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Demotivation in Second Language Acquisition

Insights from Japan



Keita Kikuchi

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Demotivation in Second Language Acquisition

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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*Keita Kikuchi
Tokyo, Japan*

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Introduction

It is probably more than 20 years ago, but I am still able to recall my memories from secondary school English class just as clearly as events that happened several years ago. I started studying English when I entered junior high school like everybody else in Japan back then. I remember receiving a new textbook, a notebook and cassette tapes to listen to passages from the textbook. I was so excited.

Did I do well from the beginning? No. My grades in English courses were poor. They were so bad that in my second year in junior high school I was asked to go to a special summer camp to study for about a week. In the meantime, most of my friends were enjoying their free time during the break between the first and second term.

I was not motivated to study English because I just did not feel like memorizing all the exercises and passages in my English textbook. Labeled as someone whose grades were bad, I was even more demotivated. I remember that I simply did not want to memorize anything.

I experienced three demotivating aspects while studying English at a high school in Japan. These demotivating aspects I later came to conceptualize as *demotivators* (I will expand on this idea in Chapter 1). The first demotivator I can easily think of is a specific teacher. I had the same English teacher for three years. This teacher, Mr K, almost never talked to me. During class, he did talk to students who, in his mind, behaved badly by not doing what he wanted students to do. He also seemed to enjoy talking to students who met his expectations. I did not belong to either group.

In order to be successful on midterm and final tests, students had to memorize passages from a textbook. One time, Mr K asked every student in the class to recite a passage of the textbook from memory. I was initially unable to memorize the uninteresting reading passage; however, eventually, after long practice (I cried to my parents at home during this hard practice!) I successfully recited the passage alone in front of the teacher. Until I was able to do this, I was not allowed to go home.

This teacher probably believed that memorizing the passage would help students to understand and acquire English grammatical structures, yet it was certainly a demotivating experience for someone like me who liked English but who did not like being forced to memorize uninteresting passages. Back then, I did not have any dislike for English. I liked to read English fiction just as much as Japanese. However, this experience was so humiliating that I still remember it.

A second demotivator for me was class activity. What we did mostly in the classroom, in addition to memorization, was translate English passages into Japanese. Students were called on one at a time and asked to orally translate a passage or to come to the front to write it on the blackboard. Sometimes, the teacher explained difficult structures on the board, too. Other than the translation exercises, the only other activities we had were grammar or vocabulary exercises. With just these few kinds of exercises, everybody needed to survive the 45-minute classes more than three times a week. We kept doing this for almost six years. It was not until I entered college that I was able to take an English course that I liked.

The third demotivator for me was being with the same classmates for six years. I needed to stick with this same community for several years in high school. What I still remember about senior high school English class is not the instruction, but what many people did during class. Since it was not interesting to just translate all the time, some students did not listen to the teacher. If the class was in the morning, some ate their lunch from their lunchbox. If it was in the afternoon, many slept. It was not easy for students to be motivated in this kind of environment. Fortunately, I usually did not have to be with the same class members after a semester at university. With all three of these demotivators gone – a humiliating teacher, boring class activities and an unenthusiastic community – I was able to enjoy English again.

In explaining my personal experience in this introduction, I have used three terms: *demotivators*, *demotivating* and *demotivated*. In Chapter 1, I clarify these terms after describing motivation, the positive side of demotivation. Chapter 2 discusses the necessity of studying demotivation in second language acquisition research. Chapter 3 provides a literature review on demotivation studies conducted both outside and within Japan.

In the succeeding three chapters, I present a combination of examples using quantitative, qualitative and mixed method approaches. Chapter 4 describes a questionnaire-based quantitative study involving more than 1200 high school pupils studying English. Chapter 5 describes a follow-up study using regression analysis. Chapter 6 describes a study on demotivational factors in English courses at junior and senior high schools and presents a qualitative analysis of the study. Chapter 7 describes another study on demotivational factors, this one for university freshmen studying English in Japan.

Chapters 4 through 7 are used as a springboard to discuss methodological and research issues in later chapters. Chapter 8 summarizes the findings from the studies described in the previous chapters, examines common themes and discusses how demotivators influence language acquisition. Chapter 9 discusses how teachers deal with learner demotivation using motivational strategies. Chapter 10 concludes the book by suggesting directions for further research based on implications drawn from the studies in this book.

Contents

Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	xi
1 Understanding Demotivation	1
Definition of Demotivation	1
Summary of the Chapter	6
2 Prior Focus of Demotivation Studies	7
Expansions from the Original 'Demotivation' Construct	7
Studies on Demotivators	8
Studies on Demotivation	10
Strategies for Dealing with Learner Demotivation	12
Summary	16
3 The Importance of Demotivation in Second Language Acquisition	17
Brief Overview of Key Individual Difference	
Constructs in SLA	17
Demotivation as Social and Environmental Factors in SLA	22
Summary	24
4 A Survey Study to Test Demotivator Models	26
Introduction	26
Questionnaire Development	29
Data Screening	41
Results of Statistical Analyses	46
Summary of the Results	58
5 Learner and Teacher Perceptions of Demotivators	62
Introduction	62
Methods	62

Results of Statistical Analysis	64
Discussion and Conclusion	68
6 Learner Reflections: Demotivators in Secondary School	71
The Use of Qualitative Data Obtained from Questionnaires	71
The Research Design	72
How the Quantitative Data were Analyzed	74
How Qualitative Data were Analyzed in This Study	75
Analysis of Changes with Two Demotivated Students	88
Conclusion	89
7 Uncovering Demotivators Beyond the Classroom	90
Introduction	90
Results	94
Discussion	102
Conclusion	104
8 Summary of Findings From Studies of Demotivators	105
Findings From the Quantitative Studies Presented in Chapters 4 and 5	105
Findings From the Qualitative Study Presented in Chapter 6	106
Findings From the Mixed Method Study Presented in Chapter 7	107
Synthesis of Findings	108
Limitations of the Studies Presented	110
Summary	111
9 Motivational Strategies and Demotivation	112
Basic Motivational Conditions to be Considered	113
What to be Careful of in Generating Initial Motivation	114
How We can Maintain and Protect Learner Motivation	114
How We can Encourage Positive Retrospective Self-Evaluation	115
Why These Strategies to Deal with Demotivation?	116
Conclusion	117

10 Future Explorations of Demotivators	119
Problems with Current Demotivation Studies	120
Identifying Demotivators' Different Levels of Contexts	123
Methodological Issues	124
Two Research Terms: Ambivalence and Disengagement	126
Suggestions for Future Studies	128
Conclusion	129
Appendix A: Demotivation Questionnaire 1 (Japanese Version)	131
Appendix B: Demotivation Questionnaire 1 (English Version)	133
Appendix C: Demotivation Questionnaire 2 (Pilot Version)	135
Appendix D: English Translation of Demotivation Questionnaire 2 (English Translation of Pilot Version)	137
Appendix E: Demotivation Questionnaire 2 (Final Version)	139
Appendix F: English Translation of Demotivation Questionnaire 2 (English Translation of Final Version)	141
Appendix G: Demotivation Questionnaire 3 (Final Version)	143
Appendix G: Demotivation Questionnaire for College Students (English Translation of Final Version)	145
Appendix H: Demotivation Questionnaire for College Students (Final Version)	147
Appendix I: Letter for College Cooperating Teachers (in Japanese and English)	149
Appendix J: English Translation of a Part of the Questionnaire Used in Kikuchi and Sakai (2014)	150
Appendix K: Item Description of the Questionnaire Used in Chapter 7 (Adapted from Taguchi <i>et al.</i> , 2009)	151
References	153
Index	161

1 Understanding Demotivation

Definition of Demotivation

How can teachers help students to be more motivated to learn a foreign language? This is a question that many foreign language teachers ask themselves, and I have been looking for the answer to this question following the experiences that I described in the Introduction. Researchers in the field of motivation in second language learning have argued that motivation is a crucial factor in language learning and that there are a variety of measures that teachers can take to improve learner motivation.

Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of teachers, many learners lose interest in foreign language learning. As Dörnyei (2001: 141) points out:

Classroom practitioners can easily think of a variety of events that can have demotivating effects on the students, for example public humiliation, devastating test results, or conflicts with peers. If we think about it, ‘demotivation’ is not at all infrequent in language classes and the number of demotivated L2 learners is relatively high. (Dörnyei, 2001: 141)

Dörnyei’s concern is that no matter how hard teachers try to encourage their students, there will always be a certain number of demotivated learners. Demotivation seems to be particularly widespread in Japanese high school English classrooms and, as briefly described in Introduction, it can occur for a variety of reasons (see Kikuchi [2013] for a detailed review of this issue). Before defining demotivation, the central theme of this book, let me briefly provide a definition of ‘motivation’. Demotivation combines the prefix *de-* and the noun *motivation*. As an important first step, it is necessary to think about how we should view motivation. While motivation is the process that drives learners to move toward a goal, demotivation is the negative process that pulls learners back. An understanding of demotivation follows more easily from an understanding of motivation.

Working definition of motivation

It is useful to understand how lay people may conceptualize motivation. Table 1.1 describes definitions of motivation found in three different online dictionaries. As can be seen, the definitions vary greatly, ranging from inner feelings, such as desire, drive, interest or willingness, to the act itself,

Table 1.1 Definition of motivation in online dictionaries

Source	Definitions
Cambridge Academic Content Dictionary	Willingness to do something, or something that causes such willingness
Collins English Dictionary	(1) the act or an instance of motivating; (2) desire to do; interest or drive; (3) incentive or inducement; (4) (psychology) the process that arouses, sustains and regulates human and animal behavior.
Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary	(1) the act or process of giving someone a reason for doing something: the act or process of motivating someone; (2) the condition of being eager to act or work: the condition of being motivated; (3) a force or influence that causes someone to do something.

to a condition and to a process. By simply taking a look at the dictionary entries, you may understand the difficulties of defining motivation.

Among these dictionary entries, *Collins English Dictionary* includes a definition related to psychology. This definition is closest to the working definition that is used in this section. Based on Schunk *et al.* (2008: 4), I would like to view motivation as ‘the process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained’. In their perception,

The term motivation is derived from the Latin verb *movere* (to move). The idea of movement is reflected in such common-sense ideas about motivation as something that gets us going, keeps us working, and helps us complete tasks. Yet there are many definitions of motivation and much disagreement over its precise nature. (Schunk *et al.*, 2008: 4)

In preparing for this book and consulting many resources, this definition of motivation as a process that involves goals and requires activity to be activated and sustained made the most sense. In the field of language learning motivation, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011: 4) state that motivation concerns (a) the choice of a particular action, (b) the persistence in that action and (c) the effort expended. In this vein, I view language learning motivation as a process in which learners choose to learn a language and put effort into doing so.

Researchers’ views of ‘demotivation’

How has demotivation been viewed in the literature? Zhang (2007: 213) defined it as ‘the force that decreases students’ energy to learn and/or

the absence of the force that stimulates students to learn'. Zhang, who conducted a study about demotivation that utilized the framework of instructional communication studies developed by Christophel and Gorham (1995; Gorham & Christophel, 1992; Gorham & Millette, 1997), argued that various teacher-related factors (e.g. teachers' incompetence, offensiveness and indolence) can become negative motivational influences.

Dörnyei (2001a: 143) defined demotivation as 'specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action'. He argued that demotivation is different from amotivation, which refers to a lack of motivation that is most closely associated with self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2002). Dörnyei considers demotivation to be related to specific external forces that cause a reduction in motivation. In Dörnyei's (2001a) conceptualization, amotivation refers to a lack of motivation caused by the realization that there is no point in studying a foreign language, or a student's belief that studying a foreign language is beyond his or her capacity. Based on Vallerand's (1997) conceptualization of amotivation, people can be amotivated because of various beliefs (e.g. capacity-ability beliefs, strategy beliefs, capacity-effort beliefs and helplessness beliefs). Due to these beliefs, a relative absence of motivation can occur. As stated by Dörnyei (2001a: 143), 'amotivation is related to general outcome expectations that are unrealistic for some reason, whereas demotivation is related to specific external causes'.

The problem with this definition of demotivation, however, is that it has not yet been empirically determined whether or not demotivating factors are completely external. A number of researchers (e.g. Arai, 2004; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Tsuchiya, 2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b) included in their studies of demotivation both external factors, such as teachers and class materials, and factors that are internal to the learner, such as a lack of self-confidence and negative attitudes. Despite his conceptualization of demotivation as being caused by external factors, even Dörnyei (2001a) listed two internal factors, reduced self-confidence and negative attitudes toward the foreign language, as sources of demotivation. Therefore, Kikuchi (2011) has added the notion of *internal* to Dörnyei's (2001a) definition and defines demotivation as 'the specific internal and external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action'. Based on this definition, I refer to these individual internal and external forces as *demotivators* in this book.

Note that the studies included in the following chapters are not only about demotivated learners. The participants in most of the studies are a mix of motivated and demotivated learners. This is a very important conceptual issue that I will return to in Chapter 9.

It is also important to note that students' motivation to study English fluctuates (Koizumi & Kai, 1992; Miura, 2010; Sawyer, 2006). Demotivation does not necessarily mean a lack of motivation; demotivation also occurs,

for instance, when the motivation of a highly motivated student decreases to an average level. In terms of motivational fluctuations, the level of motivation might decrease from the beginning of the student’s English study over many years.

Working definition of demotivation

In the previous section, I clarified that what scholars have referred to as ‘demotivation’ will be treated as *demotivators* in this book. In this section, I will define the term *demotivation* for this book. I introduced the working definition of motivation in the previous section, Now, I will work with the prefix to motivation, de-.

According to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, the prefix de- can mean (a) do or make the opposite of; reverse; (b) remove or remove from; (c) out of; (d) reduce; or (e) derived from. While language learning motivation concerns the process that involves goals and requires activities to arouse and sustain motivation, demotivation concerns the negative process that pulls learners down.

In terms of the perception of demotivation in the literature, scholars use the word demotivation in different ways. From my understanding, the term *demotivation* can be differentiated from demotivators, demotivating and demotivated. Figure 1.1 represents the conceptualization of these four words, along with the positive side of this concept, motivation, and a complete loss of motivation, amotivation. As I discussed above, first of all, I see demotivators as ‘the specific internal and external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action’. The pull, or series of *demotivators*, that makes people ‘demotivated’ can be seen as *demotivating*. We can use this word demotivating as an adjective.

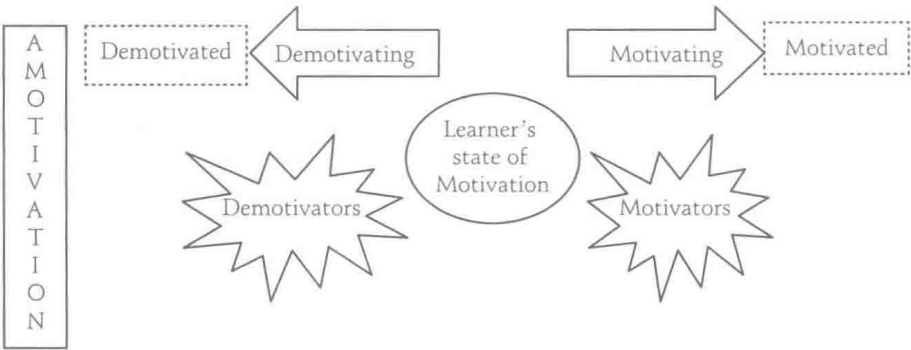


Figure 1.1 Concept of demotivation and demotivators

I would also like to discuss the difference between demotivation and amotivation. As I described, demotivation concerns the negative process that pulls learners down. I see, however, that demotivation is situational, and demotivated learners can still be motivated again. In contrast, amotivation concerns a lack of motivation. Vallerand and Ratelle (2002) describe amotivation as follows:

Amotivation is at work when individuals display a relative absence of motivation. In such instances, individuals do not perceive a contingency between their behaviors and outcomes, so they do not act with the intention to attain an outcome... They begin to feel helpless and may start to question the usefulness of engaging in the activity in the first place. (Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002: 43)

Language learners who have become amotivated probably cannot see why they should keep attending classes and decide to quit coming to school. On the other hand, demotivated learners still come to classes and engage in activities if they feel like it.

In order to illustrate the difference between demotivation and amotivation, let us imagine that two Japanese learners of English, Yuki and Takashi, are entering a university at the same time. Expecting that English courses at the university level are different from what Yuki experienced in high school, her state of motivation to study English is high at the beginning. However, after experiencing *demotivators*, such as getting a low score on a test or being placed in an inappropriate class level, she may become *demotivated*. We can call this process *demotivation*. We can say that it was *demotivating* for her to experience *demotivators*: receiving a low score and being in an inappropriate class.

Her state of motivation may increase after experiencing *motivators*, such as meeting an international student with whom she can communicate in English or making a plan to study abroad. We can say that in this state she is *motivated*. The process of being motivated can be seen as motivation. The push to her becoming motivated can be called *motivating*.

On the other hand, Takashi experiences *amotivation* after entering the university. In the first class of an English course in which an American teacher, James, tells the class to meet their classmates and ask them about their hometowns, high schools and hobbies, Takashi just sees everybody around him looking happy communicating in English with new Japanese friends that they have just met. These kinds of experiences can be *motivators* for many students. While Takashi can see the point that he needs to meet new friends and communicate in English in this course, he just does not feel like talking in a foreign language with Japanese people. After several minutes of seeing many Japanese classmates trying hard to talk only in English, he walks away from the classroom. The teacher, James,

immediately notices this, catches him and rebukes him in English, Takashi never understands English. This experience works as a *demotivator*, but he does not care at this moment.

Feeling helpless, Takashi stops going to this class and starts to question the usefulness of learning English in general. He clearly understands that he needs to get credit for this course in order to graduate, but he just does not feel like going to this class anymore. This condition can be seen as *amotivation*.

Summary of the Chapter

In Chapter 1, I have provided definitions of demotivation discussed in previous literature and described the focus of the book. I attempted to clarify the current confusion surrounding the terms by distinguishing demotivators from demotivation. In Chapter 2, I review previous studies in three areas: studies on demotivators, demotivation and strategies for dealing with demotivation. What are the sources of demotivation? What is happening in the process of demotivation? How do learners cope with the process of demotivation? Please keep these questions in mind while reading Chapter 2.