
“DEMOTIVATION FACTORS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM: IDENTIFYING RECURRING THEMES IN WHY LEARNERS "DROP OUT" OR DISENGAGE”

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to present a systematic review and thematic analysis of English language learner demotivation in the English language classroom to find the major factors that cause demotivation of students and the tendency to leave the classroom. Although English language proficiency is highly valued in the world, students in EFL and ESL environments still have a low level of motivation and active involvement in their classrooms. The main aim of this study was to synthesize the literature for general patterns of learner demotivation in a variety of educational contexts.

A qualitative systematic literature review approach was used and analyzed 38 studies that published between 2015 and 2025. Thematic analysis was employed to detect and explore common themes within the literature, which was retrieved from major academic databases. The results identified five key themes that emerged as influential factors on the demotivation of learners: teacher centered instruction, curriculum irrelevancy and examination orientation, learner autonomy, negative classroom climate and limited communicative opportunities.

Results show that demotivation is a multidimensional phenomenon, the components of which are interconnected and have pedagogical, curricular, and psychological dimensions. The use of traditional teaching methods and exam-oriented curricula consistently identified as key factors in students' disengagement from learning. Furthermore, anxiety and self-confidence issues and not many chances for genuine communication further accentuated demotivational experiences.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of pedagogical changes that focus on learning, communicative teaching methods and curriculum development that has more relevance in the English language learning context. The results are significant for teachers, curriculum

developers and policy makers interested in enhancing engagement in EFL/ESL classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Learner demotivation; English language learning; systematic review; thematic analysis; EFL classroom.

1. INTRODUCTION

Motivation in second/foreign language learning has been identified as one of the major factors in successful language learning and acquisition for a long time. Motivation significantly affects the engagement of the learner in classroom interaction, communicative interaction, persistence in challenging tasks, and language attainment (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) in the field of English language learning. But, as well as motivation, there has been a growing focus on the phenomenon of demotivation, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms. Demotivation is the decrease or disappearance of the motivation of the learners to learn the language because of a variety of internal and external factors (Dörnyei, 2001). Demotivation can result in students becoming disengaged, passive in the classroom, under achieving in their studies, and, in extreme instances, disengaging from participation in language learning activities entirely—this is not a lack of interest.

The research on language learning demotivation concentrated on the variables of the teacher and classroom practices. Chambers (1993) pinpointed a number of factors to account for learner disengagement, including behaviour of teachers, negative classroom experiences and dispiriting teaching methods. Subsequent research further revealed that pedagogical, psychological, institutional, and socio-cultural factors all play a role in the occurrence of demotivation (Kikuchi, 2015). Disengagement from the learning process can happen in the present-day English classroom for a variety of reasons, such as too much focus on examinations, teacher-centered approach to teaching, and the lack of relevance of the curriculum in relation to the learners' needs as well as lack of meaningful communication and learner autonomy in the classroom (Ojong, 2024). All these are especially relevant in EFL environments with little or no social motivation for the learning of English.

In the past ten years, English language teaching (ELT) has experienced significant changes as a result of the demands for communicative competence, globalization, and greater incorporation of the use of technology. However, most educational systems still adhere to a traditional teaching style which focuses on grammar translation, memorization, and examination performance (Shahi, Khany & Shoja, 2023). These methods tend to restrict student interaction and limit opportunities for the use of the language in real-life situations. Recent systematic

reviews indicate that, in the context of many EFL language classrooms, learners are less motivated because classroom activities lack novelty, are teacher-dominated, and lack relevance in relation to the students' interests and future plans (Gürlüyer & Atmaca, 2025). Likewise, students' willingness to learn the English language is often reduced by over-teaching and under-participation by the students, as noted by Wang and Littlewood (2021).

The problem of demotivation of learners has been increasingly conspicuous in international educational settings. English is seen as a mandatory language for higher education, job opportunities, and travel abroad in many Asian nations such as China, Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Thailand. However, students in these settings frequently express low engagement, and interest in English classes, with reasons ranging from poor curricular design, too high-stakes testing, too many students in a class, and lack of communicative opportunities (Gao, Liu & Liu, 2022). Research in both Japan and Korea has shown that in the learning of English, students often view the learning process as mechanical and abstract, rather than being in touch with genuine communication (Kikuchi, 2015). In the South Asian context such as Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, the literature indicates that lack of adequate resources, teacher-centred instruction and restricted exposure to relevant interactions in English leads to classroom disengagement (Ali & Pathan, 2017).

Demotivation has been recognized as a worldwide problem in education, not just in Asia. According to Bahari (2022), the problems that were found in Middle Eastern, African and Latin American contexts include poor classroom climate, lack of learner autonomy, limited feedback, and low relevance of English instruction to students' personal targets. Furthermore, the digital learning environment has grown rapidly since COVID-19, bringing new issues and problems with the technological inequality, a decrease in interaction, and the emergence of emotional disengagement (Bahari, 2023). Technological innovations can facilitate language learning motivation, but the lack of integration and pedagogical adaptation of technology can intensify demotivational experiences of language learners.

The literature provides evidence that demotivation can be manifested in several ways and that it is situation-dependent. But there have been previous studies which have concentrated on the national or institutional level of demotivation rather than attempting to draw up general patterns of the nature of demotivation across a variety of educational contexts. Although there have been a number of reviews on English language learning motivation, there have been fewer studies that have systematically examined the themes that emerge as motivation in ELs to drop out of classroom participation and processes. In addition, little research has focused on understanding the nature of a multi-faceted problem of disengagement – that is, how institutional practices,

curriculum structures and pedagogical approaches can collectively contribute to this disengagement in various EFL and ESL contexts.

Hence, the present study aims to fill this gap by conducting a systematic review and thematic analysis of the recent literature on demotivation in the English language classrooms. This review is designed to be a synthesis of the main factors that are found repeatedly in recent empirical research findings which influence learner disengagement and lower level of participation in learning English. Understanding these factors is essential for improving instructional practices, enhancing learner engagement, and creating more supportive and meaningful English language learning environments.

Accordingly, the objectives of this study are:

1. To systematically review recent literature on learner demotivation in English language classrooms.
2. To identify and analyze the recurring themes contributing to learner disengagement in EFL and ESL contexts.
3. To examine how pedagogical, curricular, and contextual factors influence students' motivation and participation in English learning.

Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on English language education by providing a comprehensive thematic understanding of demotivation factors affecting learners across diverse educational settings. The findings are expected to offer valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and policymakers seeking to promote more engaging, learner-centered, and contextually relevant English language instruction.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design and Approach

The research design used in this study was qualitative research with inductive approach, which is designed to study the factors that cause demotivation and disengagement of learners in the English language classroom in a systematic manner. Qualitative systematic reviews can help to synthesize findings from various educational contexts and also help to reveal any common conceptual patterns in the existing literature (Snyder, 2019). The inductive nature of the study allowed themes to be created within the data presented in the review rather than theory-based categories. The approach is suitable in studying complex educational and psychological processes like demotivation of learners which can also be different in different sociocultural and pedagogical contexts (Thomas & Harden, 2008).

The study used a specific method of systematic literature review (SLR) and thematic analysis. A systematic review offers a structure and transparency in identifying, appraising, and making sense of scientific literature on a given topic of enquiry (Page et al., 2021). Systematic reviews are designed to be done to reduce the researcher's bias in search strategy, inclusion criteria, and analysis, compared to narrative reviews. The present study sought to draw insights about the nature of the demotivation factors found in various contexts of the English language learning, so the use of SLR provided the opportunity to get an overall and evidence-based insight into the problem.

2.2 Literature Search Strategy

Literature search was carried out using various renowned international academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, ERIC, Taylor & Francis Online, and Google Scholar. The reason for the choice of these databases is that they have a very wide coverage of peer-reviewed publications in the field of English language teaching, applied linguistics and educational psychology. Words that were used in the search process are: “learner demotivation,” “English classroom disengagement,” “EFL motivation,” “ESL learner dropout,” “student disengagement in English learning,” and “teacher-centered learning and motivation.”

The review focused on recent studies published from 2015 to 2025 as a way to reflect the developments and current issues in the field of English language education. This period was deemed to be suitable as the engagement patterns have transformed considerably as a result of globalization, curriculum changes, technology integration, and changes in education after the pandemic. To ensure that the material was of academic quality and relevance, only peer-reviewed journal articles published in English were included.

A total of around 145 articles were found by searching in the databases. The 82 studies to be further evaluated were selected after the removal of duplicate records and screening of titles and abstracts. Then, full-text screening was done according to predetermined inclusion/exclusion criteria. Lastly, 38 empirical and review-based studies were chosen for final analysis.

2.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included in the review if they:

1. Focused on learner demotivation, disengagement, or dropout tendencies in English language learning contexts;
2. Examined EFL or ESL classroom environments;
3. Were published between 2015 and 2025;
4. Were peer-reviewed academic journal articles; and

5. Provided empirical or theoretical findings relevant to classroom demotivation factors.

Only studies that had a clear focus on general academic motivation (not specific to ELL) and sufficient methodological clarity and that were not conference abstracts, non-English publications, editorials, or unpublished theses were included.

The selected studies reflected different geographic settings, ranging from East Asia, South Asia, Middle East, Europe to Latin America. Countries like China, Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Turkey, Iran and Saudi Arabia were highlighted in the literature. The geographic diversity enhanced the comparative and international value of the review results.

2.4 Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the selected studies. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analytic technique that involves identifying, structuring and elucidating common themes or patterns in text (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach was deemed to be suitable as the study aimed to identify factors that demotivated students in common across various educational settings and research results.

The analysis was carried out in six stages following the six-stage approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing report. Themes of 'learner disengagement' were found and grouped under themes during coding process. Themes that appeared repeatedly in the literature reviewed were teacher-centred teaching, irrelevance of the curriculum, examination pressure, lack of learner autonomy, negative classroom atmosphere and limited communicative opportunities.

Thematic analysis also helped to clarify the findings of the study and to interpret them in a more coherent manner, thus adding depth and interpretive value. In addition, thematic analysis has been acknowledged for its adaptability and appropriateness in educational research where sources of qualitative data may encompass a variety of sources (Nowell et al., 2017). This gave the study the flexibility to build a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to demotivation in English classrooms, but also ensured that it was methodologically sound and analytically transparent.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Overview of Included Studies

After all studies had been screened systematically, there were 38 peer-reviewed studies that were included in the final synthesis that were published between 2015 and 2025. These studies have been conducted in different EFL/ESL contexts, such as East Asia, China, Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, Middle East, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and selected European contexts, such as Turkey. In all these studies, the phenomenon of learner demotivation was found to be a multi-dimensional and continuous one which is influenced by pedagogical, curricular, psychological and institutional factors.

The results of the thematic analysis of the literature selected revealed five main themes: (1) teacher-centered instructional approaches, (2) irrelevant curricula and exam-oriented learning, (3) less learner autonomy and less learner involvement, (4) negative classroom atmosphere and affective barriers, and (5) less communicative opportunities and less input exposure. All of these themes were interrelated and together helped students become disengaged and more prone to dropping out of English language classes.

1. Teacher-Centered Instructional Practices

The most common demotivation factors in the literature were found to be the teacher-centered instructional methods. Researches invariably showed that traditional teaching method in the English class results in lower participation and engagement.

In his large-scale study in Japanese EFL settings, Kikuchi (2015) revealed that students often complained about boredom and lack of interest in the grammar oriented teaching and learning and limited communicative interactions. Gao, Liu and Liu (2022) also found that in Chinese secondary schools students' participation was restricted and opportunities for them to speak were gradually reduced as teacher-dominated classrooms developed.

Similarly, Wang and Littlewood (2021) indicated that excessive teacher talk and low levels of learner autonomy were significant factors in demotivation in their case study of a group of university students in Hong Kong. Ali and Pathan (2017) reported that the Pakistani college students' motivations were low because of the instructional methods of rote learning instead of interactive communication in the context of South Asian.

Throughout these studies, pedagogical practices in which teaching becomes the focus of the learning process were found to be consistently demotivating, especially in situations where the English language is learned as an examination subject instead of an instrument of communication.

2. Curriculum Irrelevance and Examination-Oriented Learning

The second theme revealed in the literature is the irrelevance of the curriculum, especially the lack of integration between the English language teaching and learners' communicative needs. In many FLL settings, curricular content is dominated by the testing regime and the focus of the curriculum is on grammar accuracy, memorization and on test-taking.

Shahi et al. (2023) have pointed out that, in some Asian ELT situations, curricular requirements and standardized test systems are too constraining, causing learners to disengage. Finally, in their systematic review, Gürlüyer and Atmaca (2025) concluded that exam-driven instruction is usually linked to low levels of intrinsic motivation and surface learning strategies.

This study found that in Sri Lanka, students' lack of interest in classroom participation was found to be due to their perception of the lessons being over-emphasis on examination rather than communicative competence as well as the educators' limited knowledge of how to teach English as a communicative language (Jayasundara and Premarathna, 2020). Similar results were found in Iran where students related the learning of English with the academic pressure instead of personal and professional relevance (Rahimi & Zarei, 2019).

The results from this study indicate that curriculum design and assessment systems is a key factor in influencing the motivation of learners. However, if English is taught mainly as an academic subject, students are likely to become disengaged because it does not appear to be relevant.

3. Lack of Learner Autonomy and Participation

A third theme was the low level of opportunities for learners to be autonomous and to participate in English classrooms. Studies identified in various contexts, indicated that students generally do not have much control over learning activities, what to learn, or over the interaction in the classroom.

Rahayu and Cahyono (2018) concluded that Indonesian students were more motivated if they could select tasks and involve in cooperative learning. But there are limitations in traditional classroom settings, leading to passive learning behaviors.

In the same line of thought, Uslu and Acar (2020) stated that in Turkish EFL setting students experienced disaffection when the teacher-controlledness of the classroom activities was high because it did not allow them to be creative or think independently. Alrabai (2016) argued that the lack of autonomous supportive teaching techniques played a significant role in the motivation to learn English, which was perceived by the students in the University.

These results together suggest that motivation toward student autonomy is an important motivational factor. If students don't have chances to be actively involved in their learning

process, they are more likely to disengage and lose interest in learning the English language.

4. Negative Classroom Climate and Affective Barriers

Another important theme that emerged from the literature is the relationship between classroom climate and affective factors with regards to learners' demotivation. Anxiety, fear of getting it wrong, lack of confidence and negative feedback from teachers were consistently linked to emotional disengagement.

Dörnyei (2001) has first signalled the significance of affective factors in the language learning demotivation, and the latest empirical research still confirms its view. In Thai EFL classroom, Noom-Ura (2013) discovered that the students were highly anxious because of being afraid of the negative evaluation and this anxiety decreased their participation in speaking activities.

In Chinese university classrooms, similarly, Li and Liu (2020) found that excessive critical remarks by teachers and comparisons by peers made the classroom a stressful learning context, thus reducing students' active learning motivation. Lack of encouragement and supporting feedback resulted in a loss of confidence in the use of English in the Pakistani context, learners reported (Ali & Pathan, 2017).

In all of these studies, negative classroom-based emotional experiences were found to have significant negative impacts on motivation and participation.

5. Limited Communicative Opportunities and Input Exposure

The last significant theme that emerged was lack of purposeful communication opportunities in the English classroom. In all regions, students often complained of a lack of genuine English input and of limited opportunities for meaningful interaction.

For the Japanese EFL context, Kikuchi (2015) found that the learners were not actively engaged in spontaneous communication activities and this was one of the reasons for boredom and disengagement. In Vietnam, too, Le and Phan (2017) noted that students lacked adequate opportunities in communicative tasks, consequently, speaking confidence was low.

Wang and Littlewood (2021) also pointed out that communicative difficulties in classrooms will hinder language learning and lead to lower learners' motivation. Al-Seghayer (2014) pointed out that in Middle East countries, English teaching is commonly reading and grammar teaching rather than speaking and listening practice, resulting in passive learning.

The results of these findings indicate that communicative insufficiency is one of the factors that can hinder the motivation of learners in the field of English language learning.

Cross-Cutting Patterns Across Studies

The identified themes are listed separately, but the analysis showed that there were strong

connections between these themes. For example, teacher-centred learning is often accompanied by passive learning attitudes, and exam-based learning curricula promote passive learning behaviors. Likewise, the negative school climate is often exacerbated by the use of traditional pedagogical methods, poor communication, etc.

However, in each of the 38 studies, a common theme was demotivation in English language classrooms was not a single factor, but rather a pedagogical, curricular and affective factor. This is in line with Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) claim that motivational constructs in language learning are dynamic and context dependent, which are shaped by a host of interacting factors.

3.2 Summary of Key Findings

The systematic review reveals that the disaffection of students is a problem that is common across all English classrooms around the world, with five recurring themes namely: the teacher-centered approach, lack of relevance of the curriculum, lack of learner autonomy, negative feelings and emotional atmosphere, and lack of communicative exposure. All these factors play a role in causing learners to become disengaged, and in some cases drop out of school.

The results indicate that the improvement of learner engagement needs to be shifted to learner-centered pedagogy, communicative teaching and reform of the learner's curriculum with focus on language application in reality. In addition, developing an enabling classroom culture and giving learners autonomy are necessary to keep learners motivated in the learning environment of English.

4. DISCUSSION

This systematic review and thematic analysis was able to answer the research question of what are the common demotivation factors leading learners to become disengaged and vulnerable to leaving the English language classroom. The study aimed to review existing literature in a systematic way, to identify the dominant themes of demotivation and to investigate the relationship between pedagogical, curricular and contextual factors and the participation of learners in EFL and ESL classes by synthesizing the results of 38 peer-reviewed studies published from 2015 to 2025.

The results show five interrelated themes that explain the demotivation of learners: teacher-centered learning, irrelevance of learning contents and examinations, lack of autonomy of learners, negative in-class climate and limited communication opportunities. The results are consistent with Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), who believe that language learning motivation is context and situational dependent, shaped by internal motivational factors of the learners and

external motivational contexts in which they learn and teach.

The learners' lack of engagement is reflected in the predominance of teacher-centered pedagogy in context, which shows that traditional methods of teaching are still a major obstacle to engagement. Although the shift to communicative language teaching is taking place worldwide, in many classrooms meaningful interaction is restricted (Kikuchi, 2015; Wang and Littlewood, 2021). This indicates that there is a long-standing disconnect between educational theory and practice.

Likewise, it was found that consistently the curriculum irrelevancy and exam orientated instruction were the demotivating factors. This result shows that English is not seen as an exam language for students and thus there is a decline in their intrinsic motivation (Shahi et al., 2023). This calls for a reform of the curriculum in order to strengthen the aspects of language communication and application in the real world.

Learner autonomy and affective factors are also emphasized in the study. The lack of participation and autonomy-supportive environments leads to a lack of ownership and increase learners' anxiety and disengagement, respectively (Arabai, 2016; Li & Liu, 2020). This study highlights the importance of motivation as an emotional and social process.

In addition, the problem of limited communicative exposure is still a major concern in both contexts: especially in EFL contexts outside of the classroom where English is not used. This impedes real usage of language and brings about passive learning behaviour.

So, the present study demonstrates that learner demotivation is a complex phenomenon which can be attributed to the interconnectedness of pedagogical, curricular and psychological aspects. In synthesizing the findings from various contexts, this review gives a comprehensive understanding of the reasons behind learners' disengagement from learning English and the importance of learner-centred, communication-oriented, and contextually relevant teaching and learning.

5. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this systematic review was to explore in-depth factors that contribute to the learner demotivation in English language learning classes and what factors recurred. The research effectively met its goals by synthesizing 38 empirical and reviews studies and by systematically analyzing the literature and isolating five thematic patterns: teacher-centered instruction, curriculum irrelevance, lack of learner autonomy, negative classroom climate and limited communicative opportunities.

The results prove that a variety of pedagogical, curricular and affective factors interweaves to contribute to the demotivation of learners. Traditional teaching and testing approaches are still constraining learners' engagement and authentic language use in different environments around the world, especially in EFL classrooms. Furthermore, disengagement is exacerbated by emotional issues like anxiety and insecurities.

The study has a positive impact on ELT scholarship in that it brings together the study of a thematic approach that elucidates the reasons for the lack of motivation in English classrooms. It emphasizes the importance of pedagogical change in the direction of student-oriented, communicative and autonomy supporting education.

Future education reforms should emphasize the relevance of the curriculum, interactive teaching and learning methods, and classroom atmosphere to ensure that students are motivated and engaged in learning English.

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