

INVESTIGATING STUDENT MOTIVATIONS AND BARRIERS TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT HONG DUC UNIVERSITY

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Abstract: *This study explores the factors that motivate and demotivate undergraduate students in learning English at Hong Duc University. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with ten students from various majors. Thematic analysis revealed five motivating factors (career goals, cultural interest, teacher support, supportive environment, and social influence) and five demotivating ones (academic pressure, language skill problems, negative feedback, exam stress, and lack of speaking practice). The findings further indicated that increasing speaking activities, diversifying teaching methods, and promoting learner autonomy are essential for enhancing students' motivation in learning English.*

Keywords: *Language Learning Motivation, demotivation, speaking skills, English teaching, learner autonomy.*

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, English has become an essential skill in education, employment, and international communication. In Vietnam, English is widely taught at the university level, even in non-language-related disciplines. Despite this, many students face challenges in maintaining consistent motivation and engagement in English learning. Prior research, both globally and in Vietnam, has shown that motivation is a key factor influencing language learning success [4], [3], [10]. However, most studies have focused on English majors or used quantitative surveys, leaving a gap in understanding the lived experiences of students from diverse academic backgrounds. This study addresses that gap by exploring what motivates or demotivates students at Hong Duc University to learn English, and how they perceive current instructional practices. The goal is to provide context-specific insights to inform more effective and responsive English language teaching.

2. Literature Review

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), motivation is widely recognized as one of the most critical factors influencing learning success. Gardner and Lambert [6] were among the first to distinguish between two major types of motivation: integrative

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motivation (the desire to integrate into the target language community) and instrumental motivation (learning a language to achieve specific goals such as passing exams or securing a job). Dörnyei [4] further emphasized that language learning motivation is a dynamic and evolving process shaped by individual, contextual, and educational factors.

Self-Determination Theory [3] differentiates between intrinsic motivation when learners engage in learning for personal satisfaction or enjoyment and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by external rewards, grades, or social pressures. Additionally, Expectancy-Value Theory [5] argues that learners' motivation depends on their expectations for success and the value they place on the learning task.

On the opposite end of the spectrum lies the concept of demotivation. According to Dörnyei (2001)[4], demotivation occurs when learners who were once motivated lose interest or confidence due to negative influences such as monotonous teaching methods, lack of practice opportunities, exam stress, or discouraging feedback. Studies in Vietnam ([14], [15]) have shown that non-English-major students are particularly vulnerable to demotivation, often due to irrelevant content and a perceived disconnect between English learning and their academic disciplines.

Understanding these theoretical foundations and the specific learning context is essential for designing effective instructional strategies, particularly for non-English-major students in Vietnamese universities.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were ten undergraduate students currently studying at Hong Duc University. They were from both English-related and non-English-related majors and represented different academic years. The selection ensured variation in learning experiences, academic disciplines, and year levels. All participants voluntarily agreed to take part in the research and were assigned pseudonyms (P1 to P10) to ensure confidentiality. The table 1 below presents background information of the participants.

Table 1. Participants' Background Information

| ID | Year of Study | Academic Major |
|-----|---------------|---------------------------|
| P1 | 1st | English Teacher Education |
| P2 | 2nd | English Teacher Education |
| P3 | 1st | English Linguistics |
| P4 | 4th | Accounting |
| P5 | 3rd | Preschool Education |
| P6 | 2nd | English Teacher Education |
| P7 | 3rd | Preschool Education |
| P8 | 4th | Law |
| P9 | 4th | Preschool Education |
| P10 | 3rd | English Teacher Education |

3.2. Instruments

The main instrument employed in this study was a semi-structured interview questionnaire designed to investigate students' motivation and demotivation in English language learning. The interview protocol consisted of four sections: (1) background information, (2) motivating factors, (3) demotivating factors, and (4) student suggestions.

The questions were open-ended to allow participants to share their experiences freely and in detail. The instrument was developed in consultation with English language educators to ensure clarity, relevance, and appropriateness. It was also piloted and revised before being used in the actual data collection.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face depending on participants' availability. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The recordings were later transcribed for analysis.

3.3. Procedures

The research was conducted over a three-week period, from March 11 to April 1, 2025. An invitation was sent to potential participants, and appointments were scheduled based on their availability. Each participant was informed of the study's objectives, confidentiality, and their rights as voluntary participants.

Before the interviews, participants completed a short screening form. Individual interviews were conducted in a quiet location on campus and. All interviews were conducted in English and audio-recorded with participants' consent.

The recordings were later transcribed verbatim. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym (P1 to P10) to ensure anonymity. The transcribed data were used for subsequent thematic analysis to explore patterns related to students' motivation and demotivation in English language learning.

3.4. Data collection and analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) [2] six-phase framework. First, the researchers became familiar with the data through repeated reading. Initial codes were then generated and grouped into potential themes. Themes were reviewed, refined, and named to reflect key patterns in the data.

To enhance trustworthiness, peer debriefing and member checking were applied. Selected codes and themes were discussed among the researchers, and summaries of findings were shared with a subset of participants for validation.

4. Findings

This study was conducted with the participation of ten undergraduate students from Hong Duc University. These students were carefully selected to represent various academic majors and levels of study, ranging from first-year to fourth-year. The sample included both English-major students and those from non-English-related fields such as Law, Accounting, and Preschool Education. This range helped ensure a broad and realistic understanding of English language learning experiences within the university.

By including students from diverse backgrounds, the study was able to explore how different academic contexts might influence their motivation, confidence, and perception of English education. Some of the students had more frequent exposure to English due to their curriculum, while others considered English a minor subject. This difference gave the research a wider lens and richer set of insights.

4.1. Motivating factors

Through the analysis of the interview responses, several factors emerged as significant motivators for students in their English learning journey. One of the most commonly mentioned reasons was the importance of English for future careers. Students believed that having strong English skills would give them a competitive edge in the job market. Many of them viewed English not just as a school subject but as a tool for achieving personal and professional goals.

English can help me get a better job, maybe even abroad. (P8)

It helps me to get better job prospects, professional development. (P10)

Another motivating factor was cultural interest. Students said they enjoyed watching English movies, listening to English music, or reading literary works in English. These activities made English more enjoyable and relevant to their daily lives. Several participants mentioned that they learned new vocabulary or phrases from songs and used subtitles to improve their listening.

Well, Taylor Swift's songs have played a big role in refining my pronunciation. By singing along, I get to practice the natural flow of the language, including stress, rhythm, and intonation. (P1)

I often watch English movies and listen to music. One movie I like is The Shawshank Redemption. I also watch documentaries about American culture and read classic literature. These activities help me understand the language and improve my vocabulary. (P5)

The role of teachers also played a key part in sustaining motivation. Most students emphasized that supportive, enthusiastic, and creative teachers made a big difference in how they felt about learning. When teachers explained clearly, gave constructive feedback, and used interactive activities, students felt more involved and less anxious.

My teachers always give feedback to us. They always highlight the good parts first before correcting mistakes. I really appreciate their teaching style. It really boosts my confidence and makes me feel like I'm making progress. (P2)

My teacher has a really engaging way of teaching. The way they explain things just grabs my attention, so I never feel bored in class. (P6)

In addition to teachers, the general classroom environment also mattered. Participants appreciated when their classmates helped each other, especially during group activities. Peer support created a safe space where students felt comfortable trying to use English, even if they were not confident. A few students mentioned that they worked harder when they saw their friends making progress.

The competition in class actually helps me stay motivated. Seeing my classmates improve pushes me to work harder and keep up with them. (P2)

The classroom atmosphere is engaging, and my classmates are motivated, which pushes me to do better. We also have a lot of useful resources that make learning more effective. (P6)

Finally, family and social expectations also influenced motivation. Some students were encouraged by their parents, who believed that English was essential for long-term success. Others mentioned peer influence, saying they were inspired by classmates who spoke English well or participated in English-related events.

4.2. Demotivating factors

Despite the positive influences, students also faced several challenges that made them feel discouraged or frustrated. One major issue was academic pressure and time constraints. Students, especially from non-English majors, often had packed schedules with heavy workloads. As a result, they found it hard to make time for English, even when they wanted to improve.

Sometimes I feel unmotivated because I'm very busy with other subjects, and I don't have enough time to focus on English. (P7)

I feel overwhelmed when I have to deal with difficult exercises and my communication skills are still weak. It makes me feel a bit discouraged. (P8)

Another common problem was difficulty with language skills. Many students struggled with pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary. Some mentioned that even after studying hard, they did not see much progress, which made them feel disappointed. Pronunciation, in particular, was a major concern. Students said they were afraid of speaking English in English class because they worried about making mistakes. This fear sometimes led them to avoid participation altogether.

Negative feedback and comparisons with classmates also contributed to lower motivation. A few students recalled being criticized by teachers in ways that felt harsh or unhelpful. Others said they felt embarrassed when teachers compared their performance to others who were more fluent.

There was a time when I had to translate a passage in class, but I couldn't do it fluently because of my lack of vocabulary. Seeing my lecturer's disappointed expression was disheartening, especially since it wasn't my first struggle. After class, I received critical feedback, which made me question my abilities and reflect deeply on my weaknesses. (P6)

If I am not mistaken, when my group had to do the first reading and writing presentation. Since I was the first to present, I was nervous and mispronounced several words. When my teacher gave feedback, she pointed out that I was the weakest in the group. That day, I felt both sad and embarrassed. However, instead of giving up, I made a commitment to practice speaking every day to improve my pronunciation. (P1)

Exams were another source of stress. Several students reported that English classes focused too much on tests, which made learning feel mechanical. They often studied just to pass exams rather than to understand or enjoy the subject. Some said that comparing test scores with classmates created pressure and anxiety, especially when they received lower grades despite their effort.

Tests sometimes make me nervous. I focus too much on getting high scores and forget about real learning. I want more creative ways to test knowledge. (P9)

I have to express by one word “stressed” . Having too many tests at once really reduces my motivation and makes learning feel overwhelming. (P10)

Lastly, many students pointed out the lack of speaking opportunities. Although grammar and vocabulary were frequently taught, there were few chances to actually speak English in a natural way. Students said they needed more real communication practice to build fluency and confidence. Without this, they felt their English skills were stuck and not improving.

4.3. Student suggestions

When asked how English learning could be improved at their university, students provided several practical suggestions. One of the most repeated ideas was to increase speaking practice. They wanted more classroom activities that allowed them to talk, such as discussions, role-playing, and presentations. Some even recommended setting up English clubs or inviting guest speakers to interact with students. These suggestions show that students clearly recognized the gap between theory and practice in their current classes.

Another common recommendation was to make lessons more engaging. Students said they would feel more motivated if classes included multimedia, games, or tasks based on real-life situations. For example, one participant suggested using English movies or news clips to teach vocabulary and listening. Others believed that creative group projects would help students stay interested and work better together.

Students also talked about the importance of having a learning environment that supports autonomy. Several participants described how they set personal goals, created their own study plans, or practiced English through self-study.

I set a goal to learn 5 new words every day, watch English movies without subtitles, and try speaking English with my friends. (P4)

I have a small Xplanner. I always create a study plan and follow it. It helps me not miss any tasks easily. (P6)

These individual strategies showed that many learners were proactive, but they needed encouragement and structure from the school to stay consistent.

Overall, the students hoped that English education would become more interactive, practical, and focused on communication. They believed that with the right support and teaching approach, they could overcome their current challenges and become more confident English users.

5. Discussion

The findings of the study indicate that motivating factors for English language learning include career-oriented goals, cultural interest and personal enjoyment, family and social influence, teachers' instructional methods and support, as well as a supportive learning environment. Demotivating factors comprise academic pressure, difficulties with language skills, negative feedback from teachers, exam pressure, and limited

opportunities for language use. These results confirm that students' motivation in English language learning is shaped by both internal and external factors. Career aspirations and cultural interests reflect learners' personal goals, whereas teacher support and classroom environment highlight the significance of instructional and emotional conditions.

These findings are consistent with previous studies conducted in Vietnam (e.g., [10], [14]), which emphasized the role of instrumental motivation and identified demotivation stemming from rigid teaching methods and exam-oriented practices. The present study further reinforces the importance of instrumental motivation, revealing that even students from non-English majors recognize the role of English in their future careers, yet face challenges due to limited speaking opportunities and emotional barriers.

Students' recommendations-such as incorporating more speaking activities, diversifying teaching techniques, and promoting learner autonomy-underscore the necessity of integrating learners' perspectives into effective language pedagogy. These findings align with Self-Determination Theory, which posits autonomy, competence, and relatedness as essential components of sustained motivation. The results also imply that both teachers and the learning environment play a critical role in shaping learners' motivation. Accordingly, teachers should be encouraged to employ creative teaching strategies that provide students with meaningful opportunities to demonstrate and improve their English proficiency. Practical learning activities and assessment methods should be adopted to foster learner autonomy. Furthermore, extracurricular activities and English clubs should be organized more frequently to increase students' exposure to and practice with the language.

Although the study was limited in scope, it offers valuable implications for university-level English teaching in Vietnam. To obtain a more comprehensive understanding, future research should be conducted on a larger scale with participants from a broader range of institutions. Addressing both motivational and demotivational factors is essential for enhancing student engagement, particularly among non-English-major learners.

6. Conclusion

This study explored students' motivation and demotivation in English language learning at Hong Duc University. The findings showed that students were motivated by career goals, interest in culture, teacher support, classroom environment, and family influence. At the same time, they faced demotivation due to academic pressure, difficulties with skills, negative feedback, exam stress, and lack of speaking practice. The study also revealed that students expected more practical and interactive learning, especially speaking activities and diverse teaching methods. These insights can help improve English instruction, particularly for non-English-major students. Although the study was small in scale, it provides useful implications for teaching and further research on student motivation in higher education.

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