

Revisiting Demotivators in the EFL Classroom: The Interaction Effect between Gender and Performance on Negative Teacher Behavior

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Abstract

The existing research on demotivators in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms is extensive, but there is still not much known about how different students react to these demotivators. This study aimed to extend prior research by examining the connections between gender, academic performance, and factors that can demotivate students. We adopted the Learner Perceptions of Demotivators Scale (Xie et al., 2021) to measure three demotivating factors: *negative teacher behavior*, *loss of task value*, and *low expectancy for success*. Data were collected from a sample of undergraduate students in China ($n = 320$) representing various majors. The results showed that negative teacher behavior was a unique demotivator in several ways: (a) female students showed higher need for relatedness-supportive teacher behavior ($t = 2.22, P = .03$); (b) there was an interaction effect between gender and performance on negative teacher behavior $F(1,316) = 4.63, p = .03$; and (c) low-performing male students were less sensitive to negative teacher behavior. Practical implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Keywords

Demotivator, demotivation, interaction effect, negative teacher behavior

Introduction

Motivation is derived from the Latin word *moveo*, meaning to move, stir, agitate, provoke, or affect. The psychological construct of motivation captures the mechanism by which individuals choose certain behavior and persist with it. Motivation provides individuals with goals to work towards and drives human actions. In education, motivation is necessary for student engagement. Students who are motivated are goal-oriented, unfazed by distractions, and able

to maintain their attention during longer periods of time. Demotivation, on the other hand, is a state of disengagement; demotivated students struggle to engage and persist in goal-directed activity (Dörnyei, 1998; Xie et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2024). Demotivated learners devalue challenges and may experience unpleasant psychological reactions to demanding academic settings. Motivation affects how students approach school in general, how they relate to teachers, and how much time they devote to their schoolwork when they are struggling. Demotivated students can even disengage other students from academics, impacting the learning environment of an entire classroom.

Demotivation in the EFL Classroom

Research in EFL motivation began in the late 1950s and flourished in the 1970s with the pioneering work of Lambert and Gardner (Mallik, 2017). The field of language learning and teaching has been influenced for many years by the model which came from the studies of language immersion in Canada (Ehrman, 1996). The model classifies motivation into two categories, instrumental and integrative. Instrumental motivation refers to learning to accomplish a task, such as passing a course or getting a raise. Integrative motivation refers to a favorable attitude toward the target language community; for example, wishing to integrate and adapt to a new culture through use of the language.

Recognizing the importance of motivation in language learning researchers have paid increasing attention to EFL demotivation in recent years. EFL demotivation is an emerging research topic that interests both researchers and practitioners. If motivation is the force that drives learners to achieve their goals, demotivation drives learners in the opposite direction. Demotivation negatively influences learners, degrades classroom dynamics and students' drive, and leads to negative learning outcomes such as low self-efficacy and performance (Xie et al., 2021). EFL demotivation researchers have sought to identify learner perceptions of demotivators or learner attributions of demotivation specific to EFL learning. External attributions (e.g., negative teacher behavior, for example, teachers do not have faith in their students.) are often found to influence the internal conditions of the learner (e.g., attitude towards learning) in the demotivational process. Specifically, learners' perceptions of their external environments are processed internally, where further psychological factors contribute to the demotivational process (Falout et al., 2009).

Gender and Demotivation in the EFL Classroom

The role of gender in shaping achievement motivation has long been the focus of psychological and educational research. Developmental research shows that gender differences in motivation are evident early in school and increase within science and language arts over the course of school. Across all motivation theories, research indicates girls' and boys' motivation-related beliefs and behaviors continue to follow gender role stereotypes: boys show stronger ability and interest in mathematics and science, whereas girls report higher self-efficacy level and interest in language arts and writing (Meece, et al., 2006). Gender differences in EFL demotivation research has focused on demotivation levels and results have been inconsistent. A student's demotivation level is generally measured by various learner attributions of demotivation or perceptions of demotivators in the EFL classroom, such as experiences of failure, class environment, and class materials. For example, while there was a significant gender difference in terms of factors related to the characteristics of classes and experiences of failure (e.g., low grades), no gender differences were detected in lack of interest and class materials (e.g., Han et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2018).

Performance and Demotivation in the EFL Classroom

Motivation energizes and directs behavior toward achievement and therefore is a critical determinant of academic success. According to a meta-analysis of studies focused on intelligence and motivation as predictors of school achievement ($N = 80,145$), there is a positive average correlation between motivation and school achievement ($r = 0.27$); motivation contributes substantial and unique share to the prediction of school achievement (Kriegbaum et al., 2018). Motivation is one of the forces that leads to performance, therefore, when students are demotivated, their academic performance will be adversely affected. A wealth of literature highlights the importance of self-efficacy for academic performance. Findings from the meta-analysis conducted by Richardson et al. (2012) demonstrate that self-efficacy beliefs account for up to 9% of the variance in college students' GPA. However, internal demotivators such as low expectancy for success can fundamentally alter the form and direction of the self-efficacy–performance relationship (Hardy, 2014; Xie et al., 2018).

The Current Study

Learning a foreign language often involves more instances of failure than other cognitive tasks. This is because it demands a substantial investment of time, effort, and commitment. Therefore, the motivation of EFL learners fluctuates over the course of learning (e.g., Sawyer, 2007). One of the places where demotivation is manifested earliest is the classroom. The EFL classroom demotivation is a multifaceted psychological construct that dampens one's desire to learn English as a foreign language. Students are demotivated by different combinations of both internal and external demotivators. Many EFL learners are exposed to external demotivators (e.g., negative teacher behavior or class climate) but there is great psychological variability in how people respond to these external demotivators. It is not clear what explains these differences.

Although a few studies have attempted to explain the differences by taking gender and performance into consideration separately (e.g., Han et al., 2019; Xie et al., 2018), the answer is complex and only partially understood. Therefore, more research is required to delve into the processes given that: (a) independent variables may work together to affect an outcome (b) demotivators vary in their respective degree of influence on individuals, and (c) individual differences are associated with students' unique needs (which links to their motivation levels). The current study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Are there any gender differences in demotivation attribution or demotivators?
- 2) What is the relationship between demotivation attribution and performance?
- 3) Is there an interaction effect between gender and performance on demotivators?

Method

Participants and procedure

A total of 320 college students (Female = 191, Male = 129) who studies English at a university in southeast China were recruited to participate. The questionnaire was administered to the participants during a 30-minute class break. The principle of voluntary participation was strictly abided by so that students were not forced to participate in the research. They were assured regarding confidentiality and anonymity.

Measures

Learner Perceptions of Demotivators Scale (LPDS) was used to measure students' demotivation (Xie et al., 2021). The items were summed to function as Negative Teacher Behavior (e.g., "Teachers don't have faith in their students."), Loss of Task Value (e.g., "It's not clear to me why I have to learn English."), and Low Expectancy for Success (e.g., "I

struggle with improving my English writing skills.”) indexes, Cronbach’s alpha values were .89, .94, and .87, respectively. Students responded on a scale of 4 to 1, with higher scores indicating higher levels of demotivation (see Xie et al., 2021 for the survey content).

Students’ EFL performance was measured using students’ self-reported College English Test “Band 4” scores, better known as CET 4. The CET score was reported on a scale from 290 to 710 with a passing score of 425, which guided us to divide participants into two groups based on the CET score threshold. There were 70 low-performing students ($CET < 425$) and 250 high-performing students ($CET \geq 425$).

Data analysis

First, to examine gender differences in demotivation attribution (negative teacher behavior, loss of task value, and low expectancy for success served as dependent variables), three separate independent *t*-tests were performed. Second, Pearson’s correlations were computed to determine whether significant correlations exist between the three demotivators and student EFL performance (CET score). Finally, given that: (a) no significant gender differences were found, except within negative teacher behavior ($t = 2.22, P = .03$); and (b) negative teacher behavior was the only demotivator that found to be positively correlated with academic performance ($r = .18, p = .002$), a 2 (gender) \times 2 (performance) ANOVA was performed to determine whether there is an interaction effect between gender and performance on the demotivator of negative teacher behavior. We placed students in categories of high ($CET \geq 425$) or low ($CET < 425$) performance with the use of the threshold split method.

Results

RQ1: Are there any gender differences in demotivation attribution /demotivators?

Among the three demotivators (negative teacher behavior, loss of task value, and low expectancy for success), no significant gender differences were found except within negative teacher behavior. Table 1 displays the results of the three *t*-tests.

Table 1

Results of Independent-Samples T-test Analysis of Gender on Demotivators

	Male ($n=129$)	Female ($n=191$)	<i>t</i>
	<i>M(SD)</i>	<i>M(SD)</i>	
NTB	20.25(6.37)	20.99(2.77)	2.22*
LTV	18.12(3.19)	17.19(3.89)	1.84
LES	23.05(4.31)	23.20(3.66)	.35

Note. $df = 318$ for all tests. * $p < .05$.

NTB = Negative Teacher Behavior, LTV = Loss of Task Value, and LES = Low Expectancy for Success

RQ2: What is the relationship between demotivation attribution and performance?

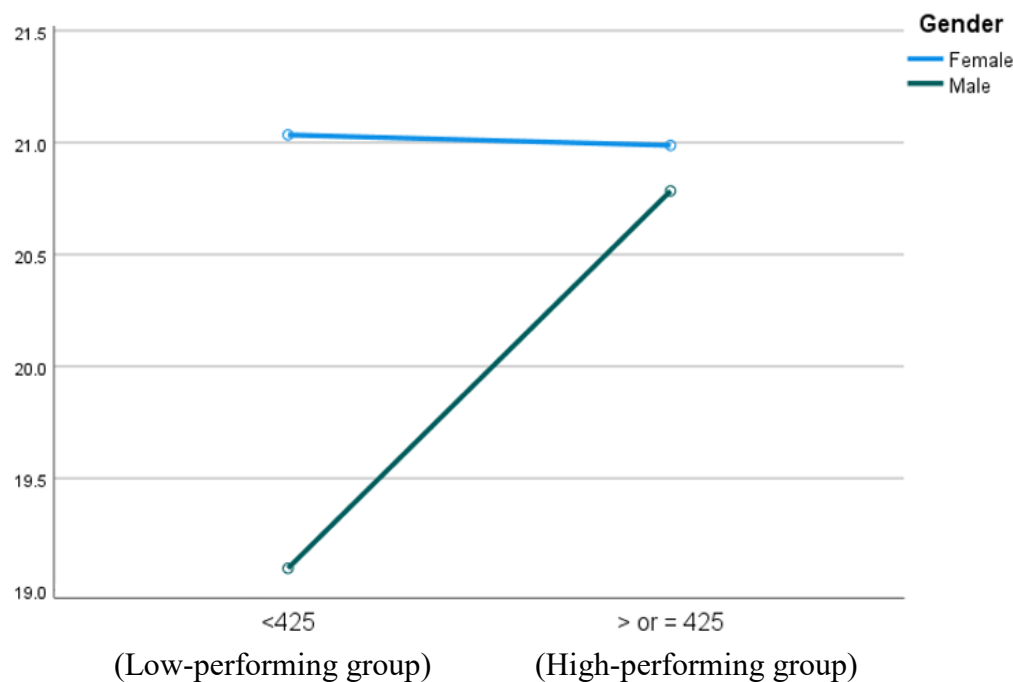
While loss of task value ($r = -.27, p < .001$) and low expectancy for success ($r = -.24, p < .001$) were negatively correlated with performance, negative teacher behavior was positively correlated with academic performance ($r = .18, p = .002$).

RQ3: Is there an interaction effect between gender and performance on demotivators?

Given the uniqueness of negative teacher behavior in the previous analyses, it is the only demotivator that was subjected to the 2 (gender) \times 2 (performance) ANOVA. As hypothesized, there was a significant interaction effect between gender and performance on negative teacher behavior, $F(1,316) = 4.63, p = .03$ (see Figure 1). Follow up tests were conducted to establish where the difference lies. It showed that low-performing male students ($M = 19.09, SE = .46$) were significantly different from low-performing female students ($M = 21.03, SE = .54, p = .006$), high-performing male students ($M = 20.78, SE = .31, p = .002$), and high-performing female students ($M = 20.99, SE = .23, p < .001$). No significant differences were found among other groups.

Figure 1

Interaction Effect Between Gender and CET Score on Teacher Behavior



NTB = Negative Teacher Behavior

Discussion

The current study extended the existing literature by examining the interconnections among gender, performance, and demotivation. Low-performing male students scored significantly lower than the other three groups (low-performing female students, high-performing male students, and high-performing female students) in terms of negative teacher behavior. In other words, it appeared that low-performing male students had the lowest need for relatedness-supportive teacher behaviors. Moreover, overall, all female students showed higher need for relatedness-supportive teacher behavior (see Figure 1).

Intrinsic motivation refers to the motivation to engage in a behavior because of the inherent satisfaction of the activity (e.g., the joy of learning a foreign language) rather than the desire for an external reward. By comparison, extrinsic motivation is driven by external rewards. These can be tangible, such as grades, or intangible, such as praise or fame. A sense of belonging, such as students feeling respected by the teacher, opens the door for intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Further, students who rate higher in their need for

belongingness have higher values for intrinsic goals such as personal growth, healthy relationships, and relatedness (Niemic et al., 2009). Therefore, it seems that low-performing male students were more extrinsically oriented for EFL learning, and it is the extrinsic motivation that results in the low need for relatedness-supportive teacher behavior.

The gender gap identified in the current analysis also replicates previous literature. As social agents play an essential role in the development of student beliefs and values, gender differences in student academic demotivation can be explained by the social influences that students experience. Cross and Madson (1997) learned that social relationships (e.g., teacher-student relationship) are more likely to affect females' mindset than males' mindset. Feelings of relatedness are specifically important for the retention of women in many disciplines. Several studies suggest that students' academic motivation is strongly related to their perceived support and encouragement provided by their teachers (e.g., Fan et al., 2009; Patrick et al., 2007). Verbal encouragement and persuasion appear especially important for women in terms of motivation beliefs (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000). For example, females are more likely to cite a positive influence with a teacher as a factor for becoming interested in a subject, which has implications for teacher behavior in fostering an interest in the subject among female students.

Implications for Future Research

Academic success is one of the primary goals of education. Central to understanding students' academic success is motivation, typically defined as a set of interrelated goals, values, beliefs, and emotions that explain the initiation, direction, strength, and quality of behavior. Similarly, contemporary researchers have repeatedly suggested that EFL demotivation is embedded within a complex web of internal (e.g., loss of task value and low expectancy for success) and external influences (e.g., negative teacher behavior). However, much of the literature on EFL demotivation focuses on identifying demotivators in the EFL classroom even though: (a) demotivation is the other side of motivation, and (b) motivation is complex, multifaceted, and sensitive to situational conditions (Hartnett et al., 2011). For example, the way students interpret academic struggles (e.g., the challenges of learning a foreign language) in college may affect whether they remain engaged and value the learning activities in class. If students attribute their academic struggles to a perceived lack of ability to succeed, they may be less likely to persist. Therefore, the independent study of EFL demotivation, to the exclusion of individual characteristics (e.g., gender, language proficiency, and attributional style), would be impoverished.

Implications for practice

Individual differences in students include variables such as cognitive skills, personal interest, gender, proficiency, preferred learning styles, and personality traits. It is essential for the teacher to consider individual differences when planning their teaching. For example, while female students are often considered more emotionally expressive and rely on interpersonal support to a greater extent, male students are, on average, more willing to compete in academic settings (e.g., Buser et al., 2014; Buser et al., 2017). Additionally, previous research showed that several aspects of school context (e.g., teacher support and the academic and behavior expectations of the teacher) were significantly correlated with student attitudes and behaviors. For instance, the way students perceive teacher characteristics will affect their engagement in the subject. The teachers perceived as supportive enhance students' self-efficacy and their feelings of control.

Limitations

Some limitations were present in the current study. Most notably, some minor levels of selection bias may have been present in the respondent populations. Whereas regional differences and achievement gap exist in every country, the questionnaires were administered to students from a single institution in southeast China. Further, while performance was a very important variable under examination, a great majority of participants were high-performing students; only 21% of the participants were under-achieving students. In China, poor EFL performance in college has long-term consequences for the individual. Understanding college EFL under-achievers and reducing the number of low-performing students is not only a goal in its own right but also an effective way to improve an education system's overall performance and equity. In addition, increased evidence supports the link between low performance and lower social economic status. Therefore, future researchers are strongly encouraged to incorporate such demographics in future research studies and to take these factors into consideration when developing research questions, conducting analyses, and interpreting results.

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