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Demotivating Factors among Undergraduate Distance English Learners: A Chinese Case Study

Factores desmotivadores entre estudiantes de inglés en modalidad remota de pregrado: Un estudio de caso en China

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Abstract

This study explores demotivating factors for undergraduate English majors in a Chinese university in the context of distance courses during the COVID-19 lockdown. Delving into students' reflection in this unusual period through in-depth interviews, a qualitative analysis of what demotivates students is provided, as well as a comparison of the findings with those obtained in earlier studies conducted in traditional classrooms. In all, ten students participated in the study and provided their insights. The interviews were transcribed and coded following established qualitative research methods. It is shown that in the context of distance education, the lack of learning strategies demotivated students the most, followed by teacher-related factors, learning environment, technical problems, and peer influences. The lack of self-regulation was pinpointed as the largest demotivator, trailed by teacher-student interactions in class, inappropriate institutional management, long screen time, and negative peer influences. Supporting previous results, this study found that self-related and teacher-related factors impacted demotivation, but in this research they had different weightings, such as the lack of self-regulation which was more powerful than previously documented. Technical problems, such as the long screen time, were related to inappropriate institutional arrangements, and this also diverged from previous findings. These findings may prove a springboard to future discussion on blends of traditional and non-traditional language education, with possible effects on student demotivation at the forefront.

Key Words: Demotivation, English learning, second language education, distance education, COVID-19.

Resumen

Este estudio explora los factores desmotivadores para los estudiantes universitarios de inglés en una universidad china en el contexto de los cursos remotos durante el confinamiento producido por el COVID-19. Se profundiza en la reflexión de los estudiantes en este período inusual a través de entrevistas en profundidad, se brinda un análisis cualitativo de lo que desmotiva a los estudiantes, así como una comparación de los hallazgos con los obtenidos en estudios anteriores realizados en aulas tradicionales. En total, diez estudiantes participaron en el estudio y proporcionaron sus perspectivas. Las entrevistas fueron transcritas y codificadas de acuerdo con los métodos de investigación cualitativos establecidos. Se muestra que, en el contexto de la educación remota, la falta de estrategias de aprendizaje desmotivó más a los estudiantes, seguido por los factores relacionados con el docente, el ambiente de aprendizaje, los problemas técnicos y las influencias de los compañeros. Se señaló la falta de autorregulación como el mayor factor desmotivador, seguida por las interacciones entre el profesor y el alumno en clase, la gestión institucional inapropiada, el uso prolongado de pantalla y las influencias negativas de los compañeros. Respaldando los resultados anteriores, este estudio descubrió que los factores autorrelacionados y relacionados con el docente impactaban la desmotivación, pero en esta investigación se obtuvieron diferentes ponderaciones, de modo que la falta de autorregulación tenía un mayor impacto de lo documentado anteriormente. Los problemas técnicos, como el uso prolongado de pantalla, estaban relacionados con una gestión institucional inapropiada, y esto también difería de los hallazgos anteriores. Estos hallazgos pueden generar futuras discusiones acerca de las combinaciones de la enseñanza de idiomas tradicional y no tradicional, con un foco en los posibles efectos sobre la desmotivación de los estudiantes.

Palabras Clave: Desmotivación, aprendizaje en inglés, educación de un segundo idioma, educación remota, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Influences on language learners' learning behaviour constantly ebb and flow (Gearing & Roger, 2018), whether in traditional classrooms or in distance education (Bye, Pushkar & Conway, 2007). The current worldwide COVID-19 pandemic has shifted to online education. In this 'biggest distance-learning experiment in history'[1], what is the state of student motivation? This study identifies factors that impede students' learning in a population of English majors in China to be able to address them properly in a future similar scenario.

Motivation has been widely studied in language learning as an affect factor (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Pan & Yan, 2012; Lee, Yu & Liu, 2017), but its "dark side" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011: 138) has not been extensively documented. Demotivation, which has been defined by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011: 139) as the "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action", is generally believed to hinder learners' progress by offsetting the positive influence of motivation (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). A clearer understanding of demotivation can help teachers and students avoid demotivating factors, and enable them to achieve optimal outcomes. Although Dörnyei and Ushioda's definition of

demotivation is seminal, later research (e.g., Al-Khasawneh, 2017; Çankaya, 2018; Haryanto, Makmur, Ismiyati & Aisyah, 2018; Wu, Yang, Hsieh & Yamamoto, 2019) has explicitly incorporated discussion of demotivating factors as rooted in both external and internal forces. This study adopts this orientation as well, exploring the external and internal forces that reduce or diminish learner's motivation in relation to English learning.

Previous research has mainly centred on learners in traditional language classrooms, including high school students and English and non-English majors at universities (e.g., Hassaskhah, Zafarghandi & Fazeli, 2014; Kikuchi, 2015; Li & Zhou, 2017; Ghonsooly, Hassanzadeh, Samavarchi & Hamedi, 2017; Li & Qian, 2018; Vakilifard, Ebadi, Zamani & Sadeghi, 2020). Among external factors, teacher and teaching-related elements are found to demotivate learners the most, including teachers' lack of competence, inappropriate pedagogy, etc. (e.g., Yekta, 2017; Ali & Pathan, 2017; Li & Zhou, 2017; Li & Qian, 2018). Major internal demotivators include experience with failure (e.g., Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Pretty, 2019; Vakilifard et al., 2020; Zhang, Dai & Ardasheva, 2020), lack of intrinsic motivation, and attitudes towards foreign language learning (Cai & Hou, 2013; Adara, 2018; Vakilifard et al., 2020).

Most of the above-mentioned studies adopt a questionnaire-based quantitative method, with some incorporating qualitative interviews as well. This leads to conclusions based on one-off data collection (e.g., subjects filling in questionnaires in a single sitting) that ignores the temporal nature of demotivation (Thorner & Kikuchi, 2019). Additionally, such questionnaires tend to feature closed-ended questions, which makes it more difficult to elicit unlisted factors or to recognize learners as 'persons-in-context' (Ushioda, 2009) instead of members of a generalised group.

The study of demotivation in non-traditional classrooms is generally carried out in distance education contexts. However, this term is not yet appropriately defined (White, 2003). Moore and Kearsley (1996: 2) roughly defined it as:

> "teaching and planned learning in which teaching normally occurs in a different place from learning, requiring communication through technologies as well as special institutional organization".

Researchers investigate what motivates distance learners to continue learning a language and what demotivates them. Because distance courses are mostly designed for working adults, the demotivating factors found in this context are unique when compared to those in traditional classrooms. For example, teacher and teaching-related problems and technical problems are frequently cited as major external demotivators (e.g., Ayan, 2015; Su, 2015; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019; Aikina & Bolsunovskaya, 2020) while the lack of intrinsic motivation, lack of learning strategies,

and low foreign language learning ability are powerful internal factors (e.g., Su, 2015; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019; Wu et al., 2019). Unlike dominant methodologies in traditional classroom research, studies of distance education employ mostly qualitative methods, including think-aloud protocols (Xiao & Hurd, 2010) and in-depth interviews (Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019), which are considered to constitute an optimal approach (Hassaskhah et al., 2014).

The research of demotivation in traditional and non-traditional classrooms has been divided and isolated because course designs, learner characteristics, and pedagogies differ. With the advent of new technology, online and offline classrooms have begun to interpenetrate, facilitating relevant but fledgling discussion (e.g., Wu et al., 2019). The current COVID-19 pandemic has forced most school courses to move online, transferring education to distance mode overnight. However, these courses are importantly different from either the usual distance courses or traditional courses because they blend the two modes in a makeshift manner that is new to everyone. The scant research in demotivation that is relevant to this context is quite unlikely to ground the development of effective teaching and learning. Accordingly, this study narrows the gap by providing a Chinese perspective.

Specifically, this study explores two questions. On one hand, what are demotivating factors in distance language education during this pandemic? On the other hand, what are the similarities and differences in demotivating factors between traditional and distance education in the current context?

The study adopts a qualitative method, incorporating open-ended questionnaires and in-depth interviews with students who have been engaged in distance language education since the outbreak of the pandemic. This method was chosen because of the limitations of quantitative methods and the potential to tap students' observations and reflections beyond what is already established in the literature. It is likely that the demotivating factors that appear in traditional classrooms, especially the external ones, would be replicated in distance education, with certain variations due to the novelty of this form of teaching and in a way that is subject to students' responses.

The respondents' answers to these questions are expected to enlighten teachers, students, and administrators as they experiment with distance education and may continue to do so for as long as the pandemic persists.

In brief, the study identifies demotivating factors in distance education as implemented in response to COVID-19 and compares these with the demotivating factors found in traditional language classrooms. After reviewing the literature centring on demotivation in second language learning, the paper delineates the research methods, followed by a presentation of qualitative results. The major findings and limitations are also discussed.

1. Theoretical framework

1.1. Demotivation in second language (L2) learning

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) have made a systematic review and in-depth discussion on the study of (de)motivation in L2 learning. They point out that L2 demotivation research takes inspiration from research on first-language instructional communication, centring on the classroom and the teacher (ibid: 141-142), whereas L2 researchers are more inclined to emphasize the student voices and the broader sociocultural context (ibid: 147-153). Following this line of thought, later research can be roughly categorised into two major strands: the first includes investigations into demotivators across various grade levels, L2s, countries, and regions (e.g., Kaivanpanah & Ghasemi, 2011; Li & Zhou, 2017; Li & Qian, 2018; Haryanto et al., 2018), and in the second, the discussion involves correlations between demotivation and other aspects, including learning achievements (Zhang et al., 2020), language proficiency (Hu, 2011), and innovative teaching methods (Wu et al., 2019).

Unlike motivation research, which shows many and diverse model constructions (e.g., Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Li & Peik, 2020), there are few models or principles that can be used to guide demotivation research. More often, demotivation is discussed under the broader rubric of motivation, considered as a mere unintended outcome (Lamb, 2017). Besides, demotivation is sometimes misunderstood as amotivation, which is actually different in concept. Amotivation refers to the complete lack of motivation while demotivation describes learners who were once motivated but have lost their motivation and can be re-motivated (Thorner & Kikuchi, 2019). Some researchers caution, therefore, that demotivation is as complex as motivation, in that learners show individual differences in response to a single classroom, and the same learner can react to the same stimulus differently due to differences in goals, moods, and interactions with peers and teachers (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Lamb, 2017). All in all, demotivation should be examined in specific contexts and without overgeneralization.

1.2. Demotivating factors in traditional and non-traditional classrooms

Since Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) first developed a quantitative questionnaire to explore demotivating factors in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, following studies (e.g., Ghadirzadeh, Hashtroudi & Shokri, 2012; Al-Khasawneh, 2017; Ali & Pathan, 2017; Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Vakilifard et al., 2020) have repeatedly adopted their questionnaire and categorized demotivators around the five aspects that they proposed, namely, learning contents and materials, teachers' competence and teaching styles, inadequate school facilities, lack of intrinsic motivation, and test scores (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). However, this research

instrument and categorization should be applied with caution for two reasons. Firstly, the original study targeted Japanese high school students while more recent studies explored demotivation among university students (e.g., Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Vakilifard et al., 2020). Secondly, more than a decade has passed since Sakai and Kikuchi' s research, with the context, students, pedagogy, etc. all updated to a great extent. Naturally, new reality calls for a new methodology and conceptualization because new demotivators might emerge among different student groups in different settings.

Table 1. Main demotivating factors in the literature.

Demotivating factors	Traditional classrooms	Online classrooms
Internal	**Experience with failure** -Difficulty with learning -Lack of progress -Low marks in exams **Lack of intrinsic motivation** -Lack of interest -English is a compulsory course -Loss of purpose to study English **Attitude towards foreign language learning** -Negative attitude towards the country, people, and culture of the target language	**Lack of intrinsic motivation** -Lack of interest **Low language learning ability** -Poor English listening skills -Inability to memorize words **Lack of learning strategies** -Inability of self-regulated learning -Bad time-management
External	**Teacher and teaching problems** -Learning contents, materials, syllabus -Pedagogy -Teacher personality -Teacher competence **Learning environment** -Crowded classroom -School and institute management -Inadequate facilities **Peer influences** -Competition -Negative influences -Interpersonal relations	**Teacher and teaching problems** -Learning contents and materials -Pedagogy -Teacher competence -Teacher-student relationship **Technical problems** -The e-platform -Bad Internet access -Incorrect automatic evaluation

Despite various categorizations and wording of specific variables, demotivators can be safely divided into internal and external ones (Çankaya, 2018). Following this line of thought, a closer inspection of relevant literature yields some inspirational findings (see Table 1). To begin with, the focus on demotivation studies in traditional foreign language classrooms has begun to demonstrate the trend of shifting from developed regions to developing ones, including Asian and African countries, with EFL being the dominant context (e.g., Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Khouya, 2018; Haryanto et al., 2018; Vakilifard et al., 2020).

Generally, demotivation is more often attributed to external factors than internal ones (e.g., Al-Khairy, 2013; Hassaskhah et al., 2014; Li & Zhou, 2017; Li & Qian,

2018). For internal factors, experience with failure is cited frequently as a powerful, if not the strongest, demotivator (e.g., Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Pretty, 2019; Vakilifard et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). If students experience difficulties in learning, for example, little progress or unsatisfactory exam results, they easily become disillusioned. Furthermore, the lack of intrinsic motivation and negative attitudes towards foreign language learning are also important demotivators (Kaivanpanah & Ghasemi, 2011; Ghadirzadeh et al., 2012; Cai & Hou, 2013; Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Adara, 2018; Vakilifard et al., 2020). Once students lose interest in or the purpose of learning a foreign language or develop a negative attitude towards it and the foreign language community, they will no longer make efforts. This raises new issues for teachers to cultivate extralinguistic awareness among language learners.

For external factors, teacher and teaching-related demotivators are the most cited (e.g., Ghadirzadeh et al., 2012; Ali & Pathan, 2017; Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Adara, 2018; Fathi, Torabi & Arashpour, 2019; Vakilifard et al., 2020), which is in direct contrast to what Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) have concluded. Teachers' lack of competence, unfair treatment of students, monotonous teaching style, and personality all have much influence on student demotivation (e.g., Yekta, 2017; Ali & Pathan, 2017; Li & Zhou, 2017; Li & Qian, 2018). Meanwhile, students are equally affected by inappropriate teaching contents and materials over which they have little control (e.g., Ghadirzadeh et al., 2012; Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Fathi et al., 2019); consequently, the student's motivation is directly affected. Other strong demotivators include unsatisfactory learning environment and peer influences (Hassaskhah et al., 2014; Li & Zhou, 2017; Çankaya, 2018; Haryanto et al., 2018; Fathi et al., 2019; Evans & Tragant, 2020). Inadequate modern teaching facilities like multimedia equipment, crowded and noisy classrooms as well as unfriendly and uncooperative peers all cause demotivation.

In terms of online EFL learning, it is plagued by a dearth of demotivation studies. Nonetheless, existing research reveals a similar pattern to that in traditional classrooms; that is, external factors are perceived to lead to demotivation more than internal ones (e.g., Xiao, 2012a; Ayan, 2015; Aikina & Bolsunovskaya, 2020). On one hand, the lack of intrinsic motivation, particularly interest in language learning, and the lack of learning strategies together with low foreign language learning ability are major demotivating factors (e.g., Su, 2015; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019; Wu et al., 2019). Given the isolation that most distance learners experience, they are susceptible to deteriorating motivation if they are not able to self-regulate and self-adjust in the face of learning difficulty. On the other hand, this is further aggravated by more powerful external factors, including teacher and teaching-related problems and technical problems (Murphy, 2011; Xiao, 2012a; Ayan, 2015; Su, 2015; Yekta, 2017; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019; Aikina & Bolsunovskaya, 2020). Teaching styles, teacher personality and teacher-student relationship can all influence student demotivation, identical to that in traditional classrooms. However, what is unique in the online

environment is the technical glitches. From unfriendly user interfaces to bad internet connections, these will result in poor communication between teachers and students, and among peers. In the end, students are left on their own to swallow the disappointing learning experience.

When demotivating factors in traditional and online classrooms are compared, three patterns can be identified. Firstly, experience with failure exerts more influence on students in traditional classrooms. A plausible explanation might be that students have easier access to more tangible feedback in traditional classrooms, whether from immediate teacher feedback or summative assessment results whereas online courses are generally optional, requiring only voluntary participation (Aikina & Bolsunovskaya, 2020). It is likely that students might discontinue online learning as soon as they experience failure. Secondly, the lack of intrinsic motivation is a recurring demotivator in both types of classrooms. It can be inferred that no matter where teaching takes place, one key to sustaining student motivation is for teachers to design and organize teaching in a way to arouse interest among students (Hassaskhah et al., 2014; Wu et al., 2019). The students also bear certain responsibility to overcome boredom and apathy in order to fulfil the ultimate learning goals. The final pattern concerns the external factors. Teacher and teaching-related factors are one of the strongest demotivators in online and offline classrooms. Appropriate teaching methods and styles can transcend the virtual barrier of the internet and relate to each and every student. Therefore, the significance of teachers and teaching seems to be re-recognised after what Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) claimed otherwise before.

In summary, when students, contexts and social backgrounds are taken into account, demotivating factors vary from case to case. Thus, investigations into demotivation continue to emerge so as to answer to the constantly changing times. Nonetheless, some signature factors can still be pinpointed in a plenitude of demotivation research, for example, teacher and teaching factors, experience of failure, and learning environment. Besides, the mainstream methodology still centres around questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussion (e.g., Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Adara, 2018; Haryanto et al., 2018; Fathi et al., 2019; Vakilifard et al., 2020). Regarding the current online learning practice mandated by the ongoing pandemic, it is even more pertinent to explore what demotivates students in their virtual learning process.

2. Research questions and scope of the study

As can be seen from what is discussed above, demotivation research in the traditional and non-traditional classrooms is generally carried out separately (Xiao, 2014), a result somewhat out of step in today's world, where many traditional educational contexts have been so profoundly transformed by technology (Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019) along with other social changes, such as those entailed by the

COVID-19 pandemic. Resulting from the mandated social distancing and widespread lockdown occurring over much of the world, universities have had no choice but to move their classes online. Personal observation and anecdotal evidence indicate that teachers and students both have been thrown into distance education without sufficient preparation. For that reason, it is even more important to monitor learners' demotivation and seek to offset negative influences. In pursuit of this goal this study is guided by the following two questions.

Firstly, what are the demotivating factors for distance English learners at an ordinary university during the COVID-19 period?

Secondly, what are the similarities and differences in demotivating factors between traditional and distance education in the current context?

These questions require some clarification, and this study has some distinctive features. For one thing, it is conducted at a local university, giving it a unique context. However, this case may be able to serve as an epitome of the general situation in China, "the world's largest L2 learning community" (You & Dörnyei, 2014: 21), and to in turn lend some inspiration to developments in L2 education in other parts of the world. For another, although the distance education design discussed here has been put in place as a temporary exception due to the pandemic, the Minister of Education of China has asserted that "higher education will not and should not go back to the traditional mode in a post-pandemic era"[2], that points to a future in which higher education, including L2 education, will be transformed into a more technology-reliant model. At that point, what is investigated here can gain some relevance, hopefully contributing a small piece to the solution of the broader puzzle.

3. Methodological framework

3.1. Participants

A convenience sampling method was adopted, implemented in two phases. In the first phase, eighty-one second-year students in three English classes that the researcher taught online[3] and four first-year students under the supervision of the researcher[4] were asked to complete an open-ended questionnaire (discussed in section 3.2), to provide a general picture of their demotivation status. Among these students, forty-nine reported they had experienced demotivation during the distance education period and listed the reasons for this. In the second phase, a random selection of the students who reported demotivation were approached and invited to participate in in-depth interviews, and fourteen agreed: nine females and five males, all around twenty years old. Two females and one male were in non-English majors, and the remainder were studying in the same English department. Following the interview, data from one male student were excluded because he reported total amotivation in all subjects since

beginning university. The data for the three non-English majors were also deleted because their interviews were used as pilots. The final pool of interviewees enrolled in the formal study was seven females and three males. Four of the females were first-year students, and the rest were in their second year. By the time the research was completed, they had been studying at home for almost three months due to the pandemic lockdown. All participants gave their consent to the study and participated on a voluntary basis. No material or other compensation was given to them.

a. Materials

An open-ended questionnaire and an interview guideline were employed to elicit data. The details are given below.

Open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire, adapted from the one used by Su (2015), asked students two questions:

Firstly, during the distance education period, have you experienced demotivation?

Secondly, please describe in detail what demotivated you if your answer to the first question is 'Yes'.

The wording in the questionnaire deliberately eschewed giving an accepted definition of any term and was in Chinese, allowing participants to reflect on their experience and express themselves freely. Note that only those who answered 'Yes' to the first question could move on to answer the second. There was no length limit given.

The interview guideline was formulated using two sources. The first was a rough analysis of the questionnaire results. The fact that the questionnaire was distributed and collected through an e-learning platform[5] enabled the researcher to identify the most commonly used key words, which were used to isolate the dominant factors. The second was the interview protocol developed by Busse (2010). The maximum effort was expended to ensure a comprehensive and explicit layout. The final guideline included six questions that addressed potential demotivating factors related to the external environment, students themselves, teacher and teaching-related factors. Although the interviews were semi-structured, the order of the questions did not strictly follow the guide. The guideline, rather, took the role of a prompt.

b. Procedure

The data collection lasted for two months, from early April to early June (Figure 1), and it followed a procedure similar to the one Xiao (2012b) used.

All students, as reported, were invited to complete the questionnaire during their spare time and were given no specific deadline. Most students took more than a week

to complete it, and some opted out at this point. The default setting of the platform assigned respondents' real names to all questionnaires.

The interview guideline was drafted after the questionnaire was administered. For this, potential interviewees were contacted via Tencent QQ, an instant messaging software widely used in China. The aim, procedure and requirements of the research and the anticipated length of the interview were described to each student. Confidentiality and anonymity guarantees were given at this point. Three non-English major students agreed to participate in the pilot study to test the guideline and the web conferencing software Tencent Meeting and to provide feedback that was used to modify the guideline.

Lastly, the interviews were conducted individually with the ten participants. The students and the researcher logged on to the conferencing software at the agreed-upon time. After the students explicitly gave consent to being audio-recorded, the researcher turned on the audio recorder and began the interview, which started with an explanation of the term 'demotivation' derived from Cai and Hou's (2013) definition. After the student expressed full understanding, the interview moved on to the detailed questions.

Each interview lasted around thirty to forty minutes. Transcriptions of the interviews were sent to all interviewees for further comments and content check. All questionnaires, interviews, and transcriptions were in Chinese, and all participants were fully aware that participation was not compulsory.

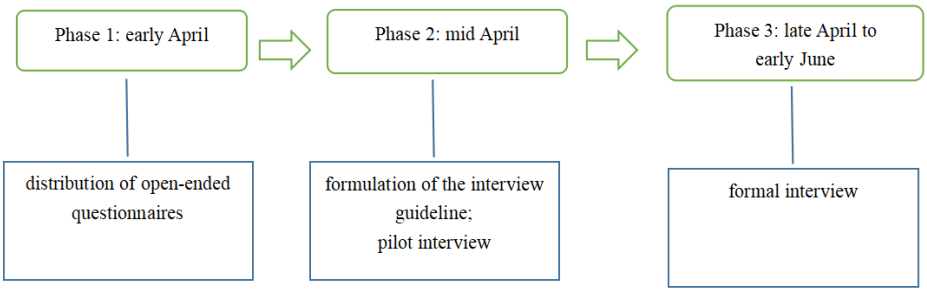

Figure 1. Phases of data collection.

4. Data analysis

Eighty-one students completed the open-ended questionnaire, of whom forty-nine (60.49%) reported they had experienced demotivation during the distance education period and provided reasons for it. All interview transcriptions were reorganized following the interview guideline to facilitate coding. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo 12 was employed.

4.1. The analytical framework

The analytical framework of the current study was based on Table 1, which derived from the discussion in section 1.2. The major demotivators listed in the table guided the whole coding process, with which the categories and concepts extracted from the interview were constantly compared in order to gain a clear understanding. It should be noted that all these demotivators served as categories, each comprised of more specific concepts. Given the fact that the wording of these concepts varied widely across different studies, maximum efforts have been made in the current study to align them with the proper categories. For example, 'experience with failure' may incorporate difficulties in learning and low marks in exams (Pretty, 2019; Zhang et al., 2020); for 'low language learning ability', it might refer to bad memory or English listening deficiency (Su, 2015); for 'lack of learning strategies', bad time management and difficulties with the course, and lack of self-regulated learning ability can be perceived as such (Murphy, 2011; Su, 2015; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019).

4.2. The coding process

The data was coded following the classical three steps of open, axial, and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In the first step, the interview transcripts were scrutinized, and the segments related to (de)motivation were identified. Since open coding is exploratory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), the concepts were marked as many as possible without strictly abiding by the analytical framework mentioned above. Only the distinction between external and internal demotivators were roughly maintained. In the second step, concepts from different interview transcripts were compared and examined more rigorously against the analytical framework. Those with similar conceptual proximity were clustered together, sometimes given a new label to form a higher-level category (Fathi et al., 2019). This step was repeated multiple times until the extant categories were exhausted and no more categories emerged. Finally, selective coding was conducted to establish the most salient categories, namely, major demotivating factors in this study, while the irrelevant lower-level concepts were dismissed. This final framework was applied for interpreting the data (Kim, 2017). The coding results and respective examples are presented below.

Table 2. Coding results.

Established categories	Number of participants mentioning the point	Number of codes	Examples
Lack of learning strategies	10	68	Without teacher regulation, learning falls solely on students themselves. But at times like this, students are very likely to lack self-regulation.
Teacher and teaching problems	10	35	The teacher-student interaction was too much. I think this might lead to fragmentation in class teaching, which is a huge distraction for students.
Learning environment	9	29	The period was extremely tough when we were required to make up for the missed lessons due to the delayed start of the semester. There was something wrong with the decision-making of the university, but it was we the students who bore the consequences.
Technical problems	8	35	It is better to communicate by talking. Typing is very time-consuming. Sometimes the teacher would move on to the next task in class before students could finish typing their answers onto the platform.
Peer influences	8	35	The (lack of) peer interaction would demotivate me. When I stared at the screen, it felt like I was taking the class all alone. There was no atmosphere of learning together.

4.3. Reliability issues

To ensure the reliability of the data analysis, the interview transcripts were triangulated against the answers of the questionnaire, which were coded in the same manner as described above. It was discovered that the major demotivating factors mentioned in the questionnaire and the interviews can roughly corroborate one another.

Moreover, the data were coded simultaneously by the researcher and an independent research assistant who has experience in qualitative data analysis and is familiar with (de)motivation in second language acquisition. After the first interview transcript was coded, the two coders met and discussed all the discrepancies until agreements were reached. The inter-rater reliability reached 0.71, which demonstrated relatively substantial agreement. The remaining transcripts were therefore coded this way.

5. Findings

Overall, the five most salient demotivating factors identified through the coding process (see Table 2) were: a) lack of learning strategies, b) teacher and teaching problems, c) the learning environment, d) technical problems, and e) peer influences. These factors are elaborated as follows.

5.1. Lack of learning strategies

All the students interviewed attributed their demotivation to the lack of learning strategies, particularly the lack of self-regulation skills. They reported procrastination, laziness, easy access to mobile phones and computers, and a comfortable environment at home as strong demotivating factors. Nevertheless, these boiled down to the fact that they were incapable of regulating their learning and avoiding distraction. Without the regulation from teachers or the peer pressure, the students were left on their own to monitor their learning process. However, as some students noted, since they were bad at self-regulation and could not receive timely feedback, they were often at a loss. They did not know what or how to learn in their spare time nor did they know who to turn to if problems arose. This sense of losing control over one's learning was only exacerbated by bad time management.

5.2. Teacher and teaching problems

In this category, it was the teacher-student interaction in class (or lack of, in some cases) that students considered to be the most common problem. A stark contrast in the amount of teacher-student interaction was observed. On one hand, some teachers interacted with students throughout the lectures, pressing students for correct answers even if the students were stammering or did not finish reading the questions. Based on the observation of some students, these extreme cases were possibly due to the teachers' fear that students would become absent-minded should the interaction stop. On the other hand, some teachers did not engage in interactions at all. According to some interviewees, if the teachers shared their own computer screens during the online class, they became so immersed in their lecturing that they forgot to check the messages left by students in the corresponding chat section. In this sense, proper interaction in class was recognized to have benefits, as it led to active engagement and focused attention. However, it takes certain teaching competence to strike a delicate balance regarding the frequency and quality of such interactions, as well as necessary know how skills to navigate the online classroom.

5.3. Learning environment

Surprisingly, institutional management emerged as a quite influential factor. Regulations, policies, and curricular arrangements all resulted in a loss of motivation, in spite of the understanding expressed by the students that the institution' s ultimate

purpose was to improve distance education and ensure smooth progress. The major reasons were two-folded. Firstly, the students were required to make up for the missed lessons due to the delayed start of the semester. They were plagued by a full schedule for almost half a month, as a result, they could not find time to digest what they were crammed during lectures. Secondly, the use of Xuexitong generated much unexpected and unnecessary workload. This was the e-platform mandated by the university to record students' learning activities and provide references for summative assessments. As for teachers, they had to assign all the homework on this platform, like watching course-related MOOC videos. As for the students, they were required to sign in before every class. Otherwise, they would be regarded as being absent, resulting in a loss of marks. Thus, the institution was accused of emphasizing pointless formality.

5.4. Technical problems

Demotivation deriving from technical problems were well expected. For one thing, the virtual environment would cause insurmountable barriers to interpersonal communication, especially if the online lectures suffered from bad internet access or device glitches. It was acknowledged by some students that when they were attending online lessons, they could not perceive the presence of teachers and peers, who constituted very important elements for education. For another, the long screen time led to sore eyes, which in turn contributed to decreasing interest, distraction, and deteriorating learning efficiency. This concurrent dilemma was the absence of hard copy textbooks in this particular case because most students did not bring their textbooks home when they left the university for the winter holiday.

5.5. Peer influences

In online classrooms, a lack of peer interaction and pronounced negative peer influences were assumed to demotivate the students a lot. Firstly, the online environment added to the inconvenience of peer interactions during lectures. Certainly, students were always able to communicate via all kinds of social networking apps at any time, but the meaningful and lecture-related interaction in class was reduced to limited forms of typing answers onto the e-platform and answering questions one by one. Many students noted that it was nearly impossible to have live discussions with peers during online lectures as they did in traditional classrooms, because such online discussions were time-consuming and often chaotic due to technical problems. Secondly, when the students were attending online lectures alone, they could not help but notice what other students were doing or not doing. For example, if no one volunteered to answer questions, other students were very likely to follow suit. Such a lack of engagement would lead to dullness and silence in lectures. Besides, due to the absence of proper monitoring, plagiarism, and cheating might emerge either in everyday assignment or in summative tests. This potential loophole in evaluation mechanism might generate negative responses from the students. In the

worst scenario, they could copy such bad examples and give up working hard altogether.

6. Discussion

The qualitative data indicated that factors related to students themselves, teachers, learning environment, technology, and peers were dominant demotivators. Among specific descriptors, the lack of self-regulation, teacher-student interaction, inappropriate institutional management, technical problems, and negative peer influences were cited most frequently.

This finding shares partial similarities with previous research, mainly in its identification of teacher and teaching-related factors as major external demotivators, including teacher's competence, teaching method, and teacher-student interaction in both traditional and online classrooms (Xiao, 2012a; Al-Khairy, 2013; Ghonsooly et al., 2017; Adara, 2018; Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019; Fathi et al., 2019). However, students in this study singled out the lack of self-regulation as the most important element, forming a clear contrast with previous research, which reported that experience with failure, lack of intrinsic motivation, and negative attitude towards foreign language learning have greater weighting (Ghadirzadeh et al., 2012; Vakilifard et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). It can be inferred that these students blamed themselves for demotivation because learning was commonly perceived as their own responsibility, as suggested by many participants in this study. This self-blaming was especially acute if they believed that their peers were outperforming them through better self-regulation. In this case, the positive peer influences might be perceived as negative.

Additionally, teacher-student interactions appeared to have a stronger than expected influence on student demotivation. This is aligned with some findings in distance education, where the lack of social interaction and personal attention from teachers that result from isolation play a key role (Sinha & Bagarukayo, 2019). In traditional classrooms, students are more easily influenced by their teachers' personality (Cai & Hou, 2013), competence (Hassaskhah et al., 2014), and bias (Li & Zhou, 2017) than by interactions initiated by teachers. From the observations of the students in this study, possibly due to the constraints posed by the distance mode or a lack of teaching competence, teachers either reduced interaction or simplified it into a monotonous and mechanical form that significantly weakened student motivation. As the students recognized, maintenance of proper and interesting teacher-student interaction helped them remain focused and involved, leading to better learning outcomes. Otherwise, "they can experience distance learning as both an isolated and an isolating activity" (Murphy, 2011: 108).

Contrary to earlier expectations, inappropriate institutional management gave rise to demotivation, deviating from previous findings, which mainly cite insufficient

facilities as a major demotivator (e.g., Ghadirzadeh et al., 2012; Hassaskhah et al., 2014; Li & Zhou, 2017). The reason for this apparent discrepancy is that in this study, the distance mode was introduced with no modifications to anything else, from the syllabus to the course design, retained as in the traditional classroom. This is quite different from previous research, especially those in distance setting, where the attendance of students was not compulsory (e.g., Su, 2015; Aikina & Bolsunovskaya, 2020). The indiscriminate arrangement seemed unreasonable, but the root cause lied in the insufficient preparation for and experience in distance education at the onset of the pandemic. This was also reflected by the awkward nature of the distance education in this study, which came across as a combination of traditional and new modes of teaching in the face of poor coordination among stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, and administrators) and little consideration of user feedback.

As a result of the above-mentioned arrangement, a series of technical problems further undermined student motivation. Existing research in the distance mode points out the technical problems in internet access, the electronic platform, etc. as demotivating (e.g., Ayan, 2015; Aikina & Bolsunovskaya, 2020), but the students in the current study were burdened more by the resultant long screen time and obstacles in online communication. Meanwhile, the lack of peer interaction and negative peer influences, compounded by the unsatisfactory teacher-student interaction, contributed to worsening motivation. This finding is aligned with those of previous studies in traditional classrooms, which report a conspicuous but limited role of peer influences in demotivating students (e.g., Li & Qian, 2018; Haryanto et al., 2018; Fathi et al., 2019).

In relation to the similarities and differences in demotivating factors between traditional and non-traditional classrooms, the external factors, namely, teacher and teaching-related problems, learning environment, and peer influences remain roughly the same, but the details vary. Besides, technical problems emerged as a unique demotivator for online learning. This is comprehensible due to the challenges brought by the virtual space as well as technology. In terms of internal demotivators, the difference is quite pronounced. Experience with failure is the most dominant demotivator in offline classrooms (e.g., Vakilifard et al., 2020; Zhang, 2020) while in online learning, the most powerful variable is the lack of learning strategies. This contrast can be partially attributed to the isolation experienced by many students in distance learning mode. Without external monitoring from teachers and peers, they were prone to losing control over their learning pace and outcomes, which in turn led to mounting demotivation (Murphy, 2011). On the other hand, the institutional management and long screen time were unique demotivators in this study. It seems clear that the institution was the source of many other demotivators. For example, it stipulated the rules for distance education, and this conditioned teacher-student interactions, peer interactions, and other activities both within and outside of the

virtual classroom. Likewise, students were forced to stare at the screen all the time according to their class schedules arranged by the institution. All these exhibited constant interaction with students and thus impacted student (de)motivation.

A few caveats are in order regarding the potential generalisability of the findings. To begin with, the study was limited by its small sample of first-year and second-year university students. Studies using a larger sample might generate a more comprehensive picture of demotivators among English learners in distance education. Furthermore, although the students were asked to reflect on demotivation for a certain period of time, the period of this investigation was short compared to other longitudinal studies, due to the limited time and financial resources available (Busse, 2010). Therefore, it is highly recommended that future research examines a longer span of demotivation changes. Lastly, this study was set in the particular context of the COVID-19 lockdown, reducing its relevance to research in 'normal' times. However, it may be taken to form a bridge that links pre-pandemic with the post-pandemic education and may prompt more discussion in this direction.

Ultimately, the findings may serve as a preliminary attempt to explore demotivating factors for English majors as the line between traditional and non-traditional classrooms is beginning to blur and may blur even further. Students are encouraged to strive for more self-regulated learning in distance education. Teachers are recommended to find better monitoring techniques in their interaction with students. Institutions are urged to maintain a balance between upholding a necessary degree of formality and supporting innovation rooted in feedback from the relevant parties.

CONCLUSIONS

To recapitulate, this study explored demotivating factors for English majors in distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a qualitative analysis of data generated from in-depth interviews with first-year and second-year students, this study found that students' lack of self-regulation, teacher-student interactions, institutional management, technical problems, and peer influences were the most important demotivators. These observations support the results of previous research on traditional and non-traditional classrooms, but they acquire a novel significance in this study.

Unlike research in traditional classrooms, where external factors tend to be the most demotivating (e.g., Hassaskhah et al., 2014; Li & Qian, 2018), this study found that the lack of self-regulation was the most significant demotivator. Instead of blaming others, the students in this study considered themselves responsible for their learning, even in difficult times. This is also reported by Murphy (2011), who notes that even if technology has removed certain obstacles from distance education, students must nevertheless be responsible for the pace of their own learning. Despite the powerful role that teachers are found to play in previous research, their

interactions with students appeared to have the most importance here. Integrating the findings of previous research and those of this study, it is argued that teachers should simultaneously enhance their teaching competence, especially by adjusting to technology-enabled teaching contexts and maintaining an optimal balance of teacher-student interaction as well as sound management of class atmosphere. They should also provide necessary scaffolding for students to master self-regulated learning. At the same time, innovation in pedagogy and assessment schemes should be highlighted to alleviate the burden on both teachers and students. Besides, the educational institution played a uniquely determining role on demotivation in the current context. The students in this study acknowledge that their institution has made significant efforts to guarantee a quality distance education, but the drawbacks they identified should also be considered in the design of future distance courses.

Demotivation is dynamic and intertwined with other aspects of learning (Hassaskhah et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2020), requiring a research perspective that is equally responsive. Because distance could amplify personality differences and increase inequalities in participation, individual characteristics, including demotivation, can be expected to play a role that may go unperceived initially (Narcy-Combes, 2010). Thus, it is to be expected that teachers, students, and institutions should monitor demotivation throughout the instructional period and adjust their approaches accordingly.

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NOTES

[1] See https://www.npr.org/2020/03/26/821921575/the-biggest-distance-learning-experiment-in-history-week-one for detailed reporting on this subject.

[2] See http://www.moe.gov.cn/fbh/live/2020/51987/ for a press conference given by the Ministry of Education of China on this subject.

[3] As a result of the existing syllabus, only first- and second-year students had courses during this semester (the 2019-2020 academic year), as third- and fourth-year students were scheduled for internship and degree theses.

[4] At the researcher's institution, each teacher supervises four to five students throughout their four years as an undergraduate on personal life, studies and professional development.

[5] The platform, Chaoxing Xuetitong (roughly translated as Super Star Master of Learning), allows teacher-student interactions and smart learning. This platform was that mandated for use by the researcher's institution during the pandemic. Teachers can use it to design, distribute and collect questionnaires, among other functions.

ANNEX

The interview guideline (translated from Chinese)

1. How do you perceive your current level of learning motivation during the distance education period?
   [Follow-up] Have you experienced any changes in motivation in this period? If so, what are the causes?
2. What factors demotivate you in distance education?
3. Do you think the reasons you are demotivated have to do with you? If so, what are the possible factors?
4. Does your teachers' behaviour impact your motivation? What behaviours demotivate/motivate you in particular?
5. What factor(s) related to the administration of our institution demotivate you?
6. What do you think has been the most demotivating factor during the distance education period?

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