items 35 and 36, we noticed LP students experienced a reduction in self-confidence between the

time they started learning and now. HP students did not (see Appendix). Interestingly, the most positive affect appeared in *attitude toward L2 community* from the LP set (see Table 1).

The same percentages of LP and HP students felt demotivated at some time (see Table 2). For the LP students, a correlation ($p < .0001$) implies a casual relationship between this past demotivation and their present, flat dislike of studying English. There was no such relationship in the HP set. More than twice as many LP students dislike studying English (see Table 3). Furthermore, the LP students who dislike English started doing so earlier; over a fourth of these responses pinpointed their second year in junior high. This finding implies not only a demotivation that lasts, but one which predates the HP set, whose dislike stems from high school; LP students were demotivated earlier (see Table 4).

Attributions of demotivation came in nearness of factor and rating as from the survey, in descending order for both sets: *disappointment in performance*, *course contents & pace*, *teacher*, and *L2 itself*. While HP students have less to say about the first two factors, they are more negatively affected than the LP students in the factor *teacher* (see Table 5).

A few generalizations can be made guided by Weiner’s (1986) attributional concepts. In their responses, LP students more often internalized the causes of their demotivation, doing so for over 40% of the attributions. They expressed an innate lack of ability. One after another wrote

Table 1. Survey results

	LP	LP	LP	LP	HP	HP	HP	HP
Factor	Mean	SD	Skew	α	Mean	SD	Skew	α
Teachers	3.881	1.176	0.071	.901	3.538	1.289	0.144	.883
Courses	3.908	1.104	-0.053	.832	3.456	1.305	0.117	.778
Attitude toward L2 community	2.963	1.158	0.527	.867	3.138	1.291	0.136	.905
Attitude toward L2 itself	3.912	1.211	-0.055	.854	3.526	1.404	0.009	.858
Self-confidence	4.332	1.254	-0.521	.665	3.947	1.260	-0.282	.659
Attitude of group members	3.594	1.303	0.124	.573	3.512	1.352	0.201	.484

Table 2. Been demotivated?

	LP	HP
Yes	71.4%	70.5%
No	28.6%	29.5%

Table 3. Do you like studying English?

	LP	HP
Yes	11.7%	46.2%
No	72.7%	33.8%
Mixed	15.6%	20%

Table 4. When did you start hating English? (for those who still do)

Since . . .	LP	HP
Grade School	2.7%	-
Jr. High, 1st year	16.2%	-
Jr. High, 2nd year	27%	4.2%
Jr. High, 3rd year	5.4%	8.3%
Jr. High (non-specific)	24.3%	16.7%
High School	13.5%	29.2%
“I began studying it”	2.7%	8.3%
“Vocabulary & grammar got difficult”	5.4%	12.5%
“I began preparing for college exams”	2.7%	16.7%
“I realized I can’t really communicate”	-	4.2%
	100%	100%

Table 5. Attributions of demotivation—factors

Locus	Factor	LP	HP
External	Course contents & pace	30.1%	26.7%
	Teacher	15.9%	20%
	Classmates	0.9%	0%
	Grades/scores	3.5%	3.3%
	L2 itself	7.1%	8.3%
	Entrance exams	0%	5%
	Personal issues	0%	3.3%
Internal	Disappointment in performance	38.9%	31.7%
	Preparation	3.5%	1.7%
		99.9%	100%

about English, “I just couldn’t understand it.” They delved no deeper into the problem, seeming to throw their hands up at it all. Lack of proficiency was associated with internal, uncontrollable causes. On the other hand, HP students externalized blame more frequently. They were more specific with their gripes and laid on the descriptions, showing more control over the causes. Furthermore, they often used conditionals and qualifiers. When discussing negative aspects of their EFL studies, only HP students involved their likes and interests, e.g., “I hated learning vocabulary only by rote, though I liked to learn it through reading texts.”

Complaints naming vocabulary and grammar, for the LP students, fell about half and half in factors of external and internal locus; for the HP set, slightly more showed in factors of external locus. Isolating these complaints, we calculated the crossover factors, *vocabulary* and *grammar*. For the latter, it was seen as inscrutable—again, LP students wrote about their incomprehension in

broad terms, and HP students became more specific: “I couldn’t understand relative clauses.” For *vocabulary*, the problem was memorizing huge volumes by rote, the most common specific attribution (see Table 6).

The ostensible reason students are submerged over their heads in vocabulary is to prepare them for the college entrance exams. This backward-projecting pedagogy, where the contents and form of the exam at the end dictate those

of the syllabus before it, rather than the reverse, is called the *washback effect*. It may seem strange then that so few of the replies indict entrance exams as a demotive, though there is a good reason for this result.

A standard college English entrance exam lasts little more than an hour. For the student who takes even three or four, the time spent in exams can hardly compare to the daily preparation over the prior six years. Being expected to soak up countless words and idioms must be more grueling, and facing all the smaller quizzes and tests constitutes a far greater portion of time. By dint of

exposure, demotives from the pressures of study outweigh those of the college entrance exam itself. Sure, some students blamed the exam, but it is the antecedent course contents—seen in the high measures from *courses* and *course contents & pace*—that reduced their motivation.

Teachers is the most interrelated and influential on the other factors. In standard practice it is the teacher who directs *course contents & pace*. There is not much we can do to change the *L2 itself*, but a teacher certainly can shape the perception of it.

Table 6. Attributions of demotivation—crossover factors

Factor	LP	HP
Vocabulary*	23.9%	13.3%
Grammar**	17.7%	8.3%

* Crosses into course contents & pace and disappointment in performance.

** Crosses into course contents & pace, L2 itself, and disappointment in performance.

Likewise, a teacher can sway the *attitude of group members* as well as modify a student's own *self-confidence*.

When speaking of their former teachers, these college freshmen displayed the most emotion. HP students said, rather than English, they learned more about autocracy, sarcasm, and nit picking. Others got on bad terms with their teachers simply because they asked questions about English. Their reward was humiliation. A common report: teachers responded with ridicule and blame, remarking only upon the ignorance of the questioner. Another common report: teachers responded, "First, go study it harder by yourself." Clearly teachers impart a deep and lasting effect by being the people they are.

As we mentioned, the same percentages of LP and HP students experienced demotivation. However, their attributions differ in type. LP students had a harder time with rudimentary, workbook type tasks, e.g. spelling, filling in blanks, completing drills and exercises. HP students were more concerned about advanced applications, such as punctuation and word choice when writing, and verbal communication. A few lost their motivation when they discovered that they could not communicate with native speakers. Possibly these differences mark the stage of their respective development, their present pitfalls and obstacles.

If HP students experienced demotivation at the same rate as LP students, they may have a few extra techniques to get over the hurdles, or the capacity to bounce back, but their claims are not to be dismissed. If they trusted the educational system and its stipulations, and now feel cheated—that, despite their efforts and achievements, they "cannot really communicate"—will they continue pursuing EFL studies? Maybe not. We must remain sensitive to and guard against the loss of motivation in learners at all proficiency levels.

Conclusions

The results of this survey demonstrate measurable differences in learner demotivation between LP and HP students at the college freshmen level with reliability. From this instrument came the factors of negative affect for LP students: *self-confidence*, *attitude toward L2 itself*, *courses*, and *teachers*. From the open-ended prompts, both sets attributed their demotivation to: *disappointment in performance*, *course contents & pace*, and *teacher*. The most common specific attribution was the high volume of *vocabulary*.

LP students were more than twice as likely to dislike studying English, and a fourth of those said their dislike started in the second year of junior high. LP students were demotivated earlier—and their demotivation correlates to their affective state now.

LP students more often internalized the causes of their demotivation. HP students showed more control over their affective states and learning situations. They especially despised the pedagogy of humiliation, though both sets vented most about teachers.

We should recognize it is never too late to mitigate the long-term effects of forces against motivation. Remember, the highest positive mark came in *attitude toward L2 community*—from the LP students. Despite forces against them, they are still reaching out, open.

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Appendix

Teachers	LP	LP	LP	HP	HP	HP
Item	Mean	SD	Skew	Mean	SD	Skew
1. My teachers were good at teaching English.	3.906	1.054	0.067	3.462	1.235	-0.101
2. My teachers' instructions were good and clear.	3.894	1.080	0.099	3.551	1.180	0.312
3. My teachers were helpful to me.	3.506	1.201	0.450	3.077	1.390	0.539
4. I liked my English teachers.	3.802	1.309	0.054	3.641	1.329	0.318
5. I liked the way my teachers taught English to me.	4.094	1.042	0.066	3.808	1.290	-0.078
6. My teachers were fair with all the students.	3.729	1.401	0.206	3.692	1.262	0.169
7. My teachers taught me what I wanted to learn about English.	4.233	0.978	0.208	3.538	1.245	-0.007

Courses	LP	LP	LP	HP	HP	HP
Item	Mean	SD	Skew	Mean	SD	Skew
8. My classes went at an appropriate pace for me.	3.942	0.938	0.205	3.474	1.192	0.133
9. The level of my English classes was adequate for me.	4.093	0.916	0.377	3.481	0.968	-0.033
10. Even if English is not a compulsory subject, I would choose to study it.	3.812	1.427	0.139	2.922	1.700	0.571
11. I liked the textbooks I used for my English classes.	4.221	0.925	-0.276	4.231	1.068	-0.151
12. The English textbooks I have used were easy to understand.	3.788	1.025	-0.172	3.731	1.124	0.105
13. The English textbooks I have used were at my level.	4.000	1.029	0.332	3.390	1.237	0.667
14. The size of my English classes was appropriate.	3.774	1.134	0.054	3.308	1.188	0.234
15. I didn't think the number of English classes I had to take per week were too many.	3.628	1.265	-0.153	3.103	1.438	0.408

Attitude toward L2 community	LP	LP	LP	HP	HP	HP
Item	Mean	SD	Skew	Mean	SD	Skew
16. I like the countries where English is predominantly spoken (Britain, Australia, USA, Canada).	3.094	1.315	0.466	2.987	1.314	0.271
17. I like the people from the countries where English is predominantly spoken.	2.791	0.869	0.094	3.295	1.141	-0.176
18. I like the cultures of the countries where English is predominantly spoken.	3.165	1.174	0.396	3.423	1.363	0.198
19. I imagine I would have good experiences in countries where English is predominantly spoken.	3.035	1.149	0.605	2.949	1.183	0.005

20. I have had a good impression of the people from the countries where English is predominantly spoken.	3.000	0.964	0.572	3.372	1.152	-0.148
21. I have had a good impression of the countries where English is predominantly spoken.	2.826	0.884	0.038	3.321	1.063	-0.013
22. If I have the opportunity, I would like to visit a country where English is predominantly spoken.	2.518	1.394	1.084	2.526	1.439	0.806
23. The more I learn about countries where English is predominantly spoken, the more I like studying English.	3.430	1.080	0.271	3.500	1.256	0.141
24. If possible, I would like to make friends with a native speaker of English.	2.616	1.170	0.705	2.628	1.310	0.583
25. I want to know more about the countries/cultures where English is predominantly spoken.	3.151	1.223	0.653	3.269	1.306	0.020

Attitude toward L2 itself	LP	LP	LP	HP	HP	HP
Item	Mean	SD	Skew	Mean	SD	Skew
26. I like the sound of spoken English.	3.294	1.335	0.271	3.103	1.344	0.072
27. I like how English grammar is constructed.	4.477	1.003	-0.437	3.846	1.239	-0.205
28. I like how English words are spelled.	4.141	1.082	0.117	3.769	1.268	-0.218
29. Learning English is an exciting activity.	4.000	1.006	0.355	3.628	1.387	-0.078
30. Learning English is not a painful task.	3.860	1.219	0.154	3.195	1.424	0.517
31. I'm interested in learning English.	3.244	1.178	0.704	2.808	1.290	0.369
32. If given the opportunity, I would like to see how well I could really speak English.	3.663	1.271	0.065	3.282	1.422	0.345
33. I don't think there are so many complicated things to learn in English.	4.459	1.140	-0.489	4.321	1.304	-0.658
34. The things I have to learn in English don't intimidate/bother me.	4.070	0.992	-0.068	3.782	1.383	-0.050

Self-confidence	LP	LP	LP	HP	HP	HP
Item	Mean	SD	Skew	Mean	SD	Skew
35. I am confident in learning English.	5.081	1.054	-1.215	4.000	1.279	-0.153
36. I was confident in learning English before/when I started learning it.	3.512	1.370	0.017	4.115	1.377	-0.397
37. I don't mind getting bad grades in English.	4.376	1.215	-0.806	4.490	1.114	-0.894
38. I have been happy with my grades in English.	4.035	1.367	-0.177	3.623	1.308	-0.024
39. When faced with a hurdle in my English studies, I could get past it easily.	4.616	0.883	-0.415	3.897	1.027	-0.159
40. In the past I could find a way to learn English effectively.	4.581	1.111	-0.473	3.667	1.335	-0.032
41. I have not had embarrassing experiences in my English classes.	4.302	1.218	-0.445	4.167	1.121	-0.395
42. I was not embarrassed using English in my classes.	4.151	1.163	-0.256	3.615	1.261	-0.228

Attitude of group members	LP	LP	LP	HP	HP	HP
Item	Mean	SD	Skew	Mean	SD	Skew
43. My classmates helped me solve problems in my English studies.	2.988	1.096	0.690	3.372	1.310	0.341
44. My classmates have not laughed at me for my English ability.	3.535	1.290	0.258	3.064	1.188	0.446
45. My classmates have not distracted me from studying English in class.	3.663	1.325	0.151	3.922	1.403	-0.152
46. I don't feel inferior to my classmates for my English ability.	4.698	1.085	-1.176	3.615	1.360	0.131
47. My classmates cooperated with my English learning.	3.094	1.007	0.308	3.410	1.253	0.311
48. I don't get depressed by embarrassing experiences in class.	4.093	1.224	-0.339	4.231	1.216	-0.280
49. I liked everyone in my group/classroom.	3.060	1.134	0.287	2.974	1.309	0.690