The Pathology of Demotivation and Amotivation in English Language Learning Context: A Case Study[1]

Mojtaba Mohammadi[2]

Abstract

Foreign language learning disabilities (FLLD) is one of the new terms in the literature of learning disabilities (LD) which seeks to investigate the disabilities English language learners may have in their experience with language. Many areas affecting learning a language are being investigated. Motivation and two other related terms demotivation and amotivation, as affective factors, are among the most recent undiscovered areas in studying FLLD. This paper aims at investigating the learning disabilities of an Iranian girl student called Shiva in pursuing her language learning in university. Different research instruments like MSQ, WTC Questionnaire, and Nelson English Language Test were adopted to diagnose different aspects of her disabilities to devise the most efficacious type of help for her. The findings indicated that demotivation causes mostly as a result of the misconduct of the teachers in not only their teaching techniques but also their misuse of motivational strategies.

Keywords: demotivation, amotivation, foreign language learning disabilities

Introduction

Just in the middle of the class time, the teacher pointed to the back of the classroom. A row of children sat there, calling one of them "Why don't you say anything? Why are you sitting there doing nothing all over the class time?" Is that too hard for you to follow me? Or no, you're daydreaming? Why don't you say a word? Are you deaf and dumb? But any way you have to pass the exam! This way you can't do it!"

This might be the scene you have seen every now and then when a teacher faces a student, so-called 'back row student', who is reluctant to participate in class activities and seems not to be in the picture. These students are hastily characterized by teachers as inattentive, unaware, and limited in ability to comprehend or follow directions, and often giving irrelevant responses. Their grave problems might be viewed as symptoms of low aptitude, lack of motivation, poor attitude, or emotional agitation or whatever. They must, however, be spotted differently. Unfortunately, in most cases, no serious measures are taken by the teachers. Scholars, generally, do not blame the teachers for this negligence of the students' affairs saying that most of them have little training in diagnosing, and adopting appropriate measures on how to meet the needs of the students with these, what they call, 'learning disabilities'. They do not even know how to scientifically diagnose it, let alone offer remedial procedures for them. This paper is going to deal with learning disabilities in language learning classroom in general and reports on one of the cases with certain learning difficulty.

Learning Disabilities

The National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children of the U.S. Office of Education presented a definition of specific learning disabilities which became part of Public Law, the Learning Disabilities Act of 1969. This definition states:

Children with special learning disabilities exhibit a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written languages. These may be manifested in disorders of listening, thinking, talking, reading, writing, spelling, or arithmetic. They include conditions which have been referred to as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction,

dyslexia, developmental aphasia, etc. They do *not* include learning problems which are due primarily to visual, hearing or motor handicaps, to mental retardation, emotional disturbance, or to environmental disadvantage. (As cited in Holborow & Berry, 1984, p. 426)

Learning disability (LD) as Ehrman (1996) asserts, "refers to a dysfunction in one of the components of learning that takes place in the brain. It is variously used to refer to a variety of learning problems that are probably brain related" (p. 262-3). Lokerson (1992) also defines learning disability as "a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia" (p. 1). Defined by Greenough et al. (1984), learning disability low performance in academic skills despite good potential ability" (p. 219). Some scholars distinguish learning disabilities from learning difficulties. Ehrman (1996), quoting Lokerson (1992), stated that:

Individuals with learning difficulties may appear to possess the characteristics of a person with learning disabilities; however, it is only when those learning difficulties are so pervasive or severe that they markedly interfere with learning or day-to-day living that a learning disability is suspected. (p. 263)

In current studies, authors take a less strict position and use learning disabilities to refer to a number of difficulties that are of mostly biological origin. Learning difficulties are commonly used to refer to more cognitive-, personality-, and affective-based ones.

Taxonomy of Learning Disabilities

Vogel (1990), studying the differences between normally achieving children and their peers with learning difficulties, lists four areas of differences: "(a) intellectual abilities, (b) language functioning, (c) visual-motor ability, and (d) academic achievement. However, it must be kept in mind that other relevant areas of study remain to be reviewed, including socio-emotional, affective, and personality differences" (p. 44).

Another detailed, well-organized taxonomy is presented by Ehrman (1996), quoting Silver (n.d.), in which components of learning which are affected by learning difficulties are enumerated. The first category of disabilities is *input* which refers to problems with recording information in the brain like visual perceptual disabilities and auditory perceptual disabilities. The second is *integration* which refers to the problems with organization comprehension of information. This includes sequencing, simultaneous processing, and abstraction disabilities. Another component is *memory* which is concerned with the problems in storage and retrieval such as short-term memory and long-term memory disabilities. Finally, *output*. It deals with the problems with communication and or use of the information and difficulties with computing and calculating, which are sometimes called dyscalculia. Language disabilities, like problems with language skills and dyslexia the most popular one, motor disabilities, and attention deficit disorder (ADD) are some of the cases under output category.

Foreign Language Learning Disabilities

In recent years a new term – foreign language learning disabilities (FLLD) – has appeared in the literature of both learning disabilities (LD) and foreign language (FL) (Gajar, 1987; Hu, 2003; Reed & Stansfield, 2004). This link has already been implicitly confirmed by some scholars (Ganschow & Spark, 1995; Ganschow, Sparks, Javorsky, Pohlman, & Bishop-Marbury, 1991).

Much of the foreign/ second language learning literature is devoted to the research which studies the learning difficulties English Language Learners (ELLs) may come up with. They have attempted to determine the reasons why some students have problems in FL classes. Sparks (2006) has reviewed the major investigations conducted in this area. This review includes studied on cognitive variables, such as language aptitude (e.g., Carroll, 1962, 1990; Pimsleur, 1966a, 1968; Skehan, 1986, 2002) and native language skills (Sparks & Ganschow, 1991, 1995b); on affective variables, such as anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986), motivation (Gardner, 1985), and personality (Ehrman, 1990).

Affective Barriers

Affective disorders impose sizeable burden on individual learners. Learners are sometimes disabled not due to their physical handicap but due to their affective distress. Everyone uses a variety of methods to defend himself from these emotional disturbances. These methods or "defense mechanisms" (Ehrman, 1996, p. 135) will not work in some learners and become dysfunctional. This is in line with what Krashen (1987) proposed in affective filter hypothesis. The affective filter hypothesis states that acquirers with low affective filters seek and receive more input, interact with confidence, and are more receptive to the input they receive. Confirming Krashen's hypothesis, Cohen and North (1989) also maintain that among all other affective variables language fear is most certainly the manifestation of this filter. Two factors of demotivation and willingness to communicate are being discussed.

Demotivation versus Amotivation

Relatively large amount of SLA literature is devoted to motivation as an influential affective variable in language learning from the works of Carrol and then Gardner to the recent studies mainly dominated by Dornyei. They generally found out that motivation as an inner drive and impetus can play a major role in English language learners' success. Definitions were given like the one by Dornyei (2001) who considers that as "...an abstract, hypothetical concept that we use to explain why people think and behave as they do". Dörnyei (2001) has also provided definition for demotivation. It "concerns specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action" (as cited in Dornyei, 2005, p. 90). We should know that motivating people is hard, but demotivation is easy. Demotivational strategies are nothing but the misconduct of the motivational strategies in a way that they have detrimental effects.

Amotivation, first introduced by Deci and Ryan (as cited in Muhonen, 2004), was defined by putting it this way. It refers to "the relative absence of motivation that is not caused by a lack of initial interest but rather by the individuals feelings if incompetence and helplessness when faced with the activity" (p. 15). They continue that "amotivating events are events that occur within the person that signify his or her inability to master

some situations or events" (p. 15). Amotivation is considered to have many reasons. Vallerand (1997) has enumerated four of them. First, a learner thinks he or she lacks the ability. Secondly, a learner does not think that the strategies to be followed are effective enough. Thirdly, a learner thinks that the effort required to reach the outcome is far too excessive. Fourth, a learner feels helpless thinking that his or her efforts are inconsequential considering the enormity of the task to be accomplished.

Previous Studies on Demotivation

Few studies, however, have been done about demotivation. The three early demotivation studies found in literature, cited by Trang and Baldauf (2007), just tried to identify the demotivating factors. Gorham and Christophel (1992) revealed three main categories of demotives, i.e., context demotives (factors likely to be regarded as antecedent to the teacher's influence), structure /format demotives (factors over which the teacher is likely to have some degree of influence, if not complete control), and teacher behaviors (factors likely to be perceived as under the teacher's direct control). The other two (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Gorham & Millette, 1997) were replicated works of the previous one. In the first study which was fully devoted to demotivation Chambers (1993) faced with quite different reasons from teachers and learners. Teachers believed the reasons as having psychological, attitudinal, social, historical and geographical origin while learners' perception was reasons such as teachers' behaviors, class size, etc.

In another study conducted by Chambers (1993), results indicated some common features of the demotivated learners most teachers are familiar with:

poor concentration; lack of belief in own capabilities; no effort made to learn; 'What's the use?' syndrome; negative or nil response to praise; lethargy; lack of cooperation; disruptive; distracted; distracts other pupils; produces little or no homework; fails to bring materials to lessons; claims to have lost materials.(as cited in Ho, 1998, p. 165)

Recognizing demotivation as a process looking backward, Oxford (1998) revealed four broad sources of demotivation: the teacher's personal relationship with the student, the teacher's attitude towards the

course or the material, style conflicts between teachers and students, and the nature of the classroom activities.

Ushida (1998) also found out nothing except the previous results that demotives were related to negative aspects of the institutionalized learning context such as particular teaching methods and learning tasks.

In quest for evaluating the impacts of these demotivating factors on different students, Dornyei (1998) hypothesizes that only demotivated students or those experienced it are to indicate its actual reasons. The findings of this study were the same as the previous ones in that the teachers were blamed to be the major cause of demotivation.

Nikolov (2001), quoted by Dornyei (2005), studied the unsuccessful language learners. In her study students called themselves unsuccessful; however, they had positive attitudes toward language learning. She concluded that the decisive reason for having an unsuccessful feeling was negative experiences associated with the language classroom.

Willingness to Communicate

As the major purpose of communicative language teaching in 80s, willingness to communicate (WTC) was first considered to be a construct in first language communication. In second language context, it was Skehan (1989), as cited in Dornyei (2005), who first mentioned it in as a non-cognitive variable in individual differences. McIntyre as the initiator of the adaptation of this construct to L2 and his colleagues have done great contributions to the field. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1998) in an attempt to conceptualize *willingness to communicate* (WTC) in the L2, explain the individual's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547). They designed a pyramid model to demonstrate the differences among the learners who have decided to take part in communication.
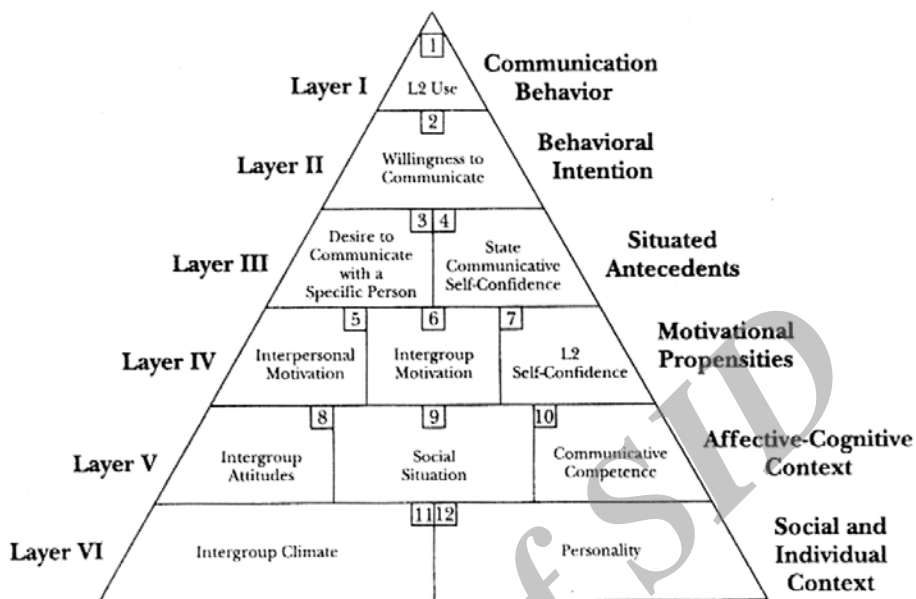
Figure 1. Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC. From "Conceptualizing willingness to communicate in a L2: A situational model of L2 confidence and affiliation," by P. D. MacIntyre, R. Clement, Z. Dornyei, and K. A. Noels, 1998, The Modern Language Journal, 82, p. 547.

The top part of this pyramid represents the intention of an individual to communicate to somebody at certain time. The next layers are all the operational aspects of initiation in communication. This includes the individual's self-confidence and desire to communicate. The next layer deals with types of motivation whether it is from inside or from outside source (Inter-group and interpersonal motivation). Then in the following layer, more individualized aspects of communication are introduced. The lowest level in the pyramid refers to two broad areas of society and individual. The first is related to "inter-group climate in which interlocutors evolve, whereas the individual context refers to stable personality characteristics found to be particularly relevant to communication" (p. 555). Baker and MacIntyre (2000, 2003) found higher WTC and lower communication anxiety reported by L1 English learners of French in immersion contexts compared to non-immersion contexts in Canadian high schools.

Kang (2005) redefined WTC as a "dynamic situational concept that can change moment-to-moment, rather than a trait-like predisposition" (p. 277). They also proposed a multilayered construct of situational WTC. Kang found that the degree of their L2 WTC was determined by the interaction of the psychological conditions of *excitement*, *responsibility*, and *security*, as well as situational variables such as the *topic*, the *interlocutors*, and the *conversational context* of the communication.

The Case Study

The subject of this study was a 25 year old girl called Shiva. She is a senior undergraduate student of English Language Teaching (ELT) at Islamic Azad University Roudehen Branch. She is learning English as a foreign language and her mother tongue is Persian. My decision to select her as a case with severe learning difficulty started when one day she came and asked me to talk to her. Since she used to be my student when she was a freshman, let us start with some background dating back to three years ago. In her freshmanship period, she was really attentive in class, seemingly very motivated. Nevertheless, her proficiency level in English was not outstandingly good, just an average student. She used to sit in the front row and ask a lot of questions related to the lesson. Before any class session, she prepared herself for the new materials. She said that it was really difficult to do so as she had to open the dictionary for quite a lot of words and this could exhaust her. Besides, she had a notebook for the new vocabulary items. Every word was along with its part of speech, phonetic form, a dictionary example, and if possible some synonyms and antonyms. She was repeatedly introduced to other students as being studious and perseverant in language learning. This was an image of her three years ago. With this in mind, she came to talk to me. He came to inform me of her decision to quit the college. After that meeting, I found out that she was suffering from a kind of disorder in her education. I arranged some more sessions of interview with her to know more about the disorder and the reasons. In my interviews (all audio-taped) with her I learned some astounding points about her present situation. Shiva was not that attentive, studious student who was trying to compensate her lack of proficiency (comparing to those with good command of English in class). Her tone of voice showed her willingness to quit college. She said: "I don't know. I just feel I don't want to go on any more. It doesn't satisfy

me. I'm not patient enough to do all my best for the classes." Besides, I decided to talk to some of her professors in that semester. They all described her "back-row student" with no class participation who had some sessions absent or came late. Her GPA as a freshman was 17.05, while it reduced to be 14.78 as a sophomore student. Her last semester's GPA decreased even more to 13.69. The first hypothesis was that she is suffering from amotivation of some sort. Therefore, the Motivation and Strategies Questionnaire (MSQ) was administered which deals with three parts of aptitude and motivation, learning and teaching techniques, and personal learning techniques. The results showed that there is little motivation on her side to study English. The second and third parts also revealed some of the techniques she preferred in learning and being taught. Moreover, an intermediate Nelson proficiency test was administered to check her command of language at the time. She gained 18 out of 50. My suggestion to her was having some more meeting sessions in my office in the university. What I did was restore her previous state of mind. She first showed resistance to my suggestion. But I insisted on that and told her to give me a chance to see a new Shiva. In our meeting, I found out that she has even lost some of her friends as she has turned to become more reserved now. The Cao & Philp's WTC Questionnaire was also administered to indicate how willing she would be to communicate on a percentage scale (0–100%). Her average came to be 40% which could prove her unwillingness to participate in class activities. I tried to make her recall the glorious past. I asked her to talk about her memories of the first semesters she started English. She first reluctantly explained some recollections but with our progress, she showed more tendencies to revive those times. These sessions of our second round of meetings passed with talking about her capabilities. Parallel with that, the results of the MSQ revealed the following tendencies:

1. I like to write down and take notes from teachers' lectures to be able to remember them better.

2. I need to have study breaks.

3. I feel the need to check my answers to questions in my head before giving them.

4. I do not feel like speaking in public to a group in class Q & A.

5. I usually like to approach a point from my perspective and explain it in my own words.

6. I do not like to be interrupted and corrected by my teacher.

These are some of the strategies which can be adopted to motivate students to study more. But it seems that they act the other way around. They act mostly as demotivating strategies rather than the motivating one. Consulting with some of her teachers at present and in past, I found out that they generally agreed that due to time limitation in classes and the number of students in each class, they had to use some techniques as such. So I let her teachers in that semester know about the techniques of her interest in learning and for teaching and requested them to be more patient with her all through the semester.

After about eight weeks, she was quite different. The WTC Questionnaire and the first part of the MSQ related to aptitude and motivation were re-administered. The results showed a refreshing state of motivation. I took the proficiency test again. Surprisingly, she got 39 out of 50 which indicated a great progress. Her teachers also confirmed her change in their classes. She could successfully catch up with all her lessons.

Discussion and Conclusion

The case of Shiva as a foreign language learning disability re-affirms the studies done by Chambers (1993), Oxford (1998), Dornyei (2001), and Nikolov (2005) in which the blame lies on teachers. The demotives like teachers' behavior and the class context which are closely under the control of the teachers are in work to demotivate students. The point to add is that some of the demotivating factors are used to be a motivator for the students. It, however, fails to be. It is sometimes claimed by teachers that students are suffering from amotivation in their classes but as definitions go, amotivation is the lack of motivation which can be compensated using appropriate motivational strategies. However, if students are demotivated, they require more time to remove this negative inner tendency and replace them with more positive, refreshing energy. The results of this case study, at least as far as they can be generalized, have the following implications:

1. Motivational strategies are to be used skillfully by teachers

2. The misconduct of the teachers in using these strategies may remain detrimental effects on the side of the students.

3. Motivating is easier said than done. If you cannot motivate, you had better not demotivate them.

4. Demotivation is more harmful than amotivation.

5. Consider students as unique individual with their likely differences in their learning and the preferred techniques for teaching.

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