EXPLORING THE CAUSES OF DEMOTIVATION IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AMONG NON-ENGLISH MAJORS

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Abstract: *With the aim of understanding the causes of decreased motivation to learn English among non-specialized students at a college in Ho Chi Minh City, one of the tools used in this research is a qualitative method, specifically in-depth semi-structured interviews in Vietnamese with six final-year students majoring in logistics and e-commerce. These students had all completed the introductory English program and had personal experiences of decreased motivation to learn English. The students are selected for the interviews had above-average learning outcome in the basic English program. the results show that many students lack clear career direction and are also pressured by expectations from family and society, feeling insecure and lacking confidence in communication, thus reducing the value of their learning. The research contributes to improving the curriculum and teaching methods. it also provides valuable empirical insights into the context of vocational college education in Vietnam, where qualitative research is still limited.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of "demotivation" is increasingly recognized as a multifaceted psychological process, indicative of a reduction or forfeiture of learning motivation influenced by many causes. In Vietnam, English is taught from high school through university, particularly in non-language academic disciplines. Besides that, some studies have initially approached this topic (Tran & Baldauf, 2007), but the majority of them still stop at the level of quantitative surveys, lack in-depth analysis from learners' actual experiences, and are not closely related to modern motivational theoretical frameworks. To overcome the limitations of previous studies that only used quantitative surveys and did not deeply analyze the interactions between factors, this study focuses only on the causes of decreased motivation, excluding factors that promote motivation. The novelty of the study is demonstrated in three points, the first qualitative study in Vietnam to uncover the mechanism through which a lack of career orientation disrupts the construction of the Ideal L2 Self (ILS), thereby triggering demotivation, next it combines two theoretical frameworks, the Second Language Motivational Self System (L2 MSS) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT), to explain the decline of motivation rather than its enhancement and lastly, it updates the literature with references from the last five years (Albalawi & Al-Hoorie, 2021; Xie, Gallo & Epting, 2024), replacing sources older than a decade. Based on these foundations, the study aims to answer the central question:

"What are the main causes of demotivation in learning English at a college in Vietnam, and how do these factors interact with each other in the learning process?"

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the L2 MSS model, the author Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) proposed three main components that make up language learning motivation, Ideal Second Language Self, which reflects the image of the learner's desire to become, Ought-to Second Language Self, which is the image that the learner believes they should become to meet external expectations; and second language Learning Experience, which are specific factors in the learning process such as teachers, teaching methods, materials, and classroom environment.

According to Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) define demotivation as "a temporary or long-term decrease in a learner's commitment to learning due to negative internal or external factors" Demotivating factors are often divided into two main groups. First, endogenous factors, which include learners' low self-esteem, lack of perceived value in learning, or lack of clear goals in the English learning process (Munoz & Valenzuela, 2020). Second, exogenous factors, including poor learning environment, boring teaching methods, lack of support from teachers, exam pressure, or unrealistic expectations from society and family (Alrabai, 2016; Ushioda, 2016).

According EVT of Wigfield & Eccles, 2000, learners' motivation is influenced by two primary factors, the worth of the job at hand and the learner's confidence in their own abilities to do it.

research on demotivation in learning EFL focuses on multidimensional factors that affect learners' motivation. the author Kikuchi and Sakai's (2009) survey of Japanese students identified six main groups of factors, including teachers' teaching methods and classroom characteristics such as comparison pressure, experience, lack of enthusiasm, lack of materials, and learning environment. meanwhile, Tran and Baldauf's (2007) study in Vietnam emphasized the role of the education system, specifically theoretical curriculum, assessment methods, lack of practice, and pressure for grades. in vietnam, research on demotivation in English learning is limited, primarily addressing instructional factors and examination stress. the author Tran and Baldauf (2007) contend that numerous students study English primarily to pass the course, rather than to cultivate practical proficiency. while these studies possess practical value, the majority employ quantitative methods, fail to explore experiences in depth, and do not examine the interplay between personal and social factors. moreover, research in Vietnam has not incorporated two robust theoretical models, namely L2 MSS and EVT, resulting in an absence of a comprehensive academic analytical framework. consequently, there remains a pressing need for research that bridges these limitations by adopting an integrative theoretical approach and delving deeper into learners' lived experiences.

III. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative exploratory study was conducted at a public technical college in Ho Chi Minh City, where English is a compulsory but non-core subject. Six final-year students including three males, three females, aged from18 to 22 from logistics and e-commerce majors were recruited through purposive sampling. All had completed at least two semesters of English (English 1 and 2) and reported personal experiences of demotivation. After ethical approval, in-depth, semi-structured interviews in Vietnamese from 15 to 20 minutes each student were conducted. The interviews explored causes of motivational decline and were audio-recorded with participants' consent, then transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The six participants were coded as S1 to S6. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, thick description of the context, an audit trail of coding decisions, and the use of direct quotes to ground interpretations in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

IV. FINDINGS

4.1. Internal Antecedents of Demotivation

4.1.1. Distorted perceptions of competence

Many students exhibited either overconfidence or unfounded self-doubt, both of which contributed to reduced effort. S2 admitted: "I feel that I have potential for learning English, so I am subjective and do not improve my knowledge". Conversely, S3 stated: "I feel that my English is very bad, and this has also affected my interest in other subjects".

Notably, both seemingly diametrically opposed extremes result in the same outcome learning stagnation. While S3, overcome by self-doubt, believes that all efforts are pointless, S2, who has an overwhelming conviction in their own skills, does not see the need to put in additional effort. from the standpoint of EVT, both situations show how "success expectations" have collapsed in two distinct ways, one side has extinguished expectations, while the other has twisted expectations. as a result, the "task value" of learning English is no longer appropriately assessed, which lowers motivation.

4.1.2. Poor self-management skills

Procrastination and lack of planning were frequently cited as internal causes of demotivation. S2 explained: "there are two reasons that I think make me lose motivation to learn English such as procrastination and not knowing how to plan to learn English" S1 also linked poor physical condition to self-regulation deficits: "I often stay up late, leading to lack of sleep, stress, and pressure in life, which leads to my health not being good enough to learn English."

These revelations demonstrate that a lack of motivation is frequently caused by behavioural habits and a lack of lifestyle discipline rather than just being a transient emotional condition. While S1 emphasizes the physiological part of the problem, where a deterioration in physical health immediately depletes the essential mental resources, S2's instance demonstrates a lack of metacognitive abilities in structuring learning. This implies that in order to restore motivation, intervention solutions must not only address psychological aspects but also provide learners with certain self-regulation techniques and encourage a healthy lifestyle.

4.1.3. Lack of career orientation

A clear absence of career goals was identified as a significant internal factor. S5 shared: "I do not have a clear orientation for my current and future career" S6 similarly asserted: "the main reason I lost motivation for learning English is because I did not have a specific and clear direction for development". These statements show that when learners fail to connect English learning to their future professional lives, intrinsic motivation deteriorates rapidly.

These statements reveal a significant gap in the construction of the ILS, a key component in Dörnyei's L2 MSS. when learners cannot envision a clear image of themselves in the future, where English proficiency plays a central role in their careers, they lose the psychological "guiding star" to motivate their current efforts. In other words, the decline in intrinsic motivation is not due to a negative experience, but rather a "purpose gap", a failure to establish a meaningful connection between current learning and future aspirations.

If the endogenous factors described above depict sustainable psychological and behavioral tendencies that quietly erode motivation over time, the data also simultaneously point to specific "crisis moments", where the loss of motivation erupts acutely. the next section will delve into these key situations, clarifying their triggering mechanisms and immediate manifestations.

4.2. Critical Moments and Manifestations of Demotivation

4.2.1. Setbacks in Achieving Learning Objectives

One of the negative factors that deeply affects the language learning process is failure to achieve learning goals, especially when the results are not as expected. such situations can lead to a serious crisis of confidence in the learner. S1 clearly described this state:

"When I tried to study IELTS, my band score did not increase, and I no longer found joy in learning English. At that time, I doubted myself a lot. Did I rest on my laurels with my previous scores, and could I still develop now?"

Similarly, S6 also falls into a vicious cycle when "I feel frustrated and lose interest in learning English when I have to study over and over again but still can't remember. Although I have spent time reviewing, after a while I still can't remember vocabulary."

Despite having different contexts such as an international standardised test and everyday vocabulary memorisation, these two experiences have a similar psychological scenario such as the effort is not rewarded with the anticipated outcomes, which causes a crisis of self-efficacy. In the context of EVT, this is a classic example of "success expectations" collapsing. when students consistently fail, they develop the psychological condition known as "learned helplessness," which sends them into a vicious cycle of quitting up.

4.2.2. Impact of Transitional Phases and Environmental Shifts

The process of learning a second language can be significantly influenced by the critical transition period and the influence of the surrounding environment, especially the peer group. S2 clearly illustrated this connection when he provided an explanation:

"I have lost interest in learning English before. When I got home, I did not have much time to study English. moreover, when I joined college, many friends around me also felt bored with learning English."

S2's account reveals a noteworthy social dimension to demotivation: the transition from high school to college disrupted established study habits, and the prevailing disinterest among peers appears to have reinforced a collective disengagement. Rather than a purely individual decline, S2's experience suggests that motivation can be shaped by the normative climate of one's immediate social group. While a single informant's report is insufficient to confirm a causal "contagion" effect, the finding raises the possibility that peer-group mood may amplify existing motivational vulnerabilities during transitional phases. This observation points to the need for further research on group-level motivational dynamics in EFL classrooms, an area that remains largely unexplored.

4.2.3. Language Barriers as Sources of Self-Doubt

Persistent difficulties in acquiring vocabulary and grammar can create significant psychological pressure, leading to low self-esteem in language learners. S3 expressed clear frustration: "When I cannot remember vocabulary during practice, I gradually lose interest in learning English. Although I have spent time practicing, it may be the wrong method, which has made me gradually lose interest in learning English."

Similarly, S4 described feeling inferior when

"During the exercise, I encountered many difficulties with vocabulary, which made me do my exercises slower than other students in the class."

In particular, this barrier also directly affects communication skills, as S5 admitted to avoiding interaction because

"With limited vocabulary, I feel self-conscious when communicating in English with foreigners, which makes me lose interest in learning English."

The series of experiences from S3, S4 to S5 paints a comprehensive picture of the psychological impact of language barriers. S3 demonstrates a deadlock in methodology, S4 reveals social inferiority when compared to friends, and S5 shows avoidance reactions in real communication. all three cases illustrate the concept of "cost" in EVT, the psychological and social losses that learners have to bear. when the "cost" exceeds the perceived "value" of learning, motivation inevitably declines. especially, S5's avoidance of communication creates a paradoxsuch as the fear of failure itself prevents learners from participating in activities that could help them improve, thereby maintaining and exacerbating their initial poor performance. while these moments of crisis reveal the vulnerability of motivation to psychological shocks, the data also show a more persistent and structural influence coming from exogenous factors, the conditions related to the learning environment and teaching methods. the next section will analyze how these factors shape experiences and systematically erode student motivation.

4.3. External Triggers and Environmental Constraints

4.3.1. Quality of the Learning Environment

The quality of the learning environment, especially the facilities and curriculum, has a direct and significant impact on learner motivation. S1 emphasized this importance:

"Because a class with stable facilities and an interesting curriculum will help me have more motivation to learn English. For me, learning English is to supplement knowledge, so I will try to absorb as much as possible. More than ever, I think it is very useful for my future career."

S3 also agrees, pointing out that

"When facilities are invested in, not only do students have the opportunity to access new technologies, but lecturers also have more opportunities to help students maximize their learning methods."

Similarly, S4 shared: "Because when the learning environment is fully invested, it will help me feel more comfortable in learning English."

The views expressed by S1, S3, and S4 suggest that facilities do more than provide physical comfort; they shape learners' psychological engagement with the subject. From the perspective of EVT, a well-resourced environment enhances the intrinsic interest value of English learning and lowers the perceived psychological cost. When students feel supported by modern technology and a thoughtfully designed curriculum, they report greater willingness to invest effort. Conversely, when the infrastructure is poor, the learning environment implicitly signals the low priority of the subject, thereby eroding motivation in a subtle but persistent manner.

4.3.2. Pedagogical Practices and Classroom Atmosphere

Pedagogy and classroom climate play a vital role in shaping students' interest and motivation to learn. S2 highlighted a positive aspect:

"I feel interested in the current lecturer's English teaching method. He has flexibly used many techniques in teaching to help me learn English well." Conversely, pressure-based methods can have significant negative effects. S4 criticized:

"The teacher's teaching method affects my interest in learning English. Specifically, checking vocabulary at the beginning of the class will make the classroom atmosphere tense. Many students learn English in a coping state, and the quality of the class will not be complete."

The contrast between the experiences of S2 and S4 reflects the dual nature of pedagogical practice. on one hand, the flexibility in the instructor's methods creates a psychologically safe space, encouraging participation and minimizing the "emotional cost" for learners. on the other hand, unexpected vocabulary tests, even if they may stem from good intentions, turn the classroom into a threatening environment, triggering a "fight or flight" response instead of genuine learning. what is concerning is that when a tense atmosphere becomes the norm, it not only diminishes an individual's motivation but also creates a toxic classroom culture, affecting the entire collective. this is clear evidence that motivation is not only in the minds of learners but is continuously constructed and negotiated in the interactions between instructors and students.

The classroom environment and teaching methods are exogenous factors that are direct and immediate, then there is another layer of pressure that operates more silently and comprehensively, the expectations from family and society. unlike physical facilities or pedagogical techniques, these socio-cultural pressures penetrate deeply into the identity and value system of the learners, potentially serving as a strong source of motivation, but also possibly becoming a psychological burden that is difficult to shed. the final part of the research results will clarify this complexity.

4.4. Sociocultural Expectations and Perceived Pressure

4.4.1. Expectations as Catalysts for Motivation

Expectations from family and society can act as a powerful source of motivation. S1 clearly affirmed this:

"I think my family and society both have expectations for my English learning. And this has positively affected my English learning and given me more motivation to develop every day."

The case of S1 demonstrates the positive functioning of the "Ought-to L2 Self" in the L2 MSS model. Here, external expectations are not seen as pressure, but are received as a source of encouragement, helping to reinforce the commitment to learning. This shows that the impact of social expectations does not lie in the expectations themselves, but in how learners interpret and internalize them.

4.4.2. The Tension between Motivation and Pressure

However, the line between motivation and psychological pressure is a fine one. S3 clearly expressed this contradiction:

"My family always wants me to study English well to get a job as expected in the future, this expectation is the motivation for me to always strive in my academic career, and at the same time it is also a great pressure for me."

The hesitation in S3's statement, "both a motivation and a pressure", reflects a fragile boundary in the process of internalizing external expectations. when the "Ego of Duty" completely overshadows the "Ego of Ideal" learners may achieve success but at the cost of their mental health and joy of learning. in the long run, this state of stress is unsustainable, it easily leads to burnout and complete abandonment if the results do not match the expectations set.

4.4.3. Autonomous Intrinsic Motivation

Some students demonstrated intrinsic motivation independent of external factors. S4 stated clearly: "My family does not have expectations for my English learning, but for my future career, I know exactly what I have to work hard for"

In contrast to S3's inner turmoil, S4's case demonstrates the most sustainable form of motivation, intrinsic motivation driven by a clearly defined ILS. S4 affirmed: "my family has no expectations regarding my English learning, but for my future career, I know exactly what I need to strive for."

The family's lack of expectations not only did not diminish S4's motivation but also freed her from external pressure, allowing her to fully take control of her learning goals and values. this is an experimental demonstration of the core argument of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), behaviors stemming from autonomy will have stronger and more enduring vitality than those influenced by external control factors.

Overall, the findings painted a multifaceted picture of demotivation, where endogenous factors including cognitive distortions, poor self-management skills, lack of career guidance, crisis moments such as failure, environmental transitions, language barriers, exogenous conditions including learning environment, pedagogical practice, and socio-cultural expectations do not exist in isolation, but interact complexly, collectively shaping the demotivated experiences of learners. the theoretical and practical implications of these findings will be discussed in detail in the next section.

V. DISCUSSION

This study set out to answer the question: "What are the main causes of demotivation in learning English at a college in Vietnam, and how do these factors interact?" the findings confirm the multidimensional nature of demotivation, aligning with prior research (Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009; Alrabai, 2016), while offering three novel contributions that deepen our understanding of the phenomenon.

First, a key contribution is the clear analytical separation of demotivating factors from motivating factors, a distinction often blurred in previous work. whereas Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) and Tran and Baldauf (2007) tended to conflate both types, this study identifies three distinct groups

of demotivation antecedents such as internal factors such as distorted competence perceptions, poor self-management, lack of career orientation, external factors including rigid teaching methods, unsupportive learning environments, and sociocultural pressure such as family and societal expectations. more importantly, the findings reveal how these factors interact. for instance, the anxiety induced by rigid pedagogical practices directly amplifies learners' pre-existing self-doubt, creating a compound effect greater than the sum of its parts. this interactionist perspective represents a departure from the tendency in earlier research to treat these factors in isolation.

Secondly, the study highlights the central role of the lack of clear career orientation in the mechanism of motivation decline. Students like S5 and S6 do not deny the objective importance of English, but the ambiguity in their conception of the ILS has prevented them from transforming that general perception into specific personal learning goals. Data shows that S5 admitted to having "no clear direction for their current and future career", while S6 claimed to have lost motivation due to "no specific development path". This explains why the value of the subject is still recognized at the societal level, but at the individual level, it is not internalized into a motive for action. This finding expands the L2 MSS model by indicating that the Ideal Self not only needs to be vivid but also must be anchored in a conceivable career path.

Third, the qualitative approach captured rich emotional dimensions that quantitative studies have systematically overlooked. the feeling of near-helplessness when vocabulary recall repeatedly fails (S3, S4, S5), the social inferiority triggered by peer comparison (S4), and the communicative anxiety leading to avoidance behavior (S5) all illustrate how negative emotions erode the perceived task value, a core component of EVT (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). these emotional states are not mere symptoms of demotivation, they are active mechanisms that accelerate motivational decline by increasing the perceived psychological "cost" of learning beyond its perceived benefits. this emotional layer is critical yet rarely foregrounded in demotivation research.

Finally, the findings offer a nuanced socio-cultural insight. in contrast to Tran and Baldauf (2007), who emphasized exam pressure as the primary demotivator, this study found that urban students in Ho Chi Minh City lose motivation despite abundant English exposure. their demotivation stems from a toxic combination of intense competition, high family expectations that blur into psychological pressure as vividly expressed by S3, and rigid teaching methods that fail to leverage the available resources. this explains the paradox of "demotivation amid plenty" and calls for a shift in educational interventions such as for urban learners, the challenge is not providing more resources, but reducing achievement pressure and humanizing pedagogical practices.

In summary, demotivation is not a static condition but a dynamic, self-reinforcing process shaped by the continuous interaction of internal vulnerabilities, external triggers, and sociocultural pressures. The findings do not address strategies for recovery or maintenance of motivation, as those are beyond the scope of this investigation. However, the identified mechanisms, particularly the disconnect between career orientation and the formation of the ILS and the role of negative emotions, offer clear starting points for future intervention studies.

In addition to the contributions, the research also has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. First, the interview duration of from 15 to 20 minutes is relatively short for an in-depth qualitative study. This duration may not be sufficient to thoroughly explore the layers of experience and complex psychological mechanisms, especially the interaction between endogenous and exogenous factors. Future studies should extend the interview duration or conduct multiple sessions to achieve better data saturation. Secondly, the sampling criteria only included students with above-average general English results, inadvertently excluding the weaker group of students, those who might face different or more severe types of demotivation. Therefore, the current picture reflects the experiences of learners with relatively strong backgrounds and cannot yet be generalized to all non-specialist students. The next study should broaden the sample's range of abilities to gain a more comprehensive view.

VI. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explored the causes of English learning demotivation among non-English majors at a college in Ho Chi Minh City.

Interviews with six final-year students showed that demotivation stems from three main sources: internal factors (low self-confidence, poor self-management, unclear career goals), external factors (rigid teaching methods and unsupportive learning environments), and sociocultural pressures (family expectations). A key finding is that unclear career orientation weakens learners' Ideal L2 Self, making it difficult to sustain motivation.

The findings support the applicability of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) and Expectancy-Value Theory (EVT) in the Vietnamese higher education context. They suggest that the Ideal L2 Self becomes motivating only when linked to meaningful career goals. Although limited by its small sample and single-institution setting, the study provides valuable insights into language learning demotivation in Vietnam and offers implications for developing more targeted motivational interventions.

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