

A Retrodictive Study of English Majors' Language Motivational Dynamics: A Triangulation Approach

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Abstract: This study investigates the motivational dynamics of English majors by integrating retrospective plotting, interviews, and narrative inquiry. Through triangulation, the research identifies key patterns and underlying causes of motivational shifts among three learners, proposing targeted strategies for re-motivation. Findings reveal that English majors' motivational trajectories exhibit marked dynamic complexity and individual variation, shaped by a multifaceted system of interacting factors, including teacher influence, academic performance, assessment pressures, emotional states, and career prospects. The study highlights the importance of understanding these dynamics to support learners effectively. Practical implications suggest that educators can foster re-motivation by guiding students toward constructive attribution patterns, regulating academic emotions, enhancing self-regulatory skills, and clarifying future aspirations.

Kata kunci:

Teori Sistem Dinamis,
motivasi bahasa kedua,
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Abstrak: Penelitian ini menyelidiki dinamika motivasi mahasiswa jurusan bahasa Inggris dengan mengintegrasikan retrospective plotting, wawancara, dan narrative inquiry. Melalui triangulasi, penelitian mengidentifikasi pola kunci dan penyebab mendasar dari perubahan motivasi pada tiga pembelajar, serta mengusulkan strategi spesifik untuk re-motivation. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa trajektori motivasi mahasiswa bahasa Inggris memiliki kompleksitas dinamis dan variasi individual yang signifikan, dibentuk oleh sistem multifaset dari faktor-faktor yang saling berinteraksi, termasuk pengaruh guru, kinerja akademik, tekanan penilaian, keadaan emosional, dan prospek karier. Studi ini menekankan pentingnya memahami dinamika tersebut untuk mendukung pembelajar secara efektif. Implikasi praktisnya menyarankan bahwa pendidik dapat mendorong re-motivation dengan membimbing siswa menuju pola atribusi yang konstruktif, mengatur emosi akademik, meningkatkan keterampilan regulasi diri, dan memperjelas aspirasi masa depan.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a pivotal individual difference variable in second language acquisition (SLA), L2 motivation profoundly shapes learners' ultimate proficiency and achievement (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Ellis, 2012). Beginning with Gardner and Lambert's (1959) seminal socio-psychological model, L2 motivation research has evolved considerably and generated robust theoretical and empirical insights (Chang, 2019). Research on second language (L2) motivation has generated substantial theoretical and empirical insights. The field has witnessed continuous conceptual developments, with Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self-System (L2MSS) emerging as particularly influential (Safdari, 2021; Chang, 2019). Other significant frameworks include the Directed Motivational Current (DMC) (Basoz & Gümüş, 2022; Chang, 2019) and Dynamic Systems Theory (DST).

Crucially, motivation is not static but evolves iteratively as learners acquire linguistic knowledge and navigate personal developmental trajectories (Xu & Wang 2020). Recent scholarship increasingly conceptualizes L2 motivation as a complex dynamic system (CDST), marked by nonlinearity, adaptability, and emergent properties (Papi & Hiver, 2020). This paradigm shift has spurred researchers to adopt CDST frameworks, examining motivation as a fluid, context-dependent phenomenon (Boo et al., 2015).

Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST) has become a fundamental theoretical framework in language acquisition research, offering a comprehensive perspective on the nonlinear, adaptive, and emergent nature of language development (Hulstijn, 2020). Although CDST originated in physics and biology, it has been effectively adapted to cognitive science and developmental psychology (Samuelson & Galligan, 2014), before being widely applied in applied linguistics through Larsen-Freeman's (1997) influential work. In second language acquisition (SLA) research, CDST provides a valuable lens for analyzing the complex relationship between cognitive processes and environmental influences (Stelma & Kostoulas, 2024). Recent literature reviews have highlighted CDST's growing influence in SLA research, especially in studies examining how language learning evolves over time (Li & Zheng, 2024). DST has gained recognition as a robust framework for investigating the complexity of L2 acquisition (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Lowie, 2017).

From a DST perspective, scholars have examined the fluctuations and determinants of L2 motivation (Dai & Yu, 2022; Bielak & Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2023), the evolution of L2MSS components under various influences (Zhan, 2018; Serafini, 2017) and the interaction between cognitive and motivational subsystems (Zhao & Yang, 2012). However, in the Chinese context, empirical applications remain underdeveloped, with studies often limited in methodological rigor and theoretical depth (Chang, 2018). There is a pressing need for more systematic research that adapts DST principles to local language learning environments. Thus, this study applies CDST to investigate motivational changes among intermediate-level English majors. The findings aim to contribute both theoretically and practically by deepening our understanding of motivation as a dynamic system and by suggesting ways to support sustained motivation in language classrooms. Within this paradigm, intermediate-proficiency English majors emerge as a critical cohort: their motivational patterns not only reflect the variability and

context-dependency central to CDST (Chang & Zhang, 2021) but also offer broader generalizability due to their prevalence in educational settings.

Demotivation, defined as the erosion of initial L2 learning motivation (Dörnyei, 1998), has also received growing scholarly attention. Two decades of research have identified key demotivational factors (Kim et al., 2019; Albalawi & Al-Hoorie, 2021). However, most studies adopt static, cross-sectional designs that capture motivation at single time points, failing to reveal its dynamic nature. In contrast, re-motivation, namely the process of rebuilding motivation, remains underexplored despite its pedagogical significance (Xie, 2015). While some international studies have examined re-motivation qualitatively (Wang & William, 2021; Song & Kim, 2017), domestic research has primarily focused on quantitative analyses of demotivation with limited attention to re-motivation strategies (Yin et al., 2019). This progression from motivation to demotivation and re-motivation underscores the need for a “Motivation Reconstruction” paradigm (Xie, 2015).

Methodologically, quantitative or quantitatively-dominated mixed methods prevail in L2 motivation research (Li, 2017; Choi et al., 2023). While providing broad statistical trends, such approaches often overlook individual differences and temporal dynamics (Chang, 2018). Qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and case studies, can address these limitations by uncovering the psychological, social, and cultural mechanisms underlying motivational changes. Notably, the field has shifted from static to diachronic investigations (Fu, 2022), with Dörnyei’s (2014) retrodictive qualitative modeling offering a promising tool for analyzing motivation dynamics.

Current retrodictive studies in China remain scarce, primarily focusing on high-achieving learners (Dai, 2023) and (2) demotivation in Chinese language learners (Zhang & Ding, 2018). Few studies track motivation changes among average English majors, and methodological triangulation, particularly incorporating narrative inquiry, is notably absent (Dai, 2023). By employing a triangulated approach, this study bridges these dimensions, delivering actionable insights for language educators and researchers alike. The present study aims to trace and systematically analyze the motivational dynamics in English majors’ second language learning, answering the following three questions:

(1) What is the motivational trajectory of English major students throughout their English learning?

(2) What are the primary factors influencing motivational dynamics, particularly the decline and rebuilding of motivation, among English major students?

(3) What effective strategies are available for the re-motivation among English major students?

2. METHOD

2.1 Participants

The study focused on three English major students from Tier-2 Chinese universities. Selected as fresh graduates, they offered valuable insights into how their academic motivation evolved over the course of their undergraduate education. All three students had chosen English as their first-choice major in China’s National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), reflecting their initial strong motivation for English language

studies. They each demonstrated intermediate English proficiency, having successfully passed the Test for English Majors-Band 4 (TEM-4), which serves as a standardized assessment for English majors in China. Following graduation, none of the participants elected to pursue further studies in English-related fields, a decision point that provided valuable insights into the evolution of their motivation during their undergraduate years. This profile represents typical English majors in China's non-elite universities, allowing examination of complete undergraduate motivational trajectories while ensuring participant confidentiality through pseudonyms.

Table 1. Basic Information of the Participants

Participant	Undergraduate Institution	Undergraduate Major	CET-4
A	Tier-2 universities	English	Passed
B	Tier-2 universities	English	Passed
C	Tier-2 universities	English	Passed

2.2 Research Methods

This study adopts a tripartite methodological approach comprising retrospective plotting, interviews, and narrative inquiries to comprehensively examine L2 motivation dynamics.

(1) Retrospective plotting: Utilizing Dörnyei's (2014) Retrodictive Qualitative Modeling framework, participants graphically represented their L2 motivation fluctuations on a 6-point scale (1=lowest, 6=highest) spanning from elementary third grade through university fourth year. This visualization technique captured longitudinal motivation patterns while establishing a temporal baseline for subsequent analysis.

(2) Interview: Semi-structured interviews explored the causal factors behind motivation changes identified in the plots. Interview protocols were individualized based on each participant's graph, specifically probing: (a) significant motivation declines, (b) sustained high-motivation periods, and (c) critical transition points. Interview transcripts were systematically coded and cross-verified with the graphical data.

(3) Narrative inquiries: Participants provided written accounts (100-300 words) addressing two key aspects: (a) pivotal influences on their motivation changes, and (b) subsequent impacts on their L2 learning behaviors. These narratives offered first-person perspectives complementing the quantitative and interview data.

3. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

3.1.1 The Motivational Trajectory of English Major Students

Figure 1 presents the composite retrodictive trajectory of L2 motivational changes among the participants of the study.



Figure 1. Motivational Trajectory of the Participants

The retrodictive analysis of L2 motivational changes, as illustrated in Figure 1, reveals distinct trends among English major students. While individual trajectories vary, the following key patterns emerge:

(1) Primary School Phase: Motivational levels exhibit significant divergence. Subject C demonstrates a notable decline from Grades 3 to 5, whereas the other two subjects maintain or increase their motivation. A marked upward trend is observed across all participants from Grades 5 to 6.

(2) Middle School Phase: Divergence in motivation persists, though overall levels remain consistently high.

(3) High School Phase: L2 motivation stabilizes at uniformly high levels, with a slight upward trajectory.

(4) College Phase: Motivation declines significantly in the first two years but recovers during the third and fourth years, ultimately returning to high levels.

3.1.2 Causes of the Motivational Changes

The motivational trajectories of the three English majors demonstrate dynamic complexity and significant individual variation. By identifying key fluctuations in their L2 motivation and integrating interview and narrative data, we analyze the underlying causes of these changes.

Table 2. Causes of Motivational Changes for Participant A

Time	Motivational Change	Cause
Grade 4	Rising	High academic performance
Grade 5	Rising	High academic performance
Grade 6	Rising	Winning English competition
Grade 8	Falling	Difficulty adapting to teaching style
Grade 10	Rising	Serving as class representative
Grade 12	Rising	Supportive teacher influence

First-year	Falling	Psychological discrepancy between expectations and reality
Second-year	Falling	Test-preparation burnout
Third-year	Rising	Career preparation motivation

As presented in Table 2, Participant A's motivation was initially driven by academic success and recognition, including positive reinforcement and competition rewards. However, it dropped during Grade 8 due to difficulties adapting to a new teaching style. The turning point came when Participant A assumed a leadership role and received strong support from a trusted teacher. In college, motivation declined again due to unrealized expectations and test fatigue, before recovering through career goal-setting.

Table 3. Causes of Motivational Changes for Participant B

Time	Motivational Change	Cause
Grade 6	Rising	Fear of falling behind
Grade 7	Falling	Teacher strictness
Grade 9	Rising	Exam preparation
Grade 10	Falling	Academic fatigue and burnout
Grade 11	Rising	High academic performance
Grade 12	Rising	Exam preparation
First-year	Falling	Psychological discrepancy between expectations and reality combined with academic exhaustion
Fourth-year	Rising	Career preparation motivation

According to Table 3, Participant B exhibited exam-driven motivation, rising during high-stakes periods and falling during times of academic fatigue. While exam preparation provided short-term motivation, Participant B was also discouraged by teacher strictness and emotional burnout. In college, early disillusionment led to reduced effort, yet motivation rebounded in the final year as career concerns became prominent.

Table 4. Causes of Motivational Changes for Participant C

Time	Motivational Change	Cause
Grade 4	Falling	High difficulty and poor grades
Grade 5	Falling	High difficulty and poor grades
Grade 6	Rising	Supportive teacher influence
Grade 7	Rising	Supportive teacher influence
Grade 8	Rising	Supportive teacher influence
Grade 10	Falling	Competitive pressure
Grade 12	Rising	Exam preparation

First-year	Falling	Post-admission relaxation
Second-year	Falling	Test-preparation burnout
Third-year	Rising	Exam preparation
Fourth-year	Rising	Career preparation motivation

As illustrated in Table 4, Participant C initially struggled due to low academic performance and perceived difficulty, leading to early demotivation. However, supportive teachers became a key turning point in motivation recovery throughout middle school. Later, competitive pressure in high school and relaxation after university admission triggered fluctuations. Motivation strengthened again in the final two years due to exam preparation and job market readiness.

By synthesizing the three participants' motivational patterns, the following key influencing factors were identified:

(1) Teacher Influence: All three participants experienced motivation fluctuations primarily during primary and junior high school due to teacher-related factors. While Participants A and B showed decreased motivation due to "difficulty adapting to the new teacher's style" and "excessive teacher strictness," Participant A's motivation improved after "gaining teacher trust and becoming class representative." Similarly, Participant C maintained increased motivation from sixth grade through junior high after "encountering an inspiring English tutor."

(2) Academic Performance: English achievement significantly affected motivation levels. Strong performance enhanced motivation through positive reinforcement, as seen with Participant A who received "consistent teacher praise" and "competition opportunities." Conversely, Participant C's motivation declined due to "consistently poor grades nearing failure level."

(3) Academic Emotions: Emotional states substantially impacted motivation, particularly during early college years. All participants reported decreased motivation due to post-achievement relaxation or study aversion. Participant A lost motivation after discovering their "English scores were merely average compared to peers," while Participant B expressed complacent attitudes like "no need to work hard after exams." Participant C similarly described reduced effort after "escaping the pressures of high school."

(4) Examination Impact: While exam preparation temporarily boosted motivation (Participant B's middle school and college entrance exams; Participant C's TEM-8 preparation), excessive test-focused learning could decrease interest. Participant A's motivation declined during TEM-4 preparation as "exam-oriented learning diminished genuine interest."

(5) Career Considerations: All participants exhibited significant motivation recovery in their final university years when facing employment prospects. Participant A regained interest after "setting clear goals to become an English teacher," while Participant C resumed regular English study due to "major requirements and career preparation needs."

3.2 Discussions

3.2.1 The Motivational Trajectory of English Majors

As presented in Section 3.1, the motivation level trajectories of Participants A, B, and C (Figure 1) reveal both dynamic complexity and notable individual variability among English majors. Key patterns emerge across educational stages:

During primary education, motivation levels demonstrate significant divergence. The middle school phase shows varied motivational trends while maintaining generally high levels. In high school, motivation displays an overall upward trajectory, though the timing and degree of increase differ among individuals. The university years present a distinct pattern: motivation typically declines in the first two years before rebounding significantly in the third year.

Notably, initial motivation levels do not correlate linearly with long-term motivational strength. Students' learning motivation undergoes varying degrees of fluctuation over time, as evidenced by Participants A and B who, despite beginning with similar motivation levels, developed divergent trajectories and reached different final states. This finding aligns with Larsen-Freeman's (2015) "law of unintended consequences," demonstrating the unpredictability of long-term motivation outcomes based solely on initial conditions."

3.2.2 Influencing Factors of the Motivational Changes

Demotivation in foreign language learning stems from various external and internal factors, with teachers playing a crucial role (Sun & Lei, 2013). Teachers' characteristics and pedagogical methods significantly influence student motivation. Strict teachers may evoke fear and disengagement, as Participant B noted: "My junior high English teacher was particularly strict, making me dread her classes for fear of being scolded." Conversely, charismatic teachers, who are approachable, humorous, and gentle, inspire greater motivation. Participants A and C highlighted how inspiring teachers boosted their motivation, with Participant A stating: "The teachers who most positively impacted my English motivation were those with amiable personalities and relatable teaching styles, fostering my strong interest and commitment."

Poor academic performance often reduces motivation, especially when learners perceive content as overly challenging (Table 4). Persistent struggles may lead to learned helplessness, where repeated failures foster self-doubt (Grimes, 1981). Participant A described this: "Comparing my English skills to more fluent classmates made me feel inherently incapable." Conversely, academic success enhances motivation by satisfying competence needs and boosting confidence (Dai, 2023). Participants A and B demonstrated how achievements, including grades, competition success, or other validations, reinforced their motivation (Dai & Yu, 2022).

Examinations also influence motivation through achievement dynamics (Atkinson, 1964). Test anxiety can demotivate avoidance-oriented learners, as Participant C explained: "Constant fear of failure created English aversion." Yet exams also clarify goals and focus effort. Participant B noted: "Major exams prompted active English study despite disengagement." In China's educational context, exams combine achievement and instrumental motivation, serving as gatekeepers to future opportunities (Li & Yu, 2022). Their motivational impact depends on individual orientations and perceptions of success.

Academic emotions significantly regulate learning motivation (Liu, 2016). Negative emotions, such as disengagement, relaxation, and fatigue, lead to resistance and diminished intrinsic motivation, reducing learning efficiency (Al-Tameemi et al., 2023). Conversely, positive emotions enhance interest and initiative, improving focus and performance (Linnenbrink-Garcia & Pekrun, 2011). Pride, in particular, strongly motivates foreign language learners by reinforcing self-confidence (Xiong, 2017). Participant A's experience illustrates this: "Mastering elementary English and receiving praise filled me with pride, transforming English into an enjoyable subject." Effective emotional management is thus vital for sustaining motivation (Arguedas et al., 2016).

Employment impacts L2 motivation through instrumental motivation and future self-guides. Recognizing a language's practical value drives learners to regulate their efforts (Dai, 2023). Participant C noted: "Facing English interviews revealed my poor speaking skills, prompting immediate improvement." Similarly, Participant B pursued business English after recognizing limited job prospects with only an English degree. Future self-guides, namely the vivid mental imagery of L2 success, provide powerful, sustained motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Participant A's clarity about teaching aspirations reignited motivation: "Exposure to education courses solidified my goals, driving my English study." Well-defined future selves predict long-term commitment (You et al., 2016).

3.2.3 Effective Strategies for Re-motivation

Teachers play a crucial role in motivation restoration by serving as facilitators rather than demotivating factors (Song & Kim, 2017). Their self-development, encompassing professional growth, updated teaching philosophies, and responsive methods, enables them to design engaging, student-centered activities (Sadeghi & Richards, 2021). Actively soliciting and incorporating student feedback further enhances teaching effectiveness and fosters positive teacher-student dynamics (Hofkens et al., 2023). Additionally, addressing individual differences through differentiated instruction ensures diverse learning needs are met (van Geel et al., 2023).

Attribution training helps learners reframe setbacks by emphasizing external, adjustable factors (e.g., environment, resources) rather than fixed deficiencies (Su, 2015). This approach preserves confidence and sustains engagement, particularly in language learning where attribution patterns influence achievement (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). Teachers should guide students to recognize situational challenges (e.g., workload, stress) to mitigate self-blame and reignite motivation (Grimes, 1981). Also, academic emotions significantly shape learning behaviors and outcomes (Liu, 2016). Regulating negative emotions (e.g., anxiety) while cultivating positive ones (e.g., interest) is essential for motivation recovery (Rentzios et al., 2025). Learners should self-adjust their emotional states, while teachers provide targeted support to stabilize mindsets (Fu & Zhou, 2021).

Self-regulation, which is the ability to manage cognition, emotions, and behavior, is key to overcoming challenges (Zimmerman, 2008). Strong self-regulators employ adaptive strategies, whereas weaker ones may resort to avoidance (Lei et al., 2002). Collaborative efforts among teachers, parents, and schools are vital to nurture this skill through structured guidance, emotional support, and resource-rich environments (Greenquist-Marlett et al., 2025). Besides, future visions of L2 success (e.g., career applications) sustain motivation by linking learning to long-term goals (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Vivid, detailed self-images enhance persistence and perceived language utility (Duan, 2016). Educators and parents should help students articulate these visions early to foster commitment and academic achievement.

4. CONCLUSION

This study employed dynamic systems theory to examine the evolving motivation of three English majors through a triangulated approach combining retrodictive motivation plotting, interviews, and narrative analysis. Tracing participants' motivational trajectories from elementary school through university revealed that English majors' motivation exhibits dynamic complexity and individual variation, shaped primarily by

teacher influence, academic performance, examinations, emotions, and career aspirations. These findings informed five targeted strategies for motivation enhancement: optimizing teacher roles, cultivating appropriate attribution patterns, regulating academic emotions, developing self-regulation skills, and clarifying future visions. The study illuminates the intricate, evolving nature of L2 motivation while offering practical implications for English language education. Further dynamic systems research within China's distinctive language learning context could yield deeper insights into local manifestations of L2 motivation dynamics.

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