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Demotivation in Second Language Learning: Evidences from Some English Majors from a Public University in China

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Abstract

Demotivation often plays a significant role in undermining the expected outcome in L2 learning. This study, under the guidance of the Complex Dynamic System Theory, explored L2 demotivation among some Chinese university undergraduate English majors and obtained evidences about the processes and patterns of its dynamic changes across three academic years. A mixed methods methodology involving the triangulation of a questionnaire survey on L2 demotivation, Graphs of L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling and stimulated recall interviews was employed. A large proportion of the participants of the study were found to be with demotivation in L2 learning despite having received three years of specialized training in English. The trajectory modelling of the evolvement of the motivation and demotivation revealed that each participant has experienced certain degree of demotivation, but with unique trajectory and experiences. The amalgamation of the graphs that modelled the trajectories revealed several patterns within the L2 demotivational dynamism, based on which different types of L2 motivational profiles were also identified.

Keywords: L2 Demotivation, English Majors, Complex Dynamic System Theory, Dynamism

Introduction

Motivation plays a crucial constructive role in successful L2 learning and has long been a focus of academic research interest. It constitutes the basic desire to initiate the learning, sustain the efforts in L2 learning and makes up significantly for the deficiency in learners' aptitude and learning conditions (Dorynei, 2005; Dornyei & Ryan, 2015). On the other hand, demotivation, being the opposite to motivation, very often has a negative impact on the motivational state, pulling the learner back and consequently undermines the expected learning outcome (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011; Kikuchi, 2015; Sampson, 2016; Ushioda, 2013). In the opinion of some researchers, demotivation constitutes arguably even a greater issue than motivation in L2 development (Thorner & Kikuchi, 2019). It is particularly true in Asian L2 learning contexts such as Japan, China, Iran and South Korea (Kikuchi, 2009; Li, 2013; Song

& Kim, 2017; Tanaka, 2017; Zhou & Wang, 2012), where most students lack the direct contact with an English-speaking community, native or non-native, in their daily lives and have little incentive of engaging with such a community (Chen et al., 2005; Song & Kim, 2017; Trang & Baldauf, 2007).

This study explores L2 demotivation among undergraduate English majors, using a sample of junior and senior students from a public university in southwestern China and with the Complex Dynamic System Theory (hereinafter, the CDST) approach. Among the huge number of L2 learners in Chinese higher educational system, English majors account as a significant portion of the potential talent pool needed for China's international contact with the rest of the world. More than 900 of the 1,270 universities in China have established and offered courses on English majors (Sohu, 2023). Yet more of the previous research on L2 motivation among university-level learners has been for non-English major students. In reality, English majors, being in more contact with the L2, tend to expect more from their learning efforts. This also contributes to the fact they are more vulnerable and sensitive to motivational fluctuations and demotivation in particular in L2 learning (Liu, 2011).

Compared with the extensive L2 demotivation research in other Asian countries like Japan (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011), South Korea and Iran, studies in China, particularly those among undergraduate English majors have been much fewer. A comprehensive literature review revealed that previously, researchers have been almost solely concerned with tracing the possible factors responsible for learner demotivation. A wide range of factors indeed have been reported. However, beyond these factors, little has yet been known about the real-life experiences and processes of demotivation within L2 learners. For instance, for the English majors, how their desire to learn the L2 weakened and their positive visions about their future selves waned during the considerably long process of specialized learning of the L2 remains unclear. The variation in demotivational experiences across different individuals has seldom been paid close attention to either.

This article reports the process and findings from the first phase of a larger research program that aimed to understand better the above key aspects of demotivation as a salient phenomenon in L2 learning. The specific processes and patterns of dynamism in its evolution, along with the specific interconnectedness and interactional mechanism among the various constructs of L2 demotivation and their respective roles in generating L2 demotivation were studied.

This article aimed to answer the following research question.

What are the processes of changes and the specific experiences of L2 demotivation among these undergraduate English majors? What patterns of change can be found both intra- and inter-individually?

To answer the question, a mixed methods research methodology involving questionnaire survey, retrodictive trajectory modelling and stimulated recall interview was utilized. A mixed methods research design is meaningful for gaining more complete understanding of the research questions of a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) and capable of providing a multiple of ways of seeing and hearing, as well as standing points on what is important (Greene, 2007).

Literature Review

Defining Demotivation in L2 Learning

Gorham and Christophel (1992) first used the term “demotivation” in their early communication studies and the term has been used since then. As the prefix “de-” means “to get rid of, remove or cancel,” “demotivate” literally means “result in the feeling of not worth making an effort.” The word “demotivation” then can be inferred to mean both the opposite of motivation and the fading of motivation (Kikuchi, 2015; Zhang, 2007).

In SLA research, demotivation has been defined in many ways. In alignment with the concern with the possible driving forces for L2 demotivation, early definitions of the term centered on the factors. Dornyei (1998) defined it as the specific external forces that tended to reduce or diminish the motivational basis underlying a behavioral intention or an ongoing action, while Zhang (2007) defined it as the forces that decrease students’ energy to learn or the absence of the force that stimulates students to learn. Chong et al. (2019) included the internal factors and re-defined it as the specific internal and external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavior intention or an ongoing action.

Prompted by a process-oriented perspective on L2 demotivation, Kikuchi (2015) differentiated three terms, namely, “demotivator”, “demotivating” and “demotivation”. He termed those internal and external factors contributing to L2 motivation as “demotivators”. “Demotivating”, being an adjective, means making people demotivated. “Demotivation” is defined as the gradual process of the reduction in learner motivation as the result of the impact from both external and internal factors.

Guided by the more recent CDST perspective on L2 motivation, this study adopted the definition by Kikuchi (2015) and treated demotivation as the gradual dynamic process of reduction in learner motivation and “demotivators” as the contributing factors for the reduction.

The CDST Approach to L2 Demotivation

Unlike previous research studies, this study explores the dynamism of L2 demotivation among Chinese university undergraduate English majors. The changeable, dynamic nature of L2 motivation has been increasingly realized and acknowledged by researchers in L2 development, especially after more research attention was paid to the process-oriented conceptualization of L2 motivation.

In recent years, the CDST has been more formally adopted by researchers to describe the operational and transformational process of motivational traits, as well as their systematic interaction with other system components of the L2 learner along the duration of time. Its principles and methodology for L2 motivation have revealed more essential features about L2 motivation and shed new light on people’s understanding of it.

The CDST holds that motivation in L2 learning is more of a fluid and ever-changing nature than merely a stable variable of individual difference (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006). In the process of L2 development, motivation fluctuates and is in flux due to the stimuli from a variety of components from the L2 development system. It evolves all the time, whether across very long, macro or very short, micro timescale. Along with the constant interaction

among the various components in the complex system of the language learner, it displays apparent temporal and situational variation. The trajectory of the dynamic variation of L2 motivation can be traced by observing the attractor states, in which the system is attracted to certain regions of state space and forms attractors in space where the motivational system settles temporarily into a state of equilibrium (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Larsen-Freeman, 1997).

Some early studies had touched upon the negative changes in L2 motivation development (Koizumi & Matsuo, 1993; Tachibana et al., 1996), but the formal introduction of the CDST into L2 motivation research prompted researchers to take a more serious longitudinal and dynamic approach to learner demotivation. In Kikuchi's (2015) longitudinal study, 17 Japanese university freshmen joined a 10-month research project which examined the process of changes in their motivation and demotivation as well as the interaction between motivators, demotivators and other contextual agents that could possibly account for the changes. Participants were asked to meet once every month to take the questionnaire survey and join the focus group discussion. After all the sessions they were asked to write a reflective journal on their learning experiences. To report the findings, five graphs were drawn to display the trajectory of ups and downs in their L2 motivation. The individual cases of attractor states in L2 motivation experienced by each learner were specifically described and the interplay among multiple factors were presented.

Song and Kim (2017) examined the longitudinal changes and the factors influencing L2 demotivation and remotivation of some Korean high school students. In the first stage of the study, 64 students from grade 11 were asked to recall the changes they had experienced in their L2 motivation from kindergarten to high school and then draw a motivational line graph to map out the trend. Next, the graphs drawn by the 64 participants were amalgamated by calculating the average motivational intensity level for each period across all participants. The results showed that 28 of the participants experienced significant decline in motivation. These 28 students were then invited to report the causes for their negative motivational changes by answering an open-ended questionnaire and taking follow-up interviews. The data collected from these 28 participants revealed that the majority of the participants became most demotivated after they became junior high school students as a result of many external factors, including ineffective teaching methods, learning difficulty and social pressure. Nevertheless, driven by multiple external and internal factors, among them, 13 participants showed considerable remotivation after experiencing demotivation. Kikuchi (2009), using similar research methods, reported the findings from a two-year research program that examined the changes in learner motivation and demotivation among 4 Japanese university L2 learners. He described the trajectories of their L2 motivational development and traced the reasons for their motivation and demotivation through monthly-interviews.

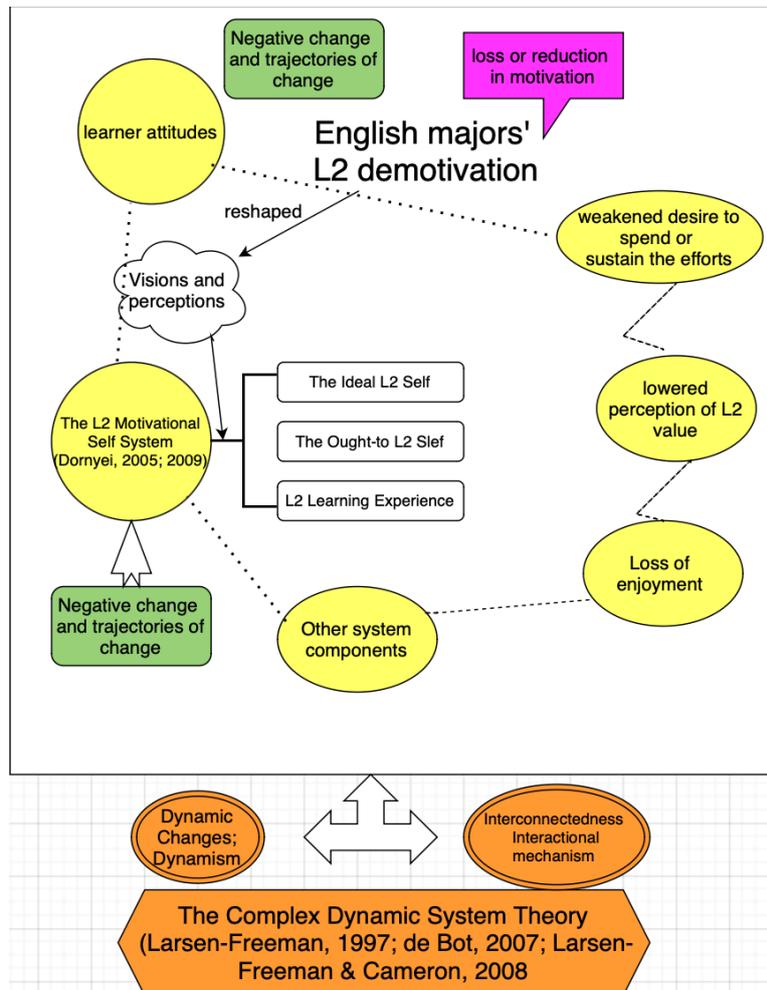
The focus of the above studies has been more on the dynamic features of demotivation among individual learners, taking a small number of participants as the sample. Cross-individual variations and patterns were not examined, especially among those learners who are actually located in the same L2 learning context. More in-depth findings about demotivation, particularly its patterned dynamism over a longer period of time and variation across individual

learners can provide more personalized diagnostic information to motivate the learners. Hence, it helps remove the obstacles and harness L2 motivation by taking more effective measures.

The conceptual framework for the present study is displayed in the following Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of the Study



Research Methodology

Research Design

To answer the research question, a quantitative questionnaire survey on L2 demotivation, entitled as “Questionnaire on L2 Demotivation among English Majors from CTBU” was administered first. It was intended to measure the various aspects about L2 demotivation within their L2 motivational system in a comprehensive way. In this way, the state of demotivation can be identified among the sample participants. Next, the Graphs for L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling were presented to the participants for them to map out the trajectories of their motivational and demotivational evolvement from the time they entered this university to the end of the junior year as English majors in School of Foreign Languages,

CTBU. To make the data collected from the trajectory modelling more solid and reliable, stimulated recall interviews were done immediately after the data analysis among those participants whose trajectories exhibited salient trends of demotivation.

The triangulation of research methods facilitated obtaining data from a variety of sources. What's more, it made it possible to identify the demotivated types of L2 learners among all the participants, preparing for the next stage of research.

Research Participants

Participants in this study were selected by purposive sampling, from the junior and senior grades of the English Department, Chongqing Technology and Business University. It is a public university located in Chongqing, a large municipal city in southwestern China. About 500 undergraduate English majors study at the English Department. The juniors and seniors were purposively chosen, because they have studied for 3 or more years as English majors at this university. According to Dorynei and Ryan (2015), a macro timescale is usually preferred for the researchers to look into the complex dynamism of L2 motivation. Two hundred and eleven students from both English and Business English classes participated in the study, with 111 of them being from the junior grade and 100 were from the senior grade. The age of the population ranges from 20 to 23. Before entering this university, they all have studied English formally at school for 9 years, as it was required by Chinese Ministry of Education. After they entered this university, in accordance with the Talent Development Plan established by the School of Foreign Languages, 80% of their courses were about and also taught in English. They all have taken the national language proficiency tests for university English majors, namely, Test for English Majors (Band 4), when they were sophomores. The average passing rate was around 70%, much higher the national average passing rate of 52% in recent years. That means the teaching quality of the department has met the requirement issued by the Ministry of Education and these students in general have a fairly good proficiency in English.

While reporting the findings, to protect the real identities of the participants, each of them was assigned with a code that indicated the information about the grade, class and their order in the students' name list edited by School of Foreign Languages, CTBU. For example, a student with a code of "3-BE-4" means that he is a junior, from Business English class and is No. 4 in the students' name list.

Instruments and Procedures

Questionnaire on L2 demotivation

Based on the way of defining L2 demotivation in the present study, a questionnaire with 38 6-point Likert scale items was administered first. It aimed to measure and trace the state of L2 demotivation among the participants.

The questionnaire was designed based on the framework provided by Taguchi et al. (2009), and Zhou et al. (2023), with modifications being made to fit the research purpose of this study program. The original questionnaire by Taguchi et al. (2009) included many items that actually addressed very similar issues. For example, the items about the promotion focus

and prevention focus in L2 motivation were highly similar to those addressing the individual's Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self. Considering this, only the related items about learners' Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self were adopted. Similarly, for the items addressing students' feelings in L2 learning, a reduced number of them were adopted so as to avoid repetition.

Like the study of Zhou et al. (2023), the majority of the questionnaire items were deliberately worded in a negative tone, since this study was to explore demotivation. For example, participants were asked to measure the degree of efforts spent on L2 learning by responding to statements such as "*Compared with my classmates, I spend fewer hours on learning English.*" and "*I seldom read in English.*". Eventually, six major constructs of L2 demotivation, namely, Efforts Spent on Learning the L2, Learner Attitudes towards the L2 and its Culture, Feelings of Enjoyment and Satisfaction in Learning the L2, Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 Value Perception were included. A 6-point Likert scale followed each item for the participant to choose from to show their degree of agreement or disagreement to the content of the item. The 6-point Likert scale was considered more appropriate, as it reduces the likelihood that students would only select "neutral" when they felt it difficult to make a definite decision and choice. The scale ranged from 1 to 6, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree", 2 "disagree", 3 "slightly disagree", 4 "slightly agree", 5 "agree" and 6 "strongly agree".

Graphs of L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling

The individual-based Graph of L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling is a retrodictive tool that enables researchers to delve into the specific processes of dynamic changes and the trajectories the L2 motivational system of each participant has followed over certain time scale. Being individual-based, the tool is expected to be able to reveal the motivational uniqueness within each individual. At the same time, by amalgamating individual trajectories, the researcher can gain insights into the patterns of changes within the group and variations across different individuals. In this study, the aims of utilizing L2 motivational trajectory modelling were twofold, first, to learn about the specific processes of changes in learners' L2 motivation and secondly, to identify L2 learners whose motivational trajectories displayed salient trends of falling.

With the graph, the participants were asked to recall their previous L2 learning experiences and evaluate their average L2 motivational level during different time periods since the time when they entered the university to the end of the junior year. The time scale covered the first 6 academic semesters they had spent at this university.

The graph consisted of a vertical motivational index scale that measured and represented the level of L2 motivational intensity and a horizontal time scale that indicated the time periods. The vertical motivational index scale was designed by referring to Song and Kim (2017) and ranged from -3 to 3, with -3 for "being extremely demotivated", -2 "being moderately demotivated", -1 "being slightly demotivated", 0 "being neither motivated nor demotivated", 1 "being slightly motivated", 2 "being moderately motivated" and 3 "being highly motivated". The horizontal time scale was divided into 6 stages, ranging from 0 to 6 (0- the time of entering university, 1 - the 1st semester, 2 - the 2nd semester, 3- the 3rd semester, 4 -the 4th semester, 5- the 5th semester and 6 - the 6th semester). Participants were asked to select a number on the vertical scale to represent their motivational intensity during each period, and then connect

these numbers. Therefore, the process of their motivational change was represented in a visualized way.

Stimulated Recall Interviews

The stimulated recall interview is an introspective research method that is used to elicit the participants' thoughts and reflections after they have carried out a task, by asking them to recall their thought processes while handling the task (Gass & Mackey, 2017). With this method, the participants are provided with some kind of stimulus information, for example, the audio - or video - recording of themselves taking part in the task or a picture they have drawn for the task (Gass & Mackey, 2017). Stimulated recall interviews can generate more in-depth qualitative data and consequently lead to a more nuanced understanding of the participants' responses to the task.

Stimulated recall interviews were carried out after the data were collected from the graphs of motivational trajectory modelling. It was, first, to verify and confirm that the L2 motivational trajectories mapped by the participants were true reflections of their L2 demotivational experiences and had solid basis in their real-life personal experiences. Secondly, by giving the participants another opportunity to look back on their previous experiences, it could elicit more details and evidences.

In this study, the graphs of motivational trajectory modelling previously drawn were used as the stimulus information for the subsequent interviews. Students were first asked about their original motivation for choosing to become English majors at university, which was regarded as the initial condition for the evolvement of their L2 motivational system. The majority of the interview questions focused on their thoughts at the moment when they marked their motivational intensity on the graph and when the graph displayed significant decline. The participants' feelings and specific experiences of being demotivated were also inquired by questions such as "How did you feel you find that your motivation in English learning had faded so much?".

Data Collection

The questionnaire survey on L2 demotivation and the Graphs of L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling were administered at the same time in early June, 2024, for the pilot study and one week later, for the main study. Printed sheets were distributed among the participants. Both instruments were translated into Chinese, which was necessary especially for those participants whose English proficiency is relatively lower. The process of conducting the questionnaire survey was audio-recorded by the mobile phone App of Voice-memo. To help participants recall their earlier experiences in a more accurate way, school calendars were also presented to them. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the process of data collection.

A pilot study was conducted first among 25 students from one of the business English classes, to assess the reliability and validity of the questionnaire and the graphs of motivational trajectory modelling. All the responses to these two research instruments were valid, and the reliability of the questionnaire was confirmed with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.826. The questionnaire was later applied in the main study.

In the main study, all the 211 participants responded to the questionnaire. But later 2 questionnaires were found to be invalid, because one of the students missed 2 items and one missed 1 item. All in all, 209 questionnaires were valid. All the students responded to the graph mapping in the correct way, but in accordance with the number of the valid data from the questionnaire survey, 209 graphs of motivational trajectory were used for analysis.

Following the data analysis of the motivational trajectory modelling, one-on-one stimulated recall interviews were carried out among those whose trajectory graphs exhibited significant trend of demotivation. The interviews were conducted online through WeCom, a social media platform used specifically for office contact inside the school, on which all the staff and students have registered an account and can be in direct contact with each other via texting, video or audio calls (WeCom, 2024). The interview process was recorded by the mobile phone App named Voice-memo.

Data Analysis

For the questionnaire survey, descriptive analysis and cluster analysis were performed by the computer software program of SPSS 29.0 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences), respectively, to learn about the general information and to identify L2 learners with demotivation.

Cluster analysis of the questionnaire data enables a quick and efficient grouping of the sample, either cases or variables into several clusters, based on the proximity and homogeneity in their responses to the data collection tools (Plonsky, 2015). The basic ideology behind it is to group a set of objects, for example, variables, cases into clusters, so that objects within the same cluster are more similar to each other than to those in other clusters. It is highly useful, efficient and having more power in predicting variability among the L2 learners (Papi & Teimouri, 2012). In the present study, it is used to group the participants into two types based on their L2 demotivational features, namely, those who were with motivation and those who were typically demotivated. Hierarchical Clustering Analysis was performed first. The number of clusters were set as 2. The result of Hierarchical Cluster Analysis also reported the memberships of each cluster and the clustering process.

For the graphs of L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling, to facilitate data analysis, the indices of students' motivational intensity level were also converted into scores and transferred to SPSS 29.0. First of all, the mean score of the indices for each period was calculated and a graph was produced to show the general feature and trend. This was followed by a comparison of the trajectories of multiple learners' so as to identify the common patterns and variations. The motivational trajectories of students within each type were amalgamated to show a general pattern with the change in the motivational tendencies. Secondly, the linear patterns of change in each of the 184 graphs were recognized, including consistent growth, decline, or stability in motivation over time. Thirdly, some key phases of attractor states in the development of the L2 motivational system as reflected by the graphs were identified, for instance, the initial condition with which the L2 motivational system started to evolve and some critical moments when there was a sharp deceleration in motivation were identified for interview study.

The data from stimulated recall interviews were transcribed first and then coded for analysis. The information that was repeated by the interviewee were also coded as being relevant. Following that, descriptive coding was done and the huge variety of codes were then grouped. Categories were created and labelled, with the research purpose being focused on. Themes therefore emerged. Eventually, connections among the themes were further described and analyzed.

Results and Discussion

To answer the research question, the features of demotivated type of L2 learners were identified and the dynamic changes within learners' L2 motivation were depicted and represented in a visualized way.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Questionnaire Data

	Statement items	Cluster 1		Cluster 2	
		M	SD	M	SD
Efforts Spent on L2 Learning	1. Compared with my classmates, I spend fewer hours on learning English.	4.47	0.910	3.21	1.254
	2. I am prepared to spend a lot of efforts on learning English.	3.69	1.037	4.06	1.210
	3. I used to study English hard, but now, I don't.	4.03	1.082	2.98	1.176
	4. I would like to concentrate on studying something else rather than English.	4.56	0.998	3.21	1.254
	5. I participate during English classes, for example, group discussions and oral presentations in English.	4.06	1.120	4.71	0.922
	6. I study English hard because I want to make progress in my English skills.	4.64	0.899	4.42	0.895
	7. I seldom read in English.	4.36	1.125	3.04	1.051
	8. I often delay finishing English tasks after class.	3.33	1.265	2.59	0.945
Learner Attitudes towards the L2 and Its Culture	9. I like other foreign languages better than English.	3.00	1.352	2.29	0.967
	10. I like watching English movies and TV shows.	4.42	1.131	4.81	0.891
	11. I have little interest in knowing about the culture of English-speaking countries, such as Britain, US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand.	2.72	1.504	2.35	0.934
	12. I am indifferent to communicating with people from English-speaking countries.	2.58	1.131	2.00	0.799
Feelings of Enjoyment and Satisfaction in Learning the L2	13. I am tired of learning English as the major.	4.47	1.183	3.00	1.220
	14. I feel that time passes more slowly when I am learning English.	3.94	1.040	2.63	1.044
	15. I often feel stressed and anxious during English classes.	3.83	0.878	2.75	1.212
	16. I am not satisfied with my study performance	4.64	0.899	3.58	1.182

	Statement items	Cluster 1		Cluster 2	
		M	SD	M	SD
	at English in university.				
	17. I often feel discouraged when comparing my English grades and performance with my classmates.	4.50	1.183	2.94	1.245
Ideal L2 Self	18. Whenever I think of my future career, I can hardly imagine myself using English.	4.50	1.134	2.78	1.326
	19. I can hardly imagine myself working successfully in a multinational company.	4.58	1.052	2.71	1.071
	20. I can hardly imagine myself speaking English fluently with foreigners.	4.39	1.103	2.58	1.069
	21. I can hardly imagine myself speaking English as if I were a native speaker.	4.47	1.108	2.87	1.142
	22. I can hardly imagine myself studying in a university where all my courses are taught in English.	4.19	0.980	2.38	0.866
	23. I can hardly imagine myself as a person who really has good skills in English.	4.06	1.040	2.48	0.825
	24. I don't think I have clear goals in learning English as an English major.	3.86	1.437	2.35	0.911
Ought-to L2 Self	25. I have to study English hard because my parents would be disappointed with me if I do not.	3.22	1.045	2.92	1.200
	26. I study English because I want to get the approval of my teachers/ family/ friends.	2.83	1.108	2.31	1.055
	27. I think I will be respected by others if I am good at English.	3.83	1.108	3.44	1.351
	28. Learning English is necessary because people I am majoring in English at university.	4.72	0.914	4.10	1.225
	29. Studying English is important to me because an educated person is supposed to be able to use English.	4.69	0.889	4.25	1.120
L2 Value Perception	30. English is not so useful as I have thought.	3.31	1.191	2.75	1.021
	31. I don't think being good at English is going to make my life better.	2.86	1.099	2.83	1.117
	32. English is useful to me because I plan to study abroad.	2.19	1.191	2.73	1.106
	33. Studying English is important because I want to get a postgraduate education.	3.61	1.661	3.44	1.413
	34. Being good at English does not necessarily mean that I can get a good job in the future.	3.94	1.453	3.90	1.292
	35. To me, the only purpose of studying English hard is to pass all exams and get a university degree.	3.42	1.381	2.63	0.959
	36. I have often been demotivated in studying English in the first two years of my university life.	4.42	0.996	3.37	1.257

	Statement items	Cluster 1		Cluster 2	
		M	SD	M	SD
	37. I think my performance in English study is even worse than the time I entered this university.	2.81	1.369	3.31	1.257
	38. I am not optimistic about my future in studying English.	4.33	1.171	3.31	1.188

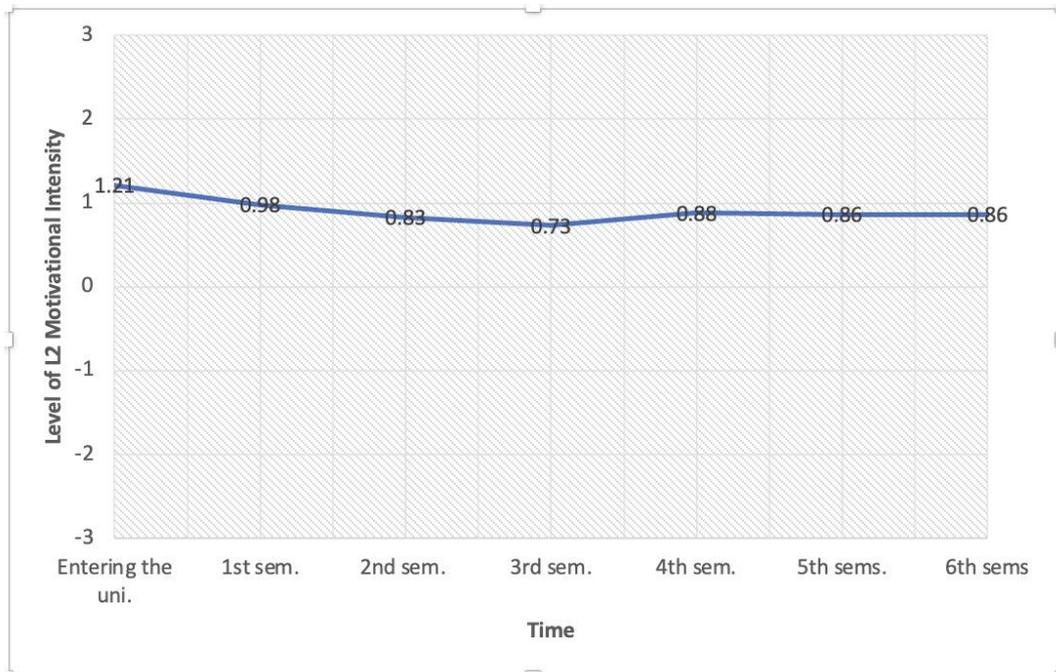
Based on the similarity and proximity in the participants' responses to the questionnaire items, the cluster analysis of the data yielded two groups of L2 learners. Together with the results from descriptive statistical analysis, the cluster analysis identified 88 students with demotivation (42%, Cluster 1 in the above table) at the end of their junior year. As can be seen from the above table, compared with those in Cluster 2, the mean scores of the data from Cluster 1 were lower than those from Cluster 2 with the positive statements about L2 motivation, meanwhile, for the negative statement items about L2 motivation the mean scores were higher. This indicated that those participants from Cluster 1 tended to agree more to the statements that revealed the negative tendency in motivation, and disagree more to the statement that revealed the motivated state among the L2 learner.

The results from the graphs of L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling showed that nearly all the students had indeed experienced certain degree of demotivation in their L2 learning process, with variations in time and degree. Thirty-six of them experienced considerable fall in L2 motivation. By "considerable", it means that the students experienced a consistent decline of motivation for more than one academic year. It was found that these students were also included in Cluster 1 drawn from the analysis of the questionnaire survey, showing congruence in research findings derived from two different research methods.

The mean score of the indices for each period studied in the motivational graphs was calculated based on which a trajectory modelling graph was then produced (See Figure 2). It shows that generally, there was a consistent decline in their L2 motivation during the freshmen year and the first semester of the sophomore year at university. This finding corroborated that of Dai (2015), which reported that university students were experiencing significant demotivation during the transition period from the freshman year to the sophomore year. After a slight recovery, their motivational intensity remained fairly stable at the relatively low level in the junior year, displaying no signs of significant recovery during the junior year. This finding provides a useful insight into the challenges faced by university L2 learners and instructors during the transitional stage.

Figure 2

The Average Level of L2 Motivational Intensity among the Participants



Compared with the questionnaire survey on L2 demotivation, visualized motivational trajectories revealed more specifics, notable characteristics and patterns of L2 demotivational evolvement among the participants, both individually and cross-individually. Moreover, in accordance with the features and patterns of demotivational change, L2 learners with different types of demotivational profiles were able to be identified. In this study, the findings were further supported by the data later obtained through stimulated recall interviews among all the 36 students that displayed significant demotivation in the graphs.

Firstly, variation in individuals’ motivational and demotivational development could be very sharp. For instance, even though none of the students’ L2 motivational intensity was always below 0, indicating that no student had always been demotivated in these three years, one student typically had experienced prolonged demotivation, followed by a rebound only until the junior year, as shown by Figure 3. A dramatic fall in a very short time in L2 motivation may also occur within a learner, as is shown by Figure 3.

Figure 3

Motivational Trajectory of Student 4-BE-4

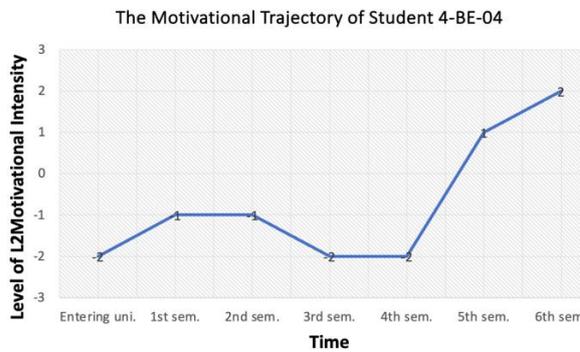
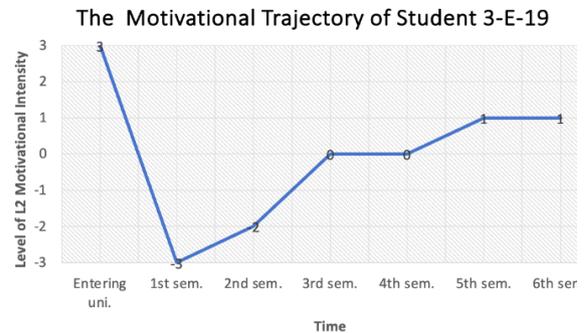


Figure 4

Motivational Trajectory of Student 3-E-19

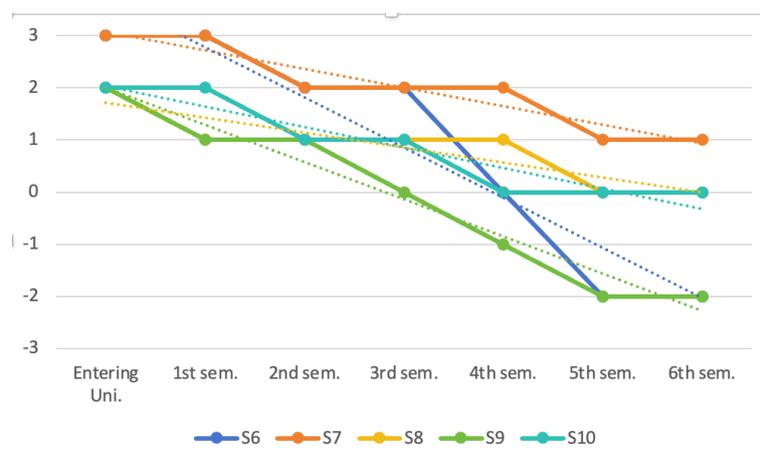


Notable patterns of demotivation across different individuals were revealed by amalgamating and comparing the trajectory modelling graphs of the participants. Based on these patterns, several types of L2 demotivational profiles could be drawn as the following.

In the 1st type of demotivational profile, students showed consistent decrease in their L2 motivation during the first three years at university, followed by no signs of remotivation or recovery at all. These students were highly motivated when entering the university. However, as time went by, their motivation in English learning as an English major consistently dropped and reached the lowest level at the end of the junior year. An evident trend of decline on their L2 motivation could be observed. For this article, some of the examples were shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5

L2 Motivational Trajectories of Participants with the 1st type of Demotivational Profile



All the above 5 participants were interviewed later, and their specific experiences, for example, their feelings and attitudes towards learning the L2 in this process, were revealed.

Take the typical experiences of Student 9 (S9 in Figure 5) as an example. When asked about her reason for choosing to be an English major and her motivational state while entering the university, she related the following information.

I was doing a pretty good job in English when I was in high school. I didn't feel much pressure while studying English. I was very interested in learning English then. I often got very good grades in English exams. English study was easy for me at that time. I was full of confidence at the beginning of my university study. But I was busy getting used to new life in university and was very homesick then. This distracted me and I was not willing to and ready to study English very hard. So I marked a 2 for my motivational level for the time of entering university.

When asked about what she was thinking about while marking a 0 at the end of the third semester, after having studied for a year and a half, she related the following information.

Because after I started learning English as a major, it was much more difficult than when I was in high school. It was different from the way of learning English in high school. I couldn't understand some of the things said by teachers during English classes. The vocabulary that was used were much more complicated. The teaching content was more difficult. I became less and less confident in myself. I couldn't focus during English classes and I was unwilling to do the homework. I felt I had to leap from a low level of requirement to a much higher level. I couldn't get what teachers said, because everything was in English.

When asked about what she was thinking about when reflecting over the motivational experiences since the fourth semester, and showing a consistent fall and became quite demotivated, she related the following information.

I didn't get good grades in English exams. I was even much less confident in myself at that time. I thought that no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't become good at English. I thought maybe I should study English only as a hobby, and I wouldn't feel so low if I could learn English only as a hobby. I had very high expectation at the beginning, but later I lowered my expectation in learning English. I wanted to make myself more relaxed.

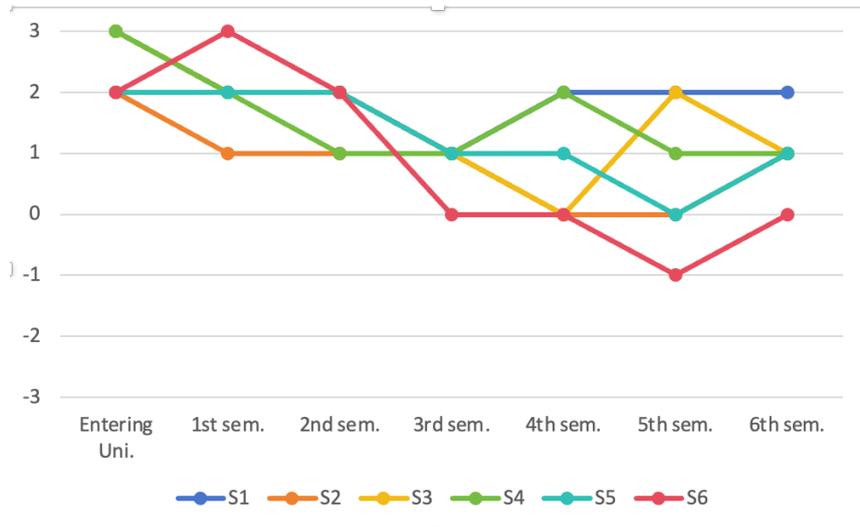
About her motivation keeping stably low during her junior year, she related that.

There was no space for me to become more demotivated. I wouldn't let myself become totally demotivated, because my parents plan to send me abroad.

In the 2nd type of demotivational profile, students experienced considerable demotivation for more than 2 academic years, but was followed by very slight recovery later. Examples are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6

L2 Motivational Trajectories of Participants with the 2nd type of Demotivational Profile

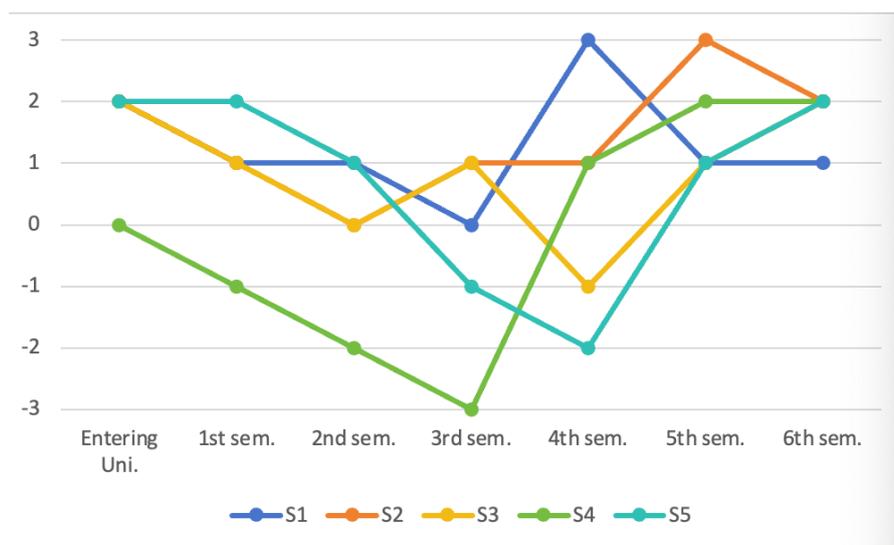


Many students were fairly motivated at the beginning of their university study, but their motivation continued to drop at different speeds for nearly two years. But during the process or when they entered the junior year, there was a period when a slight rebound took place.

In the third type of demotivational profiles, students had experienced demotivation in the early stages of their university study, but it was followed by a steep recovery in their L2 motivation and they were remotivated to a fairly high level, shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7

L2 Motivational Trajectories of Participants with the 3rd type of Demotivational Profile



Student 4 (S4) from Figure 7 talked about her experience of demotivation and remotivation.

She chose to be a business English major, because she had expected that she could learn business at university. It was only after she entered the university that she knew that the business English major was mainly about learning the English language. When asked about her motivational state when entering university and the dramatic process of demotivation she had experienced after she started university study, she gave the following information:

I thought it was a new beginning for me when I entered university. After a few days, I began to feel that I couldn't get used to the study at university, especially the rapid pace. I was very helpless and frustrated during the first year and I even suspended the study for some time. I wanted to talk about this with my parents, but they just ignored what I said. So I just wanted to be alone in my room. I thought I was mentally ill at a time.

The one-on-one stimulated recall interviews done after the mapping of the motivational trajectory revealed that most of the students chose to be English majors because they had performed well and got good grades in English study when in high school. The positive L2 learning experiences played a key role in driving them to become English majors at university. They were very confident in themselves in learning English, and expected that they could continue to do good jobs. However, after they entered the university, many of them found that the classes and learning English was much more challenging than in high school. They could not maintain the same level of self-confidence and gradually lowered their expectation of learning English.

The information obtained from the graphs of motivational trajectory modelling and the sequential stimulated recall interviews provided more specifics about learner L2 demotivation, including the specific process and dynamism of demotivation within the learners and the learners' own particular experiences of demotivation along the timescale selected for the study. By amalgamating the graphs and comparing the specifics, patterns of changes were also discovered. Both could provide guidance of L2 instruction for English majors and for the learners themselves. Generally, a large proportion of the English majors had gone through and settled into different degrees of demotivational state, namely the negative attractor states in their L2 motivational system after they entered the university. The interview data revealed that they used to expect and aim very high in English learning, but the expectation diminished as they went on with the study. When becoming demotivated, their interests and enthusiasm about English learning faded to a great extent, even though sometimes, they had been pushed by the teachers to do so. Some of them felt helpless and were unable to find a solution.

Other than those factors and experiences related to the L2 learning environment, the learners' own negative learning experiences, especially poor achievement and slow progress in learning the L2 constituted the major reasons for, and their specific state of demotivation. They could lead to very negative emotions and feelings about L2 learning within the learners, which consequently intensified their fear about the possible challenges and difficulties that arise in the process of learning.

The findings of the study not only added to the existing knowledge about L2 demotivation, but more significantly, provided more diagnostic value for researchers in investigating demotivation as a negative force that hinders L2 learning.

Conclusions

This study examined demotivation in L2 learning among some Chinese university undergraduate English majors, using the Complex Dynamic System Theory approach and a mixed-methods research methodology. Students' demotivation state was investigated. A large portion of the students were found to be demotivated, characterized by their lowered visions about their Ideal L2 Selves and Ought-to L2 Selves and perceptions about the value of learning and the need to invest their efforts on L2 learning. A good many of the students were with high motivation when they entered university, but its intensity dropped to a much lower level later, especially during the transitional period of their university study, often during the first semester of their second academic year. Individual learners differ greatly in their experiences and processes of becoming demotivated. Yet some common reasons and characteristics were shared among them for being demotivated in L2 learning, for instance, their internal experience of not making achievement and progress in learning the L2.

This provides useful insights for the support mechanism from the L2 educational system and instructors, particularly during the critical transition periods and in accordance with the demotivational characteristics of the learners. Despite this, the study has limitations in certain ways. For the first, the number of participants is limited and the sample is still big enough. The participants were from the same school and were not sufficiently varied in terms of their L2 learning background. This has hindered the generalization of the findings, even though the Complex Dynamic System Theory approach underscores personal motivational experiences to a great extent. Secondly, although being supported by stimulated recall interviews, the Graphs of L2 Motivational Trajectory Modelling, as a retrospective and retrodictive research method, was not capable of reflecting in a fully accurate way the exact processes of demotivational changes that have been experienced by L2 learners. Future studies may be carried out with the aid of new multiple research methods.

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