



# Literature Review of Learning Demotivation among Foreign Language Learners<sup>i</sup>

Meng Yanzhi

School of Foreign Languages, Xinxiang Medical University, Xinxiang, China

Email: [myz@xxmu.edu.cn](mailto:myz@xxmu.edu.cn)

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**Abstract**—Learning motivation has been considered as a determining factor in foreign language learning. The decreasing of learning motivation will bring negative impact on students' foreign language learning and teachers' foreign language teaching. In recent years, many researchers have done some empirical studies on learning demotivation among elementary students, middle school students and non-English major college students. This paper attempts to sort out the literature on the decline of foreign language learning motivation and find out the research gap, hoping to inspire relevant researches in the future.

**Keywords**—Foreign language learners, language learning, learning demotivation

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Since late 1950 when Gardner and Lambert used quantitative method to study motivation in the field of instructional education, it has been the focus of many researchers at home and abroad. These researchers did a considerable amount of theoretical and empirical studies to explore the effective ways to stimulate and maintain learning motivation. The research results show that motivation plays a crucial role in an individual's success in learning a second language (L2) or foreign language (FL). It is a positive factor involved in learning other languages. Yet, there are other factors that prevent students from being motivated and taking part in learning activities. These factors, acting on the opposite of motivation, are called

demotives that may lead to demotivation.

## II. CONCEPTS OF MOTIVATION AND DEMOTIVATION

### 2.1 Definition of Motivation

Stemming from the Latin root *move*, the word motivation is frequently used in our daily life. What is motivation? It is hard to give a precise and comprehensive definition to this seemingly easy word because of its complexity. Even the knowledgeable researchers studying on it cannot agree with each other on the definition. They attempted to define the term from different perspectives.

Gardner's definition is the most influential and widely accepted one. In his social-psychological model, Gardner

(1985) defined motivation as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language.” According to Gardner, his definition consisted of four elements: a goal, the efforts made by the learner, the desire to achieve the goal and the attitude toward learning the language. The four elements are inter-related and unified. Without anyone of them, the learning process could not continue.

From a behavioristic psychologist’s point of view, Brown (2004) defined motivation as “the anticipant of reinforcement”, in which the role of drive and reinforcement was stressed. Ellis (1994) claimed that motivation is the effort made by the learners to learn a foreign language as a result of their need or desire to learn it. From a cognitive standpoint, Williams and Burden (1997) put forward a quite comprehensive definition of motivation—a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal(or goals). In this definition of motivation, the learner’s role in making decisions about their own actions is emphasized. In addition, motivation is considered as a dynamic cognitive process. Dornyei (1998) suggested a more integrated definition of motivation. The dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor process whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) act out.

## 2.2 Definition of Demotivation

Compared with motivation, demotivation is a relatively new concept in language learning. Therefore, not many definitions are available up to date. After summarizing the previous studies, Dornyei (2001) first gave a clear descriptive definition of demotivation which became the most influential one and set a basis for later researches. According to him, demotivation refers to the “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action” (Dornyei143). Obviously, Dornyei only concerns the external factors that lead to language learners’ motivation decreasing. Not all researchers agreed on the definition

because it excludes internal factors. Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) claimed that internal forces such as lack of self-confidence and negative attitude of the learners should also be included in addition to external forces. Actually, Dornyei (2001) mentioned decreased self-confidence and negative attitude as causes of demotivation but did not put it into the definition. Thus, Sakai and Kikuchi felt that it was necessary to extend Dornyei’s definition to cover both external and internal factors that reduce or diminish the motivation of language learners.

## III. PREVIOUS RESEARCHES ON DEMOTIVATION

The research on demotivation first began in the field of instructional communication. Goham and his colleagues studied the influence of teacher’s misbehaviors in the classroom towards students’ learning motivation. Inspired by Goham’s study, Chambers (1993) began to study demotivation in the field of foreign language learning. Later, Oxford (1998), Dornyei (1998), Ushioda (1998) also paid attention to the related empirical studies. Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the research on demotivation in language learning shifted its battlefield from Europe to Asia. The Japanese researchers contributed a lot on this issue (Ikeno, 2002; Arai, 2004; Falout&Maruyama, 2004; Hasegawa, 2004, Kikuchi&Sakai, 2007, etc.). Next, the author will review the previous studies according to the shift of areas from Europe to Asia in chronological order.

### 3.1 The Researches on Learning Demotivation in Europe and America

#### 3.1.1 Chambers (1993)

In order to make clear why elementary students did not like learning foreign language, Gary Chambers (1993) administered a questionnaire to 191 students and 7 teachers in four schools in Leeds, UK. They found that the demotives perceived by teachers were quite different from the ones perceived by students. In the teachers’ opinion, the features of the demotivated students are: 1) making no effort to learn; having no interest in language learning; lacking concentration; doing little or no homework; refusing other’s help. 2) lacking self-confidence. 3) feeling the target language impractical, giving negative response to praise. 4) showing no willingness to cooperate, distracting other students, throwing things, etc.. Some

teachers even contributed the students' demotivation to psychological, social, historical and geographical factors. Obviously, teachers were just describing students' negative attitudes toward language learning. None of them regarded themselves as the main demotive. On the contrary, students' responses are just the opposite. They blamed their teachers for unclear instruction, poor equipments, criticizing students, using outdated teaching materials and so on.

### 3.1.2 Oxford (1998)

Oxford used 5 years to do a follow-up study on 250 American high school and college students about motivation decreasing. He asked them to recall their learning experience in the past five years by writing a composition. Oxford used some prompts relating to the role of teacher such as "please describe a situation in which you had conflict with your teacher", "talk about the classroom where you felt uneasy". The result of the study indicates that all the participants once experienced demotivation in the process of learning, and the main reasons centered around four aspects: inharmonious relationship between teachers and students; teacher's negative attitude towards the course and teaching material; conflict between teacher's teaching style and students' expectation; unreasonable design of classroom activity. Oxford's findings coincide with Chamber's. Both of them agreed that if we want to help students regain learning motivation, teachers must change accordingly and cooperate with students effectively.

### 3.1.3 Ushioda (1998)

Ushioda (1998) interviewed 20 Irish learners of French. She asked the participants to talk about the demotivating factors in their learning experience. Interestingly, the interviewees attributed their excellence to personal ability or other internal factors while attributed their negative learning outcomes to external factors such as learning environment, teachers. These findings were in line with Gorham (1992) and Chambers (1993) research findings.

### 3.1.4 Rudnai (1996)

Rudnai was among the early researchers to investigate demotivation. In order to find out why students lost their interest in studying English, she interviewed 15 students from four Hungarian high schools. These students accounted themselves demotivated. Following Dornyei's (1994) three-level motivation theory, Rudnai prepared

some interview guides concerning demotivation at the language level, the learner level and the learning situation level. After the interview, Rudnai found that the primary causes of the students' demotivation were at the learner's level and the learning situation level. The learner level problems were lack of confidence, negative learning experience and the learning situation level problems are lack of qualified teacher, lack of relaxing and pleasant learning atmosphere and so on.

### 3.1.5 Dornyei (2001)

Dornyei (2001) presented his study on demotivation which was carried out in 1998. He chose 50 Hungarian high school students who were studying English or German as foreign language as his subjects and conducted interviews in 10 to 30 minutes. The participants were regarded as highly demotivated students by their teachers and classmates. By analyzing the interview contents, Dornyei summarized nine demotives which set the basis for the following demotivation researches in the field of L2 learning. The nine demotivating factors are:

1. Teacher's personality, dedication, competence, etc.;
2. Poor school equipments (big class size, unreasonable level of classes, outdated machines);
3. Lack of confidence;
4. Passive attitude toward the foreign language studied;
5. Compulsory nature of foreign language study;
6. Interference of another foreign language being studied;
7. Dissatisfaction with the foreign language community;
8. Impacts of peer members;
9. Textbooks used in class. (Dornyei, 2001)

Among the nine factors described by Dornyei, the first category teacher-related factor accounts for 40% of all the factors. This finding is consistent with the findings reported by other researchers mentioned above.

In the above researches, most of the researchers chose middle school students as their subjects. They used qualitative method like interview or writing composition to collect and analyze learners' L2 learning experience, paying close attention to motivation decreasing. These researchers focused on external factors and their findings

are similar to each other. Teacher's improper behavior would have negative impact on learners. The learning and teaching environment can also influence learners' motivation.

### 3.2 The Researches on Learning Demotivation in Asia

Different from the European researchers, the Asian researchers more likely use quantitative method to study learning demotivation. Their attention mainly focused on the non-English majors at university. Despite the different subjects, their findings are nearly the same as the ones reported by European researchers. Japanese researchers Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) did something different and significant. They found that internal factors like lack of interest are also important reasons causing learners' demotivation.

#### (1) Vietnamese Researchers Trang and Baldauf (2007)

Vietnamese researchers Trang and Baldauf (2007) investigated 100 sophomore non-English majors to explore what caused the students to lose motivation to learn English. They asked the students to write a passage about their past learning experiences. By analyzing the data they collected, Trang and Baldauf found that 88% students had experienced or was experiencing motivation decreasing. The demotives could be divided into two groups: internal factors (36%) and external factors (64%). The internal factors were related to students themselves, such as attitude towards English, confidence. While external factors included teacher-related factors and learning atmosphere among which teacher-related factors accounted for 38%. They also found that for the demotivated students, teacher behavior had great impact on them and partially determines whether they could get rid of demotivation or not.

#### (2) Japanese Researchers' Demotivation Study on Japan Context

Inspired by Dornyei's findings, many researchers in Japan began to investigate demotivation phenomenon among Japanese foreign language learners. Some of them attempted to classify the demotives according to the learners' responses to the questionnaire or interview.

Ikeno(2002) and Arai(2004) adopted retrospective writing and interview methods respectively to probe into the English learning demotivation problem among undergraduates. The results showed that teacher behavior

was still the main reason leading to learners' motivation decreasing. Ikeno found that among the demotivating factors, disbelief in teacher's ability ranked the second, and doubts about teacher's personality ranked the third. But his sample was too small and it was necessary to gather more data from learners of different learning contexts. Arai collected 105 comments and sorted the factors into four groups: teacher's behavior, class being uninteresting, class atmosphere and others. Of the four groups, the factors concerning teacher accounted for 46.7%, followed by class being boring which accounted for 36.2%.

Both Hasegawa (2004) and Kojima (2004) carried out researches on demotivation among high schools. The results of these two researches indicated that the teacher-related factors and learner-related factors were the main sources of motivation decreasing in the process of learning English. Hasegawa found that learners' negative attitude, teacher's personality, relationship between teachers and students, teaching methods were the salient factors leading to demotivation. Her study was quite significant because she directly asked the participants what demotivated them. Kojima set up a model which consisted of five constructs: the language level, the learner level, the learning situation level, the students' listening ability, and the amount of assignment. According to the students' response to the survey, he found that the learner level problem affected motivation mostly. The second one was language level problem. Kojima made a breakthrough because he found something that was not reported by other researchers—the students' listening ability and the amount of assignment to be the demotivating factors.

Falout& Maruyama (2004) and Tsuchiya (2006a, 2006b) referred to Dornyei's nine demotives and designed their own questionnaire. They administered the questionnaires to university students. Both of the two researches divided the subjects into low-proficiency and higher-proficiency learners of English. The results of the two researches had some similarities. Both found that reduced self-confidence was one of the demotives. In the research conducted by Falout and Maruyama, self-confidence ranked as the first demotive, which was different from Arai, Trang and Baldauf's findings. The two researches all indicated that the higher-proficiency learners tended to attribute their

demotivation to external factors especially teachers. In Falout and Maruyama's study, the lower-proficiency learners attributed their demotivation to self-concerned factors while in Tsuchiya's study, there presented a mix of internal and external factors in the rank order. These two studies were different from the previous ones. The researchers did comparative studies by dividing the participants into lower-proficiency and higher-proficiency groups.

Sakai and Kikuchi cooperated with each other and carried out three large scale demotivation researches. Kikuchi (2009) explored the demotivation status among Japanese high school students. The research indicated that teacher's behavior in the classes (poor pronunciation, fast pace of the course ect.) and teaching method (translation or grammar-oriented methods) ranked the first and the second among all the demotivating factors. Based on the previous studies, Sakai and Kikuchi designed a 35-item questionnaire. They (2009) used the questionnaire and an open question to investigate 117 undergraduates on demotivation problem. Using a principal axis factor analysis, they extracted five demotives, among which teacher competence and teaching style were mentioned both in the questionnaire and the open question. In the same year, Sakai and Kikuchi chose high school students as their participants and suggested six demotives: teacher's aspect, nature of the course, experiences of failure, class environment, learning material and lack of interest. Compared with the previous studies, Sakai and Kikuchi's findings were quite new. Teacher behavior was not found to be the most salient demotivating factor. Learning material ranked number one factor. And internal factors like lack of interest were found to be as demotivating as teacher's competence and teaching style. This suggests that internal factors should be taken into consideration when studying demotivation.

### (3) Demotivation Study in China

Demotivation has been receiving growing concerns in China in recent years. When talking about demotivation, Zhang Shuwei (1995) thought there were internal and external sources for motivation decreasing. The internal sources may include weak self-confidence, self-esteem being hurt, improper self-evaluation and so on. The external sources were concerned with teachers' attitude,

teaching methods and textbooks. In addition, unreasonable organization of the course and the classroom environment could also lead to students' demotivation. Liang Liang (2007) summarized seven external demotivating factors among which teacher-related factors like teaching method, teacher's quality, relationship between teachers and students accounted for 61%. Tang Wenli (2012) administered questionnaires to 227 non-English majors of a university in Guangdong province to investigate demotivation problem. She found that factors concerned with teachers are the main demotivating factors, followed by students' intrinsic factors. Her findings were similar to Dornyei's finding.

Some researchers summarized the demotivation studies in China and abroad. Tang Wenli (2009) outlined the typical motive deficiency researches by foreign researchers. Liu Honggang (2010) recalled and reflected on the demotivation research in field of foreign language learning. He gave some suggestions for the future research. Zhu Xiaohong (2011) overviewed the studies on lack of learning motivation from both retrospective and prospective view. Yu Zhangya and Wei Xiaobao(2019) investigated the demotivating factors of learning English for non-English major postgraduates through a questionnaire survey and interviews among 367 postgraduates. They found that the lack of communication opportunities and unwillingness to speak English, conflict between the major study and English study, and low self-efficacy are the main demotivating factors. Chen Yide and Wu Yiwei(2020) studied on junior school students' demotivating factors in English learning from the perspective of dynamic systems theory. They conducted questionnaires and interviews on 230 students of different schools from three dimensions of learner factors, language factors and environmental factors. The result of their study reveals that loss of confidence, lack of learning strategies, differences between English and Chinese, unreasonable curriculum design and poor family learning atmosphere lead to students' decreasing motivation in English learning. CaiLing(2021) did a case study on junior high school students' English learning demotivators in ethnic areas. She extracted eight demotivators by factor analysis. Learners' language learning competence, interest and confidence turn out to be the most influential.



#### IV. CONCLUSION

After reviewing the researches on motivation and demotivation, the author has found that problems exist in the previous studies. Firstly, up to date, there is not a clear theoretical basis for demotivation research. The early researches aimed at studying learners' learning motivation, and demotivation was just one aspect of the research. Later researches gradually focused on demotivation. We can only apply motivation theories to demotivation study. Secondly, though the above researches had different subjects and research contexts, they had something in common. Demotivation exists among all the learners in different contexts, including middle school students and college students. Of all the demotives, teacher-related factors are the most salient ones. Thirdly, the definitions of demotivation are mostly descriptive and experienced a process of being expanded. At the very beginning, researchers only paid attention to external factors, especially the influence of teacher behavior on students' motivation. Later, internal factors such as self-confidence, lack of interest etc. were gradually noticed. Fourthly, the researchers used either qualitative or quantitative methods to do the research. Interview, questionnaire and essay are the commonly used instruments. They usually asked the participants to recall their learning experiences, fill in the questionnaire, accept interviews, or write retrospective essays. Last but not the least, the previous researches concentrated on definition of demotivation, demotives, the order of frequency of the demotives. More variables should be taken into consideration, such as gender, grade, achievement, language proficiency, and the relationship between these variables and demotivation.

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