

The Impact of Learner Demotivation: Retrospective Accounts of Japanese EFL Learners

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Introduction

Despite growing interest and enthusiasm toward early English language learning in Japan, many of the learners tend to lose their motivational drive somewhere along the way of their learning processes. According to research findings that have investigated students' motivation in Japanese EFL contexts at various educational levels (e.g., Arai, 2004; Dörnyei, 2005; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Hamada & Kito, 2008; Hasegawa, 2004; Kikuchi, 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Tsuchiya, 2004, 2006), young learners often start their foreign language learning with strong interest and motivation yet sustaining that motivation and interest in learning a foreign language tends to decline with increasing age and grade level (Matsuzaki-Carreira, 2006).

As commonly observed in foreign language classrooms, demotivation is so prevalent a phenomenon that even some initially motivated learners might end up being frustrated or anxious with the feelings of despair. To date there have been a variety of demotivational factors identified across different educational levels or settings through the use of questionnaire surveys, but the potentially harmful impact of learners' demotivation on their subsequent language learning has not been yet fully explored, especially from a qualitative or interpretive standpoint. Thus this study attempts to explore and describe the effects of learner demotivation on language learning processes. Particular focus was placed on capturing the learners' introspective and retrospective accounts of demotivation experiences in their previous language learning in terms of 1) what episodes/incidents have led to their

motivation to plummet, 2) what impact such experiences has had in their subsequent leaning behaviors, and 3) how they have managed or dealt with their demotivated feelings.

Participants of the study were drawn from 115 college students enrolled in a 2-year intensive English program at a liberal arts university in Japan and they were asked to write a narrative essay on the topic “English Learning and Myself”. Based on the content of their self-reflective essays, 12 participants were recruited for qualitative in-depth interviews, where they were engaged in further self-reflections on their previous language learning experiences. The purpose of the individual interviews was not only to gain further insights into the phenomenon of learner demotivation and its sources, but also to explore the effects of demotivation on their actual learning behaviors as well as their perspectives or beliefs on language learning. All the narrative data from the interviews were analyzed according to thematic categories that emerged through the entire research process.

One of the preliminary findings from the analysis was that the participants found instances of demotivation inevitable or rather quite natural for such a complex and challenging task of learning a foreign language, but sustaining their motivational drive while managing the frequent surge of emotional difficulties such as the feelings of despair and anxiety would require constant incentives both internally and externally so that they can stay active and confident in their learning processes. By referring to the participants’ narrative accounts, the paper will also discuss some pedagogical suggestions for language teachers, along with implications for further research.

What is Demotivation?

Before looking closely into the study findings, the study background and methodology will be briefly explained. What is the idea of student

demotivation and its potential sources or factors?

Dörnyei (2001), who has first conceptualized the idea of demotivation, defined a demotivated learner as “someone who was once motivated but has lost his or her commitment or interest for some reason...” (p.142). As can be inferred from the word, “Demotivation” has a basic assumption that someone was once motivated before he/she has become demotivated. So it’s different from “No motivation” or what is called “Amotivation” in nature (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Legault et al., 2006).

Amotivation refers to a lack or absence of motivation caused by the learner belief that “There is no point ...” or “It’s beyond me...,” and it’s not caused by a lack of initial interest by the individual’s experiencing the feeling of incompetence and helplessness when faced with an activity (Hasegawa, 2004). On the other hand, “demotivation” is related to specific external causes, including various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation (Dörnyei, 2001).

However, the distinction between external and internal causes are sometimes difficult. For example, quizzes in the classroom appear to be external but the impact of the quiz scores on learners’ psyche (reduced self-confidence, self-confidence) seems to be internal (Kikuchi, 2009). In other words, it’s still debatable whether the phenomenon is only related to external influences in the sense that there is a good possibility that learners might get demotivated because of their inner emotional or affective difficulties, such as reduced self-confidence or self-efficacy. So the clear distinction between external and internal causes seems often quite difficult.

Factors of Demotivation

Demotivation research first started in the U.S. in the field of communication studies, and Dörnyei (2001, p. 143-152) spearheaded research

on EFL demotivation in Budapest. According to his research findings from questionnaire data (50 secondary schools), EFL learners potentially become demotivated for nine reasons.

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

Similarly, Oxford (1998) found four broad themes that might decrease learners' motivation in language learning. They are:

- 1) The teacher's personal relationship with the students
- 2) The teacher's attitude towards the course or the material
- 3) Style conflicts between teachers and students, and
- 4) The nature of the classroom activities.

Demotivation and its potential sources have also been widely researched in Japan, mostly in the university and high-school levels (Quantitative multiple-item questionnaire surveys & qualitative open-ended interviews; e.g., Arai, 2004 ; Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009 ; Falout & Maruyama, 2004 ; Hamada, 2008 ; Hamada & Kito, 2008 ; Hasegawa, 2004; Kikuchi, 2009 ; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009 ; Tsuchiya, 2004, 2006). Those studies in Japan revealed several demotivators among Japanese EFL learners, which suggests that there are various reasons that demotivate learners both internally and

externally. They include;

- The teacher related (e.g., teacher's competence and teaching style) (Arai, 2004 ; Hamada & Kito, 2008)
- Class content and atmosphere (e.g., non-communicative methods) (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Hamada & Kito, 2008)
- Reduced self-confidence (e.g., sense of incompetence) (Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Tsuchiya 2004, 2006)
- Negative attitudes (e.g., negative attitudes toward English) (Falout & Maruyama, 2004)
- Learning facilities and environment (e.g., compulsory nature of English study)
- Course books and tests

Not much research in junior high-school levels, but some studies similarly indicated teacher related issues as a primary demotivator for high-school students (Hasegawa, 2004) and reduced self-confidence and grammar instruction as primary demotivating factors for junior high school students (Hamada, 2008).

Unfortunately to date very few studies that investigates demotivational factors in Japanese elementary school levels have been found so far, yet Carreira's study (2006) on intrinsic and extrinsic motivation provides valuable insights into Japanese elementary school pupils' motivation. The study revealed "a developmental decrease in motivation for learning EFL, which may be influenced by such external factors as education, teachers, parents, peers, and the classroom" (p. 151). Factor analysis identified five affective factors that influence their motivation; 1) interest in foreign countries, 2) intrinsic motivation, 3) caregivers' encouragement, 4) instrumental motivation, and 5) anxiety. Although the study did not specifically focus on

the reasons behind the decline of motivation with age (from the third to sixth graders), the findings above seem to suggest how the teaching methods for elementary school pupils can be improved. Carreira notes, "... for students in higher grades, motivation for learning EFL can be enhanced by providing an appropriate environment and improving teaching methods and materials" (p. 152).

Similarly, Adachi's study (2009, 2010), though not specifically focused on demotivating factors, analyzed 5th and 6th graders' motivation attitudes toward English learning in a Japanese elementary school and found that their motivation is strongly influenced by factors such as:

1. Attitudes toward learning (not just attitudes toward learning English but also towards learning other subjects)
2. People around the learner (that is, their motivation is closely related to their feelings about the encouragement from the people around them, including parents, teacher, and peers, and Adachi noted that Japanese students' attitudes towards language learning are influenced by not just their teachers but their peers in the classroom)
3. Vitality of English (or awareness of the extent to which pupils consider English important in society)
4. Communicative attitudes toward people from different cultures (connected with the idea of WTC (Willingness To Communicate) with people who have different cultural backgrounds)

As these factors suggest, Japanese students' attitudes towards language learning are influenced by not just their teachers but their peers in the classroom. Similarly Kunitomo's study (2006), which compared positive and negative affects in English activities at a Japanese elementary school, found that some negative affects such as anxiety, boredom, or other demotivated feelings were caused by interpersonal relations among peers during English

activities where they often feel a sense of incompetence (i.e., self-efficacy).

Though not conducted in Japanese elementary EFL contexts, Kim & Seo's study (2012) investigated Korean elementary school students' motivational change and their teachers' perception of student demotivation. The study revealed a steady decrease in their motivation (i.e., instrumental, intrinsic, integrative, parental extrinsic, and academic extrinsic motivation) as they advanced through the school grades (3rd to 6th). And the teachers attributed their students' demotivation to 1) the negative impact of the teachers on students' motivation (e.g., incongruence with students' needs, teachers' impatience and disinterest in teaching and their students), 2) excessive social expectations of English proficiency, and 3) the widening gap in FL proficiency among students. Although Kim & Seo note that the findings are limited to the Korean EFL contexts and cannot be generalized to other EFL settings, some of the perceived attributes of student demotivation seem to be quite relevant to the Japanese elementary EFL, when considering the similar cultural and educational backgrounds both countries share.

As seen so far, a general review of research on demotivation in second/foreign language learning reveals that the phenomenon of demotivation is rather quite common in various educational levels and that teachers have a considerable responsibility for the occurrence of student demotivation. The primary sources of demotivation identified in previous research "concern some aspects of classroom existence 'owned' by, or under the control of, the teacher" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 90).

Rationale for the Study

To date there have been a variety of demotivational factors identified across different educational levels or settings, but the potentially harmful impact of learners' demotivation on their subsequent language learning have

not been yet fully explored, especially from a qualitative or interpretive standpoint. The issue of learner demotivation has been discussed but not fully described for specific EFL contexts as in Japan, for example, in the sense that English education in Japanese universities has often been described as “motivational wasteland” (Berwick & Ross, 1989, p. 297).

By focusing on Japanese EFL learners, this study can recognize the cultural context and its influence on their perceptions of demotivation. Thus more qualitative, interview-based research can yield deeper insights into how learners make sense of their experiences.

Methodology

Participants of the study were drawn from 115 college students at a liberal arts university in Japan and they were asked to write a narrative essay on the topic “English Learning and Myself”. Based on the content of their self-reflective narrative essays, 12 participants (7 sophomores & 5 juniors) were recruited for qualitative in-depth interviews, where they were engaged in further self-reflections on their previous language learning experiences in relation to the impact of learner demotivation on their subsequent learning behaviors. All had previously been students in the researcher’s Reading/Writing courses (Placement TOEFL PBT 420~550). The interviews of 60-90 minutes were conducted in Japanese and then transcribed and translated by the researcher. All the narrative data were analyzed according to thematic categories that emerged from the essay data as well as the interview data.

Results

One of the main findings from the qualitative analysis was that the

participants saw instances of demotivation to be commonplace and rather inevitable in the complex task of learning a foreign language. They related a variety of episodes of how they sustained or regained their motivational drive to stay active and confident in their learning processes while managing emotional difficulties such as feelings of despair and anxiety.

In terms of demotivation factors, three main factors merged from the data; 1) a loss of personal goal, 2) a lack of self-regulation, and 3) dissatisfaction with various problems in the learning environment. Each of the three major demotivating factors will be illustrated with quotations from the interviews.

A loss of personal goal

One major demotivating factor mentioned by students was a loss of a personal goal for studying English. Ms. Hayashi reflects:

Ms. Hayashi: In our college English intensive courses, a lot of communicative activities are naturally encouraged in English, but I just cannot imagine myself using English in such a way when I start working after I graduate from college. In other words, I just wonder when and in what specific situations I might need English in my future jobs or career.

Despite being English majors, several interviewees mentioned that they see no point in learning English because they are not sure whether they will need it in their career. They have no vision or an unclear vision of an ideal L2 self that uses English well based on constant efforts in college. They are doing it because it seems vaguely useful for their future, but they do not have a clear goal like in high school to get ready for exams. They mentioned this sense of lost purpose, either temporary or long-term, as being the main reason they

don't feel motivated to learn well. Ms. Hashimoto takes it one step further.

Ms. Hashimoto: *When entering university, I wanted to work hard and get a good job using English...but now I feel like any type of interesting job is OK, and I don't necessarily have to get good at using English.*

Ms. Ishida also expressed a similar sentiment.

Ms. Ishida: *I have often heard that English skills will be truly valuable in the near future, but living in Japan, I don't see any particular need or urgency in our daily lives. Studying English for one's future "just in case" sounds nice and admirable, but that's not so motivating in itself, because you can choose not to use English if you don't want to, and still live a happy life without using it after all! Plus, in high school, teachers asked to do this and do that all the time to help students pass the college entrance exams, but here in college, not many teachers push you much, and they know we do not want such pressure to study more. Do we really need to speak English here in Japan? I don't think so.*

Her feeling that there is no pressing need for her to study English well sounds strange coming from an English major in Japan where English skills are often considered valuable in many careers. However, students are required/forced to study English as a high school subject and they feel it is a strong or fun subject, which is often the only reason why they take the exams to enter English departments. It is easy to lose one's motivation when no clear personal goal is set or maintained. Her quote also includes an interesting reference to her study in high school, where English as an exam subject was highly regulated by the teacher. This connects to the next factor of demotivation, a lack of self-regulation.

A lack of self-regulation

The second factor of demotivation salient in the data was a lack of self-regulation. In other words, the students argued that their inability to push themselves to study well or autonomously and the subsequent lack of a personal sense of achievement led them to feel demotivated about studying. Ms. Miyazaki notes:

Ms. Miyazaki: *When I look back on my high-school days, I was always busy with assignments given by English teachers, of course to pass the college entrance exams. So in a way I was forced to study back then! But now entrance exams are over, how can I spur myself to study English? Learning English for what?*

Though I feel a need to study English for my future career, I don't think such a vague ambition drives me much. I wish I could have a strong reason to motivate myself, or someone to force me to study, whether I like it or not!

She feels that she could study well if she were forced (like in high school), but her Japanese college is not an environment in which students are pushed with small daily assignments and tests, and so she does not study hard, and as a result, feels demotivated. In the interview, it was clear that she feels she needs to do something herself, ideally, with self-regulation, but does not do so in reality, because she does not have to, and thus cannot achieve a positive cycle of effort and achievement. Ms. Shimizu's quote expresses a quite similar idea, in slightly different words.

Ms. Shimizu: *The gap between what you want to do, and what you do not*

do, affects motivation. In college, it is a fight with yourself. In my case, I don't improve when I am not being watched/monitored. In high school, I pushed hard. Now I don't. You get lazy when it is up to you.

Here again, she perceives her own lack of ability to drive herself to improve and recognizes her laziness as a factor that makes her feel down or demotivated about learning English. Her disappointment in herself is the factor she emphasized the most. Ms. Hashimoto's quote highlights the same issue of wanting to be forced to study, and being unable to push herself.

Ms. Hashimoto: Because I had trouble in my college English classes, I came dislike them. In high school, we just needed to do what we were told well.

In college, we needed to practice well independently. I got lazy and didn't push myself to improve.

And I shouldn't blame other people, but when others wouldn't do it, I wouldn't feel like pushing myself either.

If the teacher would check it, I would do it...but it was up to me in many cases, and I felt like I wouldn't do it. And other students wouldn't do it either...

One interesting dimension added here is the role of peers. She mentions that "because others wouldn't, I wouldn't." This feeling they cannot study autonomously because their classmates are not expending efforts either came out in several of the interviews.

Dissatisfaction with various problems in the learning environment

Finally, the third demotivating factor from the interviews involves

perceptions of problems in the learning environment. Naturally the student's demotivation from a lack of clear personal goals and a lack of ability to do self-regulated learning is already part of a "problematic learning environment" in the sense that the college could help students in some ways in those learner development areas of goal setting and autonomous learning, and such issues will be further examined for the discussion.

The previous two factors mentioned by the students as problems were internal, within themselves. The following focus is on problems they saw as external, in their environment. One problem the students often mentioned was the lack of opportunity to use English and feel their progress or even lack of progress. For example, Ms. Ishihara reflects:

Ms. Ishihara: I think people easily lose their interest in learning English, especially when they cannot see their own progress or do not have enough chance to show their ability to others.

Praise and positive feedback from the teachers barely sustained my motivation in high school, but now in college, that's not enough to keep my motivation to learn English high.

You need to use English and get some immediate feedback. That's what makes you feel that you need to practice more.

Similarly, Ms. Makita's quote here focuses on the lack of chances for speaking English in a Japanese college, in comparison with her own experience in an overseas program.

Ms. Makita: Am I just lazy? Speaking opportunities after coming back (from the overseas study program) ... are limited. Maybe something like that?

Over here, we just use Japanese. If I were overseas, I think I would study well. But here in Japan it is hard to keep up my motivation.

As with Ms. Ishihara, she feels that it is important to have ample opportunities to speak in English to keep up motivation.

In a similar, but slightly different point, Ms. Miyazaki felt that a main problem with her college English learning environment, in terms of motivation, was not being able to feel her own progress. She had this feeling in high school, but could not attain the same feeling through her college classes.

Ms. Miyazaki: *There was no visible standard in any of my English classes to show whether my English had improved or what areas needed improvement. Well, I never liked high-school English grammar classes, but we had quizzes & tests almost every week to check our progress and compare scores with others. If you've got high scores in exams, you feel better and somewhat confident about yourself, and that'll help you get motivated to study more.*

Should this be seen as a problem of college English classes, or just her inability to adapt to a different style of learning from her high school English classes? The factors of self-regulation/autonomous attitude and problems of the learning environment are indeed intertwined and difficult to separate in many instances. Ms. Hashimoto notes:

Ms. Hironaka: *What was scary was...my speaking class teacher would talk really fast...and everyone was scared of her...if we were late, she would be especially scary. She was very critical of my speaking, and had a frightful atmosphere, especially in the tests, and we could not look at our paper...even though I needed to look at the paper...but I passed the course somehow. It was traumatic.*

Since then, I feel that speaking in English is scary. The teacher and evaluation makes a big difference. I felt like "I am not good at this." I felt I

am not good at making speeches in Japanese anyway, and it is not part of my personality, and I kind of gave up.

And when I compare with other people, my pronunciation sounds bad, and there is really nothing I can do about it by myself...and I feel like I am not good at speaking and don't want to speak. I have anxiety about the weakness of my English and making communication mistakes due to English usage mistakes.

Discussion & Suggestions

As seen so far, the impact of student demotivation is rather grave, sometimes detrimental to fostering and also sustaining motivation for further learning opportunities. A loss of a clear personal goal, an inability to self-regulate, and perceived problems in the learning environment lead to self-resignation, anxiety, lack of self-confidence, or even avoidance of English. When such a negative cycle of lack of effort and lack of sense of achievement comes in, further demotivation naturally follows. What can be done about student demotivation? Any ways/suggestions to prevent students from becoming demotivated in the classroom? Or any ways to remotivate them?

Here are some of the suggestions and ideas that would help remotivate demotivated students.

- **Try different teacher behavior, teaching style/methods, class activities.** Previous research shows that teachers appear to be one of the primary demotivating factors (Christphel & Gorham, 1995; Zhang, 2007). Teachers can explore alternative teaching styles and methods by receiving feedback from students (Carreira, 2006). Hamada (2011) notes, "...teachers appear to be a crucial demotivator. On the other hand, teachers are preventers of demotivation" (p. 66). Teachers' teaching styles and activities are

demotivating for some learners, but the same ways of teaching are motivating for others (i.e., preventing other students' demotivation). Hamada concludes "...the instructor's originality and unique ideas or talks appear to be more effective than imagined" (p. 66).

- **Create an intrinsically motivating climate** (in response to the developmental decline in intrinsic motivation among upper graders). It can "promote autonomy and self-determination" and "promote children's sense of curiosity by placing learning in meaningful and exciting contexts" (Lepper and Henderlong, 2000, p. 289).
- **Foster positive learning attitudes** by letting students engaged in activities where they can feel a sense of success or confidence in learning to use a foreign language (i.e., to build a sense of self-efficacy in communicative language skills).
- **"People around the learner"**: To create an atmosphere in class where students can feel comfortable collaborating with their peers. As young students are generally more influenced by their friends or classmates, teachers need to provide positive learning experiences where they can share the pleasure of learning a foreign language with their classmates.
- **"Vitality of English"** (or awareness of the extent to which pupils consider English important in society). Ironically as the school grades advance, student motivation tends to decrease yet students' awareness of the importance of English in society seem to increase with their cognitive development. Thus it will be quite necessary for teachers to have students understand the meaning of learning English in a global society.

- **Listen and find out reasons for lack of motivation.** Teachers can provide class discussion on English Learning (e.g., small scale questionnaire survey, discuss why you need/want to learn English. What motivates/demotivates you as a language learner? How can we keep ourselves motivated?).
- **Use more interesting, age-appropriate tasks (not more games/songs).** Teachers can take into more account of students' cognitive and affective development and promote further independence and autonomy (e.g., by providing self-access learning materials that students can choose on their own or giving some guidance or group/individual project on how students proceed in their language learning on their own).
- **Make real the fun and usefulness of EFL:** Bring the world in by online video exchanges, for example, by showing/inviting some real life models (e.g., successful EFL learners) to the classroom and have them talk about their experiences of learning English, so that students can envision their future selves as second language learners/users (i.e., help create their positive self-images in language learning).

In order to prevent prolonged effects of demotivation accompanied by the loss of one's self-confidence in language learning, Ushioda (2001) proposes that learners control their own affective states, which can be done in the following two ways: 1) to dissociate demotivating experiences by placing blame on external factors, which protects beliefs learners have of themselves; and 2) to believe in self-motivation through a process where learners affirm the ability to motivate themselves. Once demotivated learners can control their affective states, they can continue learning.

Ushioda (2001) found that learners who had been demotivated were able to continue their learning by bypassing the demotives and pursuing

motivational strategies which got their motivation “on line again.” Common strategies in her study were focusing on incentives/pressures, such as the reward of traveling abroad after exams, the dread of failure, or the thrill of good assessment, focusing on L2 study, such as setting goals and doing work regularly, or doing whatever you can; seeking temporary relief from L2 study, taking a break from study, or doing anything enjoyable in the L2 that does not relate to coursework such as watching L2 movies, listening to music, talking to an L2 speaker, or talking over motivational problems. The best method for these learners was to engage in the L2 in a way that was meaningful and relevant to them, free from the pressures and expectations in the institutional context.

One of the participants for this study noted an insightful observation about her own motivation and its maintenance.

Ms. Makita: Well I'm actually fairly content with my current English ability, though it does not mean that I'm fully competent as a language user. Maybe it's a kind of self-resignation, but not in a negative sense. So when asked if I'm highly motivated, I would say I'm not! But I think I want to keep such a low key attitude toward English learning. That's my little trick to sustain my own learning, I guess.

I used to torment myself with the feeling that I can't speak like a native English speaker. But let's face it. If you get stuck in the gap between your ideal and reality, you naturally suffer and eventually quit!

Similarly Ms. Miyazaki reflected on her attitude toward learning.

Ms. Miyazaki: Well...some students really hate it, like I hate math...not just lazy like me, but really dislike it...in that case maybe the only way is to quit and do something else. But they may find some aspect that is

fun...like they may not like to read in English, but may enjoy talking with non-Japanese persons in English.

As Ms. Miyazaki suggests here, one important solution is for students to learn to take a more active role in the decisions of learning. They need to know that learning is in their own hands, and that there are many different ways they can go about it.

Conclusion/Further research

This study revealed that the students experienced demotivation from a variety of factors, and the three most salient in the interviews were loss of goals, lack of self-regulation, and problems of finding opportunities for practice that would match their preference.

Despite the large number of studies on motivation, “research that focused on prevention of demotivation is quite limited” (Hamada, 2011, p.61). Thus further research on how we can apply the existing motivational studies to classroom teaching should be done from the perspective of encouraging “remotivation” (Carpenter et al., 2009). And the phenomenon itself also needs to be investigated from a variety of approaches/perspectives. Rather than relying too much on quantitative survey data, “[q]ualitative research, including interviews with students and teachers, assessments of actual performance, and classroom observations, may significantly provide further layers of analysis” (Carreira, 2006, p.153). Further research on demotivation in Japanese different educational and school settings (both public and private institutions) also needs to be conducted in a more longitudinal, ethnographic manner that follows the development of learners in depth.

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