

## SALIENT ELEMENTS OF DEMOTIVATION FACTORS FROM ESL LEARNERS' PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract:** *The study of demotivation, or the adverse aspects of motivation, is a topic that warrants more attention, particularly due to its direct impact on the educational experiences of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners at the tertiary level within Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (MHEIs). The aim of this research was to examine the factors that demotivate ESL learners who are presently enrolled in an English proficiency course at MHEI. The data were collected from a sample of twenty individuals using semi-structured interviews. Based on the coding and thematic analysis conducted, this study has revealed four prominent characteristics that contribute to demotivation factors from ESL learners' perspectives. These elements include: (1) the presence of language barrier, (2) lack of self-confidence, (3) limited vocabulary in the English language, and (4) issues of resentment and dejection. By gaining a deeper knowledge of these aspects, educators and policy makers may enhance the ESL learning process, hence fostering increased motivation among ESL learners to acquire proficiency in the English language.*

**Keywords:** *Demotivation, Motivation, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, English Proficiency course*

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## Introduction

Demotivation is a prevalent issue encountered by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, representing the counterpoint to motivation, a topic well explored in the realm of motivation studies (Dornyei, 2001; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). According to Dornyei and Ushioda (2011), the study of motivation is a socio-dynamic process that encompasses complex interconnections between individual learners, the central psychological processes, and the learning environments in which learners are situated. Researchers from various periods, ranging from Gardner (1985), Gardner and Lambert (1972), and Lambert (1963), to more modern post-millennium researchers such as Dornyei (2001, 2005), Kim (2010), and Sakai & Kikuchi (2009), have dedicated their research efforts to investigating the concept of motivation, particularly in the context of second language acquisition. The primary objective of motivation is to cultivate a favourable disposition towards the acquisition of the English language (Dornyei, 2001 & 2005; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). In accordance with this assertion, it is indisputable that English is widely recognised as the global lingua franca. According to Gill (2002), English language is considered the second language in Malaysia. For example, English is extensively used in several domains such as the business sector, technology, education, and the social fabric of urban Malaysian society. These circumstances serve to enhance learners' motivation to engage in the process of acquiring English as their second language.

Previous research has shown that Malaysian students possess a clear awareness of the significance of the English language in relation to their future job prospects (Ainol Madziah & Isarji, 2009; Thang, 2004; Thang, Ting & Nurjanah Mohd Jaafar, 2010). Furthermore, it has been established that students exhibit extrinsic motivation when it comes to their English language learning endeavours. For instance, those who possess exceptional proficiency in the English language may get lucrative employment opportunities or gain access to Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (MHEIs) for further academic pursuits. However, the research has shown that possessing extrinsic motivation does not always ensure success in the English language. For the last ten years, the word "demotivation" has emerged as a relatively recent idea within the Second Language (L2) sector. This notion pertains to the hindrance or obstruction of a learner's advancement in their L2 acquisition process (Dornyei, 2001; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2010).

The study of demotivation, often known as the negative aspects of motivation, is a subject that warrants more attention due to its significant educational consequences. In addition to Aladdin's (2012, 2013, & 2016) research on demotivation among advanced learners, there is a scarcity of studies examining demotivation among ESL learners, particularly within MHEIs. The authors consisted of Normazidah Che Musa, Koo, and Hazita Azman (2012) assert that there is a dearth of research papers focusing on learners in higher education, particularly in the context of L2 or Foreign Language (FL) acquisition.

## Literature Review

Dornyei (2005) asserts that demotivation influences play a significant role in the area of second language acquisition. However, it is worth noting that this phenomenon has not been well explored in either mainstream psychology or L2 motivation research. According to the author, demotivation may be described as a progressive decline in motivational factors.

A small number of research have been conducted to investigate the elements that lead to demotivation. In her dissertation, Aladdin (2012) discovered that attitudes, motivation, and demotivation played a significant role in fostering a strong positive attitude towards the

acquisition of a foreign language, specifically Arabic. Consequently, learners exhibited a favourable disposition towards both native Arabic speakers and the process of learning Arabic as a foreign language. The study conducted by Aladdin (2012) revealed that instructors have a substantial impact on the development of their students' motivation. The findings suggest that intellect, patience, and humour are crucial factors in effectively inspiring students. In a further investigation conducted by Aladdin (2013), it was shown that the primary factor contributing to demotivation was the limited availability of possibilities for Arabic communication. In the study conducted by Aladdin (2013), the author posited that a comprehensive comprehension of the elements that contribute to learner demotivation has the potential to enhance the efficacy of the teaching and learning process within the context of FL education in Malaysia.

One aspect related to learners is the impact of negative learning emotions on their motivation, as highlighted by Elahi Shirvan and Talebzadeh (2020). Falout (2009) further emphasises that a decrease in confidence, lack of interest in learning, and negative language attitude can contribute to anxiety and diminished motivation to learn. Furthermore, it has been noted by Song and Kim (2017) that some educators excessively rely on conventional instructional approaches and neglect the use of contemporary technologies in their English language instruction. Consequently, this may result in students experiencing feelings of boredom and being susceptible to demotivation.

Kikuchi (2009) argues against the use of the grammar and translation approach as a pedagogical technique, asserting that its inherent characteristics fail to foster active student participation in the communicative process, particularly within the target language. Moreover, in a study conducted by Aladdin (2012), it was shown that the teaching methods used by instructors and their behaviours were identified as the most significant sources of demotivation. In the context of Malaysia, the existing body of research on language acquisition and motivation has mostly focused on examining this phenomenon from the viewpoints of instructors and students. The aforementioned research has identified a range of elements that contribute to learners experiencing a decrease in motivation. However, there is currently a lack of research that prioritises addressing strategies for overcoming this issue. Aladdin (2012, 2013 & 2016) conducted many studies that specifically examined demotivation factors, syllabus content, and teacher-student interactions in the context of foreign language acquisition, with a particular emphasis on the Arabic language. Therefore, the researcher proposed that it is important to tackle these issues in order to effectively sustain and cultivate students' motivation and interest constructively. Hence, educators need to provide their students with more opportunities for English language communication within both formal and casual settings.

### **Methodology**

In qualitative research that incorporates case study methodology, the researcher collaborates with participants to explore and comprehend the phenomena under investigation within its authentic real-life setting. The data used in this study were obtained from a cohort of individuals who were engaged in the process of acquiring English as their second language (L2). The L2 English language classes include four essential language abilities, namely reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

The data for this research was obtained via the use of three distinct data-gathering methodologies. The first phase of the study included the administration of semi-structured interviews. Marshall and Rossman (1995) assert that interviews are a valuable method for elucidating and articulating the viewpoints of participants on events and the central subject of

research. In the current study, the researcher collected data and evidence pertaining to demotivation among undergraduate students enrolled at Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM). Subsequent documents, such as transcriptions, were subjected to analysis.

In order to conduct this study, the researchers selected UUM as the focal point. The study included conducting interviews with a sample size of 20 individuals who were presently enrolled in their respective bachelor's degree programmes. The primary objective of this research is to investigate the problem of L2 demotivation, specifically focusing on the viewpoints of students enrolled in MHEIs. Additionally, the purpose of this study is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to demotivation among students in their L2 learning journey. This research aims to delve into the challenges encountered by students throughout their L2 learning process and examine their responses to demotivation.

The age range of the participants spanned from 20 to 27 years old consisting of 12 males and 8 females. The participants in this study were selected from several majors including Business and Management (2), Mathematics (2), Hotel and Management (1), Business Human Management (2), Management Development (2), Accounting (1), International Business Management (5), Media Technology (2), Hospitality Management (1), Industrial Statistic (1) and Technology Management (1). Regarding the participants' nationalities, it is worth noting that all 20 individuals were of Malaysian origin.

**Table1: Demographic Profile of the Research Participants**

Participant	Age	Gender	Major	Nationality
Participant 1	22	Male	Business and Management	Malaysia
Participant 2	24	Male	Mathematics	Malaysia
Participant 3	21	Male	Mathematics	Malaysia
Participant 4	27	Female	Hotel and Management	Malaysia
Participant 5	21	Female	Business and Management	Malaysia
Participant 6	23	Female	Business Human Management	Malaysia
Participant 7	23	Female	Business Human Management	Malaysia
Participant 8	21	Female	Management Development	Malaysia
Participant 9	22	Female	Management Development	Malaysia
Participant 10	24	Male	Accounting	Malaysia
Participant 11	20	Male	International Business Management	Malaysia
Participant 12	21	Male	Media Technology	Malaysia
Participant 13	20	Male	International Business Management	Malaysia
Participant 14	21	Male	Media Technology	Malaysia
Participant 15	20	Female	International Business Management	Malaysia
Participant 16	22	Male	Hospitality Management	Malaysia

Participant 17	23	Male	Industrial Statistic	Malaysia
Participant 18	22	Male	Technology Management	Malaysia
Participant 19	20	Male	International Business Management	Malaysia
Participant 20	21	Female	International Business Management	Malaysia

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with a sample of 20 students enrolled at UUM who were concurrently pursuing their undergraduate degrees in diverse academic disciplines while also taking an English course. Furthermore, this methodology allows the participants to articulate their viewpoints and perspectives about demotivation in language learning. According to Patton (2002), the process of interviewing serves as a valuable instrument for researchers to get insight into the thoughts and viewpoints of those being studied. Document analysis may be defined as a methodical process of examining printed or electronic documents and resources. According to Bowen (2009), the examination and interpretation of data may facilitate the exploration of raw data and enhance comprehension of specific issues. This study used semi-structured interviews as the major research technique, supplemented with document analysis of texts that were captured without any intervention from the researcher.

The interviews were carried out in the English language. The rationale for selecting the English language as the primary medium of communication was based on the participants' proficiency level, which may be characterised as that of an intermediate user of English as a second language, in addition to their native languages such as Malay, Chinese, or Indian languages.

The interviews conducted with the participants were transcribed verbatim. The exclusion of details such as hesitations, fillers, or overlaps that may occur throughout the interviews was implemented (Cresswell, 2012). According to the study conducted by Charles and William (2007), the act of recording allows researchers to focus and remain calm while listening to the spoken content. Moreover, proponents assert that using recording as a study method enables researchers to see or listen to the exact content being conveyed, hence reducing reliance on the fallibility of human memory. The primary significance lies in the fact that this methodology facilitated the researcher in obtaining very accurate transcriptions of the whole discourse derived from the interviews conducted with the full cohort of 20 participants.

### Analysis and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the demotivation variables identified among undergraduate ESL learners. The research question for this research is, what are the factors that lead to demotivation among L2 learners? Four main salient factors were identified namely, (1) the presence of a language barrier, (2) lack of self-confidence, (3) limited vocabulary in the English language, and (4) issues of resentment and dejection.

One of the first factors identified as contributing to demotivation was the **presence of a language barrier**. According to the data, it was found that 50% of the participants, namely 10 out of 20, identified the language barrier as a significant issue. The evidence indicates that insufficient community assistance has impeded their advancement in English language acquisition. Subsequently, individuals have challenges when confronted with the task of choosing languages, transitioning from their native language, Bahasa, to the English language. The majority of participants mostly used Bahasa Malaysia as their main language, and it was

stated that several of them had difficulties while transitioning from this language to English inside the classroom environment.

From the participant's perspective, ethnicity and background have been identified as salient issues which led to the factor of language barrier.

As quoted in the study, participant 13 said:

*mostly in Malay because of the the student is Malaysian so Malay language preferred more than English , maybe they feels more comfortable talking in Malay rather than using English.*

Participant 13 had difficulties effectively communicating in the English language due to an accent-related issue. The primary factor contributing to his difficulty in English is the divergence in speaking manner and the pronounced accent resulting from their native language, which hinders his proficiency in English.

Participant 16 had a similar perspective, noting that the syntax and vocabulary of the target language diverge significantly from their native tongue. This linguistic disparity poses challenges for the participant, leading to difficulties and potential misunderstanding. Participant 16 commented:

*Yes, there are difficulty as the use of grammar is different and the vocabulary is also different. Also the pronunciation is not that easy as some time I watch YouTube to know how to pronounce the words, because its not all English words spell as in written form. For example, the word learner, its is spell l e a r n, as in in Malaysia well spell it without the S. so kind of confusion at first.*

and, participant 8 mentioned that she struggle to cope while conversing in English, particularly when interacting with international students due to their pronounced accents, which was a significant challenge for her. As quoted below:

*I couldn't understand some of the word because, perhaps I don't have enough vocabulary and really have problem in mastering the vocabulary, and the real problem that I faced while learning English is the accent because I couldn't understand the accent from them especially the accent from African students.*

Learners exhibiting such negative attitudes need more attention from their teacher or instructor in order to foster their confidence and abilities in acquiring the L2. According to Kikuchi's research conducted in 2010, it was concluded that teachers should refrain from using the grammar-translation technique in their instructional practices. This recommendation is based on the observation that this strategy often restricts students from actively participating in communicative activities within the target language. Educators have to contemplate using a dual-sided methodology when it comes to instructional practises and fostering interactive language acquisition.

Previous studies conducted by Chambers (1993), Falout (2005), Sakai and Kikuchi (2009), and Trang and Baldauf (2007) have indicated that internal variables also have a substantial impact on the development of negative attitudes towards demotivation in L2 acquisition. A few of the participants had difficulties with their accents when speaking in the English language. They

also reported experiencing difficulties in comprehending certain meanings in the English language throughout their classroom instruction.

The second demotivating element, as reported by 17 individuals, is a **lack of confidence**. One of the contributing factors to this demotivation is the insufficient practise of English among individuals. The participants in this research felt that a lack of confidence is a contributing factor to demotivation among L2 learners. The majority of the participants in this study are experiencing a crisis of low self-confidence. Specifically, 17 out of the 20 participants, who come from diverse academic backgrounds including International Affairs, International Business Management, Business Human Management, Hotel and Management, Media Technology, Management Development, Tourism, and Hospitality Management, have expressed this common issue. All participants said that a lack of confidence in using the English language is a significant problem resulting from insufficient opportunities to practise English, reticence in speaking the language, and fear of making errors when speaking in English.

Participant 4 expressed his problem by saying:

*Ok because if people talk in English I know that I will understand about his speaking, but certain words for me its not clear and that I need to understand better, I need a lot of words in English as for example when I read about an article in English I can understand but I need more time. Also when I watch something, also I can understand.*

Likewise, participants 14 and 18 exhibited lower levels of confidence in their English-speaking abilities due to infrequent use of the language outside the confines of the classroom setting. The aforementioned deficiency in English language proficiency. Participant 14 expressed his viewpoints by stating:

*As Malaysian Malays, yes its difficult for me in learning English. For example in some of the subject that I learn, its difficult for me to cope. Some how the meaning is different for me. This for me, English is not my mother tongue, so I have to learn it more as my background as Malays not giving me much exposure to English.*

The aforementioned studies have shown that L2 learners have been seen to experience demotivation, especially concerning learner-level issues such as a lack of confidence. Based on the research results, this aspect may be attributed to a lack of opportunities for English language practise, individuals' reticence in speaking or using the language, and their fear of making errors when speaking in English. The earlier research conducted by Chambers (1993), Dornyei (1998, 2001), Ushioda (1998), as referenced in Dornyei (2001) and Kim (2009) have identified the lack of confidence as a significant concern.

Another prominent feature seen in this context is the reticence associated with verbalising the English language. Most of the participants had feelings of discomfort and timidity while attempting to engage in English communication. The participants also expressed apprehension over potential errors in their English language utterances.

The study conducted by Fallout (2010) posited that the presence of demotivation might have detrimental effects on learners' attitudes and actions, as well as on classroom group dynamics and teacher motivation. Furthermore, it was indicated that demotivation can lead to long-term

and pervasive poor results in terms of learning. Moreover, the demotivation experienced by students has the potential to result in a deficiency of motivation. In the context of L2 acquisition, it is essential to acknowledge that a lack of motivation on the part of the learner may significantly impact the overall learning outcome, resulting in a less satisfactory end.

Furthermore, **limited vocabulary in English** emerged as an additional demotivating element, as corroborated by the consensus of 10 participants. There are several contributors to this component. The participants' lack of comprehension of various English accents resulted in demotivation and difficulties in engaging in English conversations. The participants had challenges while engaging in English conversations, particularly in social settings with friends and language teachers. Additionally, the need for new phrases in the English language to be precise and accurate has also played a role in diminishing learners' desire towards acquiring a second language. Moreover, a significant proportion of individuals had difficulties comprehending the precise connotations of the terms. Based on the conducted interviews, it has been shown that the participants have attained a very advanced level of English proficiency throughout their time in the class. However, it has become apparent that they are unable to effectively meet the obligations placed upon them.

Among the primary factors contributing to a deficiency in English vocabulary, two prominent issues can be identified. Firstly, the comprehension of various English accents, particularly among international students who may be influenced by the strong accent of their native language. Secondly, the issue of insufficient practice in utilising English vocabulary. Certain participants perceived a lack of proficiency in English vocabulary as demotivating, as it hindered their ability to independently review and complete homework without assistance from peers or their English teacher. This was particularly evident in speaking skills. As an example, the following passage is extracted from the research article:

Participant 7 mentioned that a lack of vocabulary, especially in certain words gave her a hard time when conversing in the English language. She added:

*I ...I couldn't understand some of the word because of the ...perhaps maybe I don't have enough vocabulary so I really really have problems to some of the words that will be my main problems here.*

Moreover during the interviews, 10 individuals conveyed **feelings of resentment and dejection**. The majority of interviewees conveyed their dissatisfaction and exasperation over the social rejection or animosity they encounter while opting to communicate in the English language. In these instances, the participants experienced humiliation due to someone ridiculing or mocking their proficiency in the English language. Additionally, the individuals had feelings of shyness and shame while communicating in English, leading them to prefer utilising their native language, Malay language, instead. For example, the subjects experienced feelings of dejection when they were communicated with in English and subjected to ridicule by their peers. Finally, it is important to note that signs of negativity were seen among the participants as they had feelings of dejection when attempting to comprehend the English language. This predicament was experienced by a total of ten individuals.

The majority of individuals conveyed their predicament with feelings of resentment and dejection in relation to this problem. The participants expressed their dissatisfaction and annoyance at the negative reception they get from the public when they choose to communicate



in English. Participants had challenges such as experiencing embarrassment due to the ridicule and contempt of their English-speaking abilities, as well as encountering negativity and sarcasm while using the English language. In several instances, participants said that feelings of animosity or dejection did not yield any discernible effects, particularly when interacting with others who exhibit condescension towards those attempting to use the English language. An illustration of this predicament may be seen in the following instance:

*Pardon me. Many times indeed I felt this feeling of discomfort. Especially using English in public, my friends make fun on it, ejek you know macam being sarcastic lah to me if I try to communicate or ajak them in English. But thankfully, not all my friends are like that. Some of them are very open about English. For them its nothing , just being normal. Right?*

Nevertheless, Participant 4 emphasised that not all individuals encountered him engage in such demotivated behaviours, as others exhibit a good attitude towards the utilisation of the English language and can embrace it without any biases. Participant 2 experienced embarrassment due to the derision and ridicule directed towards his proficiency in the English language. To mitigate any demotivation, participant 2 decided to only use the English language while on campus. The individual emphasised that:

*Yes. Some people did make fun of my English saying, alah cakap melayu lah, English pun berterabur...something like that. That's why I use English in University only. Not outside. Don't want people to make fun of my English language.*

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has determined that there exist four primary factors contributing to demotivation among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. These salient factors, as perceived by the learners themselves, include four main elements:

- (1) the presence of a language barrier,
- (2) a lack of self-confidence,
- (3) a limited vocabulary in the English language, and ,
- (4) feelings of resentment and dejection

Therefore, it is recommended that more research be undertaken in the near future to explore demotivation from the viewpoints of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. This study has yielded a more comprehensive comprehension of the variables that have arisen from the viewpoints of ESL learners, which have led to their demotivation. The noteworthy conclusion for ESL learners is that causes of demotivation may have a significant influence on their performance and accomplishment, potentially leading to poor outcomes. In addition to other elements, it is important to examine characteristics such as strategy and affect from the learner's viewpoint while examining demotivation. Consequently, the researcher proposed that learners use specific strategies to address these demotivation phenomena and be aware of the potential impact of demotivation on their learning experience. Further research should be conducted to explore the distinctions and parallels in the viewpoints of both educators and learners, particularly on elements that contribute to demotivation. Thus, this research aims to provide a valuable contribution to the current body of literature, particularly in the area of demotivation, in the foreseeable future.

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