

Constructing the demotivation discourse among Iranian university students learning English:

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Abstract

Examining how foreign language learners' discourse influences their demotivation is a burgeoning field of study. This research investigated the discursive portrayal of demotivation among four Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners—two males and two females—at Hamedan University, Iran. Utilizing Fairclough's (2003) critical discourse analysis framework, the study uncovered demotivation as a nuanced, multi-dimensional construct that evolves dynamically through discourse, shaped by the interplay between individual and societal contexts. Moreover, the findings highlighted the intricate interplay of learners' interpersonal relationships, their aspirations, and various socio-cultural and political factors in the construction of demotivation.

Keywords: demotivation; discourse analysis; future aspirations; legitimization; socio-cultural factors

Introduction:

The exploration of motivation traces back to Gardner and Lambert's pioneering work in 1959, delving into bilingual motivation within Canada. Since then, a multitude of global researchers, such as Csizér & Kormos (2008), Gao et al. (2007), and Humphreys & Spratt (2008), have pursued various angles of motivation. Diverse theories, including those by Deci & Ryan (1985) and Dörnyei (2005), have emerged to grasp the complexity of motivation, with Dörnyei's "L2 Motivational Self System" highlighting the ideal and ought-to selves. Concurrently, the notion of demotivation, termed "the dark side of motivation" by Dörnyei & Ushioda (2011), has gained attention, prompting investigations into its sources by scholars like Alavinia & Sehat (2012) and Kim (2011). Despite the prevalence of quantitative methodologies in demotivation studies, there's a growing call for qualitative approaches to complement these findings.

Literature review:

Demotivation, previously overlooked, has gained recent attention from researchers, who aim to identify factors diminishing students' motivation. For instance, Tuan (2011) explored demotivating factors among English learners in Vietnam, finding common themes such as self-esteem, L2 failure experiences, and classroom atmosphere. Seo and Kim (2012) examined demotivation among Korean elementary students, revealing a decline in motivation across various constructs as students progressed through grades, attributed partly to teachers' negative impact and social pressure for English proficiency. Tabatabaei and Molavi (2012) focused on Iranian seminary students, highlighting issues like ineffective teaching methods and lack of real-life English use. Sahragard and Alimorad (2013) studied Iranian high schoolers, identifying factors like lack of self-confidence and inadequate school facilities as demotivators. Despite these insights, existing research tends to view demotivation as a static construct influenced by contextual factors, without delving into the dynamic interplay between individuals and their social environment. By employing a critical and discursive approach, this longitudinal case study aims to investigate how Iranian EFL learners construct demotivation through discourse, considering both micro and macro influences, including Iran's political landscape and English's global prominence. Understanding the role of discourse in demotivation construction may illuminate the intricate relationship between individuals and their learning context.

The study's theoretical and analytical frameworks:

The study drew upon Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) perspective on discourse, which posits that discourse shapes the understanding of the social realm, constantly evolving through interactions with other discourses. While valuable philosophically, their theory lacks detailed analytical tools. To address this gap, Fairclough's (2003) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was utilized, focusing on the interplay between individuals and their social context. Fairclough's framework comprises three dimensions: text, discursive practice, and social practice. The analysis delved into the construction of demotivation through modal choices at the text level, considering the circumstances of text production at the discursive level, and examining legitimization strategies at the social level. Specifically, van Leeuwen's (2008) expanded notion of legitimization, which identifies four categories, was employed. Among these, authorization emerged as the sole strategy employed by the study participants, involving various forms of institutional and personal authority. The study also explored the broader societal implications of discourse, investigating its ideological and hegemonic effects on knowledge systems, social relations, and identities. Examples from the findings section are presented chronologically to illustrate the developmental process of demotivation construction, with researchers ensuring accuracy by consulting participants during the analysis phase.

Research questions :

This study delves into the demotivation experiences of four university English language learners by analyzing their interpersonal dynamics within the learning environment, their aspirations for the future, and their struggles with social norms. It also explores how their language usage influences their demotivation, employing Fairclough's CDA framework (2003). Rather than simply outlining the factors contributing to demotivation and its impact on learning outcomes, the study focuses on two key research questions:

How do participants' interactions within the learning community and broader educational contexts contribute to their demotivation?

In what ways are their demotivation experiences shaped by their aspirations for the future?

Method :

The setting of the study and the participants

Four Iranian individuals volunteered for this research, all enrolled as senior BA students at Hamedan University, majoring in English Literature within the Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics in the college of Humanities. Referred to by pseudonyms Hector, Alex, Sinati, and Nikki, they shared an average age of 21. Hector and Nikki hailed from Shiraz, Iran. Hector's formal English education began at eleven, culminating in graduation from a renowned language institute (I1) before entering Hamedan University, previously studying mathematics in high school. Concurrently, he taught English at two language institutes in Shiraz. Alex, also with a high school background in mathematics, pursued English education at a different prestigious language institute (I2) in Shiraz, earning his senior (intermediate level) degree before joining Hamedan University at age thirteen. Nikki initiated her English journey at ten, studying at the same institute as Hector, achieving senior status by grade two of high school and later becoming an English teacher. Sinati, starting English studies at sixteen in her hometown's language institute, continued until a year before university enrollment.

Alex and Sinati opted for the "English-only entrance examination" for university admission, a test including general high school subject exams alongside a specialized English test comprising 100 items. This route restricted their major choices to English-related fields such as English Literature, English Translation, Linguistics, and Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Hector, however, took both English-only and engineering entrance exams, eventually selecting English Literature due to insufficient scores for engineering studies. Nikki similarly attempted both English-only and Dentistry entrance exams, facing similar score-related limitations as Hector. The researchers' backgrounds as former students (at BA, MA, and Ph.D. levels) of Hamedan University facilitated a deeper understanding of the participants, blending insider knowledge with outsider perspectives. Their Iranian identity and familiarity with the university's culture enriched comprehension of participant experiences, augmented by their ongoing education enhancing self-awareness and insight into learning and life journeys.

Instruments and data collection procedures :

During the spring semester of 2024, data collection utilized interviews, emails, and diaries as primary instruments. Five individual interviews, each lasting approximately thirty minutes, were conducted, alongside weekly diary entries totaling sixteen entries with an average length of 300 words per entry. Additionally, researchers sent 20 emails, distributing five to each participant. The semi-structured interviews, conducted every three weeks in Persian, focused on the participants' English language learning experiences, future plans, motivation levels, and factors influencing their motivation, particularly negative influences leading to demotivation. Diaries encouraged

participants to record critical incidents beyond English learning, while email exchanges covered diverse topics to establish rapport and trust.

Data analysis procedure :

The data analysis process was characterized by a gradual and iterative approach, with data collection and analysis occurring concurrently. This allowed for constant evaluation, reevaluation, and refinement of the study's theoretical framework, coded categories, and research questions. Each interview or email received prompted a preliminary analysis, leading to the generation of new questions for subsequent exchanges or sessions. Diary entries, interviews, and emails were examined collectively to cross-reference various data sources. Transcribing interviews was a significant and complex aspect of the study, involving careful listening followed by meticulous transcription and translation into English. While efforts were made to maintain the original essence of the utterances, pauses, fillers, and vocatives were not replicated verbatim, as the focus was on the textual content itself. Attention was devoted to preserving grammatical and linguistic features for the study's purposes. Participants were given the option to use either English or Persian, with emails primarily conducted in English, while 25% of diary entries were in English and the remainder, along with interviews, were in Persian. Translations of Persian diary entries were cross-checked with interview content to ensure accuracy. Following transcription and translation, thematic coding was applied to all gathered data, revealing key themes contributing to learners' demotivation.

Results:

In the context of demotivation construction among students, interpersonal relationships at Hamedan University play a significant role. For instance, Hector regretted not heeding his friends' advice against choosing English Literature as his major, feeling influenced by their opinions that English should not be a standalone major but rather a supplementary skill.

Modal verbs were employed by Hector to emphasize his friends' beliefs about the peripheral role of English in people's lives, leading to his decreased motivation for studying English. This influence from his peers reduced his enthusiasm for English studies at Hamedan University compared to his experience at another institution, denoted as I1, where the atmosphere was more engaging and supportive.

Similarly, other students like Alex, Sinati, and Nikki, compared their experiences at university with those at private institutes, highlighting a sense of dissonance with the university's atmosphere. Nikki even considered changing her major to something more practical like MBA due to her dissatisfaction with the English Department's approach and the perceived lack of useful skills learned.

Sinati's demotivation stemmed from the restrictive environment at university, where creativity was stifled and topics were dictated rather than chosen by students. This contrasted with her expectations formed in private institutes.

Alex's family's disapproval of his choice to study English further contributed to his demotivation, as his sister, an English teacher, discouraged him based on her perception of limited job opportunities in the field.

The participants' future self-guides influenced their demotivation as well. While Alex persisted in his English studies despite familial opposition, Hector and Nikki considered switching to MBA for its perceived practicality. Sinati's decision was influenced by broader socio-political factors affecting the field of English Literature in her country.

Overall, the students' demotivation was shaped by their interactions with others, contrasting experiences at different institutions, and their perceptions of future career prospects in the field of English.

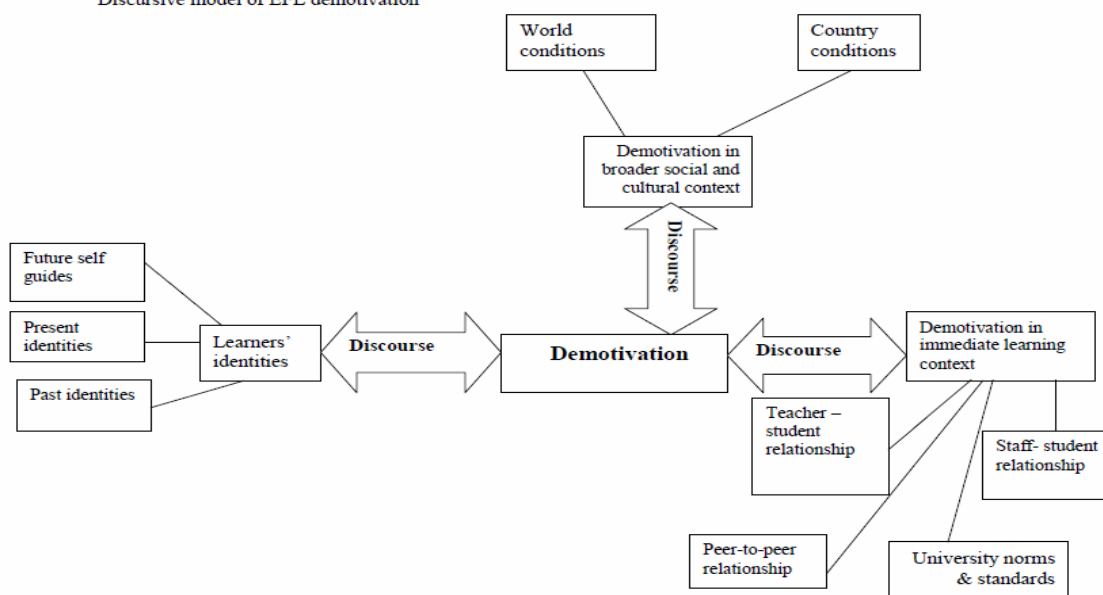
The demotivation experienced by participants in Iran regarding their English studies became evident as they discussed their future career prospects post-graduation. Social influences, such as Alex's sister warning about the lack of suitable jobs in their field, significantly impact their motivation levels. Alex's observation that humanities are perceived as more suitable for women than men reflects the societal norms shaping his attitude towards English studies. This highlights the ongoing dialogue between individual aspirations and societal expectations. Financial considerations also play a role, as careers in humanities are typically lower paid in Iran compared to professions like engineering or medicine. This financial disparity further demotivated individuals like Hector, Nikki, and Sinati, leading them to consider changing their majors to pursue more financially lucrative paths.

Discussion and conclusion :

Research in the realm of EFL demotivation construction, particularly through the interaction of individuals within their social context using discourse, is lacking. This study addresses two research questions, revealing participants' use of various discursive strategies to validate their demotivation. They employed relational structures and expressions of 'meaning inclusion' and 'contrast' to establish both equivalence and difference simultaneously. Additionally, authorization was a key strategy, along with the use of non-modalized verbs indicating self-legitimization. Demotivation is examined as an integrative, multidimensional construct shaped by individual learners' past and present experiences, environmental factors, and broader social and cultural contexts. Contrary to

previous studies viewing demotivation as an individual trait, this study emphasizes its dynamic construction. Employing a discursive approach, it delves into the interaction between individual and social-cultural conditions. Various factors concurrently influence demotivation, including social, cultural, and political conditions, educational context, relationships, future financial support, and the status of English in their locale. Despite being from the same department, participants' demotivation processes differed due to the complexity and diverse degrees of these influencing factors.

Figure 1
Discursive model of EFL demotivation



The study highlights a significant issue: while the participants were initially motivated learners with private institute backgrounds, their enthusiasm waned at university due to unmet expectations and redundant learning practices. To address this, steps must be taken to "remotivate" such learners, recognizing that motivation, demotivation, and remotivation are interconnected in the language learning cycle. The research emphasizes the complexity of demotivation, which is influenced by past experiences, present contexts, and broader social factors, warranting further investigation globally. Practical implications include enhancing teachers' understanding of students' backgrounds, updating university curricula, improving English teaching in public high schools, and prioritizing student learning over exam-centric approaches.

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