

Demotivation in English Language Courses: Exploration of Reasons and Suggestions

Nasreen Sultana*

Abstract: The study aims to find out the factors of demotivation, which hinder the learning of the students in English language courses in Bangladesh. Even after learning English as a compulsory subject for twelve years in schools, students enter into university with a poor knowledge of English. Eventually, most of the students are found to be demotivated in the fundamental English language courses at the tertiary level and usually teachers are blamed for the demotivation of the learners. However, teachers might not be the sole reason for making the students unwilling to learn. This study assumes that often students are demotivated to learn because of their own barriers, which is sometimes psychological. They do not learn because of their unwilling nature towards studies. For the purpose of the research, data were obtained through structured long interviews both with the students studying at the tertiary level and the English language teachers teaching them. Afterwards, findings and necessary solutions are offered.

Introduction

As English has become more and more important as an international language, in most countries around the world, large numbers of students are learning English as a compulsory subject in schools and universities. In Bangladesh too, irrespective of public or private universities, English language is taught as the fundamental prerequisite course for all students studying in different disciplines. Generally, two or three foundation courses on English language are offered to the newly enrolled students which aim to develop their English language skills, so that they can pursue their own disciplines which are taught in English.

Despite the fact that students must pass English language examinations to graduate, many students are unable to learn the language successfully due to their high level of demotivation. In this regard, Trang and Baldauf Jr. (2007) have found out in a study in Vietnam that in language classes, demotivation always has a negative impact, which prevents students from gaining a positive learning outcome. Instead of learning, students just want to somehow pass the compulsory English language courses.

Research problem

Even after learning the English language for twelve years as a compulsory subject, students enter into the tertiary level with insufficient knowledge of English. Despite the pressure to learn English in Bangladesh, many students seem never to develop any interest in learning this language. Usually language teachers find it challenging and, in some cases, impossible to motivate the demotivated students who do not have any interest in learning the English language.

Interestingly, whenever students are demotivated to learn, typically teachers and their teaching are blamed. There is extensive research on how, because of the teacher's

* Senior Lecturer, Department of English and Humanities, University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh

inability to motivate, students fail to learn the language successfully. However, this might not be the case always. Often, some students remain demotivated in the successful language teachers' classes also. So, if the teachers know the reasons for the demotivation, they can help in the learners' learning process.

In this study, it is assumed that teachers are not the only responsible factor behind the demotivation of some students. There might be many other psychological problems also, which demotivate students in the language classes. Hence, it is important to explore critically the underlying causes of demotivation to understand the phenomenon in depth. The current study researches the causes behind demotivation to know why students dislike the English language courses so much, so that effective solutions can be offered.

Demotivation in language classes

According to Yan (2009), demotivation is the negative counterpart of motivation. Typically, motivation is known as the driving force to do something or to achieve something. On the other hand, demotivation prevents students from gaining the desired learning outcome (Trang and Baldauf, 2007). Dornyei (2005) defines demotivation as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behaviour intention or an ongoing action" (p. 143). By external factors, he means aspects such as learning environment and teacher. So, a demotivated learner is someone who was once motivated, but lost his/her motivation due to some external reasons. Later Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) have suggested that Dornyei should have added the internal factors (such as self-confidence and negative attitude towards English) also in defining demotivation. Moreover, there are some students who are demotivated from the beginning of the course. So, it should not be thought that there was a time when they were motivated.

Students' dislike of language courses has always been linked to the failure of the teachers. In this regard, Gorhem and Christophel (1992) list some problems, such as the teacher being boring, unorganized, unprepared, and unapproachable for which language learners become reluctant in their studies. However, later he concludes that the dislike of the subject area is one of the major reasons behind the demotivation of the students. Later in 1998, Oxford's investigation has also discovered four areas in which students in the English language courses feel demotivated. These areas are the teacher's personal relationship with the students, the teacher's attitude towards the course, style conflicts between teachers and students, and classroom activities.

Nevertheless, demotivation may originate from other sources as well, as Chamber (1993) points out, like the home environment, previous learning experience, and students' low self-esteem. The respondents (teachers) in his research consider that demotivated students are unwilling to learn and they lack confidence in their own capabilities. Of course, teachers' views would be different from those of the students and hence, Chamber suggests for conducting an in-depth study with the students to understand the reasons behind demotivation.

Apart from these, language learners can be demotivated due to personality factors, teaching content, and teaching aids or materials as well. Both Chamber's (1993) and later Ikeno's (2002) studies state that sometimes a student's personal characteristics are responsible for making them demotivated in English language classes. Learners may have too low self-esteem and less confidence to be successful in the learning. Further, factors such as uninteresting content, slow pace of the lessons, inappropriate level, and

load of the course are also reasons behind the demotivation in language classes (Gorham & Christophel, 1992; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Therefore, teaching materials play a major role in motivating the students. Interestingly, students, who are unwilling in the language classes, usually have some basic characteristics. In defining demotivated students, Chamber (as cited in Hasegawa, 2004) offers some characteristics of the demotivated learners. A demotivated learner

- Lacks a belief in his/her own capabilities, demonstrates lethargy, ‘what’s the use?’ syndrome and gives negative or no response even to praise
- Makes no effort to learn, shows no interest, and demonstrates poor concentration
- Is unwilling to cooperate, distracts other students
- Produces little or no homework, does not bring materials to the class, or loses them

Based on the given literature review, it can be said that in researching the reasons for demotivation, scholars have pointed out problems related to teachers, teaching, course contents or teaching materials. Very little research has been addressed towards the students themselves. So, students should be the starting and central point while finding out why they are demotivated in English language classes and how they can be motivated.

Methodology

Participants in the study consist of thirty-five undergraduate first year students studying at different universities of Bangladesh. These students belong to various disciplines including English, Computer Science, Electrical Engineering, Media Studies, Economics, Environmental Studies, and so on and have taken English as the prerequisite course to fulfill the requirement for graduation. Participants have been selected as demotivated by their English course teachers for the purpose of data collection.

A qualitative analysis was done by conducting structured long interviews (Appendix A) in 10 to 30 minutes with the selected 35 students. The interview setting was a both formal and informal. Additionally, 10 English language teachers teaching at tertiary level were interviewed (Appendix B) to support the collected data from the students. The interview with the teachers was informal and they were simply requested to offer their thoughts behind the demotivation of the learners in their language classes. Interviews with both groups were recorded and the data was later transcribed and analyzed, and the findings were given.

Findings

The present section includes the findings from the two groups of participants: students and English language teachers.

The interview with the students revealed the following:

◆ *Inattentive to studies*

It was found out that most of the demotivated learners in English language courses do not have any motivation for other subjects either. In general, they do not have the

intrinsic drive to study. Not surprisingly, due to their reluctant nature towards study, they do not have any particular aim in life either. So, these demotivated learners not only have distaste for language classes, they also dislike studies in general. Most unexpectedly, most of the learners are aware of their demotivated nature.

◆ *Dislike of the subject area (Fear factor)*

It was noted that demotivated students do not like English as a subject from their school days. Over the course of time, the dislike of English language has turned into a matter of fear for them. So they never enjoy the language classes and do not even try to learn anything from the course. For them, English language foundation courses at the tertiary level are an extra burden which they find unnecessary.

◆ *Not meeting expectations*

Interestingly, many students enter into the university with a sense of relief that they do not have to study language from now on. When they are asked to practice some language related activities, they feel greatly demotivated. Somehow, demotivated students develop a false notion about their own level of competency. Since many of them have passed the SSC and HSC examinations with relatively good grades, they believe that they do not need further language training.

◆ *Mismatch between their knowledge and results of previous public examinations*

Unfortunately, many students with poor English knowledge earned satisfactory grades in their previous public examinations. Thus, they have acquired a false notion too that they are good in the English language. However, at university, when they fail to meet the teachers' expectations, they become puzzled. Many of the demotivated students accuse their teachers of partiality when they receive poor grades.

◆ *Medium of instruction*

At the undergraduate level, teachers usually use English as the medium of instruction, which many of the learners cannot understand and cope with. They are simultaneously afraid of speaking in English inside the class, which is necessary since the class is being conducted in English.

◆ *Not relevant to the academic subject area*

Many students (except students majoring in English) complain that the materials they are taught in the English language classes are not relevant to their other academic disciplines. So, they do not have any interest in the classes. They find it difficult to understand how this English language training is going to help them in earning good grades in other subjects. Most of the learners criticize reading and writing materials which are based on English literature and are thus completely irrelevant to their academic life.

◆ *Low self-esteem and distrust of the teachers*

Almost all the participants were found to have less confidence about English classes than others. These students had very low self-esteem about their ability to do well in their studies. Unfortunately, demotivated students develop a kind of belief that their teachers are unable to make the lesson interesting.

From the above mentioned results, it is evident that though students have a tendency to blame the teachers, in most cases learners themselves are responsible for their own failure. They are demotivated essentially because they do not have any

personal drive for learning.

The findings from the interviews with the English language teachers are given below:

1. Students who are demotivated in English classes are generally inattentive to their studies. These students do not have goals for their studies and thus they find the classes worthless. From the first class, teachers can identify them as reluctant learners. Due to their fear of and low confidence in the English language, demotivated students never interact in the class and typically are irregular. Further, they never seek help from the teachers. Some students are unwilling to accept their poor English ability and thus stop learning.

2. Many of the learners come from rural areas where English is typically not the medium of their prior schooling. So, at the tertiary level, they feel uncomfortable in the English medium classes. When they find it difficult to follow the class, rather than trying harder, they choose not to learn.

Though teachers believe that learners are not demotivated because of their teaching, all of the respondents have agreed that whenever students are unwilling to learn, it becomes their responsibility to stimulate them. Sometimes they try to bring a change in their own teaching style, so that students do not get bored and add innovative activities to keep the reluctant learners active.

Overall the study finds that usually demotivated students are unwilling to learn from the class and the teacher. Generally, these students have low confidence and thus they do not believe in their own abilities to do well in the English language classes.

Probable suggestions

The study reveals that demotivated students suffer from their own psychological barriers, which are impossible to remove without external help. Some probable solutions are offered below to help the demotivated learners:

♦ *Involve the students*

According to the findings, since students are aware of their demotivated nature, they can be involved in finding the solutions too. The teacher might ask the learners to come up with different ideas to make the lessons more interesting and motivating for them. In this process, at least some students will feel more involved in the course of learning.

♦ *Awareness of the importance of English*

At the tertiary level, students are mature enough to understand the importance of learning English in today's world. So teachers can explain how English is going to help them to do well both in their academic and professional life. The research conducted by Trang and Baldauf Jr. (2007) has found that learners can only improve if they can realize the importance and significance of English language in their lives.

♦ *Offer ESP courses*

As the findings demonstrate, one size does not fit all. That is, one kind of material is not going to help everyone. Since learners' needs for English varies, the universities should offer English for Specific Purpose (ESP) courses. For example, the materials designed for engineering students will address only their needs and purposes. For them, materials prepared from literary work are not going to help them and eventually, they will not be motivated to learn something which is not required in their academic or real life. Therefore, to reduce the burden, universities should not form mixed batches; rather English language classes should be formed based on the students' academic disciplines.

- ◆ *Counseling and the multi-tasking role of the teachers*

Nowadays teachers have to play a multi-tasking role. In the present system of education, teachers take on various responsibilities as educator, as administrator, as counselor, as advisor, and sometimes as a personal mentor too. If learners are demotivated, then teachers have no option but to act as counselor or mentor to help the reluctant students.

In many of universities of Europe, America, Canada, and even in some reputable universities of Asia, there are counselors to help in developing the psyche of the problematic learners. Expert counselors can easily understand the shortcomings of the learners and can make suggestions accordingly. In Bangladesh too, the universities may hire trained counselors to counsel the demotivated students. In this way, students may discuss the problems with the counselors which they cannot discuss with the teachers.

- ◆ *Action research*

Teachers may conduct action research based on their own group of students to find out reasons behind low motivation or demotivation, so that they may come up with contextual possible solutions. This could be an avenue for self-development as well.

Conclusion

The study reveals that many students are not motivated in English language classes mostly due to their lack of intrinsic motivation. They are not learning simply because they do not want to learn. Eventually, a big responsibility lies on the shoulders of the teachers to investigate the reasons for demotivation and accordingly, to motivate the learners for better learning outcomes. Since teachers play a central role in the entire education system, he/she is the most direct contact for the students.

Limitations and further research

The present study has been conducted with a limited number of respondents. So, a further study can be conducted by collecting a larger volume of data from the students studying at various levels. Moreover, for a deeper understanding, a comparative study between motivated and demotivated learners can be undertaken so that more realistic solutions can be offered to motivate the demotivated students.

References

- Chambers, G. N. (1993). Taking the "de" out of de-motivation. *Language Learning Journal*, 7, 13-16.
- Dornyei, Z. (2005). *Teaching and Researching Motivation*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Falout, J., & Maruyama, M. (2004). A comparative study of proficiency and learner demotivation. *The Language Teacher* 28, 3-9.
- Gorham, J., & Christophel, D. M. (1992). Students' perception of teacher behaviors as motivating and demotivating factors in college classes. *Communication Quarterly*, 40, 239-252.
- Hasegawa, A. (2004). Student demotivation in the foreign language classroom. *Takushoku Language Studies*, 107, 119-136.
- Ikeno, O. (2002). Motivating and demotivating factors in foreign language learning: A preliminary investigation. *Ehime University Journal of English Education Research*, 2(1)-19.
- Oxford, R. L. (1998, March). The unraveling tapestry: Teacher and course characteristics associated with demotivation in language classroom. *Demotivation in foreign language learning*. Paper presented at the TESOL '98 Convention, Seattle, WA.
- Sakai and Kikuchi (2009). An analysis of demotivators in the EFL classroom. *System*, 37, 57-69.
- Trang and Baldauf Jr. (2007). Demotivation: Understanding Resistance to English Language Learning - The Case of Vietnamese Students. *The Journal of Asia TEFL*, 4(1), 79-105.
- Yan, H. (2009). Student and teacher demotivation in ESL. *Asian Social Science*, 5(1), 109-12.

Appendices

Appendix A (Questions to the students)

1. Why did you take this English course?
2. Do you think that universities should offer English as a prerequisite course? Are these an extra burden for you?
3. "I do not earn good grades because of the English medium education at my university".

Agree or disagree?

4. What are the problems of English classes?
5. Please offer some suggestions to solve these problems.

Appendix B

(Questions to the English teachers)

1. According to you, what are the reasons for students' demotivation?
2. As a teacher, what do you do to help the demotivated learners?