

JALT2007

Challenging Assumptions  
Looking In, Looking Out

# Demotivation in Japanese high schools

Yo Hamada  
 Yokote-Seiryō Gakuin  
 Kazuya Kito  
 Temple University

## Reference data:

Hamada, Y. and Kito, K. (2008). Demotivation in Japanese high schools.  
 In K. Bradford Watts, T. Muller, & M. Swanson (Eds.), *JALT2007 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

This paper presents a motivation study designed to determine the demotivating factors affecting Japanese high school students studying English. Dornyei (2001) defines a demotivated learner as "someone who was once motivated but has lost his or her commitment/interest for some reason" (p. 142). There have been several studies conducted in Japan based on Dornyei's research. These earlier studies found several demotivating factors, however, the participants were mostly university students, and few studies have investigated demotivation in high school students. Therefore, the writers conducted this research project to determine the primary demotivating factors for Japanese high school students and the roots of those factors. The questionnaire results show five interesting reasons for demotivation, and the subsequent interviews explored these reasons more deeply. The writers reflect on the outcomes, discuss implications, and suggest steps for further investigation.

本稿は日本における高校生英語学習者についての動機減退理由を調査する目的で行われた研究の報告である。動機減退学習者の定義は「以前動機があったが、何らかの理由で失われた者」である。ドルネイのリサーチを基盤として、日本でもいくつかの研究が行われ、動機減退の原因として数々の理由があげられている。しかし、ほとんどの研究は大学生を調査したもので、高校生に対する詳細な調査はまだほとんど報告されていない。それゆえに、本研究は、日本の高校生にとっての主要な動機減退の理由は何かを調査し、それらの理由の根幹をさらに調査する目的で行われた。アンケート分析の結果5つの動機減退理由が発見され、それらはインタビューによりさらに深められた。全体を踏まえて、さらなる研究についての言及がなされている。

In recent decades, we have seen a surge in interest in the study of motivation and a number of studies have been carried out on this topic (Gardner, 1985; Little, Ridley, Ushioda, 2003; Dornyei, 1994, 2001; Dornyei and Murphy, 2004). In addition, there are several famous motivational theories: self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), goal-setting theories (Locke & Latham, 1990), attribution theory (Weiner, 1992), self-worth theory (Covington, 1992) and self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1993). Nevertheless,

it is too early to conclude motivation research, because motivation needs to be explored in-depth from many different dimensions. In other words, motivation theories alone cannot explain all of the facets of motivation, therefore other variables need to be investigated as well, one of which is *demotivation*. Students can be motivated at one point, but no matter how teachers put motivational theories into practice, some learners will still lose motivation. In addition, if students are demotivated, motivation theory alone cannot cure their lack of motivation. Recently, demotivation has started to catch the attention of language teachers.

Dornyei (2001) defines a demotivated learner as “someone who was once motivated but has lost his or her commitment/interest for some reason” (p.142). This is different from *amotivation*. Amotivation refers to a lack of motivation caused by the realization that ‘there is no point...’ or ‘it’s beyond me...(Deci and Ryan, 1985).’ In other words, a demotivating factor is some external force that reduces or decreases the motivation that the learner already has; an *amotivating* factor is not so much an external factor as something that is produced by the learner.

According to Dornyei (2001), demotivating factors consist of nine categories: 1) the teacher; 2) inadequate school facilities; 3) reduced self-confidence; 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) course book.

Lately, based on Dornyei’s research (1998, 2001), several studies have been carried out in Japan. Researchers observed learners who study English as a foreign language starting

with Arai in 2004 to a more recent study by Kikuchi and Sakai in 2007 (Arai, 2004; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Hasegawa, 2004; Kikuchi, 2007, Kikuchi & Sakai, 2007; Tsuchiya, 2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b).

Arai (2004) surveyed 33 high proficiency university English majors on their demotivating factors and how they dealt with them. They reported on experiences in elementary school, junior high school, high school, *juku* (cram school) and college. The demotivating reasons she found are teachers’ attitudes toward students, teachers’ personalities, teaching methods, and teachers’ language proficiency (46.7%). In addition, class content such as no feedback, simple and boring lessons, inappropriate levels, and uninteresting materials (36.2%). Class atmosphere such as class being inactive, other students’ unwillingness to communicate, studying with higher or lower level classmates (13.3%) and a few miscellaneous reasons were factors in their demotivation.

Falout and Maruyama (2004) investigated differences in pre-college demotivation factors between lower (LP) and higher proficiency (HP) learners. They administered a 49-item questionnaire, which was created based on Dornyei’s (2001) investigation, to 164 university students from two science departments. The students were divided into the two levels (LP and HP) by an in-house institutional test.

The demotivating factors found for the lower-proficiency group were: self-confidence, attitudes toward the L2 itself, courses, teachers, and attitudes of group members. For the higher proficiency group: self-confidence was the highest factor, followed by the other factors, which were relatively neutral. The learners in both groups were demotivated to the

same degree. In addition, the LP group started to develop negative attitudes towards English earlier than the HP group.

However, there seems to be a problem with the study as Kikuchi and Sakai (2007) point out: Though they intended to find the differences between HP students and LP students, it is questionable whether the actual proficiency levels of the two groups differ. Judging from their description of their students' proficiency: "LP and HP averages were 49 and 78 points respectively, with corresponding TOEIC score averages at 300 and 347" (Falout & Maruyama, 2004, p. 4), it is difficult to see any differences.

Tsuchiya's (2004a, 2004b) 26-item questionnaire based on educational psychology was administered to 204 university freshman engineering students with limited English proficiency, 90-university freshman and sophomore English majors, and International relations students with high motivation and proficiency. She found six demotivating factors: sense of English uselessness, sense of incompetence, little admiration, inconsistent studying way, sense of discouragement, and lack of acceptance (2004a).

Tsuchiya found nine demotivating factors by integrating her own research (Tsuchiya, 2004a, 2004b) with the findings of Dornyei (2001a) and Falout and Maruyama (2004), Tsuchiya (2006a, 2006b): teachers, classes, compulsory nature of English study, negative attitude toward the English community, negative attitude toward English itself, reduced self-confidence, negative group attitude, lack of positive English speaking model, and ways of learning. Her 37-item questionnaire was based on these nine factors and was administered to 129 freshman university students (2006a). She divided the students into two levels (LP and HP) by

means of an English proficiency test. The result indicates that the LP group rated higher than the HP group in each factor. Moreover, the rank order of demotivating factors differed between the two groups. Furthermore, Tsuchiya (2006b) analyzed the data of the LP group by cluster analysis and found that the group consisted of four categories. In short, "Tsuchiya (2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b) showed the motivational state of low proficiency learners of English had their differences from high proficiency learners (Kikuchi and Sakai, 2007, p. 9)."

Reviewing all the studies discussed above, Kikuchi (2007) conducted a qualitative research project by means of an open-ended questionnaire to find out what were the demotivating factors for high school students. He asked 47 university students about their experiences in high school and found eight factors: teachers, school facility, students' experience in the past, students' negative attitude toward English language or spoken community, compulsory nature of English study in high school, interference of another foreign language that students are studying, attitudes of group members, and textbooks used (p. 8).

To explore more deeply, Kikuchi and Sakai (2007) created a 35-item questionnaire with an open-ended question: *Write your experiences about situations in which your motivation to study English was heightened.* They administered it to 112 first-year university students. After conducting a factor analysis, five factors were identified: 1) course books, 2) inadequate school facilities, 3) test scores, 4) non-communicative methods, and 5) teachers' competence and teaching style. Most of these factors were supported by the participants' comments, while the second factor,

*inadequate school facilities*, was found to be less frequently demotivating than the other factors for the participants.

Kikuchi and Sakai's research (2007) was of great value in that they focused on demotivating experiences in high schools and they devised the instruction so that they could elicit demotivating instances more directly, reviewing almost all the studies conducted before in Japan.

Reviewing the research conducted in the past, a few limitations should be pointed out. The participants were relatively successful learners of English. Most of the participants in previous studies were university students with the exception of Hasegawa's 2004 study. Even asking university freshmen in April, it is unavoidable that their recollection of high school experience will be imperfect. It remains unclear whether only using questionnaires, except for Arai (2004) and Kikuchi (2007), can reach a deep understanding of how students have been feeling.

### Research Question

The current study is an attempt to overcome these problems. The main research questions addressed in this study are: First, what are the primary demotivating factors in Japanese high school students? Second, what are the roots of those factors?

### Methods

#### Participants

First, the participants for the questionnaire were 100 second-year students (74 males, 21 female, and 5 unknown) in a

public high school in Tohoku, aged 16-17. The English proficiency level of most of the students is slightly below the National average for the Japanese high school students. As for English proficiency, the level they are at is near Testing English Proficiency (STEP) test pre-second grade. All of them are encouraged to take the test in January every year. Although the original number of the participants was 100, the writers excluded 13 participants' responses, because they did not complete the questionnaire as instructed. All of them are taking English II class this year and it seems their motivation is generally not high.

Second, the participants for the interview were 26 second-year students (18 males, 8 females). The interviewees were selected randomly from the 100 students who responded to the questionnaire.

### Materials

Kikuchi and Sakai (2007) developed a questionnaire reviewing mainly Kikuchi's (2007) questionnaire survey, and other previous studies (Arai, 2004; Tsuchiya, 2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b; Falout and Maruyama, 2004). Based on Kikuchi and Sakai's (2007) research, we administered 35-item questionnaire in Japanese to the participants. A five point Likert scale was utilized: 1) It does not apply to me, 2) it does not apply to me so much, 3) I am not sure, 4) It applies to me to some degree, 5) It applies to me. Therefore, the greater the number they choose, the stronger the demotivating reason.

After analyzing the data obtained from the questionnaire survey, we created 11 questions for a subsequent interview,

including two additional questions: “When did you start getting demotivated?” and “Has living in non-urban city demotivated you before?” These two questions were not included in the 35- item questionnaire, but we determined these two factors could be additional demotivating reasons (see Table 1).

### Procedure

First, we administered the questionnaire before summer vacation, in July 2007. In all cases, we asked the participants to respond during English class time. It took them 15-20 minutes to finish answering the questions.

Second, we conducted a structured-group interview on a day approximately one month after the latter semester began. Lynch (1996) explains the advantage of the group interview as “the participants can question and clarify each other’s responses” (p. 130). The interview was carried out during the English class time or after school. Each interview took 12-17 minutes.

We followed the interview guide by Lynch (1996, p.132), used by Kikuchi and Sakai (2007). 1) Casual, put-the-interviewee-at-ease question/comments, 2) General questions: 3) Specific question, 4) Closing questions, 5) Casual, wind-down questions/comments.

### Analysis

First, to extract demotivating factors, we analyzed the descriptive statistics for the participants’ responses and explored them through factor analysis. Second, based on the factors and the question items, we developed nine questions

and added two extra questions to deepen the understanding of the factors and find other possible demotivating causes.

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The four steps are as follows (Dornyei, 2001, p. 239).

1. The initial *coding* of the transcripts, often utterance by utterance, based on discrete observations.
2. The formation of *broader categories*... that allow the researcher to compare what different people have said.
3. Identifying *patterns* in the responses and reassembling the information into overarching and hierarchical themes and arguments.
4. By selecting from the main themes, determining the *interview theses*, that is, the theoretical and practical implications of the insights gained.

### Results

For the factor analysis of the participants’ responses, we used principle axis factor analysis. A scree plot determined the numbers of factors to rotate. Five factors were rotated using the promax rotation with a kappa of four. Five factors were extracted and named: (a) Learning environment (b) Teacher’s competence and teaching style (c) Little intrinsic motivation (d) Non-communicative methods and (e) Textbooks and lessons. The researchers asked the students 11 questions (see Table 1) to explore these factors more deeply. The results of each question are summarized in Table 2-Table 8.

**Table 1: Questions asked in the interview**

Q1.	Technologies such as Internet DVD PC LL CD are not used very often. Has it demotivated you before?
Q2.	Some friends around you do not like English. Has it demotivated you?
Q3.	Has a teacher's pronunciation demotivated you before?
Q4.	Has a teacher's teaching style demotivated you before?
Q5.	Have you lost interest in English or the purpose of studying English? Has that demotivated you?
Q6.	Some lessons always focused on translation and you did not have chances to use English. Has it demotivated you?
Q7.	Sometimes you have been forced to learn grammatically correct English and the English for entrance exams. Has it demotivated you?
Q8.	The English used in textbooks is too difficult or long. Has it demotivated you?
Q9.	I have lost how to prepare for lessons. Has it demotivated you?
Q10.	When did you start to get demotivated?
Q11.	Is there any reason why you are demotivated because you are in non-urban city but in a non-urban city?

**Table 2. Results of the interview for Factor 1: Learning environment**

Q1. Technologies such as Internet, DVD, PC, LL, CD are not used very often. Has it demotivated you before?	Q2. Some friends around you do not like English. Has it demotivated you?
*** Not really Hopefully, they will be used (2)	*** Not at all (100%)

Note. \*\*\* response from >75% of respondents.

\*\* response from > 50 % of respondents.

For the first factor, *learning environment*, two questions were asked but none of them were supported by the participants. Only two interviewees hoped for some increase of use of technology.

**Table 3. Results of the interview for factor 2: Teacher's competence and teaching style**

Q3. Has a teacher's pronunciation demotivated you before?	Q4. Has a teacher's teaching style demotivated you before?
***No Yes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>It's not pronunciation but the way the teacher talks</li> </ul>	***Yes (100%) "The style in which teacher teaches based on the opinion that students have known all he had taught." e.g. "You know this already, right?"

Note. \*\*\* response from >75% of respondents.

\*\* response from > 50 % of respondents.

\*response from > 25 % of respondents.

The results of Question 3 show teacher's pronunciation does not discourage the students. An interviewee commented that it is not the teacher's pronunciation, but the way the teacher talks. On the contrary, everybody agreed with the issue that a teacher's teaching style has demotivated them. According to the interviewee, the most demotivating teaching style is one in which the teacher teaches based on the assumption that students have known all the teacher has taught before. Here are some examples of teachers' comments that explain this assumption.

- “You know this, right?”
- “We learned this before, haven’t we?”
- “You have to know this by now.”

One of the interviewees added that teachers assumed we knew everything that was taught, so they had to pretend they knew everything even though they did not, in fact.

In summary, the interview revealed that the teacher’s pronunciation is not a critical demotivating factor, but the teachers’ teaching style is demotivating, especially the style in which the teacher presents lessons, expecting the students to learn everything he/she teaches.

**Table 4. Results of the interview for factor 3: Less intrinsic motivation**

<b>Q5. Have you lost interest in English, or the purpose of studying English?</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I haven’t had any purpose from the beginning</li> <li>• My purpose is just to get high scores on exams</li> <li>• Even though we learn difficult English, we cannot use it.</li> <li>• Not necessarily so.</li> </ul>

Note. \*\*\* response from >75% of respondents.

\*\* response from > 50 % of respondents.

\*response from > 25 % of respondents.

The results of this section are of great interest, in that the interviewees’ comments reflect that they lack intrinsic motivation. As Brown (2001) indicated, “one type of extrinsic reward can indeed have an effect on intrinsic motivation” (p. 77), both intrinsic motivation and extrinsic

motivation are important in language learning according to research. Moreover, in Dornyei’s definition, learners who had had no motivation from the beginning are not considered demotivated learners. This raises the question of how we should define these learners and how we should treat them.

**Table 5. Results of the interview for factor 4: Non-communicative methods**

<b>Q6. Some lessons always focused on translation and you didn’t have chances to use English. Has it demotivated you?</b>	<b>Q7. Sometimes you have been forced to learn grammatically correct English and the English for entrance exams. Has it demotivated you?</b>
<p>*No, it has not.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I’d rather like the style because I feel shy about talking to unfamiliar classmates”</li> </ul> <p>* I hated the style.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I haven’t experienced such a style.</li> </ul>	<p>Yes (100%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I got demotivated because teachers emphasized grammar too often.”</li> <li>• Teachers said quite often, “learn this, or fail.”</li> <li>• I was told to use English “correctly.”</li> <li>• I don’t like learning grammar.</li> <li>• I don’t like “word check test.”</li> </ul>

Note. \*\*\* response from >75% of respondents.

\*\* response from > 50 % of respondents.

\*response from > 25 % of respondents.

The results of Question 6 attacks the prevailing view that supports the use of a communicative lesson style. More than 25 % of the interviewees disagree with negative aspects of grammar based teaching style. Here are some examples of their comments:



- I'd like the (Grammar translation) style because I feel so shy when I talk to a classmate I normally do not talk to.
- The uncomfortable classroom atmosphere when a communication-based lesson is held is rather demotivating.
- I really do not like the communication-focused teaching style.

As for Question 7, all the interviewee agreed that being forced to learn grammatically correct English and the English for entrance exams is demotivating. The below are some of the supporting responses from the interviewees.

- I got demotivated because teachers always emphasized grammar.
- Teachers threatened us by saying, “learn this grammar point, or you will fail the entrance exam.”
- I don't like learning grammar.
- I don't like vocabulary tests.

In short, the interview implies that translation-based style is not necessarily demotivating, but grammar-centered style discourages students.

**Table 6. Results of the interview for factor 5: Textbooks and preparation**

Q8. The English used in textbooks is too difficult or long. Has it demotivated you?	Q9. I became confused with how to prepare for lessons. Has it demotivated you?
<p>***Yes (100%)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The passages are way too long.</li> <li>• The long passages take my motivation to read away.</li> <li>• We are focusing too much on detail.</li> <li>• High school textbooks do not have pictures(2).</li> </ul>	<p>*Yes, I was confused and ended up preparing inadequately</p> <p>*I don't prepare for the lesson.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If the teacher did not force us to do, we wouldn't.</li> <li>• I don't have any purpose for studying English in the first place (2)</li> </ul>

Note. \*\*\* response from >75% of respondents.

\*\* response from > 50 % of respondents.

\*response from > 25 % of respondents.

The results of Question 8 makes it clear, that the English used in textbooks, which is difficult and long, is a strong demotivator. An interesting comment from this interview is “high school textbooks do not have pictures,” though no study has mentioned this as one of the reasons for students' demotivation. However, it is true that the rate of pictures contained in high school textbooks and the ones in junior high school are different.

The answers for Question 9 have both *Yes and No*. An example for *Yes* is “Yes, at first I was motivated to study, but eventually I became at a loss what to do, then ended up stopping preparing.” A few examples for *No* are, “I didn't prepare from the beginning,” “I don't know exactly what



I should do even though teachers strongly try to make us prepare,” and “If the teacher does not force us to prepare, I don’t. But if the teacher gets angry, I do.”

In summary, the reason, *the too long or difficult textbooks*, is supported by students’ questionnaire and interview and to be regarded as a strong demotivator. Additionally, *preparation* is considered another demotivating reason. The interview implies that they could be re-motivated if the teacher leads them to prepare efficiently and successfully.

**Table 7. Additional question 1**

Q10. Is there any reason why you are demotivated because you are not in an urban city but in a non-urban city?
<p>***No</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>We have an ALT.</li> <li>Even if we are surrounded by English speakers, it does not mean anything if we do not understand English in the first place.</li> </ul>

Note. \*\*\* response from >75% of respondents.

\*\* response from > 50 % of respondents.

\*response from > 25 % of respondents.

Question 10 is one of the questions, which was not included in the questionnaire but produced valuable data. The result shows that more than 75 percent of the interviewees do not consider it substantial, but it is implied that being able to understand English is their first priority. However, there is an issue that the interviewees cannot compare accurately since they have not lived in an urban city and what they know is only the non-urban city.

**Table 8. Additional question 2**

Q11. When did you get demotivated?
<p>**When Grammar appeared, I started disliking the lesson</p> <p>When I started failing to achieve high scores( JH2, 3 grade)(2)</p> <p>The routine atmosphere.</p> <p>When I was in JH1, 2, or,3 grade (3).</p> <p>I did not have any purpose from the beginning</p>

Note. \*\*\* response from >75% of respondents.

\*\* response from > 50 % of respondents.

\*response from > 25 % of respondents.

Lastly, as Kikuchi (2007) points out, most of the previous studies did not address the issue of time of demotivation (p. 9). Thus, it was necessary to interview participants directly to confirm this information. More than half of the interviewees revealed that they had started disliking English when *grammar* appeared. Also, two of them remarked that when they started failing to achieve high scores on tests, they started to be demotivated, which was in the second grade or the third grade in junior high school. Some participants were not sure of the exact year when they started getting demotivated.

Moreover, it has become a critical issue that some students do not have any purpose or motivation from the beginning. Though they are not regarded as an issue of demotivation since it does not apply to the definition of it, further investigation is necessary.

## Discussion

In this study, five factors about demotivation were found:

1) Learning environment and facilities, 2) Teacher's competence and teaching style, 3) Little intrinsic motivation, 4) Non-communicative methods, 5) Textbooks and lesson. Though self-confidence was found to be a demotivating factor in the past studies several times, it was not found in this study.

One notable factor which appeared in this study was "little intrinsic motivation," which is similar to Sense of English Uselessness (Tsuchiya, 2004a) and negative attitude toward English itself (Falout and Maruyama, 2004, Tsuchiya, 2006a). In the interview, some students said that they had started having negative feelings toward English when they were in junior high school. However, other students revealed that they had not been interested or had any purpose in studying from the beginning.

This implies three significant points: First, they have started getting de-motivated at some point in junior high school. Second, some participants were not de-motivated but a-motivated or did not have any motivation in the first place. Third, the three distinctions (de-motivated learners, a-motivated learners, and learners with no motivation) have to be made clearly. For example, being motivated once and getting it back, and motivating the students from the outset is quite different.

Analyzing these results and considering limitations of this research, three steps are suggested for future studies. 1) To investigate more about when the students start getting de-motivated, especially in junior high school, and to study what demotivates them in junior high school. 2) To make a

distinction between de-motivated learners and a-motivated learners. 3) To study more participants because these reasons vary significantly between individuals.

We hope that the result of this study represents an early step toward understanding demotivation and will trigger further investigations into this topic.

**Yo Hamada** teaches at high school in Tohoku area. He is currently interested in demotivation and learner beliefs.

**Kazuya Kito** is a student at Temple University Japan, Graduate College of Education. He is currently interested in bilingual education and demotivation.

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