Remotivating demotivated English learners: A case study

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Abstract: Remotivation is the process of restoring lost or diminished motivation by either teachers' mediation or students' application of self-regulating strategies. This longitudinal case study reports on the attempts to help four demotivated students renew their motivation. Students' diaries, interviews, questionnaires, classroom observation and field notes were used to collect data. All cases attributed their loss of motivation to primarily external factors and two cases attributed it to internal causes too. Once demotives were identified, motivational strategies were employed for eight months. Overall, the findings suggested that demotivated students' motivational beliefs could be *worked on*: it could be brought into surface and negotiated with subsequent positive effects on their *motivational autonomy*. Not only in behavioural measures but also in classroom achievement a promising pattern was observed. The prime case-general remotivators are discussed while acknowledging the individuality of cases and uniqueness of contexts.

Key words: classroom learning, motivation, remotivating

INTRODUCTION

The significant role of motivation in language learning has been extensively discussed in literature. Whether to view it as the cause or effect of learning or follow the consensus nowadays, that it has a cyclical relationship with learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda 2013), motivation is widely accepted to play a key role in L2 learning. Students with healthy motivations handle learning hurdles more efficiently and tend to expend the sustained effort necessary for successful L2 learning. Everything else being equal, motivated L2 learners often do better and achieve more than demotivated students. Demotivated learners in English classes are a major educational concern worldwide. Researchers have taken an interest in investigating why some students gradually lose interest and become demotivated. Factors contributing to different English learners demotivation in different settings have been studied. Demotivating

factors have been found to vary in different contexts with different learners. More specifically, the main demotivator for some learners might be an external factor (e.g. teachers, materials and tasks) whilst for some others an intrinsic issue might negatively affect their motivation. For example, Quadir (2017) reports that 'teachers' are the key demotivators in Bangladesh and Husniyah (2019) notes that 'boring materials' demotivate Indonesian students. Li and Zhou (2013), however, contend that 'learning strategies deficiency'—an internal factor—is the key demotivator of Chinese students. Interestingly, the first demotivator for some English learners might stand last for other students. For instance, whereas 'teachers' have been reported to be the key demotivator in some studies (Quadir, 2017), Çankaya (2018) concludes that the same factor comes last for Turkish students. Of course, it should be noted that *a list* of demotivating factors consisting of both internal and external factors is typically reported and some such factors might be shared among different learners. For example, issues pertaining to 'textbooks/materials' have been found to demotivate students in Saudi Arabia (Yadav & BaniAta, 2013), China (Zou & Xu, 2016), Iran (Mazlum & Poorebrahim, 2013), and Taiwan (Lai, 2013), to name some. Studies on demotivation abound in literature yet it is still an important line of inquiry as it can help teachers and learners in varying settings overcome educational challenges associated with motivation (Gao & Liu, 2022).

A relatively new concept in L2 motivation is *re*motivation; a process of restoring lost motivation or "maintaining motivation in the face of difficulties" (Song & Kim, p.92). Investigating how to get demotivated students on track again is an important line of research since findings can help teachers in practice and researchers in theory: teachers learn how to deal with demotivated learners better and researchers know more about the complex and fluctuating nature of motivation. Over the past two decades, a few studies have been done on remotivation. Song and Kim (2016) investigated factors affecting South Korean high school students' remotivation and concluded that both external and internal factors remotivated their participants. Falout, Murphy, Fukuda and Trovela (2013) examined Japanese EFL learners' remotivation strategies and suggested that learners' past experiences and self-beliefs are significant. It should be noted that the field of motivation in general has been busy more with theorization rather than pedagogy and the number of studies addressing the latter is disappointingly few. The gaps this study intends to fill are two. First, although there are many studies on demotivation in English learning in general, one can find admittedly few studies on remotivation. Given that once causes for students' demotivation are identified, it is pedagogically significant to do some motivationally remedial work, the present study contributes to our understanding of such endeavors. Second, unlike few prior studies (e.g. Moskovsky, et al., 2012) in which the effects of teachers' motivational strategies on students' motivation are examined quantitatively over a short time (8-week period, for example), the current study follows Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2013) advice, adopts a qualitative approach, and, instead of changes in demotivated students' grades, focuses on their *behavioral changes* longitudinally.

Given that both teachers' instructional interventions and students' purposeful application of self-regulating strategies can play a role in such a process (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008) and since the above studies on remotivation principally focus on the latter, self-motivation, this study was done to, first, learn about the demotives of the participants and, second, explore how the teacher can help them recover their bygone motivation. We were interested to probe the 'situated and embedded lived experiences' of our demotivated students and track any possible changes in their motivation configuration as we tried to remotivate them over the whole academic year.

THE STUDY

This study follows the principles of case studies (Duff, 2012). First, we covered literature on motivational strategies. We drew on Dörnyei's Framework of Motivational Teaching Practice (2001) and the ten macro motivational strategies (Dörnyei & Csizer 1998). Although an exhaustive list of motivational strategies exists (Dörnyei 2001), we decided to limit our strategies menu following Dörnyei and Ushioda's *quality not quantity* advice. However, since contextual peculiarities affect generalizability of motivational strategies we were prepared to be flexible. We were also careful not to *impose* theory-driven pedagogical implications on our cases to address the concern raised by Ushioda (2013, p.1): "the relationship between motivation theory and practice tends to be of a top-down kind in the sense that it is from theory and research that implications for practice are instilled".

Second, we were interested to learn why our cases had lost motivation in learning English and how, if feasible, we could help them repack for and maintain it. We were also interested to track our participants' dynamics of remotivation in response to our program over time which gave a longitudinal character to our research design.

Third, in selecting cases, we followed *purposeful intensive* sampling in which information-rich cases are selected (Patton, 2002). This sampling procedure was followed with classes and grades (grade 8) the first researcher taught when the study was done. We selected four demotivated students rich in terms of the phenomenon under investigation, i.e. demotivation. The criteria for their demotivation included their own reports, their previous English teacher's view, their academic performance at an earlier grade and their parents' views. Observation of their behaviour during the first month provided further evidence that they were demotivated; their maladaptive behaviour included refusing to study and do homework, ignoring the teacher (the first researcher), getting absent and even taking a nap in class.

Given the status of English and the functions it fulfills in the new millennium and the fluidity of learning contexts in the age of dot-coms, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain the dichotomous account of ESL versus EFL. Classically speaking, however, English is a foreign language in Iran. Despite the official rhetoric of policy documents, *foreign* language education, it is English that prevails. Foreign language learning is compulsory for all Iranian students and they start learning it officially in the first year of high school when they are 13. Nowadays, a large number of Iranians attend fee paying private English institutes to start English education earlier, prepare for international tests such as IELTS and meet their increasing need to functional English.

Currently, Iran follows a two tiered education system: primary (grades one to six) and high school (grades 7 to 12). Our cases were eighth graders in a state school in West Azerbaijan, Iran. A profile of our cases follows.

Table 1: Cases' goal, background in PEI, age, and gender

	Gender/Age	**PEI/years**	**Goal**
Case one	Male/14	Yes/two years	Survival pass score
Case two	Male/14	Yes/three years	Survival pass score
Case three	Male/14	No	Survival pass score
Case four	Male/15	Yes/one year	Survival pass score, migrate to Türkiye

Note: PEI= Private English Institute

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

To collect data, interviews, questionnaires, students' written narratives (diaries), classroom observations and teacher field notes were used. At the beginning of the second month, we interviewed our cases to learn about their demotives. We also gave them an open-ended questionnaire to provide us with more of their *demotivation history*.

As for diaries, appreciating the inherent tension associated with solicited diaries (Alaszewski, 2006), the first researcher briefed cases on the overall research purpose and provided them with guidance on writing and keeping diaries. In their narratives, they were guided to reflect whatever (feelings, opinions, beliefs, teacher behaviour, peers, tasks, family and school factors, etc.) they deemed effective in their motivation rise and fall and their attitudes to motivational strategies. Their first diaries were checked to ensure they addressed relevant issues. They wrote in Farsi, the official language, to avoid any likely language obstacle in sharing their lives. They were asked to write at least ten diaries per month. They handed their diaries at the end of each month.

Although we kept a track of our cases' scores, we decided to focus on *behavioural measures* more. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013, p.200), "if we want to draw more meaningful inferences about the impact of various motives, it is more appropriate to use some sort of a behavioural measure as the criterion". More specifically, we considered *quality and quantity of home assignments*, *volunteering answer*, *soliciting help*, *class participation*, *extent of task engagement* and *course attendance* as potential manifestations of our cases' remotivation. Besides, we were open to include any other behavioural measures that could be interpreted as signs of remotivation if ample evidence in diaries and interviews made such interpretations plausible. Therefore, our classroom observations and field notes were only guided by, and not necessarily limited to, such measures.

Finally, for triangulation purposes, we interviewed our cases. The first interview aimed at learning about what had quenched their motivation flames. During the program, each case was interviewed four times, once every two months, to better keep under surveillance their motivational ebbs and flows. Inspired by Alaszewski's (2006) example, we followed a diary-interview technique: we used the major motivation related issues in their diaries during the subsequent interviews to gain a deeper and thicker account of cases.

To analyze interview, questionnaire and diary data, we followed a thematic content analytical procedure. First, we read and re-read our cases' interview transcriptions, diaries and answers to the questionnaire several times to familiarize with data and get a sense of whole. Next, we went on with noting pieces of data (key words, phrases…) that were relevant to research focus and questions followed by condensing such pieces into more inclusive codes, categories and themes (Braun & Clarke, 2013). We did the analyses independently of each other so that inter-coder consistency could be established later. Follow-up negotiations between the researchers helped resolve any potential discrepancies. Our data from classroom observations and field notes were used to further endorse the logic of our category and theme extraction. To address trustworthiness, we used triangulation—as described above—to take *credibility* of our findings into account. Regarding confirmability, not only did we do the analyses independently and negotiated discrepancies but also we did member checking. Moreover, explicitness of the data analysis steps further advocates the themes we ended up with. With regard to dependability, we asked a colleague (expert in qualitative analysis) to examine the steps we followed and the themes we extracted. Finally, our thick explanation of how we tried to remotivate the four demotivated students is intended to address transferability.

Demotivators

The most dominant recurring theme vis-à-vis demotivation across *all* cases was labeled 'extrinsic phenomena' which, in essence, meant 'significant others' which, in turn, meant *the teacher*. The cases unanimously blamed their former teacher in grade seven for damaging their motivation health and believed their negative past experiences were largely shaped by him. Two subthemes, however, were subsumed under this general theme and variations were observed across cases regarding how their teacher demotivated them. Whereas cases one and two placed more emphasis on *negative teacher behaviour*, the others stressed *professional practice* more. The excerpts come from cases one to four respectively.

> *He was tough … and…kind of authoritarian. He used to shout at us… even sometimes punishing … we had to keep silent like a stone. A teacher should be kind, patient and gentle… be a friend with students… this way the atmosphere becomes pleasant.*

> *Our teacher was strict and angry… I don't know why…never saw him smiling… he never tried to get close to us… he kept distant…didn't feel relaxed… his behaviour made me anxious … I would leave the class if I could…*

> *He just read the dialogs and readings fast and moved on…not checking if we understood… he didn't explain grammar clearly… not enough examples… only few bright students could follow him…*

> *He couldn't teach well; a short explanation of grammar and that's all…he was in a hurry to cover and finish!... he was sometimes unprepared… he made us memorize long dialogues… lots of homework without checking … what's more, his exam questions were much more difficult than what we had in the textbook…*

The other extrinsic factor resulting in inter-case difference was 'textbook'. Data suggested that textbook induced factors demotivated cases one and two and less so cases three and four. For the first group, the textbook tasks were *artificial*, *boring* and, in some cases, *too hard*. Finally, interesting inter-case differences were observed regarding 'interior phenomena'. Whereas for case one and four the prime demotivators were out there, cases two and three made some internal attributions, albeit hesitantly by the former, too:

> *I think I am not good at English… maybe I don't have the talent others have in learning English… I am not sure…*

> *Unlike other courses, English is out of my control… I feel I am incompetent in English learning …*

The cases with backgrounds in private English schools varied in relating their prior experiences to their existing motivation profile. For cases two and four, the experience was positive and motivating since the *teacher* was gentle, friendly and easygoing creating a laid-back climate; *textbooks* were more attractive, and the *tasks* included student interaction, role plays, music, and fun activities. For them, the two learning contexts were markedly different and this *context transition* turned their motivation sour. Case one, however, did not agree:

> *I didn't enjoy English classes there either… first, I was sent there…it was my mom's decision and not mine… also, the teacher was demanding… asking for neat and careful task completion at home… all this added to my workload…*

Remotivation journey

Based on case-general and case-specific demotivational factors and inspired by motivational strategies by Dörnyei's (2001) and Dörnyei and Csizer (1998), we took the following steps to help our cases rebuild their collapsed motivation. Before moving on, a few points seem in order. First, except case one whose early dislike of English had increased before our program, the other cases were initially motivated in grade seven and had lost motivation gradually. Second, nowadays the role of teachers in motivating students is viewed differently; they are no longer considered as an external cause in the linear *cause effect approach*; rather, "teachers need to develop an understanding of how their learners conceive their own learning process and how learners' thinking shapes their behaviour" (Waddington 2017) to stimulate students. Bearing this in mind, the first researcher tried to know as much of their learning perception as possible. Due to space limitations, we focus mainly on case-general part of our study.

Developing close relationships

All our cases carried 'left alone', 'abandoned' and 'detached from teachers' feelings in their emotional baggage. We decided to care and listen to them by holding regular meetings and intimate talks in the first researcher's office and by creating a *WhatsApp* group where we could spend more time and let them share their stories with each other so that their *sense of cohesiveness* could be fostered too. We called our group '*Biz Qayıdacağıq*' (Azerbaijani Turkish for *we'll get back*). The link also increased availability for personal contact with teacher. We reached out to our cases' families believing that "parents can be powerful allies in any motivational effort" (Dörnyei 2001, p.39). We regularly informed them of their children's journey and asked occasionally for their assistance.

Offering remedial classes

One common demotive was found to have roots in their past: they reported problems with our remotivation program because they almost lacked grade 7 language knowledge. Moreover, we found that to help students *sustain* the *initiated* motivation, their linguistic self-confidence should be nurtured. Supported by school principal and their parents, we held free remedial courses to compensate for what they lacked. The courses were assumed to positively affect their *expectancy of success* too since it gradually prepared them for tasks in class.

Creating relaxed atmosphere and projecting enthusiasm

We increased the *norm of tolerance* by encouraging our cases to take risks while doing tasks without worries of subsequent criticisms. They were frequently told that making mistakes is a natural phenomenon in learning. The teacher also avoided the rigid authoritative attitude the cases disapproved. Additionally, he showed his interest to English by sharing his opinions about the role of English in the globalized world and how it helps with learning about other, and not necessarily English, cultures. He also raised the cases' awareness of instrumental potential of English by discussing financial and promotional benefits accorded to English in Iran and abroad.

The teacher showed shorts videos of their favorite games to link English with joy. Short videos of their sports idols, Iranian football players, were also shown while using English with reporters and fans to spark their interest more. Also, two 12th graders were invited to talk to them in the second and third months. These students were known as first demotivated, then motivated and successful in English. Such real success stories were used to raise the cases' awareness of the role of *effort* or *investment* in language learning. This was of high relevance to all cases with attribution mechanisms described above. Also, the teacher brought scripts of scholars' views on language learning to class and compared them with business driven claims (learn English in 30 days) to dispel the myths.

Substituting mono with multi-methodical teaching
To address some causes of demotivation the cases reported, the teacher made as much change as he could to avoid monotony. He used video projector, flash cards, *authorized* music and information gap, problem solving group activities. Language games with a prize for the winner group were also used occasionally. When applicable and for personalization purposes, students were required to imagine themselves as the character in reading tasks and create their own stories. For challenging tasks, the teacher played the role of a student and *thought aloud* to familiarize them with effective strategies.

Working on expectancy of success

Dörnyei's (2001) suggestions to address students' expectancy of success were followed: pre-tasks activities preceded main tasks; the teacher provided assistance (giving hints, clues, explanations, examples, etc.) with tasks and group activities let students help each other. To address our cases' expectancy of success and a demotive in their past life, low scores, we gave them regular short quizzes. Since the quizzes were limited in what they covered, they were assumed to be affordable, student friendly and less tense provoking. Parallel to institutional assessment goal setting (formal, product oriented summative achievement tests) for which we could do nothing, we used portfolio assessment to gain a process perspective too.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Our cases tended to project the responsibility for their loss of motivation onto primarily external factors. Two cases attributed the loss to uncontrollable internal causes too: 'I don't have the knack' or 'foreign language is not my forte' beliefs. Surprisingly enough, two cases with moderate to high motivations in PEIs viewed their teachers as the prime motivators. With little or no *sense of agency* amongst all cases, a low *sense of self efficacy*, a dose of *learnt helplessness* in the belief system of two cases, and setting a survival pass grade as their goals (except for case four), we had to start with shaking their belief assemblage first. Our experience suggests that students could be *nudged* in the right path of motivational mindset and their belief conglomerations and motivational buildup could be *worked on*, if not changed substantially. In other words, their initial highly skewed attribution mechanism could be brought into surface and negotiated with subsequent positive effects on their *motivational autonomy*. Evidence for this comes not only from their diaries and interviews in which moderate acknowledgment of investment and self-confidence increased over time but also from our records of their behavioural measures: qualitative and quantitative improvement of assignments, class participation, volunteering answer, soliciting help, etc. Our experience gives credence to Anderman and Anderman's (2010, p.2) argument that teachers "influence students' beliefs about their own abilities, their attitudes towards certain subject areas…their beliefs about the

causes of their successes and failures". Finally, a mild but progressively upward grade pattern emerged from our quantitative data too.

Second, teacher rapport and close relationship with the cases was the best remotivator across all cases; no other motivational strategies even came close to it. This was followed by the relaxed and emotionally safe learning climate. These two make up Dörnyei's 'creating the basic motivational conditions' in his model of motivational teaching, suggesting that they are, in fact, *the basics* or the very fundamentals. Our experience suggests that what Dörnyei (2001) calls *small gestures* are probably as effective as big motivational strategies including teacher availability, belief in their ability to achieve and recognition of their efforts. In his diary, case two wrote:

> *Today, I got a voice message from Mr. X. I couldn't resist my tears …a happy birthday message! It is the first and probably the last message coming from a teacher… I listened to his message at least ten times… I played it to my parents too… Oh my God…what if he leaves our school next year?*

An interesting *ought-to L2 Self* motive was found to have merged with their *sense of cohesiveness* at the end of the program. With no reflections in diaries and interviews, the cases admitted at the end that they had made an agreement in month four or so: *when we saw how genuinely and passionately you were trying to help… holding free classes … always answering our questions in WhatsApp … we made a resolution… we promised each other to do our best to not let you down… we would feel guilty if we did… it would prick our conscience …*

Third, and in line with contemporary approaches to motivation recognizing the uniqueness of the complex mutual relationships between each unique individual and the unique context in which s/he is, our cases provided interesting evidence of the uniqueness of each learner's motivational dynamics. For instance, giving regular quizzes was viewed positively by three cases because it let them experience success and recover self-confidence but brought anxiety to case one. Additionally, the cases' motivational rise and up could be accounted for, in some particular cases, by task properties and their assessment of its challenge potential. With initiated motivation, some cases failed to sustain it in some domains: '*this* the *is very difficult to understand… confusing and deceiving … lots of exceptions…*' Or, case four for whom 'Turkish citizenship' made the core of his *imagined community* did not acknowledge the role of English as the world's lingua franca as his peers did:

> *English is important these days… but I'm planning to leave Iran and move to Türkiye like my brother… my brother says English is not important here… I watch Turkish soap operas and I understand them…our Turkish [Azerbaijani Turkish] is so similar to theirs…*

Fourth, despite our efforts to raise our cases' awareness of the role of English as a collective cultural capital, its function in intercultural communication and its enriching and expanding capacity vis-à-vis senses of selfhood and identity, we found our cases did not relate to and communicate with such notions. For them, mastering book content and passing tests sounded more tangible. This might be partially explained by Block's (2007) arguments that in home country institutions learners primarily forge an identity of a *pupil* since English is another subject on curriculum. This justification is further supported by Iran's attempts to deconstruct English since it might pose identity threats to students and their identities might get *the colour of the Other* (Mazlum, 2022). Complicating this is the age of our cases; were they too young

to perceive and recognize globalization and start experimenting and exploring their selfhood in Yashima's international posture?

Finally, we believe that our qualitative findings can be juxtaposed with those coming from quantitative investigations, which, in turn, places a heightened emphasis on 'teachers' and their roles in remotivating demotivated English learners. More specifically, the key role of the first researcher—an English teacher—in this longitudinal study in remotivating our demotivated cases is similarly reflected in experimental quantitative studies providing similar evidence that teachers are the prime factors in enhancing English learners' motivation (Moskovsky, et al., 2012). In addition to pedagogical importance, this is of theoretical significance since it expands our understanding of the roles teachers—compared to other significant others such as peers—play in students' motivational buildups. This is further supported by the findings of McCarthy and Farr (2022) who report that, compared to parents, teachers play a more fundamental role in student motivation in general. Of course, we admit that the transferability of findings in qualitative studies is bound to transferability to similar contexts and individuals and not generalizability to broader contexts. This might explain why raising students' awareness of the role English plays internationally remotivated Japanese English learners (Song & Kim, 2016) but not our cases.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Case studies aim essentially at analytical rather than statistical generalizations. Despite this, our case-general findings advocate the pivotal role teachers play in (de)motivating students. The belief that teachers are the major motivators, demotivators and, at the end of our program, remotivators provides further substantiation to the probably unrivalled role this group of *significant others* play in students' lives.

To re-whet demotivated learners' appetite, we suggest teachers get to know how such learners conceive their own learning process and gain as much information on their *antecedent conditions* as possible first; their belief and emotional baggage should be carefully x-rayed. We believe this is a longitudinal process for which genuine personal interaction is necessary. Next, the two sides can proceed with negotiations during which such learners are ushered to develop *realistic motivational and learning beliefs* that will need even more time.

Finally, as echoed by Ushioda (2013), local contextual realities might call for a reappraisal of theory-driven motivational strategies suggested as pedagogical recommendations; thus what comes as 'Ten Commandments for Motivating Language Learners' should be treated as tentative only. Our cases did not appreciate the cultural capital potential of English, for example. Only further studies taking local contexts as the starting point can reveal more.

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