FACTORS INFLUENCING ENGLISH LEARNING MOTIVATION: A STUDY OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF NON-ENGLISH MAJORS AT A PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IN HANOI, VIETNAM

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the internal and external factors that motivate university students to learn English. The subjects were 30 non-English majors at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam, who had completed at least three semesters of university-level English. All of the students participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews revealed that extrinsic orientation, teachers, and peers substantially improved learning persistence among the students, while unattractive learning materials and a lack of authentic communicative activities contributed to learning demotivation. The study also provided insightful recommendations to enhance student motivation in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: English learning; Factors; Motivation; Non-English majors; Tertiary-level students.
1. INTRODUCTION

English teaching and learning in higher education in Vietnam appear to be encountering challenges meeting the rapidly increasing demand for a high-quality labor force with English proficiency owing to the global expansion of English in almost all fields such as science, trade, and commerce (Lam, 2019). According to Bui et al. (2019), approximately 97% of Vietnamese tertiary students are learning English as a second language (L2); nevertheless, more than 70% of undergraduates lack confidence in their English abilities in the work environment. They not only appear reluctant to attend English classes but also devote little time and effort to learning English at university.

Arguably, this result can be attributed to the low level of learning motivation among the students. According to Trinh and Mai (2019), low levels of motivation can result in insufficient student investment in learning. Lam (2019) found that students who lack motivation for L2 learning present low English proficiency. Consequently, it is urgent to investigate motivators for improving English learning by students at the university under study and in higher education in Vietnam in general.

Recent studies have explored factors affecting tertiary students’ motivation toward learning English in Vietnam (Dang et al., 2021; Tran & Nguyen, 2021). Dang et al. (2021) reported that teachers, parents, and the learning environment were contributors to learning motivation in an English department in Southern Vietnam, whereas Tran and Nguyen (2021) found that learning orientation drove the motivation of Vietnamese English majors. Therefore, there appears to be inconsistency among recent studies on Vietnamese tertiary students. Moreover, previous literature has mostly focused on English majors and ignored non-English majors, who account for the majority of EFL students in Vietnam (Nguyen & Habók, 2021). Therefore, more research is needed on the motivation of tertiary students who are not English majors as a resource to improve the quality of English teaching and learning in Vietnam.

To address this research gap, this study investigated internal and external factors that may positively or negatively affect the motivation to learn English of non-English majors at a university in Vietnam. The results of this study can contribute to an understanding of motivators in university classes for non-English majors. It is hoped that the results of this study will help teachers at the tertiary level consider potential motivational sources to enhance the effectiveness of their lessons.

The present study seeks answers to the following questions:

(1) What factors positively influence the English learning motivation of non-English majors at a public university in Hanoi?

(2) What factors negatively influence the English learning motivation of non-English majors in this setting?
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Definition of learning motivation

According to Gardner (1985), motivation subsumes desire, attitude, and effort to learn a language. Thus, a truly motivated individual is one who desires to learn a second language, enjoys learning it, and works hard to achieve a learning goal. However, this definition may not fully cover all aspects of motivation. For example, an individual’s decision to learn a language does not necessarily originate from their desire but could be aroused by external influences such as another person or event (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2021).

Dornyei and Ushioda (2021) proposed another definition that characterizes motivation as a combination of the choice of learning a language, the effort expended on it, and the persistence with it. In other words, the motivation to learn a second language is responsible for why an individual decides to learn a language, how hard they work in pursuing their goals, and how long they are willing to maintain the effort. This definition will be followed in this study owing to its relative comprehensiveness.

2.2. Importance of motivation in L2 learning

Motivation is considered one of the determinants of success in L2 learning (Woodrow, 2016). According to Dornyei and Ushioda (2021), there is a cyclical relationship between motivation and achievement in L2 learning; that is, a highly motivated individual can obtain high achievement, which then leads to their next high motivation state during the learning process, and vice versa. A study by Bailey and Phillips (2015), for instance, is aligned with this argument. Their findings show that the students who had stronger motivation gained better outcomes.

Moreover, motivation is closely related to student engagement in language classes. Reschly and Christenson (2012) view motivation as a prerequisite for student engagement in academic tasks and activities. When students are motivated, they tend to sustain their attendance and participation in lessons. An investigation by Philp and Duchesne (2016), for example, confirms this view. In their research, learners who were more motivated to learn expressed greater enthusiasm and willingness to join in the activities.

Overall, motivation appears to make a great contribution to L2 learning. Hence, understanding the factors affecting learning motivation in EFL classrooms should be taken into consideration.

2.3. Factors affecting L2 learning motivation

2.3.1. Learner-internal factors

Learner-internal factors are defined as the reasons an individual decides to learn a second language (Williams & Burden, 1997). They are mental factors that drive the effort and persistence required to sustain and achieve learning goals. Bailey and Phillips
(2015), for instance, revealed a positive correlation between intrinsically motivated learners and their efforts to accomplish tasks.

Regarding the categorization of internal factors, Gardner (1985) identified two reasons for increased learning motivation: integrative orientation and instrumental orientation. Integrative orientation reflects the learner’s desire to be identified as a valued member of the L2 community, whereas instrumental orientation concerns the desire to learn an L2 because of external benefits such as getting a better job or a higher salary. Despite its huge role in the L2 motivation field, this model has been criticized for its emphasis on the influence of individuals’ dispositions toward L2 communities and the values of an L2 rather than its practical relevance to learning settings (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2021).

From an educational perspective, Williams and Burden (1997) proposed a new concept consisting of intrinsic orientations, which refer to language learning because of learners’ inherent interests, and extrinsic orientations, which reflect language learning because of its perceived values, such as passing exams or receiving awards. Rather than representing a rejection of Gardner’s (1985) theory, this concept focuses on motivational sources related to the learning environment, stressing the role of mental beliefs and mechanisms in controlling the behaviors and actions of learners (Woodrow, 2016). The present study will consider these two concepts of learner-internal factors in EFL classrooms.

2.3.2. External factors

Because individuals’ actions are driven by environmental dimensions (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2021), learning motivation is not independent of classroom impacts. In the education-situated focus, the motivational framework of Williams and Burden (1997) demonstrates that influential individuals, such as teachers and peers, and the learning environment act as considerable contextual or external factors in L2 classrooms. Recent research on motivation has been consistent with this point (Al Khalidi, 2019; Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016; Urhahne, 2015). For example, in Urhahne’s (2015) study of 246 German EFL students, the participants perceived teachers’ behaviors as a mediator of their learning motivation and orientation. In other words, teachers can contribute to an individual’s appraisal of L2 learning in positive or negative ways. Additionally, in some cases, classmates are considered a motivational factor that increases learning effort (Al Khalidi, 2019; Dornyei & Ushioda, 2021), whereas others report peer influence as a demotivator that might sap learners’ confidence in EFL classrooms (Li, 2021). That is, peers could be a potential contributor to an individual’s learning motivation. Also, the motivation of L2 learners appears to be associated with the materials used in the class. Students can lose their attention in the lesson if materials are not designed creatively and if the content of the materials is inappropriate for their level (Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016).

2.4. Previous studies

There appears to be inconsistency among recent research studies regarding the analysis of learner-internal factors (Dang et al., 2021; Tran & Nguyen, 2021). A study by
Dang et al. (2021) that used a questionnaire to survey 84 English majors in Southern Vietnam indicated that most students were motivated to learn English because of their inherent interest and pride in being good at the language. This result is contrary to quantitative research by Tran and Nguyen (2021), in which the participants, 180 freshmen at a university in Western Vietnam, were extrinsically motivated to learn English for future work and to pass exams.

Researchers have come to different conclusions when investigating external factors (Al Khalidi, 2019; Dang et al., 2021; Ekiz & Kulmetov, 2016). Dang et al. (2021) found that teacher behavior has the most significant impact, followed by the learning environment and parental support. Similarly, Al Khalidi (2019) found that teacher behavior, learning materials, and group activities were the most positive influences on learning motivation, whereas parental factors had little effect. A quantitative study by Ekiz and Kulmetov (2016) in an English language department in Turkey also found teachers to have a positive effect on student motivation. However, classroom factors such as classmates, activities, and learning materials were reported to have the least impact.

Significantly, despite exploring a wide range of internal and external motivators in EFL classrooms, the above studies did not address English learning demotivators. In addition, the previous research mostly used questionnaires to investigate motivational factors, which apparently did not provide insights into learners’ perspectives and experiences with such influences.

Furthermore, most studies have focused on English majors and ignored non-English majors. There have been few investigations into motivational factors conducted in Hanoi, Vietnam (Nguyen & Habók, 2021), especially at the university under study. Therefore, qualitative research into the factors affecting the learning motivation of non-English majors in Hanoi should be conducted.

3. DATA AND METHODS

3.1. Methods

This study was designed as qualitative research, which refers to an approach involving non-experimental research procedures to obtain in-depth views of individuals on a social problem (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This approach engaged the researcher in exploring and understanding the participants’ perspectives on the topic in an unscripted classroom setting without an attempt to control the situation being studied. Dornyei (2007) proposed a qualitative approach as an ideal method for gaining insights into why and how situational factors influence language acquisition. This is supported by Mackey and Gass (2012), who claim that this approach allows educational researchers to analyze the natural contexts in which language events occur to understand the contextual impacts on the language. Therefore, a qualitative research design was chosen for this study, which aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the thoughts and experiences of tertiary students on the classroom factors that affect their English-learning motivation.
3.2. Research context and participants

3.2.1. Research context

This study was conducted at a public university in Hanoi, Vietnam. English is taught as a compulsory subject and is the medium of instruction for various courses, such as business finance and economics. Four general English modules, which are equivalent to 12 credits, are compulsory for non-English majors. In EFL classrooms, general English lessons are delivered weekly by experienced Vietnamese teachers using in-house materials and technological aids.

3.2.2. Participants

The participants were 30 undergraduate non-English majors from 20 or 21 years of age in an EFL class at a university in Hanoi, whose language proficiency was at the CEFR B1 level. They were third-year students who had completed nine credits of three compulsory general English modules and were attending the last three-credit module. Vietnamese is their mother tongue, and English is their foreign language.

3.3. Data collection instrument

Semi-structured interviews, which involve the flexible use of a pre-prepared interview guide (Creswell & Creswell, 2018), were used to collect qualitative data. Dornyei (2007) proposed using interviews as a valuable means for researchers to gain insight into the underlying thinking of individuals about educational issues. The interviews probed the students’ perspectives and experiences that could explain their responses to motivational factors in the EFL classroom. A semi-structured interview was chosen because it allowed the researcher-as-interviewer to encourage interviewees to elaborate on certain interesting responses and provide more information.

The construction of the interview protocol was based on three motivational factors in Williams and Burden’s (1997) framework. The questions in the interview protocol generally explored students’ orientations for learning English, the in-class factors that influenced their motivation to learn English, and how such sources affected their motivation.

3.4. Data collection procedure

First, a pilot test using a non-English major from another class was conducted to identify interview questions that may cause confusion. Before the interview, the participants were informed of the research purpose, the procedures to maintain the confidentiality of their identities, and their rights. Those who agreed to participate in the study were required to sign a consent form before the interview was carried out.

Interviews were conducted individually, face-to-face, and entirely in Vietnamese so that the participants could fully understand the questions and elaborate on their answers. All 30 interviews were audio-recorded. The recorded interviews were then transcribed for later analysis.
3.5. **Data analysis method**

Thematic analysis, a method for identifying, analyzing, and generating themes in qualitative data (Terry et al., 2017), was used to analyze the interview data. According to Terry et al. (2017), thematic analysis offers flexibility in analyzing patterns of meaning to find complex latent themes in the data. Thus, this method was chosen for this study because it helped the researcher seek comprehensive answers to the research questions on what factors affect learning motivation in EFL classrooms.

The data coding process combined both a theory-driven or deductive approach, in which the data coding and analysis are driven by theory, and a data-driven or inductive approach, in which codes and themes are derived from the data themselves (Terry et al., 2017). The aim of this combination was to enable the researcher to capture both manifest themes formed by the theory and underlying themes from the participants’ responses. Specifically, deductive analysis was used to identify themes based on Williams and Burden’s (1997) framework, while inductive analysis was used to interpret new themes in the data.

4. **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Five main themes emerged from the analysis, of which learning orientations, teachers, and classmates were considered strong motivators, while learning materials and activities were reported as potential demotivators in the class. Details follow.

4.1. **Motivating factors**

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Motivating factor</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Learning orientations</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Classmates</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>0</td>
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</table>

Table 1 indicates the number of participants who reported learning orientations, teachers, and classmates as the main motivating factors. It is noteworthy that all 30 students considered their learning orientation as a remarkable motivator; however, no student had positive comments about learning motivation from activities in the class. To be specific, a common view among the participants was that they chose English because of its value in contributing to their job prospects and personal development; that is, their motivation was extrinsically oriented. The students all expressed a strong need to learn English for their future job requirements. In a multinational working environment, most are required to accomplish various tasks in English and to use English as a means of
communication with colleagues who may not share the same mother tongue. Some of the participants said the following:

In my internship place, knowing English is mandatory because my boss and my project teammates are foreigners. We don’t know each other’s first languages, so we mainly use English to communicate and discuss matters at work. (Student 1, personal conversation)

Most of my clients are foreign businessmen from Malaysia, Philippines, or South Korea, so I have to be proficient in English to work with them ... I also need a good ability to read and understand professional documents in English. (Student 4, personal conversation)

Besides job fulfillment, a majority of the participants stated that English-proficient graduates would be offered wider opportunities for promising, well-paid jobs. For these students, their professional prospects could be boosted, provided they learned English well. They made the following statements:

If you major in engineering, you may only apply for an engineering position. But if you major in engineering and have remarkable English ability, you are welcome to apply for a number of promising and competitive, handsomely paid positions. (Student 2, personal conversation)

Multinational corporations and large-scale companies often pay higher salaries than the average elsewhere. I mean a higher salary, given the current standard of living in Vietnam. But the prerequisite is that you must be good at English. Proficiency in English opens the door to advancement and, of course, the salary will also increase. (Student 3, personal conversation)

In addition to career-related reasons, some students explained that they took English classes to pursue personal development. From their perspectives, English was viewed as “a tool to open the window to obtain knowledge of the world” (Student 5, personal conversation), contributing to their continued competitiveness and advancement in the field. The interviewees asserted that English proficiency would provide them with access to extensive sources of knowledge, such as scientific journals, research articles, and high-quality educational programs.

Overall, as described above, the participants decided to learn English at university owing to their extrinsic orientations toward career and personal growth. No participant explained that they decided to learn English for the purpose of satisfying their interest in languages, as Dang et al. (2021) concluded. The results of this study, on the other hand, match findings by Tran and Nguyen (2021) that undergraduates tend to learn English for the sake of developing their own knowledge and skills. Career-driven decisions have also been found in a number of studies, such as those by Nguyen and Habók (2021) and Tran and Nguyen (2021). These studies report that Vietnamese non-English majors have been more instrumentally than integratively motivated to learn English.
When the participants were asked how learning orientations affected their motivation, they stated that the perceived value of the English language sustained their long-term motivation to learn the language. Hence, they tend to spend more time, energy, and effort in class to improve their English ability. For example, Student 8 said: “Sometimes I just want to give up … But I have tried my best every day to overcome those difficulties over the years because I have to use it [English] at work” (Student 8, personal conversation).

These findings corroborate those of Nguyen and Habók (2021) and Al Khalidi (2019), who found that instrumental orientations have a greater impact on the persistence of non-English majors in tertiary EFL classrooms. They also mirror the view of Dornyei and Ushioda (2021) that enjoyment and interest in a language may not foster sustained learning, and the perceived value of learning an L2 can be significantly helpful in this regard. It is possible, therefore, that extrinsic learning orientations, such as job satisfaction or personal development, strongly motivate individuals to expend more effort and continue their study beyond the present course.

Furthermore, as seen in Table 1, 100% of the respondents viewed the teacher’s role as one of the most significant extrinsic motivational factors in the class. They focused on the teacher’s attitudes and behaviors in relation to their level of motivation. The participants highly appreciated the teacher’s encouragement, enthusiasm, and willingness to listen to students’ ideas, which enhanced their eagerness and excitement in taking the English class. For example, one participant commented: “I look forward to her class. It’s always enjoyable and interactive because she encourages us to express our opinions” (Student 30, personal conversation).

In other words, a strong relationship exists between student motivation and the positive attitudes and behaviors of teachers that create a relaxed, friendly classroom climate. This is supported by Ekiz and Kulmetov (2016), who found that the motivation of language learners was higher when they were situated in a pleasant learning environment. In accordance with the present result, Dornyei and Ushioda (2021) also state that learner involvement can be highest in a classroom in which students feel that they are protected from embarrassment and discourtesy.

In addition, the qualitative data revealed positive effects of the teacher’s teaching strategies on student motivation. Below are some illustrative excerpts from the interview:

She often asks us to guess word meanings and learn vocabulary through pictures … I think her strategies are quite good. I appreciate these strategies because they motivate us to think more in class. (Student 10, personal conversation)

My teacher’s strategies … motivate me to keep studying new things during my learning process. She helps me be less passive in acquiring knowledge and also to be in self-control of the knowledge I’ve learned in the class … I’m encouraged to be a more active learner in her class. (Student 11, personal conversation)
She allows us to discuss and find out the language rules by ourselves … It’s a great feeling to discover something by ourselves. I feel I can be the master of my own knowledge, and I really love that. Her teaching strategies motivate me a lot to learn English in class. (Student 12, personal conversation)

In the class, when we learn new points, we’re often given some examples, like sentences or situations, to think about and explore the rule through pair or group discussion … That way of learning is quite effective for me because I have the opportunity to self-discover knowledge and can memorize it better. (Student 13, personal conversation)

In these excerpts, the interviewees showed their positive attitudes toward the teacher’s current strategy, which focused on self-discovery learning. They expressed a passionate interest in this teaching method, which allowed them to participate in the lesson and explore the language by themselves. This is in accordance with Al Khalidi (2019), who found that language learners appreciate being encouraged to participate in the learning process. This result is also consistent with a study by Tampubolon (2017), which examines the perceptions of 81 Indonesian students on the use of a discovery learning strategy in an English class. The data revealed the students’ considerable interest in and preference for inductive learning.

Moreover, from the participants’ perspectives, the current teaching strategies contributed to their desire to learn English and reinforced their knowledge. They stated that the discovery learning strategies used in the class allowed them to actively participate in and control their learning process, and that their acquisition of language knowledge was significantly improved. As one interviewee put it: “I can memorize the knowledge better by this way of learning” (Student 24, personal conversation). Another commented: “My teacher’s strategies … motivate me to keep studying new things during my learning process” (Student 11, personal conversation).

Comparison of these findings with earlier investigations, which showed that greater participation by learners in the lessons could strengthen their continuing motivation (Al Khalidi, 2019; Dang et al., 2021), confirms the influence of the discovery learning strategy on fostering learners’ persistence to learn English in EFL classrooms. In line with the present findings, Tomlinson (2023) also claims that promoting discovery activities can enhance learning motivation because it encourages learners to invest interest, effort, and attention in the learning activity. Therefore, the self-discovery learning strategy may be a noteworthy factor in reducing discouragement and enhancing the performance of the students at the university under study.

In addition to the motivating factors of learning orientations and teachers, Table 1 shows that 100% of the participants agreed that the peer effect was a significant motivator in the class. For the majority of participants, peer pressure energized them to invest more time and effort to improve their English ability and maintain their competitiveness. Commenting on positive peer pressure, one individual said: “My friends are so talented. I’ve told myself to never stop trying to achieve better results” (Student 28, personal
Moreover, some participants reported benefiting from the assistance and encouragement given by their classmates. The students emphasized the great moral support from their classmates as an important factor that increased their feeling of relatedness. “Their encouragement makes me feel less self-conscious and stressed when I am struggling with my learning results” (Student 23, personal conversation). Some participants also mentioned useful advice offered by their friends to help them overcome obstacles and avoid frustration during the L2 learning process. They made the following statements:

I didn’t like learning English when I was at school. I was afraid to speak English. But since I have a companion, I have been more motivated to go to English class. (Student 16, personal conversation)

My classmates are better at English than me, so they often help me review the lessons and practice English skills, especially speaking skills. I think having friends to learn with makes me feel that learning English is less boring. (Student 17, personal conversation)

My friends are always willing to help me improve my English. For example, my English pronunciation is not good. I often ask my friends for some advice to improve it, and they never refuse to share useful tips. (Student 18, personal conversation)

It can be concluded from the students’ responses above that they showed a perspective quite different from Li (2021), who argued that peer pressure can hazard learners’ confidence and demotivate them from learning English. In contrast, the current data indicate that peer influences can be a positive and constructive factor. Notably, while Li (2021) does not appear to have probed peer interaction, this study explored whether encouragement and assistance from classmates improved student motivation and performance in class. As Dornyei and Ushioda (2021) argue, whether peer influences are positive or negative depends on student-to-student interaction. It is therefore likely that peer pressure can become a positive influence through appropriate guidance of student interactions in the classroom.

It is also noted that learning materials were found to be a prominent motivator in this study. Table 1 demonstrates that a third of the respondents considered classroom materials a motivating factor. Specifically, the students showed a positive attitude toward the additional materials that the teacher used along with the core textbook. Visual and audio-visual aids, such as videos and PowerPoint presentations, were reported as remarkable resources that engaged students in the lessons. For instance, Student 20 shared that the supplementary illustrations “help the lessons become more attractive and enjoyable … and enhance our concentration on the lesson” (Student 20, personal conversation).
4.2. **Demotivating factors**

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<th>No.</th>
<th>Demotivating factor</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Materials</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>67</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Classmates</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Learning orientations</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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N = 30

The numbers of participants who reported various demotivating factors are presented in Table 2. Notably, no participant identified teachers, classmates, or learning orientations as a possible negative influence on their learning motivation. However, 100% of the students stated that classroom activities demotivated them from learning English. In all cases, the students reported that a lack of authentic communication tasks was a reason for their demotivation to learn and discouragement in class. Their comments are shown more clearly below:

Most of the practice activities in class involve doing exercises in the textbook, but the exercises in the textbook are mostly gap-filling or multiple-choice. They are just repetitive and boring. And I don’t see the practicality of this practice in real-life communication. I think it would be better if we could have more communicative practice in class. (Student 23, personal conversation)

I need more listening and speaking practice because I have to communicate in English with my colleagues at work quite a lot. But in class, we just do write-in exercises in the textbook and workbook. I think they are not useful for me. (Student 24, personal conversation)

The excerpts above indicate the students’ unfavorable attitudes toward the lack of authentic tasks in class. This accords with the view of Trinh and Mai (2019) that low exposure to authentic tasks probably hinders learners’ enjoyment and language acquisition because they do not understand and experience how the target language is used in real-world situations. It is also well documented that learners’ high participation and motivation in English learning could be reduced by the lack of communicative activities (Tomlinson, 2023). Thus, the lack of authentic interaction and communication tasks can be a considerable learning demotivator, which should be taken into consideration in EFL classrooms.

Furthermore, concerns regarding the current learning materials as a potential demotivator were widespread. Two-thirds of the participants made negative comments on the textbooks used in the class. The complaints concerned the small font size of the text and the number of exercises crammed onto the same page, which increased learners’
tenseness when using the learning materials. As one interviewee put it: “There are at least 8 to 10 exercises on a page, and the texts are too small. I’m tired looking at them” (Student 21, personal conversation). Other responses included: “I don’t like the current textbook. It’s printed in landscape format … the text is small, so it’s difficult to read. There are so many exercises that I get bored” (Student 22, personal conversation). The data support Tomlinson’s (2023) argument that written materials that lack white space may cause discomfort and unease. Consequently, unattractive presentation in learning materials can contribute to learners’ demotivation.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated factors affecting English learning by students at a public university in Hanoi. From the students’ perspectives, extrinsic orientations, teachers, and classmates are considered strong motivators, whereas unattractive learning materials and activities that lack authentic communication practice are potential demotivators in the EFL classroom. The study results may thus have certain important implications for both teachers and learners in the EFL classroom at the tertiary level. Regarding learning orientations, students need to set clear goals that foster learning persistence and a high level of motivation before enrolling in a language course. It is recommended that language teachers not only employ suitable teaching strategies but also maintain positive attitudes and behaviors to create a motivating learning environment. Additionally, authentic materials and communicative activities should be employed in class as a way to increase language learners’ engagement and motivation.

Despite the promising results, there are some limitations to this study. First, the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the results. Due to the small number of participants and settings, the study results cannot be generalized to individuals or contexts outside of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Additional research on other groups of students is therefore required to better understand learning motivation. Second, only one data collection instrument was used in this study. Further studies using various data collection instruments, such as questionnaires or observations, should be undertaken to collect more comprehensive and informative data.

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