

## **How Japanese students perceive demotivation toward English study and overcome such feelings**

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### **Abstract**

Researchers and practitioners in SLA have recently been interested in the “shadow” part of motivation—namely, demotivation—yet there is still more to be learned about it. The purposes of this study are to investigate how Japanese EFL learners experience feelings of demotivation and how they react to them. The 1,899 Japanese students from 20 universities who participated in this study were asked to complete a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire consisting of 40 self-evaluation questions aimed at determining the triggers for their demotivation. In addition, the participants freely wrote the reasons for their demotivated feelings and their efforts to overcome such feelings. The results of the quantitative analyses showed that, generally speaking, demotivated EFL learners tend to (1) believe that English is more difficult, (2) have been more dissatisfied with the teacher and class, (3) had weaker L2 self (i.e., a self-image of using English), and (4) have experienced higher anxiety toward L2 use. Further analyses conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively suggested the degree to which and point at which learners initially encounter difficulty in learning English and learners’ having or not having L2 self. The discussion focused primarily on these two factors and the resulting pedagogical implications. (198 words)

**Key words:** demotivation, retrieval of motivation, perceived difficulty of English, L2 self

### **Introduction**

Second language (L2) learners’ motivation is one of the most extensively investigated areas in second language acquisition (SLA) research. However, until recently, most previous studies on motivation have overlooked the negative motives, which might be a cause of English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL) learners’ demotivation (Dörnyei, 2005). Amid the growing needs for remedial courses in the postsecondary education settings in Japan, research on learner demotivation has become vastly more important. Given such research and educational circumstances, this study aims to reveal specific aspects of EFL learners’ demotivation. The purposes of the study are to (a) investigate how students in Japan experience feelings of demotivation and how these feelings differ from those of motivated learners and (b) investigate how students in Japan react to such feelings.

## Previous Studies

Since the late 1970s, numerous empirical studies have examined how to motivate second and foreign language learners (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001a, 2001b; Gardner, 1979; Hiromori, 2006; Tanaka, 2010). Such studies were conducted on the supposition that learners are inherently motivated intrinsically (Deci & Flaste, 1995). However, it is undeniable that some learners have lost their motivation to learn. Despite such a situation, very little research has been conducted to determine the cause(s) and solutions for this until quite recently (Dörnyei, 2005).

## Definition of Demotivation

Since little research on the decrease of motivation was conducted before the turn of the century, the word demotivation has not been commonly used until recently. As far as we know, in the field of second and foreign language teaching and learning, only a couple of researchers have defined demotivation explicitly. Dörnyei (2001a) explained demotivation as “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action” (p. 143). Nakata (2006) described demotivation as “a temporarily reduced or diminished motivational state due to specific external causes” (p. 92).<sup>1</sup>

We would like to discuss two issues before proposing our working definition of demotivation. First, it is difficult to determine whether or not a reduced or diminished motivational state is temporary. Nakata did not indicate how long temporary is considered to be and thus whether or not a learner lacking motivation temporarily can only be determined retrospectively. Therefore, this study considers all cases of reduced or diminished motivational states, unless they are proven terminal, as demotivation. Second, both Dörnyei and Nakata related demotivation with external factors. However, in a later study, Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) suggested that the lack of intrinsic motivation (i.e., an internal factor) might cause Japanese English learners to experience demotivation. Therefore, based on the previous studies and discussion thus far, we define demotivation as a reduced or diminished motivational state due to external and/or internal causes.

## Demotivational Factors

Research on demotivation started to appear in the 1990s. The short history of research in this subfield has produced some interesting studies. Most of the studies conducted on demotivation have focused on demotivational factors. For example, Kakita (1993) proposed three factors that can motivate or demotivate learners:

1. Environmental factors, such as social environment, family environment, and physical and emotional atmosphere at school (e.g., social, family, and school);
2. Teaching factors, such as teaching materials, teaching methods, and the quality of teaching (e.g., teaching style, number of classes, and grading policy); and
3. Learner factors, such as physical and mental health, intelligence, aptitude, interest, goal-setting, learning strategy, and study habits.

Imura (2003) also discussed environmental factors as a possible cause of demotivation. He

argued that, in the past, English ability was only required from a select few, which caused lower motivation to study English among most Japanese English learners. This argument is understood in the framework of the L2 self, which Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009) examined and discussed. The L2 self is an L2 learner's self-image of using his or her target language (Dörnyei, 2009). Dörnyei and Ushioda argued that, if a learner has difficulty imagining him- or herself using the target language, it is likely that his or her motivation to learn the language is low.

Related to the L2 self, Dörnyei (2009) proposed *ideal L2 self* and *ought to L2 self*. Ideal L2 self refers to an image of the self that a L2 learner would like to be. By trying to fill the discrepancy between the actual self and the ideal L2 self, an L2 learner who possesses an ideal L2 self would increase his or her motivation to learn the target language. Ought to L2 self refers to an image of the self that a L2 learner thinks he or she has to be. A language learner who possesses an ought to L2 self might increase his or her motivation to learn English by acknowledging other people's expectations of him or her.

Several studies have dealt with Kakita's (1993) previously noted second (i.e., teaching) factor (e.g., Arai, 2004; Hasegawa, 2004; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Arai (2004) conducted a questionnaire survey on Japanese university students indicating that nearly 50% of the causes of their demotivating experiences related to teachers. Similarly, Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) and Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) found that teachers were a demotivating factor among Japanese university students. In their studies, the teacher as a demotivating factor included the teaching styles, teaching ability, and teaching materials.

Japan is not the only country where teachers are a common demotivating factor among students. Zhang (2007) investigated what could demotivate university students in four countries: Japan, the United States, China, and Germany. The results demonstrated that teachers' behavior and the lack of teaching ability are major causes of students' loss of motivation to learn.

As for learners as a demotivating factor, Yamamori's (2004) and Tsuchiya's (2006 a, b) studies are worth mentioning. Yamamori (2004) looked into changes in junior high school students' motivation to study English. Based on the one-year investigation, an increase in the difficulty of English as a subject and a decrease in regular examination scores resulted in a decrease in the students' motivation to study English. Tsuchiya (2006 a, b) examined freshmen at a Japanese university to determine whether or not demotivating factors differ depending on the learners' grades. The results suggested that learners with high grades are more likely to lose motivation due to external factors than internal ones. On the other hand, learners with low grades are likely to lose motivation because of their lack of confidence in their abilities.

Based on the discussion thus far, most previous studies on learner demotivation focus on extracting demotivating factors. Thanks to those studies, demotivating factors have been unfolded to a certain extent. However, it is not clear if differences in demotivating factors exist between learners who have lost motivation but regained it later and those who have lost motivation and have not recovered from the situation. Moreover, what students would or would not do when they experience demotivation remains unknown. Furthermore, how some of the learners who lost their motivation and then successfully regained it has not been

researched. Therefore, this paper aims to identify the differences in demotivating factors among Japanese university students (1) who have never experienced demotivation toward English learning, (2) who have experienced demotivation toward English learning but have regained their motivation, and (3) who have experienced demotivation toward English learning and have not regained it. Another aim of this study is to investigate whether there are any differences in learners' reactions to feelings of demotivation between those who have lost their motivation to learn English but regained it and those who have lost their motivation to learn English and remained in this state.

## Method

### Participants

One thousand eight hundred ninety-nine university students in Japan completed a questionnaire. In order to ensure the diversity of participants, the data were collected from 20 universities that are academically and demographically varied. Of the 1,899 participants, 982 were males and 904 were females, with the gender of the remaining 13 being unknown. Approximately 13% of the participants were students with majors in English or related fields; the remaining majors did not directly relate to English language. About half of the participants were freshmen (48.0%). The rest consisted of sophomores (34.4%), juniors (11.5%), seniors (4.1%), and unknown (1.8%).

### Questionnaire

The questionnaire included three parts. In the beginning part of the questionnaire, immediately following the demographic section was a question about the participants' demotivating experience, which enabled us to divide them into three groups: learners who have never experienced demotivation (Group 1); learners who have experienced demotivation, but later overcame it (Group 2); and learners who have experienced demotivation and have not overcome it (Group 3). These groups were compared to each other in the subsequent analyses.

In the other two parts of the questionnaire, one contained 40 self-evaluation questions, asking reasons related to losing motivation to learn English. In this part, participants were asked questions such as "(The reason I lost motivation to learn English was that) the way the teacher taught was not easy to follow", "The objectives of the classes were not clear" and "I didn't think learning English would be useful for my future." Participants were asked to rate each question on a five-point Likert scale by selecting one through five that most closely matches their feelings (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). The other part contained open-ended questions. The groups of participants were asked to answer a different open-ended question depending on the group to which they declared themselves to belong. Group 1 students were asked to write the reasons why they are always motivated to learn English. Group 2 students were asked to indicate the reasons or the occasions related to how they retrieved their motivation to study English from their demotivated states. Group 3 students were asked to write the reasons why they have been demotivated in studying English.

## Data Analyses

Parallel analysis<sup>2</sup> and factor analysis were run on the data collected through the Likert scale questionnaire. Extracted factors' scores were then compared among the three groups of the participants by ANOVA and the Tukey multiple range tests.

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed using the process proposed by Barkhuizen (2008). In the first step, key words were identified; each was tagged with a number. The tag numbers corresponded to their coding categories. Some of the related coding categories were then grouped into larger ones. During this process of connecting related coding categories to find a larger theme, we referred to the results of the factor analysis as well as the results from the ANOVAs, which we will show and discuss in the following sections.

## Results and Discussion

### Preliminary Analysis 1: Parallel Analysis

The mean and standard deviation of each item score were calculated for the 40 questions answered using the Likert scale. Two items were identified to have a floor effect and were excluded from further analyses. For the remaining 38 question items, parallel analysis (PA) (Hayton, Allen, & Scarpello, 2004) was conducted in order to determine the number of factors to be extracted in the following explanatory factor analysis. Figure 1 shows the results of the PA, indicating that the retention of the first six factors is appropriate.

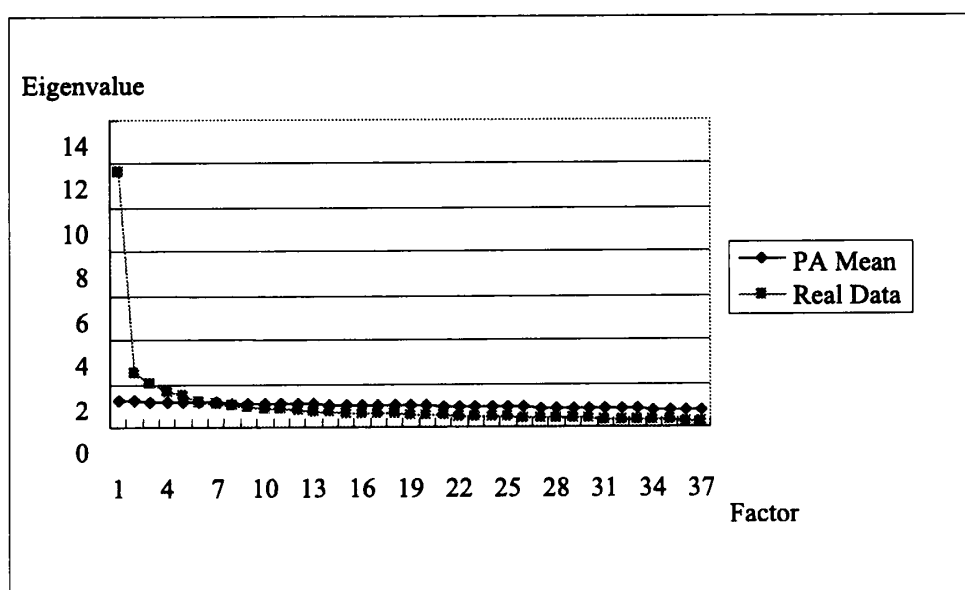


Figure 1. Comparison of the actual versus randomly generated eigenvalues

### Preliminary Analysis 2: Factor Analysis

Based on the results of the PA, a six-factor structure was assumed when exploratory factor analysis (principal factoring with Promax rotation) was performed on the questionnaire data. Following Brown (2006), items with loadings smaller than .30 were excluded. In addition, items that had loadings larger than .30 on more than two factors at the same time were eliminated. Factor analysis was repeated on the remaining items until all the items had

loadings larger than .30 and none of them had similar loadings on two or more factors. In addition, Item-Total Correlations were calculated on the items in each factor. As a result, one item was found to have a very weak value ( $r < .25$ ) and was thus omitted. As a result of this process, which involved item elimination, only two question items remained under the fifth and sixth factors. As it is recommended that latent factors be defined by at least three observed variables (Brown, 2006), the fifth and sixth factors were eliminated from further analysis. This procedure yielded the pattern matrix shown in Table 1. Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha), also shown in Table 1, indicate sufficient internal consistency in each factor.

In the first factor, items with high loadings included "English grammar was too difficult to understand," "Reading was difficult," and "I could not follow the class." As the contents of the items were closely related to the difficulty of learning English, the first factor was named *English as a Difficult Subject*.

Many of the items with high loadings in the second factor were associated with the teacher and class content. For example, items such as "I didn't like the teacher" and "the way the teacher taught was not easy to follow" were directly related to the teacher. In addition, items related to the class itself were included in this factor as well (e.g., "the class atmosphere did not encourage me to study"). Therefore, the second factor was named *Dissatisfaction with the Teacher and Class*.

The third factor included items with high loadings related to whether or not participants could link English learning and their future (e.g., "I didn't think that learning English would contribute to my personal growth," "I didn't think that learning English would be useful in the future"). As such imagery (or lack of) is closely related to the L2 self, which was suggested by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009), we decided to name the construct *Lack of L2 Self*.

The fourth factor had items with high loadings such as "it was embarrassing to pronounce English sounds" and "it was embarrassing to make mistakes when I was called on." These items related to learners' anxiety toward English use. Although the factor could have been named *Anxiety toward L2 Use*, for the sake of simplicity, it was named *Anxiety*.

### Analysis of Variance

As previously mentioned in the Methodology section, participants were divided into three groups:

1. EFL learners who have never experienced demotivation (Group 1: Motivated)
2. EFL learners who have experienced demotivation, but later overcame (Group 2: Motivation Retrieved)
3. EFL learners who have experienced demotivation and have not overcome it (Group 3: Demotivated)

In order to identify any differences among groups, we decided to compare the groups' means of factor scores obtained in the factor analysis. However, far more participants were identified to be in Group 3 ( $n = 1150$ ) than in Group 1 ( $n = 385$ ) or Group 2 ( $n = 390$ ). This imbalance could affect the precision of sample means of the groups. To overcome this problem, a similar number of participants (400) was selected from Group 3 using random sampling. With similar sample size in every group, one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs)

Table 1

*Results of Factor Analysis (Principal Factoring with Promax Rotation, N = 1,899)*

|   |   | I          | II         | III        | IV         |
|---|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Factor 1. English as a Difficult Subject (Alpha = .88)</b>             |   |            |            |            |            |
| 1   | (I lost motivation to study English because...)<br>English grammar was too difficult to understand.         | <b>.86</b> | -.04       | -.02       | -.03       |
| 2   | my test scores were not good.   | <b>.82</b> | .03        | -.02       | -.01       |
| 3   | reading was difficult.  | <b>.81</b> | -.10       | -.03       | -.03       |
| 4   | remembering words and idioms was difficult.   | <b>.77</b> | -.03       | -.03       | -.04       |
| 5   | I could not follow the class.   | <b>.68</b> | .03        | .09        | .07        |
| 6   | study materials were difficult.   | <b>.63</b> | .02        | .00        | .02        |
| 7   | I could not get good grades even though I studied hard.   | <b>.51</b> | .10        | -.01       | .03        |
| 8   | I felt I had a lower ability to learn English than others.  | <b>.47</b> | -.02       | .08        | .15        |
| 9   | I didn't study enough before and after the classes.   | <b>.44</b> | .10        | -.06       | -.05       |
| <b>Factor 2. Dissatisfaction with the Teacher and Class (Alpha = .82)</b> |   |            |            |            |            |
| 10  | I didn't like the teacher.  | -.12       | <b>.83</b> | .04        | .07        |
| 11  | the way the teacher taught was not easy to follow.  | .04        | <b>.75</b> | -.08       | .09        |
| 12  | the English class(es) gave me no sense of achievement.  | .02        | <b>.71</b> | -.05       | -.08       |
| 13  | the objective of the class was unclear.   | -.03       | <b>.69</b> | -.06       | -.07       |
| 14  | the teacher did not encourage me.   | .04        | <b>.62</b> | .08        | .03        |
| 15  | the class mood did not encourage me to study.   | .00        | <b>.54</b> | .00        | .02        |
| 16  | the contents of teaching materials were not interesting.  | .20        | <b>.42</b> | .11        | -.10       |
| <b>Factor 3. Lack of L2 Self (Alpha = .82)</b>                            |   |            |            |            |            |
| 17  | I didn't think that learning English had anything to do with my personal growth.                            | -.07       | .03        | <b>.96</b> | -.05       |
| 18  | I didn't think that learning English would be useful in the future.   | -.06       | -.08       | <b>.93</b> | .00        |
| 19  | I was not interested in the language, culture, or people of foreign (including English-speaking) countries. | .12        | .01        | <b>.57</b> | .03        |
| 20  | I was not interested in studying itself.  | .21        | .08        | <b>.37</b> | -.02       |
| <b>Factor 4: Anxiety (Alpha = .81)</b>                                    |   |            |            |            |            |
| 21  | it was embarrassing to pronounce English sounds out loud.   | -.05       | .04        | .02        | <b>.82</b> |
| 22  | it was embarrassing to make mistakes when I was called on.  | .07        | -.03       | -.09       | <b>.81</b> |
| 23  | I wanted to speak as little as possible in class.   | .09        | .07        | .08        | <b>.47</b> |
| Inter-factor correlations   |   | I          | II         | III        | IV         |
| I   |   | —          | .57        | .53        | .56        |
| II  |   |            | —          | .42        | .39        |
| III   |   |            |            | —          | .40        |
| IV  |   |            |            |            | —          |

were run to compare the groups. Means and standard deviations of each factor score are shown in Table 2, and the results of ANOVAs are shown in Table 3.

As indicated in Table 3, the one-way ANOVAs revealed that group means were significantly different in all factors ( $p = .00$ ). It should also be noted that all the effect sizes for the factors were either large (*English as a Difficult Subject*,  $\eta^2 = .19$ ; *Lack of L2 Self*,  $\eta^2 = .18$ ) or medium (*Dissatisfaction with the Teacher and Class*,  $\eta^2 = .13$ ; *Anxiety*,  $\eta^2 = .10$ ). Given such results, Tukey's multiple comparisons were performed to determine where the differences might lie. The results of the post hoc analyses are presented in Table 4.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics of the Motivated (Group 1), Motivation-retrieved (Group 2), and Demotivated (Group 3) Groups*

| Factor                                     | Group                | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>N</i> |
|--|----------------------|----------|-----------|----------|
| English as a Difficult Subject             | motivated            | -0.55    | 0.97      | 374      |
|  | motivation retrieved | 0.03     | 0.89      | 387      |
|  | demotivated          | 0.50     | 0.86      | 389      |
|  | Total                | 0.00     | 1.00      | 1150     |
| Dissatisfaction with the Teacher and Class | motivated            | -0.47    | 1.03      | 380      |
|  | motivation retrieved | 0.05     | 0.93      | 390      |
|  | demotivated          | 0.41     | 0.84      | 390      |
|  | Total                | 0.00     | 1.00      | 1160     |
| Lack of L2 Self                            | motivated            | -0.44    | 0.81      | 378      |
|  | motivation retrieved | -0.15    | 0.92      | 389      |
|  | demotivated          | 0.57     | 0.98      | 397      |
|  | Total                | 0.00     | 1.00      | 1164     |
| Anxiety                                    | motivated            | -0.41    | 0.96      | 382      |
|  | motivation retrieved | 0.05     | 0.97      | 390      |
|  | demotivated          | 0.34     | 0.93      | 398      |
|  | Total                | 0.00     | 1.00      | 1170     |



Table 3  
*Comparisons of Group Means (One-Way ANOVAs)*

| English as a Difficult Subject             |           |           |           |           |          |          |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|
|  | <i>SS</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>F</i>  | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ |
| Between groups                             | 212.07    | 2         | 106.04    | 129.81 ** | .00      | .19      |
| Within groups                              | 936.93    | 1147      | 0.82      |           |          |          |
| Total                                      | 1149.00   | 1149      |           |           |          |          |
| Dissatisfaction with the Teacher and Class |           |           |           |           |          |          |
|  | <i>SS</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>F</i>  | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ |
| Between groups                             | 148.37    | 2         | 74.18     | 84.93 **  | .00      | .13      |
| Within groups                              | 1010.63   | 1157      | 0.87      |           |          |          |
| Total                                      | 1159.00   | 1159      |           |           |          |          |
| Lack of L2 Self                            |           |           |           |           |          |          |
|  | <i>SS</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>F</i>  | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ |
| Between groups                             | 209.59    | 2         | 104.79    | 127.61 ** | .00      | .18      |
| Within groups                              | 953.41    | 1161      | 0.82      |           |          |          |
| Total                                      | 1163.00   | 1163      |           |           |          |          |
| Anxiety                                    |           |           |           |           |          |          |
|  | <i>SS</i> | <i>df</i> | <i>MS</i> | <i>F</i>  | <i>p</i> | $\eta^2$ |
| Between groups                             | 109.93    | 2         | 54.97     | 60.57 **  | .00      | .10      |
| Within groups                              | 1059.07   | 1167      | 0.91      |           |          |          |
| Total                                      | 1169.00   | 1169      |           |           |          |          |

Note. \*\* $p < .001$ .

Table 4

*Results of Comparisons Between Each Pair of Groups (Tukey)*

| <i>DV</i>                                  | <i>compared</i> |         | <i>p</i> | <i>η</i> |
|--|-----------------|---------|----------|----------|
| English as a Difficult Subject             | Group 1         | Group 2 | .00      | .30      |
|  | Group 2         | Group 3 | .00      | .26      |
|  | Group 3         | Group 1 | .00      | .50      |
| Dissatisfaction with the Teacher and Class | Group 1         | Group 2 | .00      | .26      |
|  | Group 2         | Group 3 | .00      | .20      |
|  | Group 3         | Group 1 | .00      | .42      |
| Lack of L2 Self                            | Group 1         | Group 2 | .00      | .16      |
|  | Group 2         | Group 3 | .00      | .36      |
|  | Group 3         | Group 1 | .00      | .49      |
| Anxiety                                    | Group 1         | Group 2 | .00      | .23      |
|  | Group 2         | Group 3 | .00      | .15      |
|  | Group 3         | Group 1 | .00      | .37      |

As seen in Table 4, statistically significant differences were found between each pair of groups in all factors ( $p = .00$ ). Therefore, we can say that demotivated EFL learners generally tended to have (1) believed that English was more difficult, (2) been more dissatisfied with the teacher and class, (3) had weaker L2 self, and (4) had higher anxiety toward L2 use. In the subsequent paragraphs, we will look into specific findings and discuss them.

Regarding the first factor, *English as a Difficult Subject*, the effect size (ES) was large between Group 1 and 3 ( $\eta = .50$ ) and medium between Group 1 and 2 ( $\eta = .30$ ) in addition to the statistical differences ( $p = .00$ ). Thus, learners who have never lost motivation (Group 1) perceived English to be a substantially easier subject than those who have lost it (Group 2 and Group 3). Therefore, it should be safe to say that whether learners have felt English was difficult or not might indicate their experience of losing motivation to learn English. Based on the significant difference between Groups 2 and 3, it could be said that the degree of difficulty of English that the learners perceived might affect whether or not they can retrieve their motivation.

As for *Dissatisfaction with the Teacher and Class*, in addition to statistically significant differences ( $p = .00$ ), medium ES ( $\eta = .42$ ) were found for comparisons of Group 1 and 3. This suggests that learners who have lost their motivation and never retrieved it (Group 3) are far less satisfied with the teacher and class than those who have never lost it (Group 1). Previous studies have repeatedly shown that learners' dissatisfaction with the teacher and class can cause learner demotivation (e.g., Arai, 2004; Hasegawa, 2004; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). The

results obtained from this study are consistent with these previous studies.

Concerning *Lack of L2 Self*, medium ESs were found between Groups 1 and 3 ( $\eta = .49$ ) and Groups 2 and 3 ( $\eta = .36$ ). Regarding the comparison between Groups 1 and 2, although a statistically significant difference was found ( $p = .00$ ), the ES for the difference was small and somewhat negligible ( $\eta = .16$ ). These results indicate that, whereas motivated learners (Group 1) are able to imagine themselves using English, demotivated learners (Group 3) have difficulty imagining themselves connecting with English. Furthermore, learners who have lost their motivation but retrieved it (Group 2) can better imagine themselves using English than those who have lost their motivation and never retrieved it (Group 3). Considering the aforementioned results as well as the insubstantial difference between motivated (Group 1) and motivation retrieved (Group 2) learners, it can be inferred that (1) EFL learners' having or not having L2 self affects whether or not they lose motivation to learn English and (2) if EFL learners lose their motivation to learn English, the degree of L2 self that they have affects whether or not they can retrieve their motivation.

Regarding *Anxiety*, medium ES was shown between Groups 1 and 3 ( $\eta = .37$ ), indicating that demotivated learners have much higher anxiety toward using English than motivated learners. In addition, based on the significant difference between Groups 1 and 2 ( $p = .00$ ,  $\eta = .23$ ) and Groups 2 and 3 ( $p = .00$ ,  $\eta = .15$ ), it can be said that the degree of anxiety somewhat correlates with the degree of (de-)motivation. Regarding the relationship between anxiety and motivation, conflicting claims have been made; some researchers argue that anxiety inhibits motivation (e.g., Agawa et al., 2010; MacIntyre, 1994; Scovel, 1978) while others argue that anxiety might promote motivation (Brown, 2000; Scovel, 1978). The current study's findings imply that high anxiety can inhibit motivation, thereby supporting the former claim. However, a more specific level of anxiety that might inhibit learner motivation has yet to be determined.

### Analysis of the Participants' Responses

The previous procedure section explained that each group of students was asked to write freely on why they categorized themselves in Group 1 (i.e., always motivated students), Group 2 (i.e., once demotivated but retrieved their motivation), or Group 3 (i.e., still demotivated). Group 1 students were asked why they are motivated to study English. Group 2 students were asked why and how they regained their motivation even though they had once been demotivated. Group 3 students were asked why they thought they were demotivated and/or why they remained so.

The students' answers were coded and categorized as shown in Tables 5 (Group 3), 6 (Group 2), and 7 (Group 1). The results of the one-way ANOVAs (see Table 3) clearly indicated that the first factor, *English as a Difficult Subject*, and the third factor, *Lack of L2 Self*, both had large effect sizes, meaning that these two factors contain more substantial differences among groups than the other two factors. In the process of putting coded responses in larger categories, a number of responses related to these two factors were found. Therefore, in the subsequent sections, we will discuss students' responses in relation to these two factors: *English as a Difficult Subject* and *Lack of L2 Self*.

**English as a difficult subject.** In the results of the quantitative analysis, it became clear

that there is a significant and substantial difference in the first factor between Group 1 and Group 3 students. There also seems to be a difference between Group 2 and Group 3. The original number of responses from Group 3 students was 1,499. Of these 1,499 responses, as many as 588 fell within the category *unable to catch up with the classes* (see Table 5).

Table 5  
*Group 3 Participants' Reasons for Losing Motivation to Study English*

| Category                                    | No. of responses |
|---|------------------|
| Unable to catch up with the classes         | 588              |
| Teacher                                     | 196              |
| Classes                                     | 144              |
| Entrance examination                        | 144              |
| Tests                                       | 72               |
| Studying English is useless for me          | 68               |
| No opportunity to use English               | 65               |
| Not liking English                          | 54               |
| Busy with club activities and other matters | 51               |
| Blank                                       | 38               |
| Not studying English                        | 37               |
| Other                                       | 17               |
| No interest in English                      | 14               |
| Not knowing how to study English            | 6                |
| Cram school                                 | 5                |
| Total                                       | 1,499            |

By looking at the actual comments in this category, it was found that, for Group 3 students, demotivation tended to happen in the rather earlier stages of learning English. The followings are quotes from some of the students. One wrote, "I studied English a little before entering junior high school. Nevertheless, at the very beginning of junior high school, I already felt left behind." Another wrote, "From the beginning, I couldn't keep up with the English classes. Classes went so fast that I fell even further behind. Even though I attended the classes with seriousness, I couldn't understand them. Studying English was not fun." Another student wrote, "Gradually, the lessons became difficult and the pace accelerated. My lack of preparation for and review of the lessons might be a reason, too." It should also be noted that some of the students in this group mentioned that even memorizing the English alphabet was challenging for them. Some participants wrote that even before entering elementary school they had experienced some difficulty in studying English, such as in cram school for English conversation. Such comments clearly demonstrate that Group 3 students, who categorized themselves as always having been demotivated, hardly had any experiences of feeling caught up in their English classes. In other words, they had virtually no experience of being a successful English learner in all their years of studying English. This result indicates that

teacher support in the early stages of learning is a crucial and urgent issue. Educators should bear in mind that the difficulties facing demotivated students become increasingly more serious as students advance to higher levels of English.

In comparison, Group 2 and Group 1 students did not experience the same degree of difficulty toward English study. For example, none of the motivation-retrieved students in Group 2 wrote that memorizing the alphabet was hard for them. Moreover, 20 Group 2 students mentioned that they eventually came to understand the English classes (see Table 6). From the responses of the Group 2 students, it is assumed that those who felt able to understand and keep up with the English classes had established self-efficacy or self-confidence, which enabled them to regain their motivation to study. In the case of Group 1, what could be called the “difficulty” of English factor was *able to keep up with the material*. Twenty-one Group 1 students mentioned that the ability to keep up with the material was one reason why they did not lose their motivation to study English, supporting the much lower degree of not understanding English in this group (see Table 7). Such a difference in perceived difficulty of English among groups is also indicated by the findings of the quantitative analysis, which highlight a correlation between English learners’ self-efficacy and motivation.

Table 6  
*Group2 Participants’ Reasons for Retrieving Motivation to Study English*

| Category   | No. of responses |
|--|------------------|
| No mention of reasons for why they regained their motivation | 182              |
| Meeting a good teacher                                       | 78               |
| Entrance examination   | 36               |
| Necessary for my future, helpful for my future               | 36               |
| Becoming able to understand English                          | 20               |
| Goals, such as end-of-term exams, TOEIC test, Eiken          | 19               |
| Classes  | 14               |
| Opportunities to actually use English                        | 14               |
| Homestay/language study abroad experience                    | 13               |
| Interest in foreign cultures and societies, and travelling   | 12               |
| Sense of urgency toward understanding English, wanting to    | 12               |
| Interest in English music, movies, & the language itself     | 11               |
| Liking English, and it's fun                                 | 5                |
| Plans to study abroad, take TOEFL                            | 3                |
| Necessary to attain my goal                                  | 2                |
| Understanding of how to study English                        | 2                |
| Total  | 459              |

Table 7

*Group 1 Participants' Reasons for Not Losing Motivation for Studying English*

| Category  | No of responses |
|---|-----------------|
| Liking English, and it's fun                                      | 114             |
| No answer   | 68              |
| Necessary for my future, helpful for my future                    | 49              |
| Having opportunities of actually using it                         | 37              |
| Able to keep up with the material                                 | 21              |
| Studying English outside classes by reviewing and preparing       | 17              |
| Interest in English music, movies, & the language itself          | 14              |
| Interest in foreign cultures and societies, and travelling abroad | 14              |
| Teacher is good   | 11              |
| Feeling satisfaction when I attained the goal                     | 10              |
| Wanting to speak and read English                                 | 10              |
| Necessary for entrance examination                                | 9               |
| Tests and grades are satisfactory                                 | 6               |
| Homestay/language study abroad experience                         | 5               |
| Class is good   | 2               |
| Other not so specific reasons                                     | 2               |
| The world has opened up for me                                    | 1               |
| Total   | 390             |

Another distinction of Group 1 was the number of students who said they liked studying English (the largest category) and that it was fun. Flow theory postulates that a feeling of enjoyment for engaging in a task requires a good balance between the perceived challenge of the task at hand and one's perceived skills (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). In an English classroom, the feeling of enjoyment should be accompanied with the learner's feeling that the subject is not that difficult. Therefore, it is crucial not to leave demotivated learners in a state of being unable to keep up with the classes. There seems to be a need for urgent discussion and revision of the current pace of English classes, amount of content covered by the textbooks, and the total number of hours of English classes. There should be discussions on the basic achievement level requirements necessary for first-year university students, and remedial classes should be offered for students who do not meet those requirements. Moreover, such classes should be offered in the earlier stages of learning as students who were unable to retrieve their motivation to learn English experienced serious degrees of difficulty during those earlier stages.

**Lack of L2 self.** The third factor extracted in the factor analysis, *Lack of L2 Self*, also showed a significant difference among the three groups. For Group 3 students, the category *English is useless for me* was considered to correspond with the *Lack of L2 Self* factor. Some of the responses related to this issue include "I think it's meaningless to study English," "We are

Japanese so there is no need to learn English,” “I have no idea why English is necessary for me,” “I’ve heard that even if we study English very hard in school, it has nothing to do with actually speaking English in the future. I studied English just enough to get a good grade but I didn’t do anything more than that,” “I studied English just to pass the entrance examination without any practical speaking of English. There seemed to be no meaning in studying it after passing the entrance exam,” and “Well, I like English, but it is not relative to my future. Realizing this gradually made me lose my motivation to study English.” Based on these comments, it is assumed that when students’ future self-images do not involve utilizing English, they lose their motivation to continue studying English. The other issue that emerged was the question of why they have to learn a foreign language when they live in Japan and their native tongue is Japanese. This question is not only personal, but also social and requires an answer if educators sincerely believe that those students also need to study English, even though the language is not their native tongue.

In terms of *Lack of L2 Self*, Group 2 students pointed out that the trigger for regaining motivation was the realization that English is necessary for the future. This falls under the category of *necessary for my future, helpful for my future* (see Table 6). The responses in this category contained phrases such as “globalization” and “needing to learn English.” Feeling that English is meaningful to their future is part of the notion of having an L2 self. In other words, Group 2 students are able to imagine themselves in a world that is constantly changing in the face of increasing globalization.

Another category related to L2 self, which appeared in Group 2, was *having a sense of urgency toward understanding English, wanting to have a self-image of speaking English*. This critical feeling, sometimes fueled by an aversion to being unable to handle English, motivated them and redirected them to study English. The emergence of this category in Group 2 but not in Group 3 implies that teachers could foster such an urgent feeling in demotivated students by offering objective observations on a drastically changing society that communicates in a lingua franca—namely, English.

For the Group 1 students, the third largest reason for why they have maintained their motivation for learning English was that it is *necessary for my future, helpful for my future*. Although these students were individually able to construct an image of their future selves using English, teachers should include the perspective of macro-society in the English classes as well. In other words, the role of the teacher is not only to offer knowledge of English, but also to show how it is useful in the global, digital society. For example, the teacher can use social networking systems or conventional internet in classes so that the students can experience how English can enhance their roles and involvement in a digital society that might become increasingly more dominant in the future.

## Conclusion

This study focused on three different groups of university English learners: motivated (Group 1), motivation retrieved (Group 2), and demotivated (Group 3). The study quantitatively and qualitatively investigated (a) how university students in Japan experience feelings of demotivation and how they differ from motivated learners as well as (b) how university students in Japan react to such feelings. The results of the investigation and their

implications can be summarized as follows:

- Generally speaking, demotivated EFL learners tend to (1) believe that English is more difficult, (2) be more dissatisfied with the teacher and class, (3) have weaker L2 self, and (4) experience higher anxiety toward L2 use.
- Whether learners have felt English was difficult or not might indicate their experience of losing the motivation to learn English. The feeling that English is difficult is sometimes strong enough for the students to reject the need to study English. As failing to regain motivation is also closely related to perceptions of English as difficult, educators should be sympathetic toward their students and use their ingenuity in presenting the material.
- The degree and the point at which learners initially encounter difficulty in learning English might affect whether or not demotivated learners are able to regain their motivation. Therefore, teacher support in the early stages of learning is a crucial and urgent issue. For example, for learners who strongly believe that they have fallen behind, classes focused on the basics of English could be offered at earlier stages, such as in junior and senior high schools. At the tertiary level of education, a basic achievement level requirements for freshmen should be established and remedial classes should be offered for students who do not meet the requirements.
- EFL learners' having or not having L2 self affects whether or not they lose motivation to learn English. Furthermore, it is possible for demotivated learners to retrieve their motivation by constructing L2 self-images. In order to help motivate learners, English teachers should help them construct or maintain the L2 self by including a variety of information on living in a global and digital society that uses English as a lingua franca.
- Only 13% of the participants in this study were English majors, indicating that most students studied English not because of their choice, but because of the curriculum requirement. Showing how English can benefit their individual needs and help them obtain their goals can increase such students' motivation. Educators can offer to help these students by reviewing their educational history with them and helping them determine how they would like to direct themselves in the future so some meaning can be found in studying English.

In future studies, students who would fall in Group 2 can be asked the same open-ended question as Group 3 (i.e., why they lost their motivation) so that more information will be obtained on why students become demotivated. Further studies should also investigate resilience, such as that shown in Group 2 students, as well as scaffolding in order to find effective ways of overcoming the negative state of demotivation.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Nakata (2006) defines amotivation as an aggravated condition of demotivation. He also defines learned helplessness as the most serious state of the lack of motivation, which is an aggravated condition of amotivation.

<sup>2</sup> In parallel analysis, researchers can determine the number of factors to retain by comparing eigenvalues generated based on random and uncorrelated data to those generated on observed data.



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Dr. Yasuyo Sawaki at Waseda University for her valuable advice on this study; we would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This research was supported by KAKENHI, Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (c), (20520529).

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