

Promoting the Learners' Motivation in Learning Chinese as a Second Language: From Demotivation to Motivational Strategies

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Motivation is a key factor that influences the outcome of second language (L2) learning. Chinese as a second language (CSL) learners, however, may experience demotivation in their Chinese learning process which will, more often than not, reduce their learning interest and eventually affect their learning effect, therefore, it is necessary to enhance the learners' motivation level. This article first reviews the research literature in motivation in general, then discusses the CSL learners' demotivation in their Chinese learning process studying in China. Finally, it introduces motivational strategies to activate CSL learners' motivation in learning Chinese.

Keywords: motivation, demotivation, motivational strategies, Chinese as a second language (CSL)

Introduction

Motivation is widely acknowledged as an important individual variable that determines language learning achievement. Since it provides the main impetus to start second language (L2) learning, and remains as a driving force in the later learning process (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65).

L2 learners' language learning is a "long and often tedious" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65) process in which their motivation may become weaker along with the time or when the tasks are difficult. In this case, there will appear a phenomenon—demotivation which will decrease the learner's interest in the language itself, the learning process or the learning environment. Demotivation is closely related to success or failure in language learning (Gao & Liu, 2015). Without sufficient motivation, learners can hardly achieve long-term goals, while high motivation can compensate for learners' deficiency in language aptitude and learning conditions (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65).

Dörnyei (2001b, p. 143) defined the term "demotivation" as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action". According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 138), a demotivated learner is once motivated but for some reason has lost their dedication or interest. The high rate of language learning failure worldwide verifies the importance of the study of demotivation (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 100). By examining literature that student demotivation is related to the teacher's teaching

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practice, Dörnyei (2005, p. 90) summarized that learner's demotivation is largely due to teachers' controlling of the class. After analyzing the previous studies reporting the teacher factor is the primary factor causing demotivation, Liu (2014) believed that this may be because most of the research objects are students, who may have a strong external attribution of demotivation, and teachers may be the biggest factor in the external attribution. In other words, students may attribute their demotivation to their teachers.

Therefore, it is necessary to address the problem of demotivation and work out practical ways to motivate learners. Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (2008) believed that the teachers' use of motivational strategies can enhance the students' motivation. Dörnyei (2001a) proposed motivational strategies frameworks for foreign language classroom (p. 28). Motivational strategies are methods and techniques to promote the learners' goal-related behavior (Dörnyei, 2001a, pp. 2 & 28). Dörnyei (1994) proposed a social educational framework of L2 motivation from the classroom teaching perspective. This framework categorizes L2 motivation according to the three levels: the language level, the learner level, and the learning situation level, coinciding with the three basic components of the L2 learning process, namely, the L2, the L2 learner, and the L2 learning environment. Based on the three levels, Dörnyei (1994) presented 30 strategies to motivate L2 learners. Later, many studies on motivational strategies are discussed in the framework of the three levels. The three-level framework denies the linear features of L2 motivation instead of highlighting the multiple features of it, but the limitation is that it only lists the strategies of each level without clarifying the logical relationship between the levels (Zhou, 2016).

Studies on CSL Learners' Demotivation in Learning Chinese

In Chinese as a second language (CSL) learning field, most empirical studies on motivation are about the classification of motivation (e.g., Ding, 2014; 2016), the relationship between motivation and Chinese learning achievement (e.g., Y. C. Yuan, Shang, Y. Yuan, & K. C. Yuan, 2008), and the relationship between motivation and other individual factors, such as attitude and strategies (e.g., Y. C. Yuan, Rao, & Y. Yuan, 2011), limited studies have explored the international students' demotivation in the Chinese learning contexts.

Yu (2013) reported the top five factors that led to the international students' Chinese learning demotivation: negative attitude towards Chinese learning, teaching environment, decline in self-confidence, teaching materials and learning content, and teachers. Yu's study concluded that teachers should enhance their teaching ability, improve their teaching methods, and establish a good relationship with the students. They should pay attention to the students' learning needs, select appropriate teaching materials, and teach what the students expected to learn. Moreover, teachers should create a relaxed classroom learning atmosphere, so that the learning will be full of fun. In addition, teachers should guide students to make proper attributes, help students establish self-confidence in learning Chinese, enhance students' internal learning motivation, and promote students' independent learning ability.

Zhang and Ding (2018) employed grounded theory to analyze international students' Chinese learning demotivation, and summarized 13 demotivation factors, in which L2 self-discrepancy played a central role. L2 self-change led to the L2 self-discrepancy through the mediators of learner's cognitive factors. This study probes into the reasons that result in the learners' demotivation.

Zhou (2018) reported demotivation factors of central Asian students learning Chinese in Xinjiang University, China. Logistic regression analysis revealed that the most dominating factors are the decrease of self-confidence and the negative influence from the peers. Zhou's study claims that some students' demotivation may not be due to their lack of interest in the target language or culture, or the teaching methods, but the negative influence of

their peers. Zhou suggested strengthening the goals of the class, enhancing students sense of participation in class affairs through discussions and determination of the goals, and making them realize that they are an important member of the class.

Wu and Wang (2019) investigated the motivation changes of east and southeast Asian undergraduate students in China, and found that the students mainly attribute their demotivation of Chinese learning to the internal factors, such as communication confidence, ability of solving difficulties, affective cognition, and foreign language learning ability. Teacher's influence, however, is not a significant factor of the students' demotivation. They suggested that to increase student's motivation, teachers should guide the students to make reasonable attribution, e.g., to attribute their successful learning experience to their own internal factors, so that they can improve self-confidence and enhance their learning motivation. For the negative experiences in the learning process (e.g., exam failure and slow progress), however, students can attribute them to external factors instead of their own abilities which they cannot control. According to the attribution theory (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015, p. 83), if learners ascribe the failure in a task to their low ability, they will probably not try it again, on the contrary, if they believe it is due to their insufficient effort or their unsuitable learning strategies, they are more likely to try it for the second time.

Liu, Zheng, Ma, and Wei's (2020) study found the factors that affecting Uzbekistani students' demotivation while learning Chinese in a Chinese university included both external and internal ones. The internal factors are students' negative attitudes and lack of self-confidence. The external factors include teacher qualities which are the essential reason for demotivation, the insufficient learning facilities and activities. Their study calls for joint efforts of teachers, students, and their Chinese fellow students to arouse their interest in learning Chinese and enthusiasm for it. Apart from that, students' courses and culture communication should be improved, and a vivid class atmosphere should be created.

Wang (2022) investigated advanced international students' academic Chinese learning motivation with 94 graduate and undergraduate students studying in Chinese universities majoring in Chinese language and in international Chinese language education, and found that although the students' overall motivation is at a high level, in general, they lack curiosity and interest in academic Chinese. Wang thus put forwards some suggestions to activate advanced Chinese learners' academic Chinese learning motivation: Teachers should cultivate students' interest in academic Chinese, create a good language environment, and help student develop good research habits. In addition, teachers should devote to constructing and developing academic Chinese courses. Students are suggested to find pleasure in learning Chinese, cultivate their Chinese learning curiosity, and form good learning habits.

To conclude, the previous studies mainly focused on the factors that cause demotivation, less explored the relationship between the factors, and only a few revealed how the factors affect demotivation. Most research adopted the questionnaire survey method, which is difficult to understand deeply the psychological process of demotivation, in addition, the research results are almost a list of factors affecting the demotivation, hardly revealed the relationship between the factors, nor explained how these factors have an effect on the demotivation (Zhou & Zhang, 2018).

To study the demotivation is actually to study the causes of demotivation (Liu, 2015). There are many factors affecting the demotivation of international learners' Chinese learning, but in general, they are related to the teaching methods, the learners themselves, and the learning environments (Li & Wu, 2023). These studies discussed from the internal (e.g., learners' self-confidence or negative attitude to L2 Chinese learning) and

external factors (e.g., teachers' quality, teaching methods, others' influence, and learning environments).

Studies on CSL Learners' Motivational Strategies in Learning Chinese

In China, only limited research has been done to explore CSL learners' motivational strategies.

Most Chinese studies on motivating CSL learners are based on the discussion of demotivation situations in a certain context, and then provide corresponding strategies to the teachers and learners.

Based on Dörnyei's (1994) three-level principle, Li and Wu (2023) provided some strategies to motivate international Chinese learners: (a) at the learner level, the international Chinese learners should build up self-confidence; (b) at the language level, teachers can increase learners' sense of identity of Chinese culture to help them understand the significance of learning Chinese for their future career development; and (c) at the learning situation level, teachers should foster an atmosphere for group learning, and design various kinds of content presentation forms of the teaching materials to increase the attraction of the course.

Likewise, by adopting Dörnyei's extended motivational framework, Zhou (2016) put forward some motivational strategies to activate the demotivated central Asian CSL students studying in China: (a) at the language level, cultivating the students' cross-cultural awareness and promoting their contact with Chinese speakers to stimulate and enhance their integrative motivation and instrumental motivation; (b) at the learner level, students should develop self-confidence, reduce language anxiety, and make motivation-enhancing attributions; and (c) at the learning situation level, increasing the attraction of the courses, and involving students in tasks to stimulate their interest. The difficulty level of the tasks and the teachers' language use should suit the level of the students. Furthermore, teachers should give timely and effective feedbacks, increase the students' satisfaction, and serve as the facilitator for the students.

Li (2017) investigated and compared the differences of the CSL students' Chinese learning motivation from nationality, type of students and age, and proposed some suggestions for teachers: modifying teaching content according to the students' learning situations (e.g., adjusting the teaching objectives and the difficulty levels), simplifying the content of materials and increase the cultural content, and the topic should be simple, close to life and practical. Li also suggests strengthening the emotional communication between teachers and students, and cultivate the international students' interest in learning.

Lu and Zhu (2021) explored the output-drivenness teaching, an important component of production-oriented approach (POA), in international students' oral Chinese classes. After 16-week-teaching experiment, they found that the drivenness was effective in stimulating the students' learning motivation and helping them clarify their production goals, besides, the task design and the material selection directly affected the drivenness, and teacher behavior also had an impact on drivenness. They provided some teaching methods to optimize the drivenness: The designing of the driving tasks should meet the requirements of authentic communication, cognitive challenge, and appropriateness of outcome goals. And in designing, the diversity of tasks should be considered. In addition, the selection of driving materials should consider the content quality, language difficulty level, and the sense of involvement. At the beginning of the teaching session, teachers should explain the concept and characteristics of POA, and give appropriate feedbacks after drivenness.

To summarize, most research into CSL motivational strategies started from examining the demotivation of the learners, and then explored the solutions to the unfavorable situation by providing corresponding strategies. The often adopted theoretic framework is Dörnyei's (1994) three-level model which provided practical guidance to the teachers.

Conclusion

This article reviews the studies conducted on CSL learners' demotivation in learning Chinese when studying in China, and the motivational strategies that directed at it. Most studies investigated the causes of demotivation, and provided suggestions for motivating the learners. Dörnyei's (1994) theoretical model of motivational strategies provides guidance and reference for classroom practitioners so that they can follow. To avoid the influence of demotivation, both teachers, educational institutions, and learners should make joint efforts to enhance learners' motivation.

Literature research shows that teachers' quality in teaching is the salient factor that affects students' demotivation. Therefore, teachers are suggested to make clear the motivational dispositions of the students and diagnose the students' learning difficulties to modify the teaching methods, so that the students are easy to adapt. Apart from that, the proper content of the courses, the acceptable teaching materials, the suitable difficulty levels of the tasks are among the favorable factors that may help promote the students' learning motivation. In addition, teachers are suggested to give immediate responses to the students' questions and problems as well as proper feedbacks after the tasks have finished, so that students' enthusiasm for learning will not be discouraged and they can keep interest in the tasks.

For those learners who are not confident, teachers should pay more attention to them and give them more opportunities to practice (Zhou, 2018). Moreover, learners themselves should promote positive self-awareness in learning by making proper attribution. Instead of attributing the failure in learning to their ability, they may as well attribute it to their insufficient devotion to study, so as to overcome the anxiety that may follow.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can invite both teachers and students to participate in the same research, which is helpful for teachers to reflect on their teaching practice. Teachers can also compare their own understanding of the students' demotivation by referring to the feedbacks of the students (Gao & Liu, 2015), which is useful to improve teaching and learning.

Furthermore, future study can employ mixed research methods. In quantitative analysis, besides using questionnaire survey to clarify the influencing factors of the L2 Chinese learners' demotivation and compare the differences among different groups (e.g., age and gender), an experiment research design can be considered to figure out the effects of exerting motivational strategies. Meanwhile, qualitative analysis can help probe into the deep reasons for demotivation. For example, apart from the interview, the classroom observation can be included to observe the learners' classroom performance, and the think aloud protocol can be employed to reveal their inner thoughts. In addition, given that learners' motivation is dynamic, future research can use diachronic longitudinal study to focus on the learners' motivation changes in Chinese learning and summarize its variation rules.

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