



## **“It Means One More Piece of Homework!”: Learners’ Demotivation in EFL Extensive Reading**

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### **Introduction**

Motivation, a term derived from Latin *movere* denoting to move, is defined as “a driving force or forces responsible for the initiation, persistence, direction, and vigour of goal-directed behaviour” (Colman, 2015, n.p.). A wealth of literature has substantiated the significance of student motivation in education. For instance, motivated students tend to show higher achievements in assessments and greater persistence in their studies (e.g., Robbins et al., 2004). Despite the importance of motivation for learning, Lazowski and Hulleman (2016) found in their meta-analytic review that “we do not seem to be enhancing, or even maintaining, motivation to learn in school at a systematic level” (p. 605). Studies that Lazowski and Hulleman reviewed have painted a rather bleak picture – “decreases in student motivation span grade-levels (from elementary to high school) and types of motivation” (p. 604). To illustrate, in a large-scale survey investigating the high school dropout phenomenon in the United States (Bridgeland, DiLulio, & Morison, 2006), close to 70% of the dropouts expressed that they were not motivated to work hard at school. In light of the above, greater concerted effort from teachers and researchers in different disciplines globally should be made to explore ways that increase learners’ motivation in order to provide a more overall motivating schooling for our future pillars.

Akin to other disciplines, the literature in language education is replete with research into and discussion about learners’ motivation. However, much less attention has been given to factors that may demotivate learners, which have equally important implications for language teachers. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), failure in mastering a second language/foreign language (L2/FL) has long been a cause for concern and virtually everyone has experienced failure at some point in L2/FL learning. Such failure may often lead to demotivation, which, despite the prevalence of L2/FL learning globally, remains an under-researched area (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Based on a mixed-methods research study, this brief article reports on factors that potentially contribute to students’ demotivation in EFL extensive reading programs (ERPs). The discrepancies between teachers’ and learners’ views of the demotivating factors are also delineated.

## Literature Review

### Extensive Reading

Extensive reading (ER) is one of the four primary ways of reading, the others being skimming, scanning and intensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998). ER is sometimes referred to as “pleasure reading, sustained silent reading, free voluntary reading or book flood” (Yamashita, 2013, p. 248).

ERPs aim to immerse students in plenty of reading and also develop their liking for it (Day & Bamford, 1998). Day and Bamford (1998, pp. 7-8) suggested 10 characteristics of successful ERPs. Some examples are *learners reading as much as possible, their selecting what they want to read and a variety of materials on a wide range of topics available*. An important aspect of ER underlined by scholars is reading for pleasure and for its own reward (Day & Bamford, 1998). These programs can be conducted inside (e.g., given a specific period of time to read individually) or outside classrooms (e.g., borrowing books to read at home) (Day & Bamford, 1998).

The benefits learners gain from ER/ERPs have been well documented in the literature. Apart from the gains in language-related aspects such as writing and speaking skills, fluency in reading, and vocabulary (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009), learners also benefit psychologically, for example, by developing more positive attitudes and motivation for reading (Grabe, 2009) and a sense of joy and accomplishment (Takase, 2007), which are conducive to overall success in EFL learning. Despite the benefits of an increase in linguistic competence, the effect of ER/ERPs on learners’ general FL motivation is still unclear. In a recent analyses of 30 empirical studies of ER and learners’ motivation and/or attitudes, Briggs and Walter (2016, p. 3) concluded that “there is as yet insufficient direct empirical evidence to determine whether Extensive Reading makes a difference to general language learning motivation”. Considering the popularity of ER/ERPs and EFL education, more research into motivation and reading is required.

### (De)Motivation and Reading

The substantial number of studies and theories (e.g., attribution theory, self-determination theory, and self-efficacy theory) related to motivation in language learning over the past decades is indicative of the considerable attention and interest it has drawn. Demotivation, however, has received much less attention in research. Demotivation can be defined as “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 139). Therefore, while a motive increases the tendency to perform an action, a *demotive*, according to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), decreases it. These authors also emphasize that demotivation does not imply the annulment of all positive factors leading to a behaviour; instead, the overall force has been dampened by one or more demotives and some motives can still remain operational.

Judge (2011) conducted a multiple-case study of nine EFL learners who were enthusiastic English readers. The findings showed that these highly-motivated readers were keen on looking for reading materials which were interesting to them. Similarly, in Takase’s (2003) study with 325 students, reading materials were found to be an important factor influencing learners’ motivation to engage in ER. The author concluded that easier and more interesting reads are more motivating for the learners. In Takase (2007), 219 ESL participants participated in an ER programme. Takase found that learner autonomy in choosing reading materials has a positive correlation with their motivation to read. Wilson, Carroll and Werno (2014) investigated nine modern foreign language teachers’ views on ER. They stated that freedom of choice in material selection is likely to enhance learner motivation to read. It can therefore be summarized that reading materials (e.g., whether they are interesting; Judge, 2011; Takase, 2003) and learners’ choices in choosing the materials (e.g., Takase, 2007; Wilson, Carroll, & Werno, 2014) influence learners’ level of reading motivation.

The present study aimed at furthering our understanding of demotives in EFL learners' experiences in an extensive reading programme. Studies in this area are of significance because L2 reading motivation has a positive correlation with general L2/FL motivation (Briggs & Walter, 2016). By the same token, examining demotivating factors in reading should also cast light on what potentially adversely affects language learning in general. In addition, reading is one of the key avenues to acquiring knowledge. It is thus important to understand what factors discourage learners from reading.

## The Study

ER, ERPs or similar terms such as pleasure reading and book flood (Yamashita, 2013) are commonplace in the ESL/EFL context globally. This study took place in Hong Kong where L1 (Chinese)/FL (English) reading has long been given emphasis in education. It is important for teachers to design, monitor, and evaluate the effectiveness of ERPs in their schools so that resources are well-allocated and learners genuinely benefit from these programmes. The present study endeavoured to investigate the demotives influencing learners' ER. Two research questions were addressed:

- (1) What are the demotivating factors in ERPs from learners' and teachers' perspectives?
- (2) What are the differences between their views?

## Methods

### The Participants

116 first-year secondary-level (i.e., Grade seven; hereinafter referred to as 'secondary-one') students ( $M_{age} = 12.09$ ,  $SD = 0.28$ ; Males = 63; Females = 53) and four teacher participants at a co-educational secondary school were recruited to participate in this study. The four teachers were teachers of the four classes of 116 student participants at that time. Each class had approximately 60 books (selected by English teachers at that school) in total available for the students. In the ER lessons, learners were asked to read books quietly and individually in the classroom (i.e., there was no teaching). They were also assigned tasks to complete such as book reports.

### The Questionnaire (for the Student Participants Only)

The short questionnaire comprised a section on biographical information (e.g., age and gender) and eight demotives. As there had not been any relevant lists, we formulated eight items (see Figure 1) based on relevant studies in the literature (e.g., Kikuchi, 2009), and our experience as EFL practitioners. It is important to note that the eight items do not constitute a scale; they are merely different possible reasons for demotivation in ERPs. They were checked for their appropriateness by colleagues who have knowledge of and/or experience in ERPs. The eight items were all deemed potential demotives for secondary-one learners. The questionnaire was translated into the participants' L1 and a researcher was present to guide the participants to fill it in and to provide clarifications. The participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement from '5: strongly agree' to '1: strongly disagree' for each item.

1) Teachers (e.g. teaching methods)
2) Past experiences of ERP (e.g. in primary schools)
3) School facilities (e.g. classroom environment)
4) Negative attitudes towards English
5) EFL as a compulsory subject in school
6) Influence from peers (e.g. peers' opinions)
7) Books available to read for ERP
8) Tasks involved in ERP (e.g. book reports)

Figure 1. The eight items of demotives in the questionnaire for student participants (English version).

The collected questionnaires were checked for completeness and conscientiousness (e.g., not ticking the same level of agreement in all eight items). All 116 questionnaires were found to be valid. The data collected were then input into SPSS for various statistical analyses.

## The Interviews

In-depth semi-structured interviews with nine student participants and four English teachers were conducted after the quantitative analyses of the questionnaire data were completed. The student interviewees were selected based mostly on the stratified random sampling approach – The 116 student participants were first categorized into mutually-exclusive subgroups by gender (Males : Females = 63 : 53) and by class (four classes of very similar numbers of students each). We then selected student participants randomly from each subgroup to ensure a balance of heterogeneity and representativeness of the entire cohort. Due to timetabling constraints, resources, and availability of the students, three group interviews with three student interviewees each (nine in total; five males and four females from all four classes) were conducted.

Four individual interviews were conducted with the teacher participants. Based on purposeful sampling, we selected them as they were teachers of all the 116 student participants at that time. Therefore, both the student and teacher participants were able to express their views within the same ERP context, thereby allowing comparisons of their views on the same topic.

All the interviews, conducted in Cantonese (i.e., participants' L1) for their ease of expressing opinions and recounting experiences, revolved around the topic of demotivation in ERPs. Specifically, the interviewees were asked to (1) share their general views of ERPs, (2) choose top three demotivation factors among the eight in the questionnaires and (3) elaborate on their choices and suggest ways to increase reading motivation.

All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were read, revised and reviewed thoroughly and iteratively. After preliminary themes and codes were generated, an inter-coder with a background in education studies was recruited. An overall inter-coder reliability of 83% agreement was found. The discrepancies were discussed until complete agreement was reached.

## Results

### Questionnaire Findings

Table 1 shows the student participants' views of the demotives in ERPs. Overall, the participants have different views of the eight aspects as demotives (*M*s ranging from 1.42 to 4.63 out of 5). ERP books

( $M = 4.16$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ , Mode = 4) and ERP tasks ( $M = 4.63$ ,  $SD = 0.58$ , Mode = 5) stood out as clear demotives. The modes (i.e., 4 and 5) and the absence of significant differences between males and females (from t-test) as well as among the four classes (from ANOVA) show that the participants on the whole considered these two aspects as demotivating in ERPs.

Apart from 'negative attitudes toward English' ( $M = 3.41$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ , Mode = 3), with which the participants slightly agree being a demotive, the other five aspects were not considered demotivating ( $M_s < 2.5$ , Modes = 1 or 2).

As shown in Table 1, two aspects were found to be associated with significant gender differences. These are 'negative attitudes toward English' and 'English as a compulsory subject'. In both items, the males' view of these being demotives was stronger than the females'. However, as these are not regarded as significant differences after Bonferroni correction ( $.05/8 = 0.0063$ ), it can be concluded that no gender differences were found.

TABLE 1  
*The Student Participants' Views of the Demotives in ERPs*

	$M(SD)$	$M(SD)$ by Gender		$t(df)$	$p$	$d$
		Males (n = 63)	Females (n = 53)			
Teachers	1.63(0.73)	1.54(0.69)	1.74(0.76)	1.45(114)		
Past experiences	1.43(0.53)	1.44(0.53)	1.42(0.53)	0.30(114)		
School facilities	1.42(0.58)	1.38(0.58)	1.47(0.58)	0.84(114)		
Negative Attitudes	3.41(0.91)	3.57(0.98)	3.23(0.78)	2.12(113.62)	.04	0.28
Compulsory nature	1.64(0.75)	1.81(0.84)	1.43(0.57)	2.76(114)	.01	0.53
Peer influence	2.32(0.71)	2.24(0.78)	2.42(0.60)	1.35(114)		
ERP books	4.16(0.69)	4.19(0.67)	4.11(0.72)	0.60(114)		
ERP tasks	4.63(0.58)	4.70(0.56)	4.55(0.61)	1.40(114)		

Scores ranging from 1 to 5, a higher score indicating greater agreement that the item is a demotive. Only  $p < .05$  is shown.

## Interview Findings

### Top three demotives

The top three demotives chosen by the student and teacher interviewees are presented in Tables 2 and 3 respectively. ERP tasks and ERP books were the top two most selected demotivating aspects, echoing the findings from the questionnaire. All nine student interviewees chose ERP tasks as one of the top three demotives.

TABLE 2  
*The Nine Student Interviewees' Views of the Top Three Demotives*

	The most demotivating aspect	The second most demotivating aspect	The third most demotivating aspect	Total
ERP tasks	5	2	2	9
ERP books	3	2	2	7
Peer influence		2	3	5
Negative Attitudes	1	2		3
Teachers		1	1	2
Compulsory nature			1	1

There are discrepancies between students' and teachers' perceptions of what are most demotivating. All teachers thought that students' negative attitudes contribute to their demotivation most. Only two teachers thought that the aspect of ERP books is a top-three demotive and only one mentioned ERP tasks.

TABLE 3

*The Four Teacher Interviewees' Views of the Top Three Demotives*

	The most demotivating aspect	The second most demotivating aspect	The third most demotivating aspect	Total
Negative Attitudes	2	2		4
Compulsory nature			3	3
ERP books	2			2
Peer influence		1	1	2
ERP tasks		1		1

### ERP tasks: Boon or bane?

Whether it be intuition or valid reasons such as monitoring progress or evaluations, most teachers see the need to set some tasks alongside ER. Only one teacher thought that ERP tasks (i.e., book reports) are one of the top-three reasons for demotivation. She was aware that “students regard book reports as an extremely difficult piece of homework”. This indeed could be one reason, but rather than difficulty, the primary concern stated by the student interviewees was that it is “troublesome and it means one more piece of homework!” (Interviewee B). Apart from this, some students did not see the point in doing this. Interviewee I complained:

... If I do not submit my reading report, my name is on the record. If my report is judged to be of poor quality, I am blamed for sloppy work ... Also, there is a word count. I have to count every single word every time! (Interviewee I).

For Interviewee C, doing a book report equates to mundanely copying the book he read. Interviewee H also did not understand the rationale behind the book reports in which reflection is often required:

I like reading books, but I do not like writing. We are often asked to reflect but actually, we may not necessarily have something to reflect on after reading a book.

Interviewee H enjoyed reading for pleasure, a core spirit in ER, but book reports often make reading a less pleasurable experience.

### ERP books: Flood or drought?

Both the student and teacher interviewees gave the same reasons for why ERP books at their school were demotives. Rather than *book flood*, the interviewees thought there were not enough English books, especially interesting and easy-to-read ones. Given the limited “good” books, the students sometimes compete for the same ones (Interviewee G). The two teachers who mentioned books being a likely demotive also touched upon the lack of variety in the small stock of books. The student interviewees suggested that more books should be purchased, especially well-known novels (Interviewee A), books about heroism such as *The Avengers* (Interviewee D), and books with more pictures (Interviewees B and H). Some interviewees also mentioned that a number of the books were too difficult for them.

### Negative attitudes and English as a compulsory subject: Real or no real?

All teacher interviewees ranked learners' negative attitudes towards EFL as a top-two demotive. Three of them were also of the opinion that learners were not motivated to reading extensively as English is a compulsory subject, which students do not like. Examples of the teacher interviewees' perceptions are: “... our students just do not like English and they have bias against reading” (Interviewee T1), “the students do not realize the importance of learning English” (Interviewee T2), and “students do not know

how English can help them in life” (Interviewee T3). While these comments might be true, they were not the primary reasons why learners were demotivated to engage in ERPs. In fact, these two aspects the teachers suggested and their comments seem to suggest that students may be reluctant to do well in anything related to ELF, given their negative attitude. However, this was not the case. As shown above, the demotives in students’ views are highly specific to ERPs.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Negative attitudes towards English are a possible factor hindering learners’ engagement and enjoyment in ERPs; however, as evident in the questionnaire and interview findings, this was not as clear a demotive as choices of books available and tasks involved in ERPs. Rather than a presupposed book-flood program, one might be tempted to describe it as a *book-drought* one in this study due to its insufficiency in terms of the quantity and quality of books (e.g., genres that the learners are interested in; suitable levels of difficulty). This violates principles #2 “a variety of materials on a wide range of topics is available”, #3 “students select what they want to read”, and #6 “reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students” in extensive reading approaches suggested by Day and Bamford (1998). Rather than keeping around 60 books per classroom, the school could consider storing all the books in the library or a designated room so that all classes have access to a much larger number of books. This also ensures more effective use of resources. Although it is difficult to determine an optimum student-book ratio in ERPs, the provision of a larger number of books increases the choices learners have, and in turn the likelihood of their finding books that interest them.

In terms of quality of books, EFL teachers and librarians are advised to conduct a survey of what learners are genuinely (rather than thought to be) interested in so that they can make informed decisions when purchasing books. Interesting reads are a factor positively related to learners’ motivation to engage in ER (Judge, 2011; Takase, 2003). The staff members concerned can also consider purchasing access rights to publishers who offer a wide array of books to be read as e-books on tablets. This can potentially provide more choices and interesting books for students.

As regards tasks, teachers should not neglect the core purposes of ER. A primary purpose of ER is reading for enjoyment and therefore, setting post-tasks for learners should be avoided (Day & Bamford, 1998). As evident in the student interviews, book reports were a burden for them, resulting in their negative emotions. Even though some interviewees enjoyed ER/ERPs per se, they gave different reasons for abolishing book reports. In fact, it is commonplace for some learners to look for summaries and notes online in order to complete book report assignments, which deviates immensely from the spirit of cultivation of a reading habit for pleasure. It is understandable that most teachers may not want to eradicate tasks completely and allow students to just read in ERPs. However, there are a lot teachers can do to make these tasks engaging, meaningful and fun for the learners. For instance, they may provide them with an option of either a written or oral book report. Teachers may also ask learners who have read the same books to read the completed book reports on the same book and provide responses to each other (akin to interactive writing). Greater flexibility should also be considered such as not making book reports a frequent piece of homework, allowing more creativity such as allowing pictures in book reports and even teachers promoting books learners have read to the class by sharing some students’ book reports with the entire class.

Finally, the discrepancy between teachers’ and learners’ views found in this study is not surprising. Discrepancies as such are often reported in the literature (e.g., Wolf, 2013). After all, learners are the centre of education; rather than hypothesizing, inferring or assuming what demotivates them, a more pragmatic, effective and proactive approach is to investigate what they genuinely think. If this study had not been conducted, the teachers might well still be attributing students’ reluctance to engage in ERPs to their negative attitudes towards English, unaware of the real roots of the problems.

The study was carried out in a specific FL context; therefore, the findings and implications may not be directly relevant to all FL/L2 educators. However, the discussion and recommendations in this report should provide some food for thought to L1/L2/FL practitioners and curriculum developers globally when designing and implementing ERPs.

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