Examining EFL vocabulary learning motivation in a demotivating learning environment

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ABSTRACT
Situated in a demotivating learning environment, this study examined the roles of motivation and peers in EFL vocabulary learning. The participants were 155 science and engineering students in Japan. They took a vocabulary test and responded to a questionnaire based on the self-determination theory and peer engagement/disengagement in learning. The results of six multiple stepwise regression analyses showed that: (1) to enjoy and value learning is vital to develop a larger vocabulary size; (2) perceived autonomy is important in cultivating the enjoyment and value of learning in learners’ minds; (3) perceived competence plays a decisive role in motivating and demotivating learners; and (4) whereas motivated peers have little impact on learners’ motivation in a demotivating learning environment, demotivated peers have a negative influence. These findings reveal the malleability of peer influences as well as crucial factors for successful EFL vocabulary acquisition in a demotivating learning context.

1. Introduction

Demotivation is a significant issue in learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in many countries, such as Japan (Kikuchi, 2009), Korea (Kim, 2009), Vietnam (Trang & Baldauf, 2007), Pakistan (Krishnan & Pathan, 2013), Iran (Alavinia & Sehat, 2012), and Saudi Arabia (daif-Allah & Alsamani, 2014). As difficulty in memorizing vocabulary is one of the five major factors that demotivates high school students from learning English in Japan (Kikuchi, 2009), demotivation can be further reinforced in the context of EFL vocabulary learning.

Research has revealed that the motivated peers have a positive influence on the motivations of their classmates, whereas the demotivated peers have a negative influence (Chang, 2010). However, peers’ influences may differ according to learning environments. The roles of motivation, as well as the factors that contribute to sustaining motivation might also vary among learning contexts. Situated in a demotivating learning environment with demotivated Japanese secondary school students, the present study examines the roles of motivation, peers, competence, and autonomy in EFL vocabulary learning, using the framework of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002).
2. Literature review

2.1. Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2002) is among the most influential approaches used to understand human motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). SDT focuses on the extent to which an individual’s motivation is self-determined and broadly classifies motivation into intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (see Deci & Ryan, 2002; for an overview of SDT). Intrinsic motivation refers to a self-motivated state, such as engaging in a certain behavior related to enjoyable feelings. Amotivation represents a lack of motivation. Extrinsic motivation refers to an externally motivated state. Extrinsic motivation is further classified into four subtypes, three of which (external, introjected, and identified regulation) have been used in studies of motivation in second language (L2) learning (e.g., Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999; Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000). In a state of external regulation, learners are regulated by external factors. For example, they are motivated to study English vocabulary for a course credit, good grades, or high scores on tests. Introjected regulation concerns maintenance of self-worth. For instance, learners are motivated to study English vocabulary in order to avoid poor evaluations from their classmates. The final type of extrinsic motivation is identified regulation. The key concept of this motivation revolves around the values and importance that learners cultivate in learning. For example, they are engaged in vocabulary learning because they believe it is important to attain their life goals.

SDT emphasizes the important roles of more self-determined types of motivation (i.e., intrinsic motivation and identified regulation) in learning and development (Deci & Ryan, 2002), and the positive effects of these motivational types of L2 learning have been documented in many studies. For example, intrinsic motivation was associated with higher self-evaluation (McEown, Noels, & Saumure, 2014; Noels et al., 1999); higher L2 proficiency (Tanaka, 2013, 2014); and an increased use of top-down strategies and metacognitive control in L2 listening (Vandergrift, 2005). Both intrinsic motivation and identified regulation were associated with less anxiety (Noels et al., 1999, 2000), greater motivational intensity (Noels et al., 1999), and a stronger intention to persist (McEown et al., 2014; Noels et al., 1999, 2000). In this manner, the positive effects of more self-determined types of motivation become apparent. However, it is still unknown how they are associated with the vocabulary size of EFL learners.

SDT postulates that intrinsic motivation and internalization of extrinsic values are promoted through the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs (i.e., the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; Deci & Ryan, 2002). As these three needs are operationalized into perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness in empirical studies, the enhancement of perceived autonomy, competence, and relatedness is important for the more self-determined types of motivation. The present study focuses on two of these three variables: perceived autonomy and competence, whereas motivated and demotivated peer influences on L2 learning motivation are examined instead of perceived relatedness (i.e., feeling connected to others).

In general, research on L2 learning motivation has shown close relationships between motivation, and perceived autonomy and competence. For instance, intrinsic motivation and/or identified regulation were associated positively with perceived competence (Carreira, Ozaki, & Maeda, 2013; Hiromori, 2003; Noels et al., 2000; Tanaka, 2014) and perceived autonomy (Carreira et al., 2013; Noels et al., 2000, 2014; Tanaka, 2014, in press). On the other hand, less self-determined types of motivation and/or amotivation were associated negatively with perceived competence (Hiromori, 2003; Noels et al., 2000) and perceived autonomy (Tanaka, 2014, in press). However, some studies have not demonstrated clear relationships between motivation, and perceived competence and autonomy; rather they have indicated that roles of perceived competence and autonomy vary according to learning contexts. For instance, perceived competence was neither associated with more self-determined types of motivation nor amotivation in the study of Tanaka (in press). Perceived autonomy was not directly associated with any of the five SDT subtypes of motivation in the study of Hiromori (2003). The effects of perceived autonomy and competence on EFL vocabulary learning motivation in a rather demotivating learning environment have never been examined and thus are still unknown.

2.2. The effects of peers on L2 learning motivation

Significant others (e.g., parents, teachers, and peers) are important external factors in influencing learners’ motivation (Dörnyei, 1998; Noels, 2009; Williams & Burden, 1997). The present study focuses on the roles of learners’ peers, as adolescents (i.e., the participants of this study) spend increasing amount of time with their peers and are significantly influenced by them. L2 motivational studies have demonstrated the powerful impact of motivated and/or demotivated peers on learners’ motivation. For instance, Kozaki and Ross (2011) found that the class average of perceived peers’ motivation was positively associated with an individual learner’s motivation. Tanaka (in press) reported that perceived peer engagement in extensive reading had positive effects on learners’ motivation, leading to higher intrinsic motivation and identified regulation. Chang (2010) revealed that, whereas motivated classmates had positive influences on learners’ motivation, demotivated classmates decreased the motivation of motivated learners. Tanaka (2014) showed that, while perceived peer engagement in learning kanji (i.e., Chinese characters used in the Japanese writing system) had a positive effect on learners’ motivation, perceived peer disengagement, unlike Chang (2010), had both motivating and demotivating effects, thus indicating the malleable roles of demotivated peers among different learning environments. Although motivated peer engagement has a positive influence
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