

Evaluating Demotivating Factors to L2 and Their Influence on Engagement

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Received: 15 July 2025

Accepted: 24 August 2025

Published: 10 October 2025

CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Kamarudin, H., Omar, S., & Yusoff, M. S. A. (2025). Evaluating demotivating factors to L2 and their influence on engagement. *Journal of Creative Practices in Language Learning and Teaching*, 13(3), 201-212. 10.24191/cplt.v13i3.7495

ABSTRACT

The issue of demotivation in second language (L2) learning is multifaceted, with various internal and external factors that hinder learners' progress, particularly in developing communication skills. To enhance student engagement in L2 learning, it is crucial to identify and address these complex demotivating elements. This study investigated the relationship between eight demotivating factors and engagement among diploma students at UiTM. Following data cleaning in SPSS analysis, 422 out of 428 respondents were selected for the structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) analysis. The results revealed that only the class environment and loss of interest were found to be significant predictors of student engagement in L2 learning. Future research should draw on less commonly applied theoretical and methodological approaches, such as socio-cultural perspectives, to better capture how demotivation interacts with broader social and cultural factors.

Keywords: engagement, demotivating, undergraduates, second language learning



INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, learning a second language (L2), particularly English at the tertiary level presents both challenges and opportunities. English is positioned as an L2 in the Malaysian education system, aligning with the national education policy (Darmi & Albion, 2013). This positioning is crucial, as English proficiency is widely regarded as essential for academic, professional, and international opportunities. The acquisition of English as an L2 is a complex process that is influenced by a myriad of factors, among which motivation plays a significant role. Dörnyei (2001) emphasized that motivation research has significantly shaped the field, often conceptualized along a continuum. However, less attention has been paid to demotivation, or the decline of motivation, as a distinct construct. Although the significance of motivation in language acquisition has been thoroughly examined, the notion of demotivation; characterized as a decline in learners' motivation from a previously elevated state; has garnered comparatively little focus (Chong et al., 2019; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2013; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009).

Prior research utilised established demotivation measures (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; 2013; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Kikuchi, 2011) to address the lack of contextual gap in their studies. This present study is expanding Kikuchi's (2011) Demotivation Model by incorporating two additional demotivating factors, particularly student attitude and self-efficacy. These factors are included to address a theoretical gap and expand upon the original six demotivating factors: Teacher Behaviour, Class Material, Characteristic of Classes, Loss of Interest, Experience of Difficulty, and Class Environment. According to the review of existing literature, these two factors are identified as significant components in motivation studies. In the case of language acquisition, attitude and self-efficacy of students are extremely important in either fostering or diminishing motivation. The lack of a positive attitude component, characterised by a lack of excitement and a willingness to address language difficulties, sometimes impedes learners from attaining favourable outcomes (Talpur et al., 2021).

In this present study, the complex correlation between demotivating factors and student engagement in English as an L2 learning is a topic of significant interest, and understanding these demotivating factors from the students' perspectives can provide valuable insights into how to enhance their engagement and overall learning experience. Previous research in Malaysia has primarily focused on examining demotivation among secondary school and pre-university students (Dinius, 2013; Fauzi, 2014). Compared to younger learners, university students possess the capacity to accurately assess their level of competence, particularly in tasks that require performance (Wigfield et al., 2004). According to Dinius (2013), high school dropouts were more likely to attribute their decision to leave school to a lack of motivation rather than poor academic achievement. Little focus has been placed on examining the factors that discourage tertiary level (e.g., UiTM) students. Tertiary educators should prioritise evaluating of their learners' motivation levels, as shown by Wigfield et al. (2004), who observed a decline in students' perceptions about their own abilities (their perception of their current level of competence) throughout their secondary and tertiary education. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine the demotivating factors among the tertiary students and to determine the influence of demotivating factors on student engagement in L2 classes.



1. What are the main demotivating factors (lecturer behaviour, class material, characteristics of class, loss of interest, experience of difficulty, and class environment) among tertiary students in L2 learning, including the newly incorporated factors of student attitude and self-efficacy?
2. How do these demotivating factors (lecturer behaviour, class material, characteristics of class, loss of interest, experience of difficulty, class environment, student attitude, and self-efficacy) influence student engagement in L2 learning?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), demotivation refers to "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action" (p. 143). They exclude internal factors while describing demotivation. External factors can include teacher-related, environment-related, and curriculum-related factors (Gao & Liu, 2022). Contrary to Dörnyei's (2001) understanding of demotivation, other scholars maintain a different view, contending that demotivation is not only attributable to external factors. Arai (2004), Falout and Maruyama (2004), Tsuchiya (2006), along with other studies, have examined demotivation by considering both internal and external influences (as stated in Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Internal factors are primarily learner-related, such as self-perception and psychological changes (Falout et al., 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Kim et al., 2019). Kikuchi (2011) building on prior research, identified six categories of external and internal L2 demotivating factors. These include demotivating teacher behaviour, class material, characteristics of class, class environment, loss of interest, and experience of difficulty.

Apart from this, self-efficacy, defined as a person's confidence in their own abilities, plays a crucial role in their ability to overcome challenges and difficulties (Chen et al., 2022). Individuals who score high on the self-efficacy scale undoubtedly demonstrate higher levels of motivation towards academic goals and a strong belief in their ability to effectively control their own learning experiences (Omar et al., 2021). When someone feels demotivated, their diminished belief in their own abilities leads to lack of effort and inadequate skills, which ultimately leads to poor academic performance. As motivation gradually decreases, possibly influenced by various demotivating factors, engagement may also decrease, ultimately leading to poor academic performance (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

Demotivating Factors

Since Chambers (1993) initially investigated demotivation in English as an L2 learning (as cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), there has been a growing interest in examining students' demotivation in language education. This interest is reflected in various studies conducted by researchers such as Falout and Maruyama (2004), Kikuchi (2009), Kim and Seo (2012), Hassaskhah et al. (2014), Kim et al. (2019), Karaca and Inan (2020), Thorner and Kikuchi (2020), and Gao and Liu (2022). Furthermore, Dörnyei (2001) suggested that additional research is necessary to gain a deeper understanding of this noteworthy motivational element.



Recent literature on demotivation in English as an L2 learners highlights a complex interplay of internal and external factors affecting motivation. Studies have identified several demotivating influences, such as excessive learning anxiety, reduced confidence, and negative language attitudes, which are often exacerbated by external elements like traditional teaching methods and uninspiring course materials (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Research indicates that these factors can significantly hinder language acquisition by creating a negative emotional process that diminishes learners' motivation (Kim, 2020). The ecological systems theory suggests that these factors do not act in isolation but interact with each other, influencing learners' experiences and outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

In different cultural contexts, specific demotivating factors have been identified. For instance, research in Turkey highlights the classroom environment as a primary demotivator, while lack of self-confidence is less significant (Unal & Yanpar Yelken, 2016). Similarly, studies in Pakistan reveal that teacher attitudes and poorly designed educational materials contribute to demotivation among ESL learners (Khan & Akhtar, 2023). These findings highlight the necessity of addressing both intrinsic and external elements to establish a conducive learning environment. By understanding these dynamics, educators can develop strategies to mitigate demotivation and enhance language learning motivation (Gardner, 2019).

Kikuchi's (2011) demotivation framework was adopted in this study because it provides one of the most comprehensive and empirically validated categorizations of demotivating factors in L2 learning. Specifically, the six factors capture both psychological and contextual dimensions that are highly relevant to the Malaysian L2 context. Compared to other demotivation scales that focus narrowly on either teacher or learner-related issues (e.g., Chambers, 1993; Falout et al., 2009), Kikuchi's survey instrument has been widely cited, tested across multiple cultural contexts, and shown to possess strong construct validity. Thus, his model was preferred over alternative instruments because it not only addresses classroom realities comprehensively but also allows for meaningful comparison with prior English as an L2 demotivation research.

Student Engagement

Engagement, characterised as students' active participation in a learning activity, is considered one of the main student attributes influencing learning (Christenson et al., 2012). Engagement in diverse subject areas has been linked to numerous beneficial learning behaviours and outcomes, including critical thinking abilities, perseverance, contentment with learning experiences, and academic success (Carini et al., 2006; Shernoff et al., 2016). Engagement is typically understood in terms of cognitive (sustained focus and mental effort), behavioural (the effort, determination, and concentration learners put into completing tasks), emotional (the mental states of enthusiasm, interest, and enjoyment experienced during task completion), and, more recently, agentic engagement ("students' intentional, proactive, and constructive contribution to the instruction they receive," Reeve, 2012) dimensions. The latter dimension focuses on the settings in the classroom and the tasks given to students that can enhance and energise their internal abilities to promote high-quality engagement during the instructional process (Reeve & Tseng, 2011). Illustrations of these captivating circumstances and assignments at the classroom level involve instructor assistance, educational materials/content, classroom organisation, and task configurations (Fredricks et al., 2004; Shernoff et al., 2016).



Another study focusing on student engagement in the traditional classroom context is that of Handelsman et al. (2005). In their work, the authors identified four factors that illustrate how students allocate time and energy in the classroom: skills engagement (e.g., completing readings and exerting effort); emotional engagement (e.g., enhancing course interest and relating content to personal experiences); participation/interaction engagement (e.g., enjoying class activities and actively engaging in small group discussions); and performance engagement (e.g., achieving high test scores and obtaining favourable grades) (Handelsman et al., 2005). Handelsman et al. (2005) conceptualise student engagement as comprising both affective and behavioural elements. Importantly, they also developed one of the earliest validated instruments for assessing student engagement, known as the Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ), which has since been widely used in higher education research to capture course-specific engagement. Their work is particularly influential because it operationalises the concept of engagement into specific, measurable factors beyond mere attendance or compliance, thus providing a more nuanced understanding of how students invest effort in classroom learning.

Accordingly, in this study, student engagement is defined as the degree to which learners invest sustained cognitive effort, emotional involvement, and behavioural participation in classroom activities, with the aim of enhancing their English as an L2 learning. This definition reflects the multifaceted nature of engagement and underscores its critical role in L2 acquisition. It also positions engagement as an active, dynamic process shaped by classroom interactions and individual learner attitudes.

METHODOLOGY

Two methods were used to determine the sample size. The table by Krejcie and Morgan (1970) suggests a sample size of 384 for large populations. However, based on recent recommendations, G*Power was used for more precision. With eight predictors, an effect size of 0.15, a significance level of 0.05 and a statistical power of 80, the required sample size was calculated to be 114. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure accurate representation and minimize bias. The samples were among Semester 3 Diploma Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysian students who were directly involved in all three compulsory English courses for diploma level. The lecturers teaching the third semester English course were instructed to share the questionnaire link after the semester ended. A total of 428 responses were collected and analysed using Smart PLS 3 (Hair et al., 2017) to evaluate the PLS-SEM outcomes of the reflection measurement model. The study's questionnaire was constructed by adopting several established instruments; from Kikuchi's (2011) Demotivation Questionnaire (35 items), Student Attitude (7 items) instrument developed by Falout and Maruyama (2004) and Self-Efficacy (9 items) instrument developed by Pintrich and De Groot (1990). Twenty-three items were adapted from Handelsman et al.'s (2005) framework to measure student engagement. A seven-point Likert scale was utilised to measure perception, ranging from "very not true" (1) to "very true" (7); "strongly not agree (1) to "strongly agree", each scale for Demotivating Factors variables and Engagement variable. From a total of 428 responses, 422 were selected for further analysis after the data completed screening to assure a dataset without errors.

A descriptive analysis was conducted to calculate mean values of each factor, prior to an advanced statistical analysis using the Partial Least Square-Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-



SEM) to establish measurements and structural models. The measurement model is essential for verifying the reliability and validity of the constructs in the current study. On the other hand, the structural model is employed to conduct bivariate correlation analysis and simultaneous regression analyses to determine the correlations and relationship effects among the constructs being investigated.

The analysis of internal consistency reliability, indicator reliability (outer loadings) and convergent validity for all constructs that the composite reliability for all constructs exceeded the minimal threshold value of 0.7, with a range of 0.855 to 0.961. These results indicate that the measurement model possessed acceptable reliability. While items such as LEC07, EXP04, E02, and E07, demonstrated factor loadings less than the standard threshold, at $r < 0.6$ (Hair et al., 2017), these items were retained based on other scholars' views. Researchers are permitted to retain items with factor loading as low as 0.50 (Byrne, 2016) or 0.40 (Hulland, 1999), as long as that particular construct has achieved its convergent validity requirement ($AVE = 0.50$). Furthermore, all constructs in this measurement model had achieved convergent validity threshold with AVE values as low as 0.509 and as high as 0.779, after items E01, E06 and CC01 were removed to fulfil the convergent validity requirements. Finally, items such as CC03, CC04, and CM01 were removed to satisfy discriminant validity requirement.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of an analysis of the demotivating factors that influence tertiary education students in English as an L2 with a focus on student engagement. The research addresses two main questions: first, identifying the key demotivating factors, including newly included variables such as student attitude and self-efficacy; and second, how these factors; lecturer behaviour, class material, characteristics of class, loss of interest, experience of difficulty, class environment, student attitude, and self-efficacy; affect overall student engagement in L2 learning. The data will be analyzed to provide insights into the ways in which these factors contribute to students' overall language learning experiences, particularly in relation to their motivation and communicative competence.

Main Demotivating Factors among Tertiary Students in L2 Learning

Table 1. Mean and standard deviation of latent variables

Latent Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation
Lecturer Behaviour	4.235	1.563
Characteristics of Class	4.292	1.281
Class Environment	4.160	1.417
Class Material	4.221	1.437
Experience of Difficulty	4.938	1.319
Loss of Interest	3.654	1.554
Student Attitude	2.621	1.587
Self-efficacy	4.336	1.441



Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of the latent variables related to the demotivating factors affecting tertiary students' English language learning. The highest mean score is observed for the experience of difficulty ($M = 4.938$, $SD = 1.319$), indicating that students perceive a significant level of challenge in their learning process. The instructor's behaviour ($M = 4.235$, $SD = 1.563$), characteristics of class ($M = 4.292$, $SD = 1.281$), and class environment ($M = 4.160$, $SD = 1.417$) also have relatively high mean scores, suggesting that these factors play an important role in shaping the learning experience. On the other hand, loss of interest ($M = 3.654$, $SD = 1.554$) and student attitude ($M = 2.621$, $SD = 1.587$) reflect negative perceptions that may hinder motivation. It is noteworthy that self-efficacy ($M = 4.336$, $SD = 1.441$) is quite high, indicating that students have confidence in their abilities despite some difficulties with engagement.

In response to the first research question, the analysis identifies several key demotivating factors in L2 learning among tertiary students. Experience of Difficulty emerges as the most significant demotivator, followed by factors such as Lecturer Behaviour, Characteristics of Class, and Class Environment. While Loss of Interest and Student Attitude further contribute to diminished motivation, particularly in terms of emotional and cognitive engagement, Self-efficacy; though relatively high; suggests that students maintain confidence in their abilities despite these challenges. These findings underscore the complex interaction between external classroom dynamics and internal student perceptions in shaping motivation in L2 learning.

Influence of Demotivating Factors on Engagement

This section explores how various demotivating factors; teacher behaviour, class material, characteristics of class, loss of interest, experience of difficulty, class environment, student attitude, and self-efficacy—impact student engagement in L2 learning. For example, Table 2 shows $LECT \rightarrow EG$ means that Lecturer Behaviour (LECT) has a direct effect on Engagement (EG). In other words, the way lecturers interact with students (their teaching style, attitude, etc) is hypothesised to influence how actively students participate, invest effort, and stay emotionally involved in classroom activities. Table 2 shows the two significant relationships; they involved class environment to engagement ($\beta = -0.214$, $t = 2.780$, $p = 0.003$, $LL = -0.345$, $UL = -0.091$), and loss of interest to engagement ($\beta = -0.196$, $t = 1.882$, $p = 0.030$, $LL = -0.331$, $UL = -0.015$).

Table 2. Results of Significance Testing (direct relationship)

Relationships	β	SD	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value	Confidence Interval (BC)		Decision
					LL	UL	
LECT $\rightarrow$ EG	.029	.064	.448	.327	-.089	.125	Not supported
CE $\rightarrow$ EG	-.214	.077	2.780	.003	-.345	-.091	Supported
EXP $\rightarrow$ EG	.086	.085	1.010	.157	-.070	.208	Not supported
LI $\rightarrow$ EG	-.196	.104	1.882	.030	-.331	-.015	Supported
CM $\rightarrow$ EG	-.019	.091	.208	.418	-.166	.121	Not supported
SA $\rightarrow$ EG	-.113	.083	1.368	.086	-.224	.063	Not supported
SE $\rightarrow$ EG	-.056	.073	.770	.221	-.168	.063	Not supported
CC $\rightarrow$ EG	.120	.077	1.563	.059	-.021	.237	Not supported



The analysis shows that both classroom environment and loss of interest have a significant impact on students engagement in L2 learning. Specifically, class environment ($\beta = -0.214$) and loss of interest ($\beta = -0.196$) show negative relationships with engagement, suggesting that less favourable class environment and loss of interest are strong predictors of lower student engagement. These results conclude that external classroom conditions and internal motivation significantly influence students' active engagement in the language learning process.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The data reveal important demotivating factors, particularly the experience of difficulty that may be related to the complexity of learning English as a second language (ESL). Factors such as lecturer behaviour, characteristics of class, and classroom environment also have an influence, but suggest more neutral to positive effects. The notable decline in student attitude and loss of interest suggests that while students have confidence in their abilities (self-efficacy), their motivation is dampened by emotional or cognitive disinterest. This disinterest could be due to difficulties with the content, inadequate engagement strategies, or a lack of connection to the material presented. A focus on improving classroom dynamics and increasing engagement could mitigate some of these demotivating factors and help to improve overall learning outcomes and self-perceived communicative competence.

On the other hand, although experience of difficulty is found as the most important demotivating factor among tertiary students in English as an L2 learning, it does not show a significant effect on engagement in this study, along with lecturer behaviour, class material, student attitude, self-efficacy, and characteristics of class. This contrasts with other research that identified these factors as demotivators in various contexts (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). However, the lack of significant influence here may reflect unique cultural or institutional characteristics in Malaysia, suggesting that these factors might not be as critical in determining engagement. The insignificant findings regarding lecturer behaviour and class materials suggest that these factors might not be as critical in determining student engagement within Malaysian universities. Previous research has shown that while teacher behaviour can influence motivation, its direct impact on engagement may vary depending on other contextual factors such as institutional support and peer interactions (Falout & Falout, 2005, as cited in Gao & Liu, 2022). Similarly, class materials are often cited as demotivating when they fail to meet learners' expectations or are not aligned with their interests (Richards & Renandya, 2002; Krishnan & Pathan, 2013). Nonetheless, the insignificance results in this study might indicate that Malaysian students are more resilient to these influences or that other factors play a more dominant role in shaping their engagement.

The lack of significant influence of student attitude and self-efficacy could be due to the collective learning culture prevalent in Malaysian universities, where group dynamics can mitigate the effects of individual differences (Eliason, 1995, as cited in Loes et al., 2021). In group-based learning environments, students tend to receive support and motivation from peers, reducing the direct influence of personal attitudes or self-confidence on engagement. In addition, classroom characteristics were found to have minimal influence, possibly due to the institution's focus on adaptive learning environments that meet the diverse needs of students (Aswad & Wirentake, 2023). Interactive classrooms, such as movable furniture and integrated technology,



can increase engagement, making the particular nature of a class less critical. Finally, the low impact of difficulty on UiTM student engagement may be due to their resilience. In an environment where challenges are met with institutional support and peer collaboration, difficulties may not directly hinder engagement.

The study confirms the importance of creating a conducive classroom environment and maintaining student interest to increase L2 learner engagement. The results of this study, which emphasise the importance of maintaining learner interest and a conducive classroom climate, are consistent with recent findings from Nurul Hidayana et al. (2024). Their study demonstrated that humour, when used empathetically, not only enhanced enjoyment but also promoted greater student engagement in classroom activities. The findings also suggest that other factors such as lecturer's behaviour, instructional materials, student attitude, self-efficacy and experience of difficulty are less influential in the Malaysian context, which is probably due to the cultural and institutional practises that promote collaborative learning and students' resilience.

Overall, the findings underscore the complex and context-specific nature of demotivation and engagement in L2 learning within Malaysian higher education. Although factors such as perceived difficulty, lecturer behaviour, and instructional materials appeared less influential in this study, the centrality of sustaining learner interest and fostering a supportive classroom environment remains clear. These results suggest that pedagogical interventions aimed at strengthening students' emotional investment and establishing meaningful connections between course content and learners' academic or personal trajectories may be particularly effective. Future research should consider longitudinal designs to trace the dynamic interplay between demotivation and engagement over time, as well as qualitative approaches that capture students' lived experiences in greater depth. Moreover, comparative investigations across institutions or cultural settings would provide further insight into whether the resilience and collaborative learning culture observed in Malaysia is unique to this context or reflects broader patterns in English as an L2 education.

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This manuscript was developed with the assistance of ChatGPT Plus for the purpose of editing the references. The tool/service supported the author(s) in reviewing and refining the content, and the authors assume full responsibility for the final version submitted for publication.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

Acknowledgement

The main author would like to extend her greatest appreciation to Dr Suhaida as her Main Supervisor, also to Dr Saiful as her Co-supervisor for supporting the completion of this research paper. Our gratitude also goes to the ELC231 UiTM lecturers and all the participants. Lastly, we would also like to thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback.

Authors' Contributions

Hanis carried out the research plan, conducted data collection and analysis, and took the lead in writing the manuscripts. Suhaida and Muhammad Saiful provided feedback, reviewed and assisted in completing the manuscript.