



Learner Perceptions of Demotivators in the EFL Classroom: Experiences of Failure on Learning Outcomes

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Introduction

The Chinese use the word “fever” to describe whatever is popular. English fever in China is creating the world’s largest population of English-language users. Recently, it was reported that China has the world’s largest English-learning population in the world, amounting to approximately 400 million English learners, which is one-third of China’s population (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). Although the Chinese government has been pushing students to acquire English, standardized test scores have been frustratingly low. As reported by the Educational Testing Services (ETS) in 2010, Chinese examinees’ average performance on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) ranked 105th out of 163 countries.

Working Definition of Demotivation

The achievement of any task depends on the extent to which individuals strive to attain their purpose, in addition to their desire to do so. This psychological construct is generally referred to as motivation. Spearheaded by social psychologist Robert Gardner (Gardner, 1985), motivation research in English as a Second language (ESL) and EFL has gained wide popularity. Researchers and practitioners in EFL and ESL have long realized that motivation is a significant contributor to successful second language acquisition.

If motivation is the force that drives learners to achieve their goals, demotivation drives them in the

opposite direction. Demotivation, as the name implies, influences learners in a negative manner, degrades classroom dynamics and teachers' motivation, and eventually leads to negative learning outcomes (Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009). Demotivation and its relation to second language acquisition is an evolving concept in its early stages. While Dörnyei (2001) defined demotivation as specific external forces that reduced or diminished the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action, many other researchers (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Zhou & Wang, 2012) included in their studies of demotivation both external factors, such as teachers, and factors that are internal to the learner, such as a lack of self-confidence. In the present study, we adopted Kikuchi's (2015) definition of demotivation as "the specific internal and external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action" (p. 5); that is, both an individual's internal and external forces are referred to as *demotivators* or *demotives* in the present research.

Literature Review

Research on demotivators first started in the U.S. in instructional communication. Earlier studies (e.g., Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Gorham & Christophel, 1992) indicated that most demotivators in learning were teacher-related, meaning that students would mostly attribute the lack of motivation to teacher behaviors, attitudes, and their instructional practices. In the field of second language (L2) demotivator research, Chambers (1993) also found that students mainly blamed teachers' demotivating behaviors, such as not providing clear instructions and showing little concern for their students' lack of interest in the subject. To account for such patterns of attribution, Dörnyei (1998) suggested that only demotivated students can describe the actual reasons that resulted in their loss of motivation in second language learning; his findings also corroborate previous research showing that the major source of demotivation is the teacher.

Following these endeavors, research on L2 demotivators has been conducted worldwide, especially in East Asia. Most of these experiments targeted college students who were successful academically, but highly demotivated as English learners. Another feature of the studies is that more large-sampled, quantitative approaches were adopted. Furthermore, researchers started to explore gender differences in accounting for demotivating factors, though the results have been inconsistent (Jahedizadeh & Ghanizadeh, 2015; Rastegar, Akbarzadeh, & Heidari, 2012).

Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) investigated sources of demotivation among 676 Japanese high school learners of English. Contrary to what preceding research had suggested, they found that, compared to experiences of failure (e.g., via low test scores), neither teacher competence nor teaching styles was a substantial cause of demotivation. These findings were echoed by Zhou (2012), a study comparing the impact intensity of four demotivating factors (i.e., teacher, learning contexts, language, and culture background) between 41 Chinese undergraduate students and 36 Japanese counterparts. Given the uniqueness of East Asian EFL learners' attribution patterns, Li and Zhou (2013) conducted another comparative study between Chinese and Korean college EFL learners' demotivators; nevertheless, experiences of failure, rather than any external factors related to teachers, was identified as the primary source of demotivation.

Altogether, these Chinese/East Asian studies, when contrasted with the preceding studies regarding Western/European learners, revealed that the demotivation process may be a function of culture-specific features such as Confucianism (Li & Zhou, 2013). These findings offered insight into the primary demotivators in the Chinese EFL learner population. Specifically, Chinese EFL learners seem to be more easily demotivated internally (e.g., via experiences of failure or loss of interest) rather than externally (e.g., via teacher behaviors). Certainly, this major distinction in the demotivation process between Western and Asian EFL learners warranted further empirical examinations.

Research Questions

While identifying demotivators is significant, this cannot account for how different learners (e.g., high-performing vs. low-performing students, female vs. male) perceive and process demotivators when it seems reasonable to assume that demotivators vary in their respective degree of influence on individuals. Moreover, what happens during the learner's state of demotivation and how demotivation affects performance are important, since the ultimate goal of any instructional strategy or educational research is to raise student achievement—to boost individuals' knowledge and assist students with their preparedness for future endeavors.

The focus of the present study on demotivators in EFL addresses three issues:

- (1) Which demotivator(s) is (are) predictive of L2 performance?
- (2) Do students at different English proficiency levels react to demotivators differently?
- (3) Are there any gender differences in demotivator attributions?

Method

Participants and Procedure

One hundred and two (55 females, 47 males) college junior students from a university in southeast China were recruited. College junior students have completed two years of college English learning and generally have a better understanding of the college EFL classroom context. The questionnaire was administered to the participants during a 30-minute class break. Participation was completely voluntary and anonymous.

Measures

Kikuchi's (2015) Demotivation Questionnaire for College Students was utilized to measure learner perceptions of demotivation in the present research. The questionnaire consists of items measured on a Likert-type scale (1 = *Not true*; 2 = *Mostly not true*; 3 = *True to some extent*; 4 = *True*) to gauge four demotivators: *teacher behavior*, *class environment*, *experiences of failure*, and *loss of interest*. Each subscale score is calculated by averaging the item-level scores, thus ranging from 1 to 4, where a higher score indicates a higher level of demotivation. The Rasch Person Reliability (R_p), an internal consistency measure analogous to Cronbach's alpha (α), was reported to be .81 for teacher behavior, .72 for experiences of failure, .61 for class environment, and .59 for loss of interest (Kikuchi, 2011).

Students' EFL performance was measured using students' self-reported College English Test "Band 4" scores, better known as CET 4, which is a national English language proficiency test in Chinese higher education institutes.

Data Analysis

Table 1 presents the Demotivation Questionnaire items retained for data analysis by subscale. The internal consistency reliability of the 15 items was satisfactory, Cronbach's $\alpha = .83$.

TABLE 1
Items of Demotivation Questionnaire (Kikuchi, 2015) Retained for the Present Study

Subscale/Demotivator
<i>Teacher Behavior</i>
TB5. Teachers' explanations were not easy to understand.
TB17. Teachers made one-way explanations too often.
TB34. I could not get along with teachers.
<i>Class Environment</i>
CE23. The internet was not used.
CE28. Audio materials (such as CDs and tapes) were not used.
CE35. Visual materials (such as videos and DVDs) were not used.
<i>Experiences of Failure</i>
EF8. I did not understand grammar even though I studied.
EF13. I got low scores on tests (such as midterms and final examinations).
EF15. I have difficulty in memorizing words and phrases.
EF16. There was too much vocabulary that I did not understand in the readings.
EF39. I started not to understand class content.
<i>Loss of Interest</i>
LI2. I lost my goal to be a speaker of English.
LI3. I lost my purpose of studying English.
LI11. I do not have specific goals for studying English.
LI24. I lost my interest in English.

The data were then analyzed using SPSS v.24.0 as follows:

First, Pearson's correlations were computed to determine whether significant correlations exist between the four demotivators and the CET scores, followed by a multiple regression to examine which demotivator(s) in the scale is (are) predictive of EFL performance as assessed by CET4.

Second, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to examine demotivating factor attribution differences among high-performing (HP), average-performing (AP), and low-performing (LP) students. The CET scores were reported on a scale from 290 to 710 ($M = 500$, $SD = 70$) with a passing score of 425 and a score of 550 or above considered *proficient* (National College English Testing Committee, 2006), which led us to divide participants into three groups based on these CET score thresholds (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Academic Performance Level Parameters

Academic Performance Level	CET Score (Maximum: 710)	<i>n</i>
High Performance	≥ 550	23
Average Performance	425-499	51
Low Performance	< 425	28

Third, to determine whether there was a gender disparity in demotivation attribution, a series of independent-samples *t*-tests was performed as the first step using the Bonferroni corrected α . Since there was a huge achievement gap between males and females, and achievement was shown to significantly correlate with each of the demotivators, separate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were used to test the effect of gender on the demotivators, controlling for CET scores.

Results

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations between the EFL university students' demotivators. As shown in the table, among the four demotivators, experiences of failure showed the highest mean, followed by loss of interest.

TABLE 3
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations between Demotivators, CET Scores, and Gender (N = 102)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6
CET Score	474.53	87.05	--					
Teacher Behavior	1.92	0.61	-.27**	--				
Class Environment	1.96	0.81	-.21*	.39**	--			
Experiences of Failure	2.42	0.67	-.70**	.40**	.36**	--		
Loss of Interest	2.31	0.76	-.38**	.36**	.21*	.49**	--	
Male	--	--	-.53**	.32**	.32**	.37**	.21*	--

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

A multiple regression was conducted to address the first research question (RQ): Which demotivator(s) is (are) predictive of students' English performance? Results of the multiple regression are presented in Table 4. While experiences of failure were the only statistically significant predictor, $\beta = -.69$, $p < .001$, the model accounts for a substantial amount of the variability in CET scores as the outcome measure, adjusted $R^2 = 47\%$, $p < .001$.

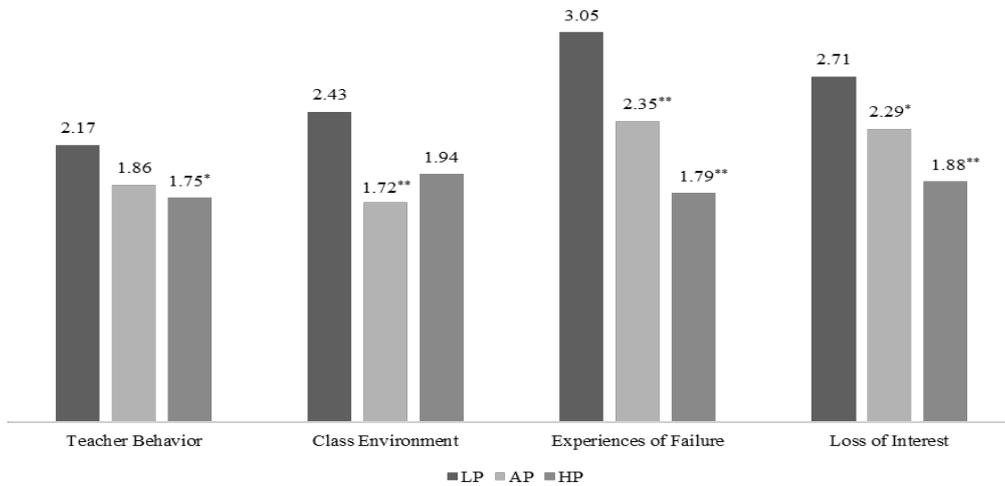
TABLE 4
Results of Regression Analysis of Demotivators for CET Scores

	<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	β
Constant	694.89*	27.60	
Teacher Behavior	1.50	11.99	.01
Class Environment	4.26	8.68	.04
Experiences of Failure	-89.92*	11.52	-.69*
Loss of Interest	-6.13	9.69	-.05

Note. $R^2 = .49$, Adjusted $R^2 = .47$, $F(4, 97) = 23.47$, $p < .001$.

* $p < .001$.

A MANOVA was conducted to respond to RQ2: Do students at different English proficiency levels react to demotivators differently? Pillai's trace, an inferential test statistic for MANOVAs, revealed that students of different performance levels are influenced differently by the four demotivating triggers in the EFL classroom, $V = 0.54$, $F(8, 194) = 9.04$, $p < .001$. Using the Bonferroni correction to control for familywise error rate ($\alpha = .05/4 = .0125$), separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables revealed a significant effect of achievement level on experiences of failure, $F(2, 99) = 40.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .45$, loss of interest, $F(2, 99) = 8.58$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .15$, and class environment $F(2, 99) = 7.84$, $p = .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$, but a non-significant effect on teacher behavior, $F(2, 99) = 3.57$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .07$. Figure 1 summarizes the post hoc tests (Bonferroni) results. While the low performance (LP) group scored the highest across all four demotivators, the attribution gaps appear to be more substantial in experiences of failure, followed by loss of interest.



Note. LP = Low Performance; AP = Average Performance; HP = High Performance.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$. Reference group = LP for multiple comparisons (Bonferroni).

Figure 1. Mean demotivator scores by achievement group.

ANCOVAs were run to address RQ3: Are there any gender differences in demotivation attribution? Although the independent-samples t -tests showed that male students were significantly more demotivated than their female counterparts with respect to all demotivators, except for loss of interest, the results of ANCOVAs allowed for in-depth examination of this gender gap (see Table 5). When controlling for the effect of the CET scores, the gender gap was closed in teacher behavior and experiences of failure, resulting in class environment being the only demotivator where a significant gender difference was observed, $F(1, 99) = 6.34$, (Bonferroni corrected) $p = .04$, $\eta_p^2 = .06$.

TABLE 5
Gender Differences in the Four Demotivators: Results of Independent-Samples t -Tests and ANCOVA

Dependent Variable	$M (SD)$		t^a	ANCOVA ^b	
	Female ($n = 55$)	Male ($n = 47$)		$F_{CET} (\eta_p^2)$	$F_{Gender} (\eta_p^2)$
Teacher Behavior	1.74 (0.53)	2.13 (0.64)	- 3.35**	1.60 (.02)	4.68 (.05)
Class Environment	1.73 (0.72)	2.24 (0.84)	- 3.34**	0.31 ($< .01$)	6.34* (.06)
Experiences of Failure	2.19 (0.50)	2.69 (0.74)	- 3.88**	67.80*** (.41)	< 0.01 ($< .01$)
Loss of Interest	2.17 (0.60)	2.48 (0.89)	-2.06	--	--
CET Score	517.33 (58.29)	424.45 (88.86)	6.13** *	--	--

^a df ranges from 78.32 to 100.

^bCovariate = CET Score; Independent Variable = Gender; $df_1 = 1$, $df_2 = 99$ for all F ratios.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$. (all p values are Bonferroni corrected).

Discussion

Based on the classical theoretical framework of demotivation, the four demotivators were divided into two types, namely, external factors and internal factors. In our study, learners' average ratings for these demotivators endorse such a division: internal factors (i.e., experiences of failure, loss of interest) received higher ratings than external ones (i.e., class environment, teacher behavior; see Table 3). The

four demotivators significantly correlate with each other at a moderate to high degree, except for the small-to-medium sized correlation between loss of interest and class environment, $r = .21, p = .04$. Many EFL teachers strive to stimulate and maintain learners' interest in the subject area, and our finding indicates that, to achieve this goal, classroom technology or multimedia use may not be effective as expected.

(RQ1) Which demotivator(s) is (are) predictive of performance? While all four predictors in this study were negatively correlated with the CET score, only experiences of failure was found to be significant in the multiple regression model. This indicates that the semi-partial correlation between the CET score and teacher behavior, class environment, or loss of interest becomes trivial, after controlling for the effect of experiences of failure. This finding corroborates Bandura's (1986) theory of *self-efficacy*. According to Bandura, a person's self-efficacy directly relates to effort expenditure on a given task. Students' successful experiences boost self-efficacy (this is the most robust source of self-efficacy), while failures erode it. Repeated failures in a so-called training task are assumed to decrease control expectations on future test tasks, which in turn produce motivation deficits that translate into weak performance.

(RQ2) Do students at different English proficiency levels react to demotivators differently? Falout et al. (2009) suggested that low-achievers are particularly at risk of becoming demotivated. This has guided us to make the low performance (LP) group the reference group in the post hoc tests following the significant MANOVA. As shown in Figure 1, the LP group suffers most across all four demotivators, but such gaps appear most substantial in experiences of failure, followed by loss of interest, and then teacher behavior. A different pattern of attribution gaps emerged in class environments, in that the average achievers (AP) appear to be the least demotivated group. No significant difference was found between high achievers (HP) and low achievers (LP). In the HP group's ratings across four demotivators, we even found that class environment was regarded as the most detrimental element. This finding confirmed antecedent studies conducted in Asia (Falout et al., 2009; Falout & Maruyama, 2004), indicating that more proficient students tend to attribute their demotivation externally (e.g., class environment).

Remarkably, high, average, and low achievers do not differ in their demotivation attributions of teacher behavior, suggesting a diminished role of teachers in accounting for EFL performance gaps. While this conclusion is contrary to most Western findings (Chambers, 1993; Dornyei, 1998; Gorham & Christophel, 1992), it confirms the prior studies conducted in East Asia (Falout et al., 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Li & Zhou, 2013). This diminishing role of teachers could be explained by Chinese traditional Confucian pedagogy, which emphasizes teachers' unchallengeable authority in the classroom. In East Asian societies with a Confucian heritage, the teacher-student relationship is hierarchical. Imbued with Confucianism, students are less inclined to blame the instructor for their demotivation.

(RQ3) Are there any gender differences in demotivator attributions? Significant gender differences first emerged as we examined the zero-order correlations between gender and the four demotivators (see Table 3). While male students were significantly more demotivated across all four aspects, their English performance ($M = 424.45, SD = 88.86$) was also shown to be lagging far behind that of their female counterparts ($M = 517.33, SD = 58.29$), Cohen's $d = 1.23$ (large effect size). Could this substantial performance gap be responsible for gender differences in demotivators? The ANCOVA results support our hypothesis: after controlling for performance (CET score), the gender gap in demotivation was mostly closed (see Table 5). While this large gender gap in achievement warrants attention and further investigation, our findings suggest that it is mostly achievement, but not other cognitive, affective, or sociocultural factors tied with gender, that accounts for female students' advantages. This again stresses the critical role of experiences of failure or self-efficacy. Although most of the scientific literature has shown that females display higher language arts self-efficacy (e.g., Wei, Liu, & Barnard-Brak, 2015) than males, teachers are responsible for equally protecting all students from being discouraged by repeated setbacks, as both male and female students feel equally demotivated regarding experiences of failure and loss of interest. On the other hand, the small-sized, marginally significant difference in class environment suggests that male students tend to make more use of classroom technology or multimedia use in classroom learning. This finding also echoes Kikuchi's (2011) finding that males had a significantly

higher path coefficient than females only in the class environment subscale.

Implications

Past investigations on EFL learner' demotivation conducted in the Western world found that regardless of years of school or proficiency, a majority of L2 learners reported teachers as the major demotivator, while recent surveys in East Asian countries demonstrated that internal factors like lower self-efficacy or experiences of failure were considered by Eastern students to be the prime demotivator. In educational systems where the study of English is mandatory, while high-achievers remain unaffected by failure, average and low achieving students struggle due to impaired self-efficacy for the duration of their academic lives. This is alarming when the official starting age of EFL learners is becoming younger worldwide. (Falout et al., 2009).

Within the context of demotivation research, many suggest that the primary goal of educators is to identify and remove the demotivators that inhibit learning and achievement. Built on Confucian philosophical perspectives, the East Asian educational systems are known for their overwhelming preference for high-stakes testing (Schenck, 2015) and the use of positive punishment, a disciplinary method that focuses on reducing an undesired behavior (e.g., making spelling or grammatical mistakes) by attaching a negative consequence to it (e.g., harsh criticism or grading). While such Confucian pedagogy has demonstrated effectiveness in subject areas such as mathematics, our findings arouse skepticism toward it in EFL practices, and suggest that EFL researchers and practitioners need to reflect on their pedagogy and assessment tools (Tavil & Sariçoban, 2017).

To uncover what demotivates college EFL learners is not the entire story of demotivation research, whose goal is to help learners regain their motivation. Teachers need to boost students' self-efficacy by helping them to succeed. Mastering new language skills builds a robust sense of efficacy. Failures undermine it, especially if failures occur before a firm belief in one's personal efficacy is established. The most effective way of developing self-efficacy beliefs is through authentic mastery experiences. People with high self-assurance take difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided. Such an outlook promotes intrinsic interest and deep involvement in activities (Bandura, 1994). Policymakers and administrators should work together to address this issue by reflecting on language education policy, evaluation, and classroom practice.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Several limitations emerged in the present study. First, the internal consistency reliability of certain subscales is relatively low in Kikuchi's (2015) Demotivation Questionnaire, which could have induced reduced predictive power in a multiple regression (Heo, Kim, & Faith, 2015). Future researchers need to use the Demotivation Questionnaire with caution and cross-validate it when necessary. Second, EFL learners' performance was indexed using a single measure (the CET score), which may not fully capture one's performance or English proficiency. Future studies may consider using multiple assessment tools (e.g., class attendance and participation and real-life applications) for this outcome measure. Third, the present study is correlational by nature, and we caution against drawing many causal inferences based on our findings. We performed multiple regression analysis to explore the role of each demotivator as a covariate in predicting performance, and then MANOVA to examine the demotivator attribution patterns of the high-, average-, and low-achieving groups. The primary goal of both analyses was to further understand the correlations between demotivators and performance. Arguably, between any demotivating factor and achievement there may exist a long-term, complex, and reciprocal relationship. We recommend that future researchers adopt a longitudinal approach to investigating the causality and plausible reciprocity.

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