



## A Review of Language Learning Demotivation Studies

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### Abstract

After 1990s learning demotivation has been an important issue in language teaching and learning research. Previous studies mainly fall into the following types: classifying the demotivation factors, exploring the influences of demotivation on learners, and discussing the strategies against demotivation. Findings show that learner factors directly affect learning demotivation while teacher factors, learning environment and social environment indirectly affect learning demotivation. Thus, strategies against demotivation not only ask for learners' effort, but also need teachers' help, good learning environment and social environment.

**Key words:** Demotivation; Factors; Influences; Learner differences; Strategies

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Since English scholars Gardner and Canadian Lambert (1959) began the studies of second language motivation from the perspective of social psychology, learning motivation has been widely researched. With the progress of motivation studies, Ludwig (1983) investigated demotivation of college students who were learning French, German and Spanish in USA. After 1990s, many scholars shifted their focus from positive factors that motivate learning to negative factors that demotivate

learning. Studies of demotivation are mainly concerned with the classification of demotivation factors, the influences of the demotivation factors upon learners, demotivation factors and learner differences, and the strategies against demotivation.

### 1. CLASSIFICATION OF DEMOTIVATION FACTORS

Almost all researches about demotivation studied demotivation factors in English learning process and the factors from their studies can be generally divided into four groups: teacher factors, learner factors, learning environment factors and social environment factors (Liu & Ying, 2013). These four factors also can be divided into internal factors and external factors (Falout and Maruyama, 2004). Internal factors include learner factors while external factors contain teacher factors, learning environment factors and social environment factors.

Teacher factors are mostly regarded as important factors responsible for learners' demotivation in the learning process (Gorham & Christophel, 1992, 1995). As a significant part in the teaching and learning relationship, teachers' teaching ability, professional competence, teaching method, teaching style, character and other things can affect learners' learning. Many researches indicate that teacher factors are most influential factors to demotivate learners (Sun & Lei, 2013; Li & Sun, 2017). Of course, the influence of teacher factors on learners' demotivation is not fixed and absolute. Sometimes teacher factors have less effect on learners' learning. (Li & Wang, 2016; Liu, Li & Gao, 2016)

It is inevitable that teachers play an important role in learners' learning process. However, the influence of teacher factors is different because of learners' specific situation. For instance, English learners of low learning level are more dependent on teachers while English

learners of high learning level pay more attention to learning environment (Li & Wang, 2016). In order to help different learners and encourage them, it is necessary for teachers to improve their teaching method and professional competence, maintain a good relationship with learners.

Learner factors are significant factors leading to learning demotivation. As subject of learning and object of teaching, learners play an essential role in the process of learning. Therefore, some learners' individual factors can influence learning process and outcome. Learners' lack of confidence, decline of interest, inadequacy of emotional cognitive ability and lack of learning strategy can demotivate their learning motivation (Yin, Fu & An, 2019). Besides, learners' attitudes towards learning and language (Yu, 2013), inadequacy of intrinsic motivation, learning experience (Yu, 2011), learning aptitude (Tang, 2013) and other factors such as communication intention, expectation of future (Yu & Wei, 2019) and life target (Gao & Wang, 2020) can cause learners' demotivation as well. All of these factors have effect on learners' demotivation, but sometimes these factors can affect each other and then bring out negative change and decrease learners' motivation together (Yin, Fu & An, 2019).

Learner factors are internal factors which are originated from change of learners' mind and thoughts. Some internal factors are difficult to control, like learners' personality and aptitude, because this part is instinctive. Some other internal factors are controllable to a certain extent, like learners' interest and confidence, for change of this part is caused by some external condition in most cases. Therefore, teachers can deeply understand reasons that bring out change of learners' factor and learners' need and then suit the remedy to the case, if they want to reduce the negative impact of learner factors.

Learning environment is another significant factor of learners' demotivation, which includes teaching facilities (Kikuchi, K., & Sakai, H., 2009; Liu, 2011; Tang, 2012), teaching content and materials (Fang, 2014; Gao & Wang, 2020), course design and arrangement (Liu, 2011; Yu & Wei, 2019), language factors like difference between target and native language, grammar, and requirement for memory and recitation (Yu, 2011; Chen & Wu, 2020), test score (Yu, 2011; Yu, 2013) and so on.

Most learning environment factors can be changed to satisfy learners' need like teaching facilities, teaching content and materials and course design. Teachers can change their teaching method and style to increase interest of learners. As to test-oriented education, it can be changed with the effort of educational department, school and teachers, which needs more time.

Social environment is a kind of environment factors but it is different from learning environment factors. Social environment factors contain social condition, learners' educational background, learning atmosphere

at home, influence of others like parents, teachers, classmates and friends. Social environment is rarely mentioned and surveyed by researchers and scholars, but this factor also deeply influences learners' demotivation.

## 2. INFLUENCES OF DEMOTIVATION FACTORS ON LEARNERS

Demotivation factors contain four kinds and they influence learners' learning differently. Learner factors directly affect learning process while other three kinds of factors cause change of learner factors and then demotivate learners. Except for learner factors, other three factors influence learners differently.

Learners will demotivate if teachers' some teaching feature and individual traits can't satisfy them. Teachers' feedback is of great importance, for learners hope they can receive informative feedback from the teacher, so as to better understand their mistakes and learning progress (Tsang, 2012). Teachers' pronunciation and teaching method sometimes have a great effect on learners. Poor pronunciation and vague speaking method cause demotivation of learners (Li & Sun, 2017). Except for vague speaking, teachers' spoon-feeding and grammar-based teaching method also demotivate learners, which would make them quite bored and not get involved (Wang & Littlewood, 2021). Personality of teachers influences learners as well. According to Wang & Littlewood (2021), teachers who are too strict, lukewarm and showing favoritism and bias are disliked by learners, especially teachers showing favoritism and bias. Learners hope there is fairness in classroom. Besides, teachers' teaching competence and teaching style affect learners' demotivation mostly as well (Kikuchi, K., & Sakai, H., 2009).

Learners may also demotivate when learning environment is not good and suitable enough to support their learning. Inadequate teaching facilities can constrain teachers from using advanced teaching method, thereby reducing learners' learning interest and decreasing their motivation (Liu, 2011). Teaching content and materials also cause learners' demotivation because textbook compiling may not satisfy learners. For instance, learners will reduce their learning motivation if textbooks are not practical and interesting (Gao & Wang, 2020). Besides, improper course design and arrangement is easily to bring out antipathy of learners and then dampen their interest. So is low test score. Language factors seriously influence learners' learning as well, especially difference between target and native language, difficult grammar knowledge and requirement for memory and recitation (Yu, 2011; Chen & Wu, 2020). Learners often dislike English language because of these reasons.

Except for these, course cohesion and test-oriented education also cause problem for learners' learning.

The study of Liu, Li & Gao (2016) indicates that course cohesion among primary school, middle school and high school is very significant. Regional education department should introduce related policies to strengthen association between each learning period, according to the local condition. As for test-oriented education, it is really current situation of the whole country. According to Wang & Littlewood (2021), too many tests contribute to a huge burden on learners, give them pressure, and make them lose interest in learning English. Although test-oriented education really improves learners' English scores, their English level, especially speaking ability, is still low.

Learners' motivation will decrease if social environment is not conducive to their learning. Learners are easily influenced by others' thoughts and behaviors like parents, teachers and classmates in the process of learning. Learners' motivation decreases under teachers' blow to their confidence and teachers' impatience. Conversely, their motivation will increase when teachers are patient and encouraging. Some parents think English learning have no use in the future work or English learning in class is useless, which leads to learners' demotivation (Yu, 2011). The negative attitude towards language learning of classmates can also shake learners' faith to learn language (Yu, 2013). External requirement for English learning demotivates learners as well. For instance, English majors need to learn English every day, which makes them bored and annoyed. Besides, career prospective of English major also confuses them and puzzles their future (Wei, 2015).

Sometimes learners need some external help like financial support and parents' help. Enough financial support can give learners good learning condition and more learning resources (Liu, Li & Gao, 2016). If parents can offer good learning atmosphere, learners' motivation will be intensified. On the contrary, bad learning atmosphere at home can severely cause learners' demotivation. For example, parents' entertainment behavior like playing phone and Mahjong will set a bad example for learners, divert their attention and then demotivate their learning (Chen & Wu, 2020).

Except for family support, learners also need a stable social condition. Recent research finds that COVID 19 Pandemic influences learning method and learning effect of English learning. During COVID 19 Pandemic, learners need to learn online. However, online learning is insufficient for learners' learning because learners feel deprived from real life interaction. And sometimes lack of stable internet connection and suitable gadgets for online learning gives learners much inconvenience (Adara & Najmudin, 2020). This condition influences learners' learning seriously and demotivates their learning.

It is found that some demotivation factors are not only influential in learners' learning, but also interrelated. According to Li & Wang (2016), learner factors and

learning score are significantly correlated. That means the greater the negative impact of the learner factors, the worse the learners' learning score. This finding is similar with research result of Sun & Lei (2013) — learner factors can predict learning score regardless of grades.

The research of Yu & Wei (2019) indicates that teacher factors, communication chance and conflicts with major course can predict learners' learning behavior, including learning autonomy and learning persistence. Teacher factors like teaching knowledge and competence are most predictive of learning persistence, which is also found by Zhou & Wang (2012). Communication chance like inadequacy of communication situation is most predictive of learning autonomy.

Except for relationship between learner factors and learning score, teacher factors and learning behavior above, internal factors are related to external factors and individual internal factors are also interrelated. For instance, teacher, teaching content, and influence of classmates may cause inadequacy of self-confidence of learners, and inadequacy of self-confidence is related to learners' attitude towards language (Yu, 2013).

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### 3. DEMOTIVATION FACTORS AND LEARNER DIFFERENCES

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Demotivation factors have negative effect on learners' learning, but the influences upon learners are different to a certain degree, depending on learners' gender, level of motivation, language competence, major, grades and even their regions.

Demotivation factors influence male and female learners to different degree in learning process. According to research of Meshkat & Hassani (2012), male learners are easier to be influenced by learning content and material and teaching competence and style. That means male learners are easier to be demotivated in the same condition of learning content and material and teaching competence and style. Wei's study (2015) indicates male learners (college students) are more easily affected by adverse learning environment and then get learning burnout, compared to female learners. Besides, male learners tend to only spend part of time on English learning.

Generally speaking, learners with different levels of motivation hold different attitudes towards demotivation factors, so same demotivation factors have different effect on them. In accordance with Tang's (2012) research, learners with low level of motivation are more apt to be influenced by learning aptitude, teaching content, for this group of learners are not confident of their English level and thereby pay more attention to difficulty and human interest of teaching content. What's more, they are easier to be affected by bad learning atmosphere caused by negative attitude to English learning of other classmates.

These findings correspond with Wei's (2015) survey. Wei's study also mentions difference of demotivation factors on learners with different levels of motivation. Similarly, learners with low level of motivation are more apt to doubt their learning ability, compared to learners with high level of motivation. Except for this, learners with low level of motivation are easier to be affected by external requirement, thereby producing learning burnout.

Learners with different language levels are affected by demotivation factors to different degrees. In general, learners with high language level are influenced more severely by external factors like course content (Yu & Wei, 2019) and teaching environment (Yu, 2013). While learners with low language level are affected more deeply by some internal factors like self-perception, learning experience (Yu & Wei, 2019), negative attitude to language and lack of self-confidence (Yu, 2013). What's more, learners with low level of language are also demotivated more easily by parents' expectation, utilization of learning strategy and lack of success experience (Li, 2013). Learners with high language level pay more attention to influence of evaluation and teaching media on their motivation (Cao, 2021).

Demotivation factors affect liberal arts students and science students differently to some extent. Liberal arts students are easier to be influenced by low self-confidence, inadequacy of life target, lack of learning strategies and teaching content, in comparison with science students. The reason is that liberal arts students face tremendous employment pressure so they easily confuse and bemuse their future. And they lay more stress on language learning so they have higher requirements for teaching content and learning methods (Gao & Zhang, 2016).

There are differences of demotivation factors between different grades like graduate learners and undergraduate learners. Graduate learners need to spend more time and energy on their major course, paper writing and experiment. Heavy coursework and other stresses make them mentally weak, which certainly reduces their interest in English. Undergraduate learners dislike difficult teaching material because of long content and new words. Besides, they dislike teaching for exam like CET-4 and CET-6. For this, they gradually lose interest in English as well (Fang, 2014).

Demotivation factors affect urban learners and rural learners differently. In comparison with urban learners, rural learners are influenced more deeply by low self-confidence, inadequacy of life target and lack of learning strategies. Because of inadequate teacher resources and bad learning environment, rural learners have weak English base and insufficient self-confidence. In this condition, their motivation decrease more seriously than urban learners.

## 4. STRATEGIES AGAINST DEMOTIVATION

Demotivation seriously affects learners' learning. In order to reduce and overcome demotivation in learning process, many scholars and researchers investigate solution for demotivation and propose some strategies against demotivation.

Some scholars thought teachers can try to arouse learners' learning interest and evoke their learning value (Su, 2015). Learning interest really influences learners' motivation deeply. If teachers can stimulate learners' interest and enthusiasm for active learning so that they actively take part in teaching interaction, learners' demotivation may be reduced and overcome (Yin, Fu & An, 2019). This idea is typically student-centered. In this case, learners can take part in class discussion, share with others and practically exercise so that their self-determination can be strengthened (Li & Sun, 2017). Teachers can set up and maintain learners' self-determination through keeping importance of English in learners' mind as well. Realizing importance of English, learners will have a good reason to learn more so as to overcome demotivation (Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Teachers can also help learners reconstruct their self-confidence, and introduce effective learning strategies to them (Chen, 2019).

These strategies can solve problems from internal perspective, and they almost not only ask for learners' effort, but also need teachers' help. In order to help learners overcome demotivation in these ways, teachers may need to change their behaviors and teaching methods. Of course, except for these, learners also need good learning condition and more external encouragement (Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Innovation of textbook and learning materials is significant for reducing learners' demotivation as well (Chen, 2019). These strategies against learners' demotivation need to be applied differently in specific learners and situation.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Researches of learning demotivation after 1990s are mainly concerned with the classification of demotivation factors, the influences of the demotivation factors upon learners, demotivation factors and learner differences, and the strategies against demotivation.

Demotivation factors can be divided into teacher factors, learner factors, learning environment factors and social environment factors. These four demotivation factors influence learners differently. Learner factors directly affect learning process while other three factors firstly cause change of learner factors and then demotivate learners. These factors are not only influential to learners' learning, but also interrelated. They often interact with

each other and cause demotivation together. Besides, the influences of demotivation factors on learners are different, depending on learners' gender, level of motivation, language competence, major, grades and even their regions.

Findings suggest that strategies against demotivation not only ask for learners' effort, but also need teachers' help, good learning environment and social environment. Therefore, teachers should center on learners and pay more attention to learners' needs.

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