



# An Empirical Study on Demotivating Factors of Non-English Majors in Colleges of Science and Engineering

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**Abstract:** Motivation is widely seen as the main factor of second language learning process. The major goal of this study is to find demotivators that impede non-English major learners' second language learning. This paper took non-English major undergraduates in Colleges of science and engineering as the experimental objects, and conducted a survey on 250 students by a combination of interviews and questionnaires. The study found 6 main factors that contribute to non-English majors' English learning demotivation in Colleges of science and engineering: English learning ability, value, influence of important others, negative attitude towards second language learning, the mandatory nature of second language learning and influence of teaching content. In order to further study the changing trend of demotivators of non-English majors, learners of different grades were identified and analyzed. Learners of different phases can be divided into junior learners and senior learners on the basis of their grades. Freshmen and sophomores were classified into junior learners, and juniors and seniors were classified into senior learners. Generally, the results showed no significant difference between the two stage learners except for English learning ability and professional work and future expectations. Junior learners were more demotivated by English learning ability while senior learners were more affected by professional work and future expectations.

**Keywords:** Demotivation, Demotivating Factors, Language Learning, Non-English Majors

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## 1. Introduction

The study of learning motivation has always been an important research topic in the field of second language acquisition. Since the 1990s, researchers had gradually shifted from exploring how to improve learners' second language learning motivation to exploring the negative factors that affect learners' second language learning process, and were committed to identifying the demotivators and thus reducing or avoiding the negative effects of demotivators by taking appropriate measures. Chinese scholars have made related qualitative or quantitative researches on different groups of second language learners [17, 19]. However, few importance was given to the influencing factors on second language learners in Colleges of science and engineering. This paper took non-English major undergraduates in Colleges of science and engineering as the research object, and used a combination of interviews and questionnaires to explore the

main demotivators that affect their second language learning.

## 2. Literature Review

Demotivation has gradually become a hot research field since the 1990s. Dörnyei defined demotivation as "the feeling of feeling less or less motivated to commit an action due to the influence of an external force" [4]. This definition mainly emphasized external influencing factors [12, 22]. However, subsequent studies had found that internal influencing factors was also an important source of learners' demotivation. Researchers conducted surveys among learners at different ages in order to explore the demotivating factors that affect learners' EFL learning motivation at different stages.

Middle school learners were huge communities in EFL learning among the world. Alavinia surveyed Iranian middle school students and found that teachers' personality and behavior, and learner's success and failure experiences were the main demotivators that affect Iranian middle school students'

foreign language learning [1]. Similarly, the research of Korean scholars Bongsun Son and Tae-Young Kim also showed that foreign language learners in South Korea were mostly affected by demotivation in middle school, and were mainly affected by external factors, insufficient teaching methods of teachers, degree of learning difficulties and social effects of stress [13].

When it comes to college students, Falout, Elwood, and Hood classified the learning motivation of Japanese undergraduate foreign language learners into three categories: the external influence of the learning environment, the learner's internal influence, and the learner's feedback behaviors to the de-motivated experience [7]. Internal factors and feedback behavioral factors were the main factors affecting learners' long-term learning. Different from some of the previous studies, teachers' behavior was not seen as the main factor affecting students' learning. On the contrary, teachers had a stimulating effect on students' foreign language learning. Al-Sharief took English-major undergraduates as the research object, and explored the interaction between motivation and demotivation [3]. The study found that external factors had no significant influence on English majors, and the vast majority of students were highly motivated to learn English, only a small number of students were demotivated. Chili li and Ting Zhou explored the demotivating factors of foreign language learners in non-key universities in China, which including two aspects: internal demotivating factors and external demotivating factors [10]. Among which, external factors, especially obscure learning objectives, had a greater impact on students' foreign language learning. Tang Wenli classified demotivation factors that affect non-English major college students' English learning into 10 categories, and pointed out that factors relating to teachers and students' own motivation had important impacts on students' demotivation in English learning [21]. Yu Zhangya and Wei Xiaobao explored the main demotivating factors of EFL of non-English major graduate students, and their relationship with students' language level and English learning behavior [23]. Studies had shown that communication opportunities and willingness, conflicts with professional learning and self-efficacy were important factors that cause the decline of graduate students' English learning motivation. Lili found that personal effort, ideal self, awareness of the importance of English, teacher's support and encouragement, teacher-related factors, and self-evaluation were the main strategies for Mongolian foreign language learners to counteract demotivation [11]. External help was the main strategy to reduce the influence of demotivators. Fu Zhijuan found that the motivational intensity of adult teaching is generally low, and

the types of motivation were more diverse, but mainly reflected in external motivation [17].

Researchers have carried out researches on the influencing factors of demotivation in EFL learning at different stages, but researches on the influencing factors of demotivation for non-English majors in Colleges of science and engineering is only the tip of the iceberg. There are a large number of second language learners in China's science and technology colleges and universities, accounting for a large proportion, which is one of the major groups to explore the demotivators in EFL learning. Hence, this study took non-English major undergraduates from college of science and engineering in the southwest area as the research object, and explored the demotivating factors that affect second language learners. English teachers and learners unveiled the reasons that affect their routinely English teaching and learning process, and thus, making necessary plans to eliminate or avoid the impact of demotivating factors in the future teaching and learning process, and better carrying out the education and teaching activities.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Research Questions

- 1) What are the main demotivators to non-English majors' second language learning in colleges of science and engineering?
- 2) Are there any differences between junior and senior learners on the demotivators of English learning in non-English major undergraduates?

#### 3.2. Participants

The study was carried out in the Southwest Petroleum University located in Sichuan province in China, where majors of science and technology are the prominent majors. The data of the study was obtained from 250 non-English majors in this university. As shown in Table 1, of the participants, 13.6% (34) were freshmen, 46.8% (117) were sophomores, 29.2% (73) were juniors and 10.4% (26) were seniors. Gender analysis indicated that 29.2% (73) were female, and 70.8% (177) were male students. The participants were come from six different majors, including Engineering, Management, Pedagogy, Economics, Law and Science. All of the participants were taking English as a second language and were taught English in their first or second grade in college. However, due to the heavy study loads, some learners spent less time in their later English learning.

*Table 1. The background information about the participants.*

Grade	Numbers	Gender		Majors						total
		F	M	Pedagogy	Economics	Management	Law	Science	Engineering	
Freshman	34	13	21			1	6	18	9	13.6%
Sophomore	117	29	88		1	1	1	6	108	46.8%
Junior	73	20	53	1	1	1		10	60	29.2%
Senior	26	11	15	1	1	2	3	5	14	10.4%
Total	250	73	177	2	3	5	10	39	191	100.0%

### 3.3. Instrument

A questionnaire was used in this research, in which two parts were included. The first part was the background information of the participants, including gender, grades, ages and majors. The second part was about the descriptive items that involved the potential factors leading to students' demotivation. 30 items were involved in this part, taking the form of 5-Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".

### 3.4. Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection was divided into three stages. In the first stage of the study, 10 participants were chosen randomly and were interviewed voluntarily to answer two questions: 1, Do you think you are highly motivated to learn English? 2, What factors are the main demotivators to your English learning? By using the data from these answers and combining with what Dörnyei had mentioned about 9 demotivating factors, a 39-item questionnaire was designed [4]. The questionnaire included two parts, background information and descriptive items. In the second stage of the study, 54 students were required to complete the questionnaire. According to the data collected, 5 items were deleted to improve the credibility and validity of the questionnaire. In the third stage, 287 college students were asked to complete the questionnaire and 250 were valid for the current study. The collected data were transcribed into SPSS 22.0 and then processed by means of descriptive analysis.

In order to identify the demotivators, factor analysis was conducted. To see whether the data is suitable for factor analysis, the result of Bartlett test and KMO test were taken into consideration [9]. Due to the acceptable result of alpha coefficient ( $\alpha=0.733$ ) and KMO ( $KMO=0.857$ ), it is assured that there was a relationship between these factors. In order to further probe the demotivators between junior learners and senior learners, an independent sample t-test was used to analyze the difference.

## 4. Results

Table 2. Mean results of the 34 items.

Item	Mean	The standard deviation	Item	Mean	The standard deviation
1	2.10	.830	18	2.99	1.087
2	2.44	.775	19	1.86	.869
3	1.63	.712	20	3.13	.898
4	2.79	.977	21	2.23	.807
5	4.10	.690	22	3.44	.926
6	2.98	1.092	23	2.22	.860
7	2.59	1.229	24	2.46	.982
8	2.82	1.088	25	2.82	.936
9	2.60	.990	26	4.17	.727
10	3.08	1.046	27	1.96	.767
11	3.10	.976	28	3.54	.887
12	2.90	.829	29	2.57	1.012
13	3.42	1.073	30	3.17	.977
14	4.16	.639	31	1.30	.468
15	3.63	.936	32	2.36	.845
16	3.02	.936	33	2.28	.491
17	2.78	1.026	34	2.02	.776

Table 2 presents the descriptive data of the 34 items in the questionnaire. According to the table, the average value of 30 items is above 2, the average value of 9 items is above 3, and the average value of 3 items is above 4, which indicates that students tend to agree with the descriptions of these items in different degrees that lead to demotivation in EFL learning process. Among them, the mean value of three items is above 4: "My English teacher treats students unfairly", "English is a compulsory course with credit requirements" and "My spoken English is poor, and speaking English outside makes me awkward", indicating that the relevant factors have a greater impact on the EFL demotivation of non-English major undergraduates.

Table 3. Factor analysis of demotivation.

Items	Subcomponent (Score)
Factor 1: English Learning Ability	
28	I never got a high score in English (.833)
13	It's difficult for me to recite English words and phrases (.744)
8	I don't think my English learning ability is as good as that of my class
19	I couldn't do as well on my exams as my friends did (.709)
27	Sentences in the text are too difficult to translate and read (.708)
21	The English texts in the textbooks are too long, too long and difficult
12	I will not choose a job related to English in the future (-.542)
14	I'm not very enthusiastic about learning English now (.446)
Factor 2: Value	
32	I will not learn English well (.770)
9	I think learning English is useless (.746)
35	I think learning English is a waste of time (.507)
29	My spoken English is poor, and speaking English outside makes me awkward (.496)
20	I'm not interested in learning English (.448)
Factor 3: Influence of Important Others	
26	My friends don't like learning English (.775)
6	My friends never take time to study English after class (.648)
Factor 4: Professional and Future Job Expectations	
21	My future job does not require high English level (.784)

Items	Subcomponent (Score)
23	My future work direction will not touch English (.699)
22	My major does not require a high level of English so there is no need to learn English well (.613)
Factor 5: Negative Attitude Towards English Learning	
17	I study English to prepare for the entrance examination (.694)
30	I study English mainly to pass CET-4 and CET-6 (.659)
5	Instead of studying English, do more math or physics (.490)
Factor 6: The Mandatory Nature of English Learning	
34	English is a required course with credit requirements (.793)
26	I study English because the teacher requires me to (.637)
24	My English teacher's English pronunciation is poor (.395)
Factor 7: Teacher's Personality	
7	The English teacher made fun of me when I answered the questions incorrectly (.741)
11	My English teacher treats students unfairly (.573)
10	None of my friends like listening to the teacher (.491)
Factor 8: Influence of Teaching Content	
15	My English teacher's teaching is too difficult (.707)
31	I need to use a lot of English in my professional courses (.653)
16	The subject of the text explained by the teacher in class is boring (.446)

As can be seen in Table 3, after the factor loading matrix orthogonally rotated by the principal component analysis method in the factor analysis, 8 factors were obtained. The cumulative variance that can be explained is 64.476%. The internal reliability test of each factor obtained after the rotation is performed, and the internal Alpha coefficient of each factor is obtained in Table 4, and the internal Alpha coefficients of the eight factors are all above 0.6.

According to the common characteristics of the items contained in each factor, 8 factors were summarized. As can be seen from Table 4, the average mean of the four factors of factor 2, factor 3, factor 6 and factor 8 all reached 3, which shows that value, the influence of important others, the mandatory nature of English learning and teaching content posed great impact on learners' L2 demotivation. These four factors are the major influencing factors of demotivation in learners' EFL learning process. Factor 8, influence of teaching content harbors the highest mean (3.34), indicating that factors related to teaching content, such as difficult teaching materials, abstruse teaching topics, obscure examination questions, and other teaching content related factors have a passive impact on learners' English learning motivation. Thus, teaching content is one of the main demotivating factors that lead to learners' demotivation in the process of foreign language learning. Factor 6, the mandatory nature of English learning (3.20) demonstrated that most learners regard English learning as a compulsory

curriculum in school, and English learning is treated as an inevitable requirement for completing their studies with little or no interest in autonomous learning. Factor 2, value (3.14) accounted for a high proportion, manifesting that some learners do not recognize the value of English learning, such as associating English with their major development. Conversely, EFL learning is only treated as a common subject. In the process of English learning, important others (3.00) also contributes to learners' demotivation. Learners are easily affected by the negative influence of others, such as complaints about difficult course setting, distractions from partners and negative attitudes toward class assignment, therefore, reducing their motivation to learn English. Besides, English learning ability (2.78) and negative attitude towards English learning (2.70) are also important demotivating factors. Phonetics, vocabulary and grammar are three essential parts of EFL learning. However, learners' ability to accept, understand and use English is uneven. Commonly, students with lower learning ability generate more negative attitude toward English learning. Learners' self-attitude towards English learning determines how they allocate their energy and time to EFL learning. Professional and future job expectations (2.43) and teacher's personality (2.28) had the lowest mean, indicating that related factors, such as expected future job requirements for English use ability, teachers' teaching attitude, teaching Style, have less effect on undergraduate learners' motivation to learn English.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of each factor.

Factor	Demotivators	Alpha coefficient	Eigenvalue	Mean	The standard deviation	Mean sort
Factor 1	English learning ability	0.737	21.934	2.78	1.001	5
Factor 2	Value	0.664	8.311	3.14	0.859	3
Factor 3	Influence of important others	0.633	6.757	3.00	1.011	4
Factor 4	Professional and future job expectations	0.747	5.229	2.43	0.776	7
Factor 5	Negative attitude towards English learning	0.649	4.619	2.70	0.779	6
Factor 6	The mandatory nature of English learning	0.691	4.069	3.20	1.007	2
Factor 7	Teacher's personality	0.781	3.680	2.28	0.838	8
Factor 8	Influence of teaching content	0.654	3.394	3.34	0.855	1

In order to further explore the differences of the influencing factors of demotivation among students in different grades,

freshmen and sophomores are classified into the lower grades, and juniors and seniors are classified into the upper grades.

There are 151 students in the junior group and 99 students in the senior group. According to the 8 demotivating factors obtained by factor analysis, independent sample t-test was used to analyze the differences between different grade groups. As shown in Table 5, the result of the analysis showed that

there was no significant difference in the demotivating factors affecting English learning among students in the upper and lower grades, which indicated that there was no significant difference in the demotivating factors among different grade groups.

*Table 5. Independent sample t-test of different grade groups.*

	Homogeneity of variance test		t-test for Equality of means		
	F	Significance	t	df	Sig.
Equal Variances Assumed	.381	.538	.242	248	.809
Equal Variances not Assumed			.246	224.621	.806

As can be seen in table 6, the mean difference between the upper and lower grades for 8 factors was presented. It can be seen that learners of the two grades have common cognitions on the related demotivating factors, but there are also differences. Different grade groups maintain a consistent attitude towards the demotivators of English

learning ability, influence of important others, negative attitude towards English learning, the mandatory nature of English learning, teacher's personality and teaching content, but hold opposite attitude towards English language ability (0.21) and professional and future job expectations (0.25).

*Table 6. Mean difference between upper and lower grades.*

Factors	Demotivators	Junior grade	Senior grade
Factor 1	English learning ability	2.86	2.65
Factor 2	Value	3.03	3.03
Factor 3	Influence of important others	2.98	3.05
Factor 4	Professional and future job expectations	2.36	2.61
Factor 5	Negative attitude towards English learning	2.69	2.73
Factor 6	The mandatory nature of English learning	3.54	3.52
Factor 7	Teacher's personality	2.84	2.83
Factor 8	Influence of teaching content	2.77	2.82

## 5. Discussion and Suggestion

Question 1: What are the influencing factors that cause non-English majors' demotivation in foreign language learning?

According to the results of the questionnaire, it can be concluded that there are six types factors that cause non-English majors to demotivate English learning: English learning ability, value, influence of important others, negative attitude towards English learning, the mandatory nature of English learning and influence of teaching content.

Firstly, the result shows that students' learning ability is one of the main factors affecting learners learning motivation, which is consistent with studies of Hassaskhah et al., Li Chenghua, Sun Hui, and Tang Wenli [8, 18, 21]. When encountering learning difficulties, learners often lack the awareness and ability to self-regulate, conversely, they tend to blur the value of English learning and only take English learning as a compulsory course subject rather than a way or tool to expand their knowledge. Teachers are supposed to encourage students especially when they are downhearted by the obstacles for the reason that they are sometimes seen as effective and supportive [11, 15, 20]. When teaching English, teachers cannot blindly emphasize the scores, questions and corresponding fixed answering patterns. They should focus on the actual needs of students, highlight the relationship between English learning and future career development, cultivate and improve students' language ability, and let

students sense the importance and value of English learning, and thus, real implementation the concept and spirit of English teaching reform that embodies what you have learned and put what you have learned into practice.

Secondly, learners' cognition of the value of English learning is still on the basis of passing exams, requirements of parents or teachers, and fulfilling graduation requirement. However, they are less likely to link English learning with their own future development. This perception of learners may be related to our country's education examination system. Most of the learners' English learning in middle school in my country is concentrated on basic usage and questioning tactics. The main purpose of learning English is to pass the entrance examinations of college [2, 8]. After getting a score and entering the university, this requirement shifts to passing the college English test band 4 and band 6, the course examination, the graduate entrance examination and other examination requirements. Learner's cognition of second language learning is still on the basis of coping with exams, especially in colleges of science and technology. However, undergraduate study is not only about exams, but also the establishment and improvement of the values learned by learners themselves. What's more, learners' major variety also contributes to their inadequate value cognition. For example, students majoring in physics are prone to conduct an experiment rather than practice spoken English. In the teaching process, teachers are supposed to lighten the stress coming from English-related tests, and emphasize the needs of learning English by combining English learning with finding future jobs,

improving communication capabilities, developing self-interest, travelling and other positive goals.

Thirdly, as teachers are the main instructors of classroom English learning, they are expected to teach students in accordance with their aptitude in the setting of classroom learning, the selection of teaching materials, the choice of teaching methods as well as the choice of topics. English learning ability includes the learner's mastery of the five major skills of English listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. For learners with different academic abilities, teachers should try to augment learners' advantages and make up for their shortcomings, helping learners to find a suitable way of learning, so that they can gradually strengthen their confidence in English learning. Moreover, teachers should consider the real situation of students' present learning condition comprehensively, and arrange learning tasks reasonably for students of different learning levels and stratify classes structure in different levels to implement targeted teaching [13]. Therefore, students can accept and complete the learning tasks actively and voluntarily instead of feeling heavily pressured by blindly increasing learning tasks which results in resistance. Only on the premise of laying a solid language foundation can students find self-confidence and improve their English learning motivation [6, 16, 18].

Finally, a good learning atmosphere also plays a multiplier effect on the construction of English learners' learning motivation, which is consistent with previous researches [5, 8]. When learners encounter problems in the learning process, they are easily affected by the negative emotions of the surrounding classmates, resulting in a feeling of weariness. Teachers should always pay attention to the learning situation of learners, exploring the internal needs of learners and try to meet the requirements, maintaining the enthusiasm of learners in English learning [14]. Starting from the needs of learners themselves, they will not give up easily when faced with difficulties.

Question 2: Are there any differences between junior and senior learners on the demotivators of English learning in non-English major undergraduates?

According to the t-test results and the comparison of the mean values of different influencing factors between the junior and senior grades, it can be found that there was no significant difference in the demotivating factors among different grade groups. Learners' learning ability is an important factor that determines whether the learner can learn independently and effectively. Due to different learners' personal cognition, language ability and social experience, the degree of learners' involvement in learning activities, the ability to detect and solve problems, and the ability to respond to difficulties are different. Junior learners have just experienced the college entrance examination, and the learning subjects in college are miscellaneous with abundant learning tasks, thus the independent learning ability and learning attitude that were cultivated in high school operate well in college, maintaining high enthusiasm for learning English and further stimulating their learning ability. In the

face of difficult learning topics and complex content, learners are not easy to give up, conversely, they are more likely to be motivated to stimulate their own learning potential. Due to more specialized and sophisticated courses, senior learners' enthusiasm for non-major related courses gradually fades, and their enthusiasm as well as their energy for English learning gradually decreases without the requirement of fixed learning tasks. Some high-grade non-English majors do not have mandatory requirements of English learning. However, as an essential learning tool, English is widely used in students' daily study, such as referring to international materials and reading professional work. In terms of formal course, colleges are supposed to set up English optional courses like reading and writing that can be chosen by non-English majors to auxiliary professional learning.

Major and future job expectations differ greatly in the demotivating factors in different grade groups. The courses junior learners attended are mostly rudimentary lessons that can be absorbed and comprehended easily. Besides, as beginners of college students, a majority of them are not clear about the development of their majors. Thus, they are less likely to make distinct and feasible plans in their studies [10]. Moreover, most of the non-English major regards English learning as a dispensable course and the only demand for English is to pass the college English test band 4 and band 6. However, with more in-depth professional learning, the senior learners pay more attention to the integrated development of the major and expectant future job. In view of the actual demand for English ability in related jobs of different majors, senior learners are more likely to highlight the connection between English learning and future career development. Schools are expected to offer relevant courses or training lectures to expand junior learners' awareness of the necessity of English learning and enhance their motivation to learn English.

## 6. Summary

This research adopts the subject of non-English major undergraduate in southwest petroleum university, studying students' demotivating factors in English learning. It can be revealed from the study that non-English majors' demotivation level is high. Undergraduates from colleges of science and engineering account for a large proportion of higher education in China. Second language teaching for such learners is a hotly debated topic that teachers and students should pay more attention to. Exploring and studying the effects of demotivation in second language learning that affect such learners is helpful for teachers to reduce the influence of negative factors and increase the influence of positive factors from the perspective of learners' practical needs, thereby improving learners' second language learning motivation. However, this study is only confined in a small number of students, so the number of subjects in this study is slightly insufficient. Subsequent researchers can expand the scope of subjects and continue to explore relevant demotivating factors from different perspectives.

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