

L2 Demotivation in Online Classes during COVID-19: From an Activity Theory Perspective

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate an L2 learner's motivation during his involvement in language learning. Specifically, it was sought to conceptualize the (de)motives that might have an impact on the participant's language learning process and to reconceptualize, in this sense, the process above referring to the Activity Theory (AT). To this end, this study attempted to examine whether there were any changes in his motivation within the framework of AT. The scrutiny of data revealed that the changes stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative influence on Ahmet's language learning process. Although he was relatively motivated as he started as a language learner, the new changes he had to adapt to amidst the outbreak externally affected his learning experiences, leading to demotivation. The present paper argues how this change can be captured by referring to Engeström's (1999, 2009) triangle model. Further discussions and implications are provided in the study.

Keywords: L2 demotivation, Activity theory, COVID-19, Learning English as a foreign language

Introduction

Today the English language is the lingua franca helping people from diverse backgrounds and cultures to communicate with each other. However, learning a second language (hereafter L2) is not an easy task and it is equally important to dig even deeper into how an L2 is learned and what factors are at play. As such, it might be argued that learning an L2 does not include the acquisition of knowledge of the target language per se, but it also centers around the fact that there are other influential factors, one of which is motivation. Motivation has a piquant impact on the achievement of language attainment. It has accordingly attracted much scholarly attention in L2 learning and education (e.g., Dörnyei, 1998; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Lamb, 2004; Ushioda, 2001; Thompson & Vasquez, 2015). A related line of inquiry that examines motivational influences has focused on demotivation because it is thought to be interwoven with interactional patterns between teachers and learners. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), the process of L2 learning is known to be popular for learning failure: nearly everybody failing to learn at least one language. Therefore, failure during language learning is recognized as a prominent fact, and research on its causes is correlated with demotivation. Demotivation does not argue that a positive motive initially feeding into a certain behavior has been disregarded; rather, it is only the resultant force that has been attenuated by strong negating factors (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Moreover, it is substantially important to find ways in the hopes of examining factors (e.g., internal or external) of

demotivation as they are astutely observed by individual learners. At the same time, they are actively engaged in learning, which might lead to demotivation (Kim & Kim, 2013). As such, as is discussed by Kim and Kim (2013), learners' perception of how and whether internal and external factors of demotivation are interrelated calls for reconceptualisation of demotivators affecting the learning processes. Dörnyei's 1998 study revealed nine demotivating factors. Among these factors, the first one (i.e., teachers' personalities, commitments and the like) was reported to be the most observed factor, representing 40% of the reports. Based on Dörnyei's research, many other researchers have focused on demotivation of learners who learn English as a foreign or second language (Arai, 2004; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Hamada & Kito, 2008; Keblawi, 2005; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2007; Kim, 2012; Kim & Seo, 2012; Meshkat & Hassani, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2011; Li & Zhou, 2017). To this end, the present study investigates factors leading to demotivation for individual learners during their involvement in learning a foreign language. The demotivation process and learners' perception within this process are exhibited from an Activity Theory (hereafter AT) perspective. In this regard, AT argues that an L2 learner is responsible for autonomously creating a socio-culturally appropriate learning context for learning to occur (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Literature Review

The question of why learners lose their motivation (e.g., demotivation) has attracted much scholar attention (e.g., Chambers, 1993; Oxford, 1998; Bastidas, 2002; Hasewaga, 2004; Keblawi, 2005; Li & Zhou, 2017) and has been the focus of the bulk of research studies (Dörnyei, 2001; Arai, 2004; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Kojima, 2004; Kim, 2013). According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), demotivation concerns "various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation". Thus, it can be argued that a demotivated learner is someone who was once motivated but lost his or her commitment and interest for some reason. Over the past decades, research into demotivation has mainly focused on instructional communication (e.g.,

Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Gorham & Milette, 1997, Zhang, 2007). However, L2 researchers also attempted to research demotivation to examine the external forces affecting L2 learning motivation. Employing quantitative factor analysis approaches, a majority of these studies investigated demotivating factors (e.g., demotivates) that had an impact on the process of L2 learning (Falout, et al., 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009) and there were also relevant studies utilizing qualitative and mixed-method approaches to examine similar issues (Keblawi, 2005; Kim & Seo, 2012; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). What these studies had in common was the fact that teacher-related factors, such as teaching style, were the most striking external factors causing demotivation. Besides, it was also found out that internal factors (e.g., negating positive attitudes towards the target language) might lead to a situation where a learner is demotivated (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009).

Oxford's (1998) investigations, being amongst the early attempts in the field of L2 (de)motivation, set off to carry out a content analysis of essays written nearly by 250 American students about their experiences in learning over five years. Oxford used some prompts to help the participants reflect on their learning, describing conflicts and talking about moments of feeling uncomfortable. Upon finishing up the content analysis, Oxford came up with four themes, namely, the teacher's relationship with the students, the teacher's attitude towards the course or the material (e.g., sloppy management), style conflicts (e.g. the amount of structure or detail), and the nature of the activities. Similarly, Ushioda (1998) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the effective motivational thinking of 20 Irish learners of French. Specifically, Ushioda (1998) asked the participants to identify what they found to be demotivating in their L2-related-learning experience. The study reported that the existent demotivates were closely linked to negative aspects of institutionalized teaching/learning context, such as teaching methods and learning tasks. As such, it was also found that learners in this study somehow managed to sustain or revive their positive motivational disposition when there are apparent negative experiences and they resorted to several effective self-motivating strategies, such as setting short term goals, positive

self-talk, engaging in an enjoyable L2 activity that is “not monitored in any way the teacher or by essays or exams” (Ushioda, 1998).

More recently, however, research on demotivation unearthed that, in addition to external factors, internal factors might play out and cause demotivation (Zhou & Wang, 2012). In this regard, a study by Hosseinpour and Tabrizi (2013) investigated demotivating factors in learning English in an Iranian context. 382 Persian learners, selected through stratified clustering sampling, of English participated in this study. The researcher collected the data through a questionnaire consisting of 40-Likert type items. The findings revealed that low-proficient learners were inclined to perceive reduced self-confidence and negative attitudes to be more demotivating than their peers at other levels of proficiency. In a similar vein, in another study by Li and Zhou (2017), the researchers examined L2 learners’ demotivation to learn English in 367 local universities. Adopting a qualitative approach to data collection and analyzing, the researchers found out that there were two main categories of demotivators: internal factors (e.g., lack of intrinsic interest) and external factors (e.g., teaching process). However, they also reported that external factors were relatively more influential compared to internal ones. Based on their findings, Li and Zhou (2017) attempts to provide an empirical basis for the needs analysis in English classes and curriculum reform, respectively, laying a particular emphasis on providing a reference for implementing central and local education policies as well.

Overview of Activity Theory

Activity theory is originated from threefold historical sources: in classical German philosophy, in Engel and Marx’s writings, and Vygotsky, Luria and Leont’ev’s Soviet Russian cultural-historical psychology. However, according to Engeström, who is accepted as the pioneer of the latest Activity Theory, today, AT is greatly multidisciplinary and international. This process brings about the breakthrough of old and new relevant approaches, discussion partners, and allies. To perceive AT, one needs to comprehend the term activity from the perspective of the theory. The terms used in AT are originally Russian, and the phenomenon activity

has a meaning far beyond “being active” in English. Indeed, it means something meaningful, purposeful & significant, and cultural formation which possesses its structure. The core of Activity Theory comprises the relationship between subject and object. In addition, both intended and unintended results can form the outcomes of an activity. In 1987, Engeström enhanced Activity Theory by employing the notion of a collective activity system. Within this system, he used elements, portrayed in Fig. 1, subject, object, rules, tools, community and division of labor.

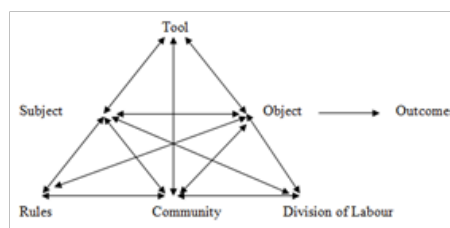


Figure 1: The Engeström (1987) Representation of a Collective Activity System

Given the legitimate focus on individuals’ idiosyncratic experience and mediation of sociocultural contexts, Engeström’s (1999, 2009) triangle model would be an epistemological advancement, in that this is useful for understanding L2 learning demotivation, “emphasizing learners’ perceptions of their learning environments” (Kim & Kim, 2013).

Based upon the literature reviewed above, to the best of our knowledge, there is not much research investigating demotivation from an AT perspective, nor is there much focus on what demotivates might affect the process of L2 learning. As such, the present study is an attempt to investigate an L2 learner’s, pseudonymously called Ahmet, process of language learning in an asynchronous environment by embracing AT model as the framework to possibly account for the demotivation of L2 learning.

Methodology

Aim of the Study

Based on the impetus for the study discussed above, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate an L2 learner’s motivation during his involvement in language learning. Specifically, it was sought to conceptualize the (de)motives that

might have an impact on the participant's language learning process and to reconceptualize, in this sense, the process above referring to the Activity Theory.

Amidst a virus outbreak, schools all around Turkey shut. The mode of education changed dramatically with the distinctive rise of e-learning, whereby teaching was undertaken remotely and on digital platforms. In line with the measures against the new coronavirus (COVID-19), universities also started distance education to ensure students continue their education in the most efficient way without any disruption. However, this process of adapting to new realities brought with it not just some concerns per se but also some required updates. As such, an in-depth investigation of the participating L2 learner's involvement in this process would offer insights into how this new normal in education affects learners.

Research Design

The study in design employed a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Specifically, the qualitative research design was based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which helped us induce a pattern of the participating L2 learner's demotivating factors as he was involved in an asynchronous course.

Participant

Ahmet, a pseudonym, is a language learner at a state university in İstanbul, Turkey. At the time of study, he was studying at preparatory program of the university. Completing his language learning studies, he would stream into his department, studying in the dept. of Naval Architecture and Marine Engineering.

Data Collection

For the current study, the data were collected through interviews. One of the researchers interviewed the participant at regular intervals for 5 weeks to prompt why he had negative attitudes towards the online classes. Each interview lasted for one hour approximately and was transcribed verbatim by both of the researchers.

Data Analysis

The interviews were transcribed into textual forms to be studied using an inductive approach to

data analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An iterative process of reading through the data was initiated by both researchers to thickly describe the data at hand as it is known to be usual to move back and forth between data collection, data analysis and data interpretation (Dörnyei, 2007). This reading process through the data was also followed to avoid misinterpretation of any kind to ensure trustworthiness. Having analyzed the relevant data individually, we negotiated the final themes through peer debriefing, sharing our thoughts regarding the interpretation process to ensure validity as well as establish the credibility of the study (Spall, 1999). Rather than seeking generalizable issues, we attempted to capture the participant's voice through thick descriptions via inductive analysis. Detailed coding & analysis were performed until it felt that no further useful categories would emerge within data.

L2 Learning Demotivation Process from Activity Theory Perspective

The teacher-related factor, being the most conspicuous and effective one during the learning process, was selected to exhibit the L2 learning demotivation process with AT model as the framework. The role of L2 teachers is vital for learners in the learning process since teachers can affect the elements in activity systems such as division of labor, the mediational tool and the object. Furthermore, teaching methods, especially teacher-centered instruction methods, are among the main factors leading to demotivation in the L2 learning process (Alaviana & Sehat, 2012; Kim & Kim, 2013; Warrington & Jeffrey, 2005). Therefore, the present study indented to stress the importance of teacher-related factors in the demotivation of L2 learners using Engeström's Activity Theory system.

To illustrate the demotivation process of an L2 learner, the above-mentioned participant, studying in English Preparatory School then, was chosen for the study. The learner, pseudonymously Ahmet, took courses in English Preparatory School mandatorily according to the university principles. However, Ahmet's motives for attending Preparatory School consisted of two factors: completing courses in English successfully at Preparatory School to continue his department in the following year, and the other was learning English as a foreign language

with the aim of self-development for his future career. These twofold motives formed the object element for Ahmet's L2 learning process in the activity system, and according to Kaptelinin (2005), the object of the activity is the one leading the activity. Moreover, the participant, as he indicated during the interviews, started the courses with high motivation and was eager to attend all the courses as a highly motivated student. As all the elements forming the context are unearthed, Fig. 2 demonstrates motivation activity system affecting Ahmet's L2 learning process.

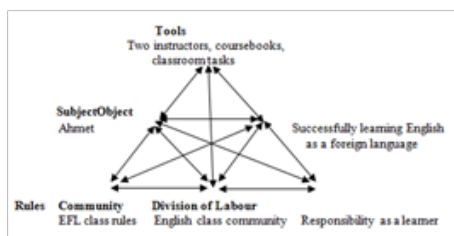


Figure 2: Ahmet's Initial L2 Learning Motivation Activity System

Ahmet continued his courses as a highly motivated learner for the first semester of the academic year. However, as the COVID-19 Pandemic arose and spread across Turkey, the country decided to turn formal education into online education. Herewith, the mediation tools, rules, and community elements of the activity system changed for the learners. Some of them preserved their motives and motivation, whereas the activity system changed for the others during this process. The participant Ahmet belongs to the latter, and eventually, outcomes of his L2 learning activity system changed due to some factors, particularly teacher-related factors.

With the new regulations due to pandemic, coursebooks and classroom tasks turned into online while the same instructors (mediation tools) continued their lessons with the same classes. Nevertheless, the findings of the interviews demonstrated that the instructors did not pursue teaching methods they used in formal education. The instructors implemented more teacher-centered approaches (e.g., lecturing) in their teaching practices. Although the rules and community changed during online lessons in the activity system, these factors did not affect the learner (subject) as much as teacher-related ones. Accordingly, the above-mentioned

object of the participant transformed into fulfilling the requirement of the university from learning a foreign language successfully. All these alterations of the participant's L2 learning motivation activity system are illustrated in Figure 3.

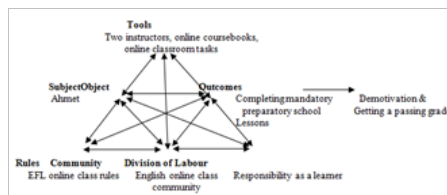


Figure 3: Ahmet's Latest L2 Learning (De)Motivation Activity System

As the teacher-related factors affected Ahmet negatively, his two fold motives in the formal education semester decreased to one since he abandoned the one related to L2 learning for self-development. He gradually lost his interest in the lessons and completing the courses to study his department in the following year became his only object. Accordingly, outcomes of the activity system were getting a passing grade & demotivation mostly.

Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate an L2 learners' (de)motivation in language learning following the new regulations initiated worldwide amidst a virus outbreak. Our findings demonstrated that although Ahmet was relatively more motivated before the pandemic, he lost his commitment and interest after new regulations took place in educational landscapes. Specifically, it was observed that an external factor leading to demotivation was apparent and affected Ahmet in ways that he had to resort to a bunch of different motives, which is in line with a body of research studies in the existing literature (e.g., Hosseinpur & Tabrizi, 2013; Zhou & Wang, 2012). Similarly, it can be argued that this change in Ahmet's language learning process due to the new normal is an indicator of idiosyncratic experiences and mediation of sociocultural contexts, as is discussed by Engeström (2009). Moreover, our findings revealed that his demotivates were closely linked to negative aspects of institutionalized teaching/learning context, such as teaching methods and learning tasks (Ushioda, 1998). Better yet, Ahmet revived and his only motive was to get a

passing grade to complete his language studies, which echoes the findings of the study conducted by Li and Zhou (2017), who argued that external factors were more influential.

Overall, the present study would provide a basis for further research to examine issues of similar interest (e.g., motivational influences) through the principles of AT as it might help conceptualize and reconceptualize what factors lead to demotivation with a critical eye. Therefore, it can be argued that there is paramount relevance to the literature focusing on how learners become demotivated. While acknowledging potential individual differences, we argue that a theoretical model needs to consider the possible contributions of Activity Theory in investigating demotivation in language learning.

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