

# The Influence and Function of Motivation in Second Language Learning

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**Abstract:** Learning motivation has long been a hot topic of concern in second language learning. Starting from the factors affecting the effect of second language learning, this paper analyzes the causes of demotivation, lists the situations in which learners lack motivation, and finally puts forward feasible suggestions to stimulate learners' motivation. It is hoped that both learners and teachers will not neglect the role of motivation in second language learning and will give full play to the positive role of motivation.

**Keywords:** Motivation, Second Language Learning, Demotivation, Learning Efficiency.

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## 1. Introduction

There are quite a number of factors that affect learners to varying degrees in second language learning, with motivation being one of the key factors. Learning motivation has long been a hotly debated topic in the direction of second language learning. It is worthwhile for every learner and teacher to think about how to improve motivation and how to play the positive role of motivation correctly. Only when learners are properly guided to develop and utilize the positive effects of motivation can learners become more effective in second language learning.

## 2. The Factors Affect Second Language Learning

There are many factors that affect second language learning on different levels, so it is important to understand them, both as a learner and as a teacher, in order to know how to avoid unnecessary disadvantages and how to make the most out of each of them.

1. Language aptitude. Language aptitude is the special ability for learning a second language. Carroll (1965) categorizes language aptitude into phonemic coding ability, i.e. the ability to code unfamiliar sounds in a way that they can be remembered later; grammatical sensitivity, which is the ability to recognize the grammatical functions of words in sentences; inductive language-learning ability, i.e. the ability to identify patterns of correspondence and relationships between form and meaning and rote-learning ability: the ability to form and remember associations between L1 and L2 vocabulary items.

2. Learner beliefs. Learners' attitudes towards learning, including their beliefs about language learning. Learner beliefs can be categorized according to whether they reflect an empirical or analytical approach to learning. And ideas about what they can achieve drive learners to learn. Learners also have beliefs about their self-efficacy as language learners.

3. Motivation. A learner's motivation stems primarily from the goals they set and the effort they put into them. According to Yerkes-Dodson Law, the efficiency of work is best when motivation is at the right intensity. When motivation is too low, there is a lack of motivation to participate in the activity,

and it is unlikely that the efficiency of work can be increased, while motivation exceeds its peak, the efficiency of work decreases continuously with the increase of intensity.

4. Willingness to communicate. Willingness to communicate is defined as 'the intention to initiate communication, given a choice' by MacIntyre, Baker, Clement, and Conrad (2001: 369). It is viewed as influenced by a number of other factors and as the immediate antecedent of communication behavior. When learners are in certain environments, especially unfamiliar environments where there is a strong need to communicate in a second language, the large amount of linguistic input and the need to express themselves lead to an increased willingness to communicate while giving learners more opportunities to do so.

## 3. Demotivation Factors

Demotivation, also known as "motivational deficits" or "negative motivation," refers to "the reduction or weakening of some specific external force that motivates behavior" (Sun & Lei, 2013). The demotivation is the result of internal and external factors, and the conclusions of exploring the factors leading to the demotivation from different perspectives are slightly different, but on the whole, they can be divided into two categories: internal factors and external factors.

Internal factors. Li Lin(2013) found that there are four internal influences on learners demotivation, namely, decreased self-confidence (the primary internal factor), insufficient affective-cognitive skills, lack of learning strategies, and lack of interest in learning. The four factors have a significantly higher impact on low-level learners than on high-level learners, especially the factors of decreased self-confidence and insufficient affective-cognitive skills, while parental expectations, peer pressure, failed learning experiences, and lack of learning strategies all lead to demotivation. According to Zhou Cibo et al, there are five factors that lead to the decline of students' English learning motivation, including internal factors such as "lack of intrinsic interest" and "lack of effective learning strategies", of which "lack of effective learning strategies" is the first internal factor. And all factors indicate that Chinese learners are better at looking for their own reasons and reflecting on

their learning. The highly motivated students do not recognize the full-teaching mode, while the weakly motivated students are more likely to accept this mode.

External factors. The external factors leading to the demotivation are complex, but the findings of the previous studies have reached a general consensus, which is a great inspiration for foreign language teaching. In the new century, academics have further explored this issue and deepened and refined it. Gao Chaoyang et al.(2013) found six external influences among the eight factors of motivation decline, namely, “teachers, teaching content, hardware facilities, extracurricular activities, homework, and other courses”, among which teachers are the first influence factor, which indicates that teachers have an unshrinkable responsibility in the demotivation. Teachers should reflect on the content and methods of teaching and emphasize the development of students’ basic English skills, which also reflects the tendency of learners to attribute their lack of motivation to external factors rather than to themselves. Teaching content can also lead to demotivation, which relates to the content of learning and teaching methods, classroom environment, etc. The classroom teaching mode is single, fixed and uninspired; the content taught by teachers is limited to textbooks and lacks extracurricular knowledge and practice. Teachers should pay attention to the stability of students’ motivation and pay more attention to students with low academic ability.

The content of the lessons is limited to textbooks and lacks extracurricular knowledge and practice. Most of the time in class is spent on vocabulary and grammar, with no other activities, which is boring. Teachers dominate the classroom and there is little interaction between teachers and students. Teachers only go to class to fulfill their teaching tasks, focusing on the progress of teaching but neglecting the quality of teaching.

The influence of external factors is more important than that of internal factors. The teacher’s factor is the first trigger of demotivation, and the influence of this factor becomes more and more obvious as learning progresses. This is a great revelation for teachers to reflect on teaching methods, content and ability. The demotivation is caused by a variety of internal and external factors, among which the internal factors have a greater impact on students with low learning ability. Among the external factors, insufficient teacher quality is generally recognized as the main reason. In order to solve the problem of motivation decline, it is important for teachers to improve their own quality and pay attention to the group of students with low academic ability.

To summarize, it is clear that there are not only external factors such as teachers, teaching materials and learning environment, but also internal factors such as students, which affect the decline of learners’ motivation. It also proves once again that motivation, whether increasing or decreasing, is a dynamic process, the intensity of which is affected by the learning time, the learning environment, the teacher and other factors.

#### **4. Situations Where Learners Lack Motivation**

When learners lack of motivation, they will not only lose interest in second language learning, but also they may even develop an aversion to it. The following are some of the situations where learners’ lack of motivation will occur.

1. No desire to achieve good results. When learners do not

treat L2 learning as an optional task in their learning, they see learning L2 as something to be ignored and easily replaced. For example, in the minds of many students with a weak relevant foundation, learning the second language is just a waste of time, taking up their time and energy for studying other subjects. For some students who have not found the right learning method, they may think that learning the second language is very painful, and in the long run, they will lose the desire to get good grades and have no positive motivation to learn the second language.

2. Thinking that learning a second language is just for exams. Some students treat learning a second language as a task that requires only an average grade in an exam. They never expect high grades or praise from the teacher, and as long as the teacher does not push them daily or penalize them for doing the homework they need to do in order to be good at the second language, they just go through the motions. Some of them are even surprised when they happen to get more points on a test, lamenting the fact that they didn’t spend any time studying the language and they got more points, so why should they spend any more time studying? Such students never think too much about: why did I only get such a high score in this exam? Or what can I do to get more attention and praise from the teacher? They are at their best when they don’t draw attention to themselves and don’t drag their feet. They just treat second language learning as a task to be accomplished, unable to experience a sense of accomplishment.

3. No positive feedback from teachers. Due to the large class sizes and the fact that each student may have different issues. When learners are attentive to the task but do not receive positive feedback from the teacher, their interest and motivation to learn a second language is greatly diminished.

#### **5. How to Improve Learners’ Motivation in Second Language Learning**

1. Create a healthy competitive learning environment. As Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) noted, ‘groups have been found to have a life of their own—that is, individuals in groups behave differently from the way they do outside the group’. Teachers need to play a good external role in the classroom community and try to create a healthy competitive environment where learners learn together, help each other and improve together. Learners can be grouped according to different levels or different interests so that learners can be motivated in their own group setting. And teachers should take care to maintain this learning environment in a positive direction. Teachers need to understand that the motivation of individual learners is largely influenced by the motivation of other partners in the environment, and that the motivation of each learner is involved in the performance and completion of the task. Therefore, the teacher can appropriately motivate some of the learners in the group so that the other group members will also be inspired by such motivation which will lead to better learning and task performance.

2. Choose themes and materials that meet authentic needs. The choice of learning materials is crucial in order to motivate learners. Teachers need to find out more about listening to students’ interests and selecting materials for listening and reading in the context of the times. For example, in letter writing practice, teachers can set the topic according to the students’ daily life in school and can connect the class with

the class. In this way, students can feel the purpose of writing letters with empathy. And under such circumstances the students know the real recipients of the letters, it will make the students take the requirement of writing more seriously, which will stimulate the motivation of the learners to learn. Teachers can connect extracurricular learning with classroom teaching and stimulate students' initial motivation for extracurricular learning through diversified extracurricular learning tasks. Teachers need to choose learning materials that start with the needs of the learners and land in the skills that students want to improve and the knowledge that they want to learn. Only then can learners make full use of their motivation to absorb and internalize knowledge and skills better.

3. Full utilization of learners' self-confidence and self-regulation skills.

Self-regulation, broadly defined, refers to the actions people take to organize and manage their learning. Teachers should develop learners' self-regulation skills so that learners can learn to plan their learning. They should also emphasize on encouraging education to enhance learners' self-confidence and make them believe that they can learn the second foreign language well from the bottom of their hearts. Dörnyei (2009) proposed a new theory of L2 motivation. The underlying principle of this theory is that motivation does not arise when learners identify with other speakers of the language, but with future versions of their own selves. There are three components to the L2 Motivational Self System: 1. Ideal L2 Self. 'If the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the 'ideal L2 self' is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves' (Dörnyei 2009: 29) 2. Ought-to Self. This 'concerns the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes' (p. 29). 3. L2 Learning Experience. This refers to the 'executive motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience' (p. 29). Teachers need to try to utilize the learner's agency to stimulate the learner's ability and motivation to self-regulate ideal self and move the learner forward.

4. Teaching should be truly "human-centered". Students are the main body of information processing, active constructors of cognitive structure, not passive receivers of external stimuli and objects of indoctrination. English teaching should be under the guidance of teachers, advocating the exertion of learners' subjective initiative, creating a richer language learning environment for students under the environment of

information technology, meeting the students' individualized and socialized service needs, improving the students' learning efficiency, and making teaching truly "human-centered". Adjust the content of classroom teaching to better meet students' needs. The curriculum should be based on the analysis of students' needs, and the content of teaching should be formulated and selected based on the results of the analysis of students' needs. Teachers should be able to choose teaching methods and materials according to the actual situation of their students. Teachers should be able to choose teaching methods and teaching materials according to the actual situation of their students, so as to put students' needs into practice. Change large class teaching to small class teaching, English teaching is based on practical guidance, supplemented by explanation, through demonstration, let students experience English learning in practice. Through demonstrations, students can experience the joy of learning English in practice and easily master the correct way of learning English.

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