

Applying the Lens of Second Language Motivation Research to Interpret Online Learner Amotivation and Demotivation

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to inform deep, contextualized insight into understanding why internal and external factors caused the amotivation of an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructor's attempts to acquire Korean online. Amotivation is a learner's realization that either their current learning trajectory is too difficult or pointless, and demotivation is a specific trigger leading to amotivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Patricia was one of 14 English L1 English speaking EFL instructors employed by a South Korean university to participate in my PhD in Applied Linguistics entitled *Factors Affecting the Motivation to Learn Korean by EFL Professors Living Permanently in South Korea*. She was the sole one-year longitudinal case study in this qualitative research and its only participant to self-study Korean online. I analyse her less than satisfactory experience through the theoretical lenses of Dörnyei's (2009) *L2 Motivational Self-System* and Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) *Process Model of Motivation*.

Keywords: Amotivation, demotivation, online learning distance student, community of practice

Observation of the chequered attempts of my English as Foreign Language (EFL) instructor colleagues to learn Korean was the catalyst for my PhD in Applied Linguistics entitled *Factors Affecting the Motivation to Learn Korean by EFL Professors Living Permanently in South Korea*. Before conducting this research, I naively assumed that language teachers would be highly motivated to acquire the first language (L1) of their host nation for intrinsic benefit (Deci & Ryan, 1985). I also assumed that my colleagues would be correspondingly extrinsically motivated to invest in this second language (L2) identity

(Norton, 2014) given its potential to facilitate the accumulation of social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Attempting to make sense of why this did not occur became far easier once I adopted the theoretical lenses of Dörnyei's (2009) *L2 Motivational Self-System* and Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) *Process Model of Motivation*.

I conducted this doctoral thesis part-time for eight years, commencing in 2009, through Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, by distance and online. I was then in my second year as one of 12 English L1 speaking EFL instructors employed by the University of Ulsan (UOU) in South Korea. I recruited seven of those instructors as participants. To protect against any potential bias, seven further instructors were recruited from different South Korean universities. One UOU participant was requested to be a one-year longitudinal case study. They would be interviewed every two weeks from May 2012, with every second interview being audio recorded. The case study participant, Patricia (real name deidentified), was a 27-year-old American with a Bachelor of Arts degree in anthropology. She taught English in private language academies for two and a half years before joining the UOU.

Literature Review

Online courses offer more learner autonomy because students in them may choose a more individualised path, pace, sequence and level of content, and such flexibility can enable learners to perform better (Hung et al., 2010). If this is the case, learners with higher levels of self-directed focus may be more likely succeed in online contexts (Lin & Hsieh, 2001; Tsai & Tsai, 2003). However, high dropout rates and achievement problems in online courses have been reported (Luyt, 2013). Understanding why may be complex. Language learners differ in their affective, cognitive, biographical, linguistic and circumstantial variables (Gardner, 1985). Among the variables are learner beliefs, anxiety and motivation (Wang & Zhan, 2020).

Given that low L2 acquisition has a negative impact on student success (Dörnyei, 2005), a robust literature has developed attempting to ascertain why. Dörnyei's (2009) *L2 Motivational Self-System* theory redefined the L2 motivation landscape by placing the learner's interpretation of themselves at its core. In this system, *The Ideal L2 Self* is the learner's image of their future L2 speaking self-vision. This motivates them to reduce the gap between their idealised and actual L2 selves. *The Ought-to L2 Self* defines which future qualities will ensure the learner L2 success including externally imposed duties, expectations

and responsibilities. Finally, *The L2 Learning Experience* refers to the immediate L2 learning environment.

This model builds on Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) *Process Model of Motivation*. In the *pre-actional stage*, an identified goal is generated and is actively protected in the *actional stage*. The learner retrospectively reviews their learning experience in the *post-actional stage*. There, learners form causal attributions to explain the degree of their learning success. Dörnyei (2005) highlights his view that the *Process Model of Motivation* does not address the internal drivers of a learner's motivation or lack thereof, and, by extension, also does not address their means to respond. However, the model does, in my experience, provide a key strategic means to alleviate potential demotivation among learners with its emphasis on iteratively monitoring and supporting a learner's progress from conception to post-task reflection.

The findings of Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) comprehensive research summary of European learners of L2s and Sukai and Kikuchi's (2009) summary of the literature on the demotivation of Japanese EFL learners are significant. From experience, their findings can all be observed in the online learning environment, in particular, that learners' biggest demotivating factor was the teacher (40%), their methodology, curriculum and resources. Other demotivating factors included *baggage* from previous negative learning experiences and a dislike of the L2 and those who speak it (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

Once a learner has entered an online course or programme, Paradowski and Jelińska (2023) note that *L2 grit* is required. They conclude that *online learner readiness* must be informed by autonomy and curiosity and motivation must align with learners' efforts and desires (Hung et al., 2010). This will lead to increased retention (Saadé et al., 2007). However, online learners often report feeling isolated and disconnected (McInnery & Roberts, 2004). Therefore, a shared sense of belonging, purpose and norms is critical (Koole, 2014).

Kebritchi et al. (2017) add that to ready themselves for online study, students should incorporate into their practice a self-directed learning model. As well as motivation, their readiness model's dimensions include computer, internet and online communication self-efficacy (Hung et al., 2010; Li & Irby, 2008). However, Cheng and Lee (2018) found that even among students with high L2 online study motivation, this decreased over time due to their busy study schedules, including commitments related to their L2 course. Importantly,

continuous support from peers and advisors, along with evidence of progress, contributed to their motivation.

Finally, Kaur et al. (2022) employed Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2017) to inform their analysis of the most significant motivating factors for a successful online classroom. These include: the learner's personality, attitude, abilities, and enthusiasm; use of audio-visual supplements; and appropriately graded speaking activities. Other factors they list include: instructional materials; suitability of online resources; flexibility of time and space; ease of use of content and technology; cultural factors; linguistic proficiency of learner; and seeing photographs of other students and the instructor. They also note the importance of the student-teacher relationship, including adequate feedback, support, communication, and empathy. Demotivating factors include lack of knowledge of topics in class, fear of making mistakes, shyness/nervousness, lack of practice and vocabulary, study habits, lack of confidence and motivation, isolation, technical issues and low language proficiency. Regarding my case study, the demotivating factors that most impacted Patricia's online L2 experience were technical issues; study habits; the learner's linguistic proficiency; the learner's personality, attitude, abilities, and enthusiasm; and cultural factors. Her interpretation of each is introduced in the findings section below.

Findings

Patricia began studying her entry-level online Rosetta Stone Korean course six weeks prior to her first interview on the 20th of May, 2012. Participation entailed being given a prompt (e.g., a photo) and a new word to acquire. Patricia then had the opportunity to speak into a microphone and match the new vocabulary to images. This was followed by a quiz. There was no written component, teacher supervision, personal feedback or contact with any other students. The factors drawn from the literature review to explain her demotivation are technical issues; study habits; the learner's linguistic proficiency; her personality, attitude, abilities, enthusiasm; and cultural factors. Insertions using square brackets appear in a number of Patricia's quotes. Within the quotes from Patricia in the forthcoming findings, insertions in square brackets enable more concise explanations than those in the original transcripts. Patricia approved these insertions as being accurate reflections of her intended meaning.

Technical Issues

Patricia consistently cited technical issues prohibiting access to the course and negatively impacting her motivation to engage with it. In her first interview on the 20th of May, 2012, she cited the incompatibility of the version of the Rosetta Stone course with her home-based MacIntosh computer as the reason for her need to use the computer in her office to study Korean. However, due to perceived and constant interferences, progress in studying Korean was stymied in that location:

Part of the motivation is that the only way to do the Rosetta Stone is in my office. I don't want to go to the office when I'm not at work or on the weekends. If I could do it on my home computer I would.

However, when pressed about her seeming lack of progress with this course in her 15th of November interview, she had not resolved the technical issue that would have enabled her to self-study at home, without interference:

I haven't been using the same Rosetta Stone course. It crashed. I had a cracked version. I got my computer reformatted in August. I lost that file last time we talked. I had stopped doing the Rosetta Stone and then when I tried to get back into it, it wasn't working.

This issue had still not been resolved by Christmas: "I have gone back to using my self-study books. I haven't been able to properly re-install the programme. It's a technical issue" (23/11/12).

Study Habits

Given her seeming lack of motivation to resolve a key technical issue to enable the formation of a robust study habit, through analysis of her interviews, it became apparent that an increasingly dominant demotivating factor was lack of time, due to external commitments: "If I didn't have to work as much, I would probably try to study about two hours, a day, five days a week but that never happens. I work a split shift" (20/5/12).

The increasing intensity of this theme also became apparent: "I've studied nothing [due to] no time. I was very overloaded at work. I had a lot of extra activities, that I was

doing, working the camp and editing for the international office for the university” (07/07/12).

I would say that it’s [Korean self-study] gone very badly. I have not studied [or] had many occasions to use Korean so I haven’t had the need to speak to anyone in Korean over the last six weeks. I was working all summer and then come home (07/09/12).

Connected to this theme, she gave a rationale for not studying Korean. She said she did not need proficiency in Korean beyond what she already possessed in daily life:

I am totally off track. I took time out from Korean, for two months. If it was like, ordering delivery, or getting in a taxi, or I’d use Korean, but that’s real survival level stuff you learn [in the] first couple of weeks (07/09/12).

Survival Korean was accordingly attributed as a further rationale for a less than robust L2 Korean acquisition motivation: “This isn’t a country where you can’t live unless you speak the language. It is very easy to live here without speaking Korean” (06/07/13).

Linguistic Proficiency of the Learner

Regarding her linguistic proficiency, at one point, Patricia made the following point: “I don’t need to study. It’s, mostly, just, building my vocabulary, making sure my grammar is correct and getting conversation practice” (20/05/12). This statement was curious considering that she identified herself as a low beginner.

Her rationale for such a bold statement appeared to be informed by several additional points. The first point related to the ever-increasing confidence, and corresponding desire, of her Korean friends to converse with her in English. Secondly, in daily life she believed her current Korean proficiency was totally sufficient for her needs: “I haven’t, really, used Korean with strangers much. They will talk to me in Korean and I will answer them in English because I understand what they are saying. [My] listening and writing [skills] are, really competent” (07/09/12).

Thirdly, she believed that this proficiency in Korean extended to her speaking skills: “I know I’m saying it right. I say it over, and over, again. No matter how many ways I say it, nobody can understand me. A Korean person says it: ‘Oh’. I still get very annoyed with that” (15/11/12).

The Learner's Personality, Attitude, Abilities, and Enthusiasm

Given that her interview responses to date appeared to indicate strong amotivation, during her 7th of September interview, I asked if she had begun articulating any strategies to counter this. She responded: "Strategies? I have not thought about it." When questioned as to whether losing the Rosetta Stone course through its crashing in August affected her motivation, she replied in the negative, adding:

That hasn't affected my motivation, but it's skewed by a greater desire to leave Korea. I've been here five years I've been stagnant. There's no promotion, at our job. Because I am so pigeonholed into this one career, I am never going to progress, so I get very frustrated [and] agitated with everyday life. It has probably been going on for, at least, six months. I knew that this contract was my final year, in Korea [negatively impacting] my desire to invest effort into learning Korean.

Given such sentiment, it came as little surprise that she had stopped studying for her Rosetta Stone course, however, she believed it was: "very helpful and useful for a student if they could set a regular time [so] they could practice it. For me, it's always been ... spurts." (15/11/12).

Also surprising was her seemingly renewed motivation to acquire Korean, despite her new focus of this being through: "self-study, books and my Korean network of friends" in order to be able to hold simple conversations with Koreans on her return to the United States:

I was de-motivated [to self-study using Rosetta Stone for the last two months] but I am eager to develop my Korean skills, much higher than what they have been, in the past five years even though I am on my way out (15/11/12).

However, tangible evidence of this new-found motivation was not subsequently apparent as she admitted when questioned about it six weeks later: "I wouldn't say it's [Korean language proficiency has] gotten any better. I haven't really had many opportunities to use Korean because I'm really busy. I just go to work" (23/12/12). When interviewed three months later, largely due to her taking a two-month yoga retreat trip to India in the interim, her focus had clearly changed: "When I am back in America I want to teach and to continue to study yoga so, I am more focussed on priming myself for that. They don't need someone

who can speak Korean” (04/03/13). However, in her next interview, she revealed that she had now decided to complete another one-year contract as an EFL instructor at the UOU, stating:

[Staying] has affected my motivation. It’s made me want to learn Korean more because I will be here another year at least and the longer I am here the more I hope I can become good at the language [to] make living here easier [and more] comfortable (4/4/13).

Nevertheless, when asked about the whether she had installed the Rosetta Stone course on her computer (to enable her to re-commence study in it) her response was that she had “given up on it”, while introducing the possible alternative of re-enrolling for a Korean class offered by the UOU.

Cultural Factors

By her last interview, her frustration at her host nation was clearly evident:

There are so many things that annoy me on a daily basis because it has built up over so many years. Yesterday was a holiday. I went to the department store to exchange something. Older people would still stop and follow me with their eyes to see where I am going or what I am purchasing. I have to make the conscious effort to ignore them because if I don’t, I’ll get upset (06/07/13).

Discussion

I now draw on the literature review to place Patricia’s external attribution of her self-study online L2 acquisition in a theoretical framework. I do this in order of the topics outlined in the findings section above: technical issues; study habit; linguistic proficiency of learner; the learner’s personality, attitude, abilities, and enthusiasm; and cultural factors.

Technical Issues

Kebritchi et al. (2017) state that computer, internet, and online communication self-efficacy are essential for self-directed learners. Regardless of the cause of Patricia’s seemingly minor technical issues, lack of teacher presence and response to issues are amotivating (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Amotivation signals the need for intervention by the instructor

(Dörnyei, 2009) whose trustworthy presence is deemed the most critical factor in the success of online teaching programmes (Bhagat & Chang, 2018; Kaur & Joordens, 2021). Even among students with high L2 online study motivation, Cheng and Lee (2018) found that continuous advisor and peer support, along with evidence of progress, were essential to their continued student motivation. By evidencing a lack of computer, internet and online communication self-efficacy, despite this being an integral part of her job, Patricia was clearly indicating a low Ideal L2-Self-Vision (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). An educator versed in amotivation and demotivation would readily comprehend and respond empathetically to this. Regardless, in solving her technical issues, Patricia did not move beyond the pre-actional stage of Dörnyei and Ottó's (1998) *Process Model of Motivation*. This near non-engagement by Patricia set the scene as the dominant theme of her entire online learning journey. As such, Gearing and Roger (2018a) argue that a student with a more robust Ideal-Self-Vision would have more proactively sought support from their learning provider and/or taken responsibility to engage with one more appropriately attuned to their needs.

Study Habits

Patricia negatively cited external commitments as impacting her L2 study, particularly lack of time, fatigue, and overwork. These themes were in common with Casanave's (2012) autobiographical *ecology of learning* case study where she recalled attempts to learn Japanese while teaching EFL as an *alien*. Key shared challenges with 'Patricia' included work-related stress due to a high workload and interconnected personal and/or work-related issues. However, regardless of external obstacles, more highly focussed, self-directed learners tend to succeed in online courses (Lin & Hsieh, 2001; Tsai & Tsai, 2003).

Linguistic Proficiency of the Learner

Patricia freely admitted in interviews that previous attempts at L2 acquisition had been less than successful (compulsory Spanish classes in high school). Such negative previous L2 learning experiences expressed as negative sentiment or *baggage* towards a host nation and its L1 speakers are typical of amotivated learners (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). In her interviews, a consistent theme was her self-attribution as a competent Korean speaker.

She projected the perceived inability of Koreans to understand her to her pronunciation, which she believed was correct. Other externalised reasons offered for her lack of progress included her denial of access to Korean-speaking communities of practice. The literature offers an explanation. Without clear goals, L2 students far more readily highlight many potential demotivators (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). By contrast, Kikuchi (2015) found that students exhibiting higher motivation were more able to self-regulate their cognitive and emotional wellbeing when encountering demotivators.

The Learner's Personality, Attitude, Abilities and Enthusiasm

To be fair, attempting to enter peripheral L2 communities of practice can be a long and difficult process for learners (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Consistent with my own experience, feelings of isolation and disconnection (McInnery & Roberts, 2004) are only intensified with no perceived affiliation with an online learning community, which makes a shared sense of belonging, purpose and norms critical (Koole, 2014). While claiming denial of access to communities of practice, Patricia's Korean community comprised friends. However, she offered scant evidence of accessing this readily available and arguably safe community of practice. Other potential alternatives were largely discounted, including a Korean class offered by her employer at reduced cost for staff. Work commitments and a disdain for how such classes were conducted were cited.

Cultural Factors

In common with Casanave (2012), Patricia, at-times, recalled, as significant: challenging cultural norms; and environmental/health issues, including air and noise pollution, along with their associated physical and mental health challenges. However, her protestations of perceived non-accommodation as a Korean speaker may have merit. In common with the majority of participants in my study, she cited being 'pigeonholed' in a role where she was actively discouraged from speaking Korean. Additionally, apart from one participant who had acquired Korean proficiency, all of those in my study displayed reluctance to invest in a minority L2 identity with perceived limited transferability by speakers seemingly possessed by a greater desire to converse in English (Gearing, 2018, 2019; Gearing & Roger, 2018a, 2018b, 2019). To be fair, as reported in some of Bonny

Norton's seminal studies (Norton (1997, 2013, 2014), this consistent denial of access to L1 communities of practice defined the experiences of immigrant working class Canadian women.

In summary, the person-in-context relational view of motivation states that language learners' current experiences and self-states may facilitate or constrain their engagement with their future possible selves (Ushioda, 2009). To mitigate against related, potential amotivation and demotivation, the internalised vision of the learner as a fluent L2 speaker needs to be primed and nurtured to flourish (Dörnyei, 2005). In response to this not taking place, Patricia attributed much of her growing negative sentiment towards her host nation L1 and those who spoke it. Her non-engagement with an online tool to potentially sidestep this issue could appear contradictory. This learning failure, however, had little to do with her self-study online course. Rather, the broader sociocultural issues that inspired her to enrol in her online Korean course in the first place may well explain her non-engagement with it, as evidenced by her lack of Ideal-L2-Self (Gearing & Roger, 2018a).

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the logical conclusion to draw is that Patricia had no internalised Ideal-L2-Self vision as a Korean speaker. She presented no evidence of an Ought-to L2 Self, nor of ever having tangibly moved beyond the pre-actional stage of L2 motivation relating to her online Korean course (Gearing & Roger, 2018a). By largely avoiding engagement with the course that could have alleviated the cause of her reported amotivation towards learning Korean, she reinforced her amotivation.

The significance of this research is that it places the student at the centre of their L2 learning trajectory within their broader sociocultural environment. This enables a much clearer rationale for why they may present as, or quickly become, amotivated. While L2 literature has historically interpreted the L2 classroom as the overriding cause of resulting L2 amotivation, this viewpoint may be limited. As illustrated, analysis of amotivation and demotivation requires broader nuance.

To conclude, this research draws on L2 motivation literature to explain how a negligible L2-Self-Vision is reflected in an online L2 learner's non-engagement. As such, its

intent is to address specific issues related to L2 acquisition, however, due to this specific focus, it could arguably be seen as limited in scope. Accordingly, further research into online learners' experiences, drawn from all disciplines and learning pathways, is welcome. This would provide learning advisors the opportunity to more broadly identify the causes of amotivating and demotivating issues online learners potentially face.

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