



RESEARCH ARTICLE

CORRELATION STUDY OF DEMOTIVATION AND ATTRIBUTION PREFERENCE IN ENGLISH LEARNING AMONG CHINESE COLLEGE STUDENTS

Lizhan, Sun*

Beijing International Studies University, Beijing 100024, China.

*Corresponding Author E-mail: yaokewen988@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have explored demotivation from the perspective of attribution preference in the domain of Second Language Acquisition. By carrying out a questionnaire with 235 college students involved and analyzing the data with SPSS, this paper aims to explore the current situation of college students' English learning demotivation and attribution preference respectively, and the correlation between them so as to shed light on English teaching and learning. The results showed that the undergraduates' demotivation in English learning was at a medium level and there was a great individual difference, which was chiefly caused by their language competence and learning methods. Besides, most college students attributed success or failure in English learning to subject-related and learner-related factors. Interestingly, there existed a significant positive correlation between attribution preference and demotivation in English learning among college students. It is suggested that teachers' active and timely attribution training for students can effectively alleviate their demotivation.

KEYWORDS

English learning, Demotivation, Attribution preference, Current situation, Correlation

1. INTRODUCTION

It was the educationalists who carried out the earliest research on demotivation in the field of educational communication (Christophel and Corham, 1992). They explored the factors which influence the students' motivation with the help of the questionnaire survey and found that the factors related to teachers accounted for nearly two-thirds. At present, many researchers in the area of foreign language learning begin to take notice of the correlation between demotivation and attribution preference of L2 learners with the purpose to explore the effective ways to relieve demotivation from the perspective of attribution. By carrying out a questionnaire survey on 235 college students and analyzing the data by SPSS, this paper explores the correlation between the phenomenon of demotivation and attribution preference of undergraduates' English studying and the effective ways to relieve demotivation.

Ausubel believed that the prefix "a" of amotivation means "nothing", especially the external circumstance that produced the powerlessness of a person (Ausubel, 1968). It is supposed that the lack of motivation is not due to a shortage of initial interest but to the perception of the inability and powerlessness of the person to confront the activity. While for the prefix "de-" of demotivation, it means "deprive of ...", to some degree, which is just a decline of motivation and it does not mean the total loss of original motivation. According to demotivation is described as a particular exterior power that decreases or weakens the motivational base of a behavioral purpose or persistent behavior (Dörnyei, 2001). For some certain reason, the enthusiasm and interest in learning English have decreased among those students who have ever had demotivation.

The first person who put forward the attribution theory (Heider, 1958). In his book, he identified two patterns of attribution: internal attribution and external attribution, and thus built up a general framework of attribution

theory to explain events or behaviors in our life. The internal attribution is the inside factors or reasons which fall within your control while the external attribution is the outside factors or forces which fall out of your control.

Table 1: Attribution and Classification (Weiner, 1986)

		Controllable	Uncontrollable
Internal	Stable	Long-term effort	Aptitude
	Unstable	Effort Ability	Mood State of health
External	Stable	Instructor bias	Difficulty of school
	Unstable		Luck

Table 1 above summarizes Weiner's attribution theory concerning how these mentioned factors affect our life. According to Weiner's attribution theory, Weiner believed that expectations change is associated with dimension stability. He put forward the principles of expectation: after a behavioral outcome, it is desirable to change the perceived stability affected by the cause (Weiner, 1992). According to this principle, if one attributed the failure to poor competence and assignment difficulty, it is difficult to conquer the inner and outer conditions of failure. As a result of these conditions, people are discouraged from their future success and lower prospects. On the contrary, because of unstable reasons, such as effort, this will enhance the success of future expectations, and people fail.

Xie (2016) carried out a study on junior high school students' English studying demotivation from the perspective of attribution theory. It is found that the overall attribution questionnaire is significantly correlative with the overall English learning burnout questionnaire and it is necessary

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to lead students to strengthen their understanding of English and form a good attitude towards English learning. Yu (2019) implemented an empirical study on attribution training based on junior high school students' English learning demotivation. The results showed that attribution training is efficient in reducing language learners' demotivation.

Based on the above literature review, although accomplishments have been done in the study of demotivation and attribution preference, there are still some limitations. With the purpose of enriching the findings in this field, the current research plans to research undergraduates' English learning demotivation and attribution preference by a quantitative research method.

The specific research questions are as below:

- (1) What is the current situation of the college students' English learning demotivation?
- (2) What is the current situation of the college students' English learning attribution preference?
- (3) Is there a significant correlation between college students' English learning demotivation and attribution preference?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Subjects

Adopting the method of cluster random sampling, 235 undergraduates from a certain university in China were chosen as the participants in the current study. Among them, there are 112 students majoring in English, 123 students majoring in non-English, and 38 boys and 197 girls.

2.2 Instrument

The research tool used in the present study is a questionnaire, which is formed from three sections: private data, the Chinese version of the English Learning Demotivation scale and the Attribution Preference scale. The scales were adapted (Xie, 2016). The English learning Demotivation scale involves 14 items and is grouped into four dimensions: emotional exhaustion (Items 1-4), inappropriate behavior (Item 5-8), personal sense of achievement (Items 9-12), teacher-student alienation (Items 13-14). The Attribution Preference scale includes 16 items and is divided into three dimensions: student factors (Items 15-19), teacher factors (Items 20-23), environmental factors (Items 24-27), and subject factors (Items 28-30). The whole scale adopts the form of Likert five-point scoring, and the options are from "fully agree" to "completely disagree", which is designed to measure the demotivation of college students' English studying and the attribution preference for English learning.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

A questionnaire was sent out on the Internet on 12th October 2021. The

3.1.2 Situation of Specific Dimensions and Items

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Emotional Exhaustion	2.75	.875	1	2.81	.576
			2	2.78	.678
			3	3.04	.823
			4	2.37	.764
Inappropriate Behavior	2.85	.756	5	3.52	.912
			6	2.13	.875
			7	3.01	.846
			8	2.75	.755
Personal Accomplishment	3.36	.802	9	2.76	.811
			10	2.74	.798
			11	4.01	.689
			12	3.87	.766
Alienation between Students and Teachers	2.85	.788	13	2.75	.854
			14	2.94	.844

As stated in Table 3, the scale of demotivation is composed of 4 dimensions: emotional exhaustion, inappropriate behavior, personal accomplishment, and alienation between students and teachers. The descriptive data in Table

questionnaire recovery rate was 100%. Incomplete questionnaires were eliminated and 235 valid questionnaires were obtained in total. Finally, the collected data were analyzed through SPSS.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 General Situation of College Students' English Learning Demotivation

To investigate whether there is demotivation in the process of English learning for undergraduates and the common condition, descriptive analysis was manifested in this section.

3.1.1 Situation of Overall Scale

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
Overall Scale	235	14	65	41.3	10.534

As shown in Table 2, the scores of the overall scale for the whole sample range from 14 to 65, with a mean of 41.3 (the mean score for each item is 2.95) and a standard deviation of 10.534. According to the value range of the Likert-5 Scale, 1-2.5 points represent the college students' English learning demotivation is at a lower level; 2.5-3.5 points represent the college students' English learning demotivation is at a middle level; 3.5-5 points represent the college students' English learning demotivation is at a higher level. According to the above results, the college students' English learning demotivation is at a middle level. That is to say, during the English learning process, most college students have ever been or are experiencing a decline in motivation because of some internal or external factors. Besides, the standard deviation of 10.534 indicates that there is an individual distinction in undergraduates' English learning demotivation.

Demotivation in foreign language learning can be attributed to various reasons. Greatly different from native language studying, besides a large quantity of language input and learning environment, foreign language studying lay higher requirements for learners' emotional factors such as strong confidence, determination, and consistency. In the process of English learning, the negative shift between parent language and target language, the large quantity of vocabulary, the complex grammatical rules, the unfamiliar foreign cultures and so on all can become annoying barriers, which can result in anxiety, frustration and even halfway giving up. Motivation is a dynamic emotional factor that can produce a sustained period of noetic or somatic exertion for the sake of achieving a beforehand set goal. Language teachers should always focus on the change in students' motivation and give timely psychological counseling.

3 displays that these four dimensions are ranked from low to high are emotional exhaustion (Mean=2.75) < inappropriate behavior and alienation between students and teachers (Mean=2.85) < personal accomplishment

(Mean=3.36). Analyzing the data above, it can be found that the demotivation in English studying for undergraduates is primarily made by their deficient language capacity.

According to Table 3, the instances got the lowest mean score in the dimension of Emotional Exhaustion (Mean=2.75). And among the four items of this part, the mean score of Item 4 (I'd rather not learn English at all, Mean=2.37), and item 2 (The thought that the next class is English would make me sigh, Mean=2.78) are comparatively lower, which indicate that undergraduates do not exclude English learning in their deep heart. Long enthusiasm and continuous hard work are difficult to maintain while integrated motivation is the best solution.

As Einstein has ever said, "Interest is the best teacher". Only if you think English is interesting will you study it hard. There are many ways to improve interest in studying English, for example, watching English movies, listening to English songs, reading English newspapers and books, communicating with each other in English, participating in English clubs, using the Internet to make friends with foreigners to improve oral English and so on. We can also use psychological tactics to make ourselves fall in love with English. We can go from superficial love to true love. Even in the face of difficulties and setbacks, you have to say to yourself: "Nothing is easy to learn. English learning is so important that it can take me to see the world and it's worth bearing the inevitable challenges and depression. As long as I stick to it, success is not far away." Countless research has proved that such a psychological hint is very useful to relieve demotivation and main long passion. Through those ways, undergraduates will not feel the exhaustion of English studying.

As for the composing items of the Personal Accomplishment Dimension in which the specimens got the highest mean score, Item 11 (In English learning, I feel that my learning efficiency is not high, Mean=4.01) got the maximum, and Item 12 got the second highest (I don't think I can find a way to learn English well, Mean=3.87), which indicate that most of the college English learners don't have an effective learning method of English learning. It has always been believed that there must be the right way, not the hard work. No matter what skills you want to master and what you would like to

learn, be careful to set quantifiable goals. Without clear quantifiable goals, the aimless approach is not able to adhere to the end. In addition, the cultivation and improvement of language capacity is a long way to go, which

could not be an excuse to give up. Teachers should lead the learners to believe that hard work, the right attitude, proper strategies and strong determination can pave a short road to success.

3.2 General Situation of College Students' English Learning Attribution Preference

To explore the attribution preference of college students for their success and failure in English learning, descriptive analysis was also used in this section. As shown in Table 4, attribution preference is composed of 4 dimensions: learner-related factors, teacher-related factors, environment-related factors and subject-related factors. The descriptive data in Table 4 displays that these four dimensions are ranked from high to low are environment-related factors (Mean=2.19) < teacher-related factors (Mean=2.23) < learner-related factors (Mean=2.32) < subject-related factors (Mean=2.67).

Through analyzing the data above, it shows that undergraduates are more likely to attribute their triumphs and failure in English studying to their inner factors rather than outer causes. In other words, most of the college students hold the belief that to a large extent, it's their hard work and strong consistency that stimulate the improvement in English study rather than the impact of teachers or the environment. And in turn, carelessness, low self-efficacy, and negative emotion are the roots of failure.

As for the composing items (Item 28-30) of the Subject-related Factors Dimension, the mean score of Item 28 (The countless vocabulary and new words to remember make me feel that English learning is very annoying, Mean=2.79) got the maximum, and Item 30 follows (There are too many things that English needs to memorize and it is easy to forget, which makes me tired of English, Mean=2.66), which show us that the heavy memory tasks in English learning are one of the critical elements that give rise to demotivation for most of the college students.

Table 4: Descriptive Data of Each Dimension and Item

Dimension	Mean	Std. Deviation	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation
Learner-related Factors	2.32	.875	15	2.49	1.421
			16	2.66	1.464
			17	2.21	1.373
			18	2.06	1.214
			19	2.18	1.650
Teacher-related Factors	2.23	.756	20	2.13	.896
			21	2.26	1.231
			22	2.27	1.523
			23	2.25	1.344
Environment-related Factors	2.19	.802	24	2.36	.788
			25	2.02	1.532
			26	2.28	1.028
			27	2.11	1.345
Subject-related Factors	2.67	.788	28	2.79	0.853
			29	2.55	1.237
			30	2.66	1.255

Most of the students at all times agree that they make little progress or even regression in their English learning despite the great effort and others always mirror that it takes them a lot of time to memorize letters but couldn't remember them deeply, which leads to their great depression and frustration. Memorization is the basic and common task in language learning, which will increase learners' language input effectively. There are many methods to promote memory efficiency. First of all, you should deeply understand what you intend to memorize, which can facilitate the memory process. Then you can choose a variety of memory methods, such as characteristic memory, classified memory, and situational memory. Moreover, according to the memory curve, what you have remembered must be timely reviewed.

As for the composing items (Item 15-19) of the Learner-related Factors Dimension, the samples got the mean score in Item 15 (The poor foundation

and the heavy learning task make me more and more impatient to learn, M=2.49) and Item 16 (Low self-confidence in my English learning ability has weakened my interest in learning English, M=2.66), which shows that most of the college students have low belief in their language learning capacity and they are inclined to attribute their learning failure and negative emotion to this factor. English learning is a long road full of heavy and hard tasks, which requires consistency, determination, and self-efficacy. Moreover, the specific language skill is linked so closely with each other that the deficiency in one aspect will greatly influence the whole performance. The combination of the complicated factors above will make it easy for foreign language learners to give up halfway.

As for the composing items of the Subject-related Factors Dimension, the mean score of Item 25 (My classmates always laugh at my poor English, which makes me feel anxious, Mean=2.02) got the minimum, and item 27

followed (My parents always blame me for my poor English grades, which makes me hate English, Mean=2.11). The results above suggest that most of the college students care about others' (especially teachers, classmates and relatives) assessment of their English learning performance. College students care about others' assessment of their English learning because they want to get recognition from others.

As long as a person needs to be respected, there will be such a psychological need -- desire to be recognized by society. Approval and praise from the outside world can be internalized into self-affirmation, confidence, and motivation, which will encourage the language learners to move on to a large extent. However, external evaluations should be treated dialectically, especially negative ones. The negative assessment reveals the weakness and deficiency, which indicates the direction of efforts and improvement.

		Attribution Preference	Learner-related Factors	Teacher-related Factors	Environment-related Factors	Subject-related Factors
Demotivation	Pearson correlation	.741**	.620**	.675**	.559**	.634**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	235	235	235	235	235

Note: **Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Moreover, there is also a conspicuous positive relationship between demotivation and the four specific dimensions of attribution preference, among which the strongest comes from the Teacher-related Factors dimension. The results above indicate that majority of the college students who bear comparatively strong demotivation in English learning tend to their language learning behavior and performance to the teacher-related factors. Every student is particular in the world, and teachers ought to take personal differences, especially emotive factors, into consideration in their teaching design. Teachers must track students' learning motivation and pay attention to the student whose motivation is decreasing. Teachers should influence students with their behavior. First of all, what teachers have to do is to improve their teaching approaches to make sure college students are interested in English learning from the bottom of their hearts. Secondly, teachers should do well in changing teaching goals to students' specific learning goals.

The establishment of learning goals should be set on the learners' real language competence. The improper goal will significantly hurt learners' self-confidence and motivation, which will produce opposite results. Students maybe feel anxious and afraid, which will let students think that foreign language learning is a painful burden. A low goal will enable students to think that foreign language learning is not challenging to reflect personal values. Thirdly, a close relationship between teacher and students is necessary. On one side, it is crucial that teachers offer students some effective and useful language learning strategies and measures to overcome demotivation. For another, teachers should provide some specific directions about the right attribution preference to the students.

3.4 Implications for English Learning and Teaching

The results of this paper give some helpful inspiration for both college English teaching and learning, which are concluded as follows.

3.4.1 Implications for English Teaching

Firstly, teachers should have a deep and thorough comprehension of the critical function of behavior. Teachers should do well in capturing educational opportunities to research the positive causes in students' learning procedures, which will make students understand the sincere feelings conveyed in teachers' words and deeds, and internalize teachers' understanding, expectation and encouragement into the driving force of hard study. On the premise of caring for every student, it is very important for teachers to protect the germination of students' interest in English studying. Teachers should go to great lengths to change the lessons and teaching into the procedure of stimulating students' learning motivation and helping students to achieve success.

Secondly, teachers can keep their teaching approach flexible due to the different difficulties of learning tasks. In the study of easier and simpler topics, the teachers should require the students to concentrate their attention and make them nervous. And in the study of more complex and more difficult topics, teachers should make a nerveless and disengaged classroom ambiance. When students meet troubles or perplexities, teachers should try to sedately and tardily lead to let students avoid excessive tension and anxiety.

To some extent, the negative assessment is more helpful and significant for learning.

3.2 Correlation Between English Learning Demotivation and Attribution Preference

The coming part aims to research the relationship between undergraduates' English learning demotivation and attribution preference, in which Pearson Correlation analysis was conducted. According to Table 5, there is a conspicuous positive correlation between English learning demotivation and attribution preference ($r=0.741$, $P=.000<0.05$). Namely, the demotivation intensity of learners' learning has a positive effect on their attribution preference.

The last but not least, students inevitably experience learning's triumph or failure, and attribution of triumph or failure what they have in learning activities will affect the strength of learning motivation. After students finish their academic tasks, teachers can lead them to make attributions of triumph or failure. Success is indeed desirable, and the positive attribution of success makes individuals feel self-worth. As an old saying goes, "failure is not the source of failure, but the mother of success". So failure is not terrible, because people will become stronger after the setback.

3.4.2 Implications for English Learning

First of all, persistence and determination are necessities for foreign language learners. As an old saying goes, "Where there is a will, there is a way". It shows that perseverance is very important. Learning English needs language learners to spend a lot of time practicing and using it every day, so college students should seize every minute and second to learn English as much as possible. There are many ways to do it. For example, language learners can listen to English radio to enhance their capacity of listening in the morning and recite the new words that they have learned in the evening. They can also make some foreign friends on the Internet and try to talk with them in English.

Secondly, setting proper goals is a good way to maintain continuous motivation. As Confucius said, "They who love it are better than those who know it, and they who delight in it are better than those who love it". Interest is a positive psychological trend held by people towards non-subjective things. It shows people's curiosity and attraction to something, which can often promote the development of people's thinking and become a strong motivation for learning. There are many methods to improve the interest in English. Improve the learner's psychological state and then they will believe that learning English is very interesting. At the start of learning, college students can set easy and short-term learning goals. If they make persistent efforts, the small goal will be achieved. Achieving small goals is the beginning of the realization of the big goals. Continuous progress will improve the confidence in learning.

The last but not least, confidence is very important to learn English. People often say that confidence is half of success. A person can do nothing well without confidence. Most of the time, confidence is an essential thing for growth and it is important for study and life. When you are under great pressure to study English, try to use psychological hints. Believe that you will make progress in due course, believe in your own ability, and enhance your self-confidence. In the process of learning there will be all kinds of difficulties and challenges waiting for us, we have to learn to face failure and believe in ourselves. No matter what the result is, we will gain more knowledge and a deeper understanding.

4. CONCLUSION

In the light of the analysis and discussions of research questions, the chief results are as follows. First of all, demotivation in the process of English studying for undergraduates is at a medium level with personal differences. Demotivation in English learning for college students is primarily caused by their deficient language ability and improper learning method. Secondly, college students attribute their English learning triumphs and failure to the

factors related to the subject and learners themselves. Finally, there is a conspicuous positive correlation between the English studying demotivation and attribution preference and the strongest comes from the teacher-related factors dimension. In other words, teachers' active and timely attribution training can effectively alleviate students' demotivation. Although this study has drawn some helpful consequences, there are some limitations. Firstly, the questionnaire survey was only conducted in a certain university in China, which cannot represent all college students in Chinese universities. Secondly, this study is a structured questionnaire. The items in the questionnaire restrict the participants' views, so the participants cannot express themselves freely. Thirdly, the research cannot be deeply explored because of the researcher's narrow knowledge and immature research capacity. In the following research, the interview and questionnaire methods should be further combined to let the results more reliable. As for future research, the researchers should focus on effective ways to relieve demotivation based on attribution training.

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