

Demotivation in Second Language Acquisition

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SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: 90

Demotivation in Second Language Acquisition

Insights from Japan

Keita Kikuchi

MULTILINGUAL MATTERS

Bristol • Buffalo • Toronto

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Kikuchi, Keita.

Demotivation in Second Language Acquisition: Insights from Japan/Keita Kikuchi.

Second Language Acquisition: 90

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Language and languages--Motivation--Japan. 2. Second language acquisition--Motivation--Japan. 3. Language and languages--Study and teaching--Japan. 4. Motivation in education--Japan. 5. Language and languages--Study and teaching--Japanese students. 6. Language and languages--Study and teaching--Japanese speakers. I. Title.

P53.48.K55 2015

401'.93--dc23 2015009683

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue entry for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN-13: 978-1-78309-394-6 (hbk)

Multilingual Matters

UK: St Nicholas House, 31-34 High Street, Bristol BS1 2AW, UK.

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Website: www.multilingual-matters.com

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Blog: www.channelviewpublications.wordpress.com

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Typeset by Deanta Global Publishing Services Limited.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by the CPI Books Group.

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Acknowledgements

My sincerest gratitude goes firstly to all the students and teachers who participated in the study. Without their kind cooperation, this study would not have been accomplished.

This book is an extension of my dissertation, which I completed in 2011. I thank my dissertation committee members, David Beglar, Steven Ross, Mark Sawyer, Edward Schaefer and William Snyder. First and foremost, I thank David Beglar, as the major supervisor, for his instruction on his research methods and statistics. Even after I had finished the dissertation, he took his time answering my questions while I was preparing this book manuscript. Dr Ross opened my eyes to an important analytic technique, structural equation modeling. Dr Sawyer helped familiarize me with the field of second language (L2) motivation research. I appreciate his constructively critical comments on my drafts as well as references to inspiring studies in other fields. I thank Drs Schaefer and Snyder for joining my committee and making insightful suggestions for improving various parts of the dissertation.

The following people commented on some aspects of the book: Matthew Apple, Eton Churchill, Jeffery Durand, Nicholas Jungheim, J. Lake, Charles Robertson, Hideki Sakai, Akiko Takagi and Ema Ushioda. I especially thank Jeffery Durand for reading the entire book manuscript over and over and for giving me precious comments. I also thank Ema Ushioda for her insightful comments on various chapters and her advice and warm encouragement from the preparation stage to the end of the book project. Finally, I would also like to thank my past assistants, Amika Hattori, Miki Sakuma and Hirona Takahashi, who helped transcribe and translate the interviews. I am grateful that I have had opportunities to have these and many other people, whom I cannot list here, in my life so that I can keep motivating myself to continuously work hard!

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Tokyo, Japan*

Note

This work was supported by JSPS Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (Grant Nos. 21720203 and 24720269).

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

1 Understanding Demotivation

Definition of Demotivation

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

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

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

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

Working definition of motivation

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

Table 1.1 Definition of motivation in online dictionaries

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

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

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

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

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

Researchers’ views of ‘demotivation’

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

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

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

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

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

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