

Investigating second language demotivation of secondary school English as a foreign language learners in Croatia: a mixed-methods study

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Aim: This study examines demotivating factors experienced by secondary school learners of English as a foreign language in Croatia. This topic has received limited attention in local educational research. Focusing on learners' negative classroom experiences, the paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of second language (L2) demotivation in the Croatian context.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was used, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis. The study was conducted on a convenience sample of 140 learners from three secondary schools in Split-Dalmatia County. This cohort was selected because of its accessibility and its relevance to Croatia's education system, where English is a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary school. A written essay task was used as the data collection instrument because it allowed participants to describe their individual experiences. This aligns with the frequent use of qualitative methodology in previous research studies on L2 learner demotivation.

Findings: Both internal and external sources of demotivation were present in the participants' essays, with the latter being predominant within the sample. Specifically, out of the 392 demotivators identified in the sample, 283 (72.2%) were categorized as external demotivators, while 109 (27.8%) were classified as internal demotivators. External demotivators were mainly related to the teacher's role and to the learning environment. Internal demotivators included the lack of self-confidence, experience of failure and attitudes towards English as major categories.

Conclusions: The essay task was an effective means for collecting qualitative data on L2 learners' demotivation. The teacher's role was the most prominent demotivating influence in L2 learning for this group of learners.

Keywords: demotivation; English as a foreign language learners; secondary school; qualitative and quantitative research; essay task

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Introduction

The study of motivation within the field of second language (L2) acquisition has a long history (1). Motivation has been extensively researched within the social-psychological framework (2) and through cognitive-situated and process-oriented approaches (3). Gardner and Lambert (1972) analyzed L2 motivation from the social-psychological perspective, emphasizing the relevance of the social context of learning, as well as learners' attitudes towards the L2 and relations between different linguistic communities. They claimed that L2 learners should be willing "to identify with members of another ethnolinguistic group and to take on very subtle aspects of their behaviour, including their distinctive style of speech and their language" ((4), p. 135). They introduced the concept of integrative motivation into L2 motivation research, defining it as the motivation to learn an L2 because of positive feelings towards the community that speaks the language.

The cognitive-situated approach shifted the interest of L2 motivation researchers to the microcosmos of the L2 classroom. The intention was to focus on the language classroom by "examining the factors that aroused intrinsic interest in learners and learners' perceptions of the reasons for their success or failure" ((5), p. 61). One of the most influential theories from this period is the Self-Determination Theory (6), which posits that individuals can be motivated by both external factors such as rewards, grades, or social approval, and internal factors such as personal interests, curiosity, or the enjoyment of an activity. These motivational forces are typically categorized as either extrinsic or intrinsic. Intrinsic motivation stems from our innate needs for competence and self-determination. An intrinsically motivated individual engages in an activity purely for the inherent satisfaction it brings – for example, experiences of mastery (or effectiveness) and autonomy. In contrast, extrinsic motivation is directed toward achieving an external outcome – *i.e.*, by rewards such as grades, prizes, money, or social recognition. Regardless of the type, "self-determination is a quality of human functioning that involves the experience of choice" ((6), p. 38). In other words, when people are self-determined, they act out of personal choice rather than obligation, with those choices shaped by internal needs or environmental influences.

The major contribution of the process-oriented approach (1) lies in its emphasis on the dynamic nature of motivation and the temporal changes that influence it. This period produced two major models of L2 motivation: The Process Model of L2 Motivation and the L2 Motivational Self System (1). The Process Model of L2 Motivation "constitutes the fullest attempt to represent the complex, dynamic nature of motivation" ((5), p. 62), which is built on previous L2 motivation research. Each of its three phases draws on certain aspects of previously established theories. The first phase, called the pre-actional phase, builds on Gardner's social-psychological perspective, as the motivation at that stage is mostly driven by attitudes towards the language and language community. Besides this, it is also influenced by other factors such as "expectancy of success" and "perceived coping potential." The key aspect of this phase is to establish learning goals and an effective action plan (5). The following phase, known as the actional stage, follows the realization of the action plan, as it "draws on the importance that self-determination theory attaches to the intrinsic motivation derived from performing learning tasks" ((5), p. 63). In the last, post-ac-

tional phase, the learner estimates the outcome of the learning process and tries to sort out the possible reasons for the success or failure of the action plan. The L2 Motivational Self-System theory (1) proposes three components of the Self: Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to Self, and L2 Learning Experience. As its name suggests, the Ideal L2 Self is the learner's vision of himself or herself as an effective L2 speaker, which incorporates both integrative and instrumental aspirations a learner might have. The Ought-to Self results from the social pressure coming from the learner's environment, incorporating "the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes" ((1), p. 86). The last part of the Self System concerns motives that are related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g., the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, or the experience of success).

The above frameworks have explored the motivational disposition of whole communities, subsequently moving to investigating motivation within L2 classrooms and to dynamic changes of motivation depending on L2 learner's self-concept (3). As Dörnyei and Ushioda note, one point of consensus among motivation researchers is that motivation concerns the direction and magnitude of human behaviour, that is: "the choice of a particular action, the persistence with it, the effort expended on it" ((1), p. 4). Motivation determines why people choose to engage in an activity, how long they persist, and how much effort they invest. However, as Trang and Baldauf (2007) argue, motivation alone does not fully account for L2 or foreign language learning outcomes – particularly in contexts where foreign language learning has become a widespread educational requirement (7). In many countries around the world, Croatia included, learners are required to learn English in schools from a very young age. In Croatia, English is a compulsory subject from grade 1, when students are six or seven years old. It is also a compulsory subject in secondary schools with a four-year program, at the end of which learners have to take the state exam in English (*matura*), i.e., the Croatian national secondary school leaving exam. This means that Croatian students spend a significant amount of time learning English as a foreign language (EFL) (12 years in total) and a significant amount of time preparing for the state exam. Trang and Baldauf (2007) highlight a pattern in countries like China, Japan, and Vietnam, where students resist language learning by "mentally withdrawing" or looking for strategies to pass exams with minimal effort. Demotivation, as the "negative process that pulls learners back" ((8), p. 1), might be a factor that accounts for at least some of these issues.

While the extent of language learning failure in Croatia remains unclear, demotivation represents an important factor that has, aside from one published study ((9), 2019), received little attention in the Croatian educational context. This gap suggests a need for further research, which this study addresses by exploring the demotivating factors experienced by Croatian secondary school EFL students.

Literature review

Theoretical background

Demotivation, as the negative counterpart of motivation, is defined broadly by Dörnyei and Ushioda as “various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation” ((1), p. 138). A more precise definition specifies that those “negative influences” are external to the learner, describing demotivation as “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action” ((1), p. 139). Demotivation does not result from powerful distractions or a more attractive option, gradual loss of interest, or an internal process of deliberation without any specific external trigger. It also does not mean that all positive influences have been annulled; rather, some positive motives remain operational despite the overall negative result (1).

The aforementioned definition links demotivation primarily with external influences, such as the role of the teacher (for example, teacher’s personality, commitment, competence, teaching method), inadequate school facilities, compulsory nature of L2 study, attitude of group members, coursebook and interference of another foreign language being studied (1). However, the issue with this definition of demotivation is that “it has not yet been empirically determined whether or not demotivating factors are completely external” ((8), p. 3). Several studies on demotivation in the L2 context also consider internal factors such as the lack of self-confidence and negative attitudes as potential sources of students’ demotivation (8, 10-12). As Kikuchi points out, “despite his conceptualization of demotivation as being caused by external factors, even Dörnyei (2001) listed two internal factors, reduced self-confidence and negative attitudes toward the foreign language, as sources of demotivation” ((8), p. 3). According to Falout and Maruyama, including reduced self-confidence and negative attitudes places Dörnyei and Ushioda’s definition of demotivation – which they explain as an external force – in an inherent theoretical contradiction (11). Kikuchi thus broadens the concept of demotivation, asserting that it includes “specific internal and external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action” ((8), p. 3). These internal and external forces negatively influencing L2 students’ motivation are referred to as demotivators (8).

Based on Kikuchi’s extension of Dörnyei and Ushioda’s conceptual framework, demotivation in L2 learning can be understood as involving both external factors (e.g., teacher behavior, instructional practices, and classroom conditions) and internal factors (e.g., learners’ attitudes and self-confidence) (8). These theoretical distinctions have influenced much of the research on the topic.

Previous research on demotivation

Oxford used a writing task in the form of an essay to explore the learning experiences of approximately 250 American students, both in secondary schools and universities (1). The data were collected over a period of five years using prompts such as ‘Describe a situation in which you experienced conflict with a teacher’ and ‘Talk about a classroom in which you felt uncomfortable’ ((1), p. 142). The content analysis of the data produced four broad

themes. The first one described the teacher's personal relationship with the students. It contained cases of the teacher's lack of caring and general belligerence, or at times even hypercriticism and favoritism. The other theme also concerned the role of the teacher, and it was their 'attitude towards the course itself or its material', which manifested through the teacher's lack of enthusiasm, carelessness, poor management and close-mindedness. Furthermore, the analysis indicated issues with 'style conflicts between teachers and students', such as conflicts about the amount of structure or detail and the degree of 'seriousness' of the class. The last theme that surfaced was 'the nature of the classroom activities', which included irrelevance, overload, and repetitiveness of the classes.

Considering the strong involvement and the importance of the teacher's role in each of the categories emerging from her previous research, Oxford (1) decided to extend the research by placing its focus exclusively on students' experiences with language teachers. She chose to do it through an analysis of the narratives from 473 students from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The task was to describe a language teacher whom they especially liked or disliked, or with whom they shared either a positive or a negative experience. As a result, her classification consisted of three major teaching approaches: the "autocratic" approach, the "democratic/participatory" approach and the "*laissez-faire*" approach. The first describes a teacher-student relationship characterised by great social distance and a teacher who holds power in his/her hands (e.g., Teacher as Hanging Judge, Preacher, Tyrant). In the second case, the teacher shares the power and responsibility with his/her students and includes them in the decision-making process (e.g., Teacher as Family Member, Co-learner, Nurturer). The last teaching style is marked by the teacher's lack of authority and low involvement in decision-making (e.g., Teacher as Blind Eye, Bad Babysitter, Absentee). Out of the categories that emerged from this research, the ones that students found most demotivating were the characteristics of the "autocratic" and "*laissez-faire*" teaching approaches, such as sarcasm, preaching, disinterest, and lack of organization or imagination. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) concluded, this research showed that the teacher's excessive control or the complete lack thereof were the most demotivating influences for students. This, in turn, had a negative impact on students' feelings, self-efficacy, and sense of control (1).

In his 1998 research, Dörnyei focused solely on foreign language learners who had already been labelled as "demotivated" (1). Fifty secondary school pupils from different schools in Budapest participated in this research study. They were studying either English or German as a foreign language and, more importantly, were identified as demotivated by their teachers or their peers. The instrument that Dörnyei (1) decided to employ was a one-to-one interview that followed a set of core questions. Learners' answers were later analysed following a "theme-based content analytical procedure", thus extracting the most important demotivating factors for every learner. After listing all negative influences mentioned by at least two students as their main source of demotivation, nine categories of demotivators emerged, in order of frequency:

1. the teacher (personality, commitment, competence, teaching method);
2. inadequate school facilities (group is too big or not the right level; frequent change of teachers);

3. reduced self-confidence (experience of failure or lack of success);
4. negative attitude towards the L2;
5. compulsory nature of L2 study;
6. interference of another foreign language being studied;
7. negative attitude towards the L2 community;
8. attitudes of group members;
9. coursebook.

As in all previous studies, the largest category by far concerned the role of the teacher. The second largest category – learner's reduced self-confidence – could also be seen as stemming from the teacher's influence, as the situations causing reduced self-confidence were a result of some classroom event within the teacher's control. According to the research data, these two categories combined included more than half of all the demotivating factors mentioned.

Bednářová investigated the demotivating factors influencing 56 students of the 8-year study program at a grammar school in Prague (13). A sample of third-grade and fourth-grade learners was given a writing task in the form of an essay. They were asked to describe a negative experience they underwent sometime in their L2 learning. As a result, rich textual data was gathered and analyzed by a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The results of the study showed the prominence of external factors in causing demotivation in L2 learning. The external factors were divided into three subcategories: factors related to the teacher, the learning environment and other demotivating factors reflecting external constraints. Out of all the demotivating influences, the strongest one turned out to be the teacher, negatively affecting students with their personality and behavior, teaching styles and methods, as well as their assessment methods. The second most numerous category of demotivators, related to the learning environment, encompassed demotivating influences such as learning conditions and school facilities, classroom atmosphere, learning material and interference with another language.

Similar themes have also been identified in other educational contexts, particularly in Asia, where research on demotivation among learners of English as an L2 has been especially prolific (8).

Kikuchi and Sakai conducted a mixed-methods study to examine demotivation among Japanese high school students studying English (12). They designed a 35-item questionnaire to identify specific classroom-related causes. The survey was completed by 112 university students who had at least 6 years of English study in high school. Additionally, the instrument included two open-ended questions: one asking learners to describe situations that increased their motivation, and another asking them to describe situations that decreased it. Five factors contributing to learners' demotivation emerged from their factor analysis: course books, inadequate school facilities, test scores, noncommunicative methods, and teachers' competence and teaching styles. Three of these factors (test scores, noncommunicative methods, and teachers' competence and teaching styles) were supported by the participants' comments. Among other issues, learners mentioned difficul-

ty with memorizing words and phrases, demotivating influence of low scores on tests, the fact that most lessons were focused on grammar and/or entrance exams, teachers' poor pronunciation, and teachers' demotivated attitude towards teaching. The authors compared their results with Dörnyei's list of demotivating categories (1) and found that four (coursebooks, inadequate school facilities, test scores, and teachers' competence and teaching styles) overlapped with their own, while one factor (noncommunicative methods) was unique to their study. They did not observe five categories from the said list (negative attitude toward the foreign language studied, compulsory nature of the foreign language studied, interference of another foreign language that pupils are studying, negative attitude toward the community of the foreign language spoken, and attitudes of group members). Some of these differences could be attributed to the English language learning context in Japan. Japanese learners rarely use English for communicative purposes outside class, so the attitude towards the community of the foreign language might not be an influential factor. They also usually study only English as a foreign language, so there is no interference from another foreign language.

In his mixed-methods study, Kikuchi developed interview guides and a questionnaire to investigate factors that demotivated learners in Japanese high school classrooms (14). Five college students were interviewed, and 42 students responded to a questionnaire that consisted mainly of open-ended questions. The analysis was again conducted with reference to Dörnyei's list of demotivating categories (1). Kikuchi identified the following teacher-related demotivators: the use of the grammar-translation method, emphasis on testing or preparation for university entrance exams, teachers' communication styles, pronunciation or voice, and overall instructional approach. The author discussed several pedagogical considerations for English teachers: first, to be cautious with the use of the grammar-translation method; second, to avoid focusing classes exclusively on exam preparation; third, to refrain from being overly critical of students' pronunciation errors; and finally, to select textbooks that include current topics matching learners' interests.

Outside the Japanese context, Trang and Baldauf studied the demotivation of 100 second-year university EFL students, whereby they used stimulated recall methodology to obtain retrospective data (7). Students were asked to write a three-part essay. The first part addressed whether they had ever experienced demotivation in learning English and why. The second part asked whether they were able to overcome these feelings, while the third invited suggestions for minimizing demotivation. The constant comparison approach was used to develop categories for coding. The study identified 372 demotivating encounters grouped into 14 categories and further classified as either internal (e.g., negative attitudes, experiences of failure, low self-esteem) or external (e.g., teacher-related factors, learning environment, curriculum). Internal demotivators accounted for 36% of the total number of demotivating factors, while the remaining 64% demotivators were external. Among the external demotivators, the most frequent external cause of demotivation included teacher-related factors, especially ineffective or improper teaching methods, followed by teacher behavior, teacher competence, and grading and assessment. Students described methods as uncreative or boring, lacking clarity, being overly reliant on textbooks, inconsistent across instructors, and often being focused on rote memorization or

test preparation. Other complaints included fast instruction, ineffective use of L1 and L2, and repetitive lessons.

To conclude, in the majority of demotivational studies, the teacher is consistently identified as a significant and often the most influential factor in shaping learners' experiences of demotivation in L2 learning (1, 7, 8, 13).

There is only one published study on L2 demotivation in the Croatian context. Specifically, Vidak and Sindik examined demotivation in learning English as a foreign language among Croatian undergraduates from the University of Dubrovnik (Marine Department and Mass Communications Department) (9). They found no significant differences in demotivation based on gender, study year, or academic program. However, they found moderately negative correlations between demotivation and both pragmatic-communicative and affective types of motivation. The authors concluded that demotivation for learning English very much depends on the teacher, teaching materials, and teaching methodology. The authors also emphasized the influence of learning difficulties, such as a lack of basic pre-knowledge and perception of EL as being too difficult.

Our study aims to shed light on the issue of demotivation in foreign language learning in Croatia by examining the attitudes of secondary school EFL learners. This was achieved with an essay task, which was used to gather information on negative influences that affected students' foreign language learning motivation. The data were analyzed by mixed methods in order to gain a deeper understanding of demotivators described by research participants.

Methods

Participants

The participants were secondary school students (in this paper, “learner” and “student” are used interchangeably to refer to individuals engaged in L2 learning within a formal education context) from three different schools in Split-Dalmatia County (the type of general education school known as “gimnazija”). The participants were asked to write an essay in Croatian describing their experiences with demotivation in foreign language learning. While they were required to state their grade level, gender, and English proficiency in the introductory part of the essay, these factors were not treated as research variables in this study. This kind of selection of participants is known as convenience sampling (accidental or opportunity sampling) and “involves choosing the nearest individuals to serve as respondents and continuing that process until the required sample size has been obtained of those who happen to be available and accessible at the time... The researcher simply chooses the sample from those to whom she has easy access” ((15), p. 218).

Instrument and procedure

As mentioned above, the essay task was chosen as the most suitable research instrument for this study. This decision aimed to promote students' sense of anonymity, as the written format provided them with greater freedom to describe demotivating influences or situations they had experienced. The essay task was based on an instrument developed by Bednářová (13). The essay used in this study consisted of two parts. The first part gathered personal information, including the name of the school, grade, age, gender, and the most recent English grade (*i.e.*, the summative grade received at the end of the previous school year). The second part included instructions for writing the essay, presented in Croatian and translated into English for the purposes of this paper:

Every one of us has at least once encountered something that affected his/her willingness to learn either positively or negatively (doubting one's abilities, uninteresting and inappropriate teaching material, teaching styles, classroom atmosphere, and so on). Describe in your own words the situations in which you felt a negative impact on your motivation to learn the English language. First write about the situation which for you had the biggest negative impact, followed by other similar situations, in order of importance. I would kindly ask you to be as detailed as possible in your answers.

The data for the present study were collected over three days in late October 2019. Access to schools was granted by school administrations. Each session with a different group of students lasted about 40–45 minutes, with the students having 20 to 30 minutes to complete the task. There were seven sessions in total.

The first researcher (BT) introduced herself at the beginning of each session and briefly explained the aim and topic of her research. Students were then given the consent form, which explained the purpose of the study, assured learners' anonymity, and asked them for their voluntary participation in the research study. The same information was also given orally to ensure greater understanding. The Croatian language was used at all times during the conduct of the task. The researcher briefly explained the notions of motivation and demotivation and provided a few examples from her own experience. The explanation was followed by a short warm-up activity in the form of brainstorming. Students were divided into pairs, according to their seating arrangement, and were given a sheet of paper with a blank mind map containing the terms “motivation” and “demotivation” along with one of the examples provided earlier. They were asked to write down some examples of their own. In the meantime, the same mind map was set up on the blackboard, where students' suggestions were to be written down. Students were encouraged to share their ideas with the class. The warmer usually lasted up to 10 minutes.

Students were then asked to write an essay in Croatian, describing in detail situations in which they felt demotivated to learn English. They were given a task sheet containing the essay task as described above. Students were reminded of the importance of describing demotivating situations in detail rather than merely naming the demotivators. They were asked to focus not only on their current secondary education but also on their elementary school education as well as their independent efforts in learning the English language.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in 2019, prior to the adoption of the Rules of Procedure of the Ethics Committee by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Split in March 2021 (Class No.: 003-05/21-02/0001, Reg. No.: 2181-190-00-21-0010). The study adhered to the Ethical Code for Research with Children, published in 2003 by the Council for Children of the Republic of Croatia (16). According to this code, participants over the age of 14 can provide their own written or oral consent. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study. Furthermore, oral consent was provided by the principals of the participating schools and the teachers whose classes were involved. A copy of the written consent form was included in the master's thesis as an appendix.

Data analysis

Qualitative analysis

Content analysis, a method or technique that systematically condenses large amounts of data into fewer categories based on clear coding rules, was used to analyze the data (17). Each essay was read and re-read to identify demotivating factors related to student motivation. Prior to analysis, essays and students were given a code: the first element indicated the student (*e.g.*, S1), and the second represented their grade level (G2, G3, or G4).

Coding – defined as the process of assigning labels to meaningful units of text ((15), p. 675) – was applied to each instance where students expressed demotivation. Any unit (a clause, sentence, or paragraph) that mentioned a negative influence on student L2 learning motivation was extracted as a unit of analysis. All demotivators mentioned at least once were included in the initial list. Through repeated comparison and refinement, these were grouped into subcategories (*e.g.*, “unfair assessment” and “high standards” were classified under “testing and assessment”). These subcategories were then merged into broader themes or categories, such as “demotivators related to the teacher's role.” Following precedent in previous research (1, 8, 14), the final categories were organized as either external or internal demotivating factors. To support validity, 30 essays were independently coded by a third-party researcher, with differences resolved through discussion. Rich examples from the essays – translated into English by the authors – are presented in the findings to illustrate some of the categories.

Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis in this study was conducted through quantitizing, defined as assigning numerical values to data that are not inherently numerical – such as experiences expressed through words or images. In this case, numerical values were assigned to categories and subcategories that had been developed during the qualitative phase (18). Once the categories were clearly defined and criteria for assigning demotivators to them established, each occurrence of a specific demotivator was counted. Although this may appear straightforward, the reliability of the entire analysis depends on the accuracy of this process. If categories are unclear or if the counting is inconsistent, the findings can be compromised. The importance of understanding why one chooses to quantitize, including

the benefits and limitations of presenting qualitative insights in numerical form, has also been emphasized (18). In this study, the purpose of quantitizing was to determine the frequency of each demotivator within the dataset.

Findings and Discussion

A total of 140 students, 99 females and 41 males, aged between 15 and 18, voluntarily participated in this study. Among these 140 secondary school students, there were 100 third-graders, 24 second-graders, and 16 fourth-graders. All participants had studied English as a compulsory subject for eight years in elementary school, beginning in the first grade. During their secondary education, English remained a mandatory subject, with only slight differences in the number of classes per week, depending on the program of their school. These differences were based on whether the school was more oriented toward science subjects or foreign languages. Of the 140 essays collected, nine were excluded for being unrelated to the topic, leaving 131 for analysis.

The analysis yielded 392 reasons for demotivation, which were divided into categories and subcategories. Among these cases, 283 (72.2%) were classified as external demotivators, while 109 (27.8%) were categorized as internal demotivators. External demotivators were further divided into demotivators related to the teacher's role and demotivators related to the learning environment. Internal demotivators included the lack of self-confidence, experience of failure, attitudes towards English, and other factors.

The largest and most prominent category – including both external and internal demotivators – was related to the teacher's role, mentioned a total of 219 times in participants' essays. This category encompassed a wide range of issues, including the teacher's personality and behavior, teaching styles and methods, testing and assessment practices, as well as classroom pace and pronunciation. The second most numerous category also included external influences, describing negative aspects of the learning environment. These were mentioned 64 times as common sources of learners' demotivation. They included concerns regarding the teaching material used during lessons, learning conditions, school facilities, and the classroom atmosphere.

This paper focuses solely on the results concerning external demotivators related to the teacher's role.

Demotivators related to the teacher's role

As mentioned above, the category of external demotivating factors related specifically to the role of the English teacher accounted for more than half of all demotivators mentioned by participants ($n/N=219/392$, 55.8%). It was organized into five main subcategories: personality and behavior, teaching styles and methods, testing and assessment, pace, and pronunciation. Each of these subcategories was further divided into more specific factors (Table 1).

Table 1. Categorized and subcategorized reasons for demotivation related to the teacher's role*

Reasons for demotivation (N = 392)	n (%)
Demotivators related to the teacher's role	219 (55.8)
Personality and behavior	79 (20.0)
<i>Favoritism</i>	24 (6.0)
<i>Uninterested, indifferent towards the subject and students</i>	18 (4.6)
<i>Undemanding</i>	18 (4.6)
<i>Too strict</i>	7 (1.8)
<i>Unapproachable</i>	4 (1)
<i>Unfair treatment</i>	3 (0.8)
<i>Ridiculing students' mistakes</i>	3 (0.8)
<i>Lack of authority</i>	2 (0.4)
Teaching styles and methods	76 (19.4)
<i>Topics unrelated to English</i>	13 (3.3)
<i>Unable to explain</i>	11 (2.8)
<i>Outdated teaching methods</i>	10 (2.5)
<i>Uninteresting ways of teaching</i>	8 (2.0)
<i>Language used</i>	7 (1.8)
<i>Too much criticism, no praise</i>	6 (1.5)
<i>Punishment</i>	4 (1.0)
<i>Focus on grammar, rather than communicative skills</i>	4 (1.0)
<i>Lack of preparation for the State Matura exam</i>	3 (0.8)
<i>Error correction by interruption</i>	3 (0.8)
<i>Focus on memorization</i>	2 (0.5)
<i>Lack of reading, book reports</i>	2 (0.5)
<i>Lessons limited to textbook</i>	1 (0.3)
<i>Too much writing, lack of speaking</i>	1 (0.3)
<i>Insufficient wait time</i>	1 (0.3)
Testing and assessment	53 (13.5)
<i>The given grades are not an objective representation of student's knowledge</i>	13 (3.3)
<i>Unfair assessment</i>	9 (2.3)
<i>Grades as "habits"</i>	8 (2.0)
<i>Difficult tests</i>	6 (1.5)
<i>"Undeserved" grades</i>	5 (1.3)
<i>Giving better grades to pet students</i>	4 (1.0)
<i>High standards</i>	3 (0.8)
<i>Specific questioning methods</i>	2 (0.5)
<i>Unfairly organized examinations</i>	2 (0.5)
<i>Different standards</i>	1 (0.3)
Pace	8 (2.1)
<i>Spending too much time on one topic</i>	4 (1)
<i>Constant repetition</i>	2 (0.5)
<i>Too much to do in one lesson</i>	1 (0.3)
<i>Too slow</i>	1 (0.3)
Pronunciation	3 (0.8)
<i>Bad pronunciation during dictation</i>	2 (0.5)
<i>British pronunciation</i>	1 (0.3)

*Frequency and percentage of demotivators related to the teacher's role were calculated in relation to the total number of demotivators as mentioned by the students (N = 392).

Personality and behavior

A teacher's personality and behavior were an important source of demotivation. These included a series of unfavorable traits, such as showing favoritism, being indifferent towards the students and the subject, being undemanding or too strict, laughing at students' mistakes, or lacking authority.

Students were the most impacted by what they perceived as unequal treatment from the teachers. Irrespective of whether teachers focused on stronger students (referred to as "pet students") or gave more attention to weaker ones – any form of inequality had a negative effect on students. Favoritism as a demotivator was specifically mentioned 24 times in participants' essays.

Participants repeatedly objected to their teachers nominating stronger students when offered responses from both weaker and stronger ones, presumably because they hoped to receive a more elaborate answer. However, students found this disrespectful and demotivating, and reported losing interest in taking part in the activity. As one student (S1 G2) explained:

The teacher often gives priority to students with higher grades, especially when it comes to questions concerning personal views and opinions or new vocabulary. Other students are allowed to take part only in solving grammar exercises from the workbook.

These student responses reflect a classroom environment resembling what has been defined as a competitive classroom structure, where the focus is on how students perform relative to one another (1). While such an environment may motivate high achievers, it can negatively influence less confident students, leading to demotivation, poor self-esteem, and even learned helplessness (1, 10).

This type of classroom structure was further supported by comments from learners, like one student (S2 G3) who wrote:

The teacher often focuses on stronger students and explains the lesson so that they could understand it, not caring whether other students can keep up with the pace of the lesson.

Some high-achieving students, identified as such due to their previous grades in English, expressed resentment towards the uneven treatment of students and the lack of motivation provided for stronger ones. Another common source of students' demotivation was the perceived "privileged" status of weaker students. Specifically, three students noted that weaker students enjoyed benefits such as arranging exam dates and selecting content for exams. In contrast, others lacked these privileges and always had to be prepared for potential exams. High-proficiency learners expressed dissatisfaction with teachers paying more attention to weaker students and failing to further encourage and develop their language abilities. One student (S3 G3) quite honestly wrote:

I know English very well; I actively participate in every class; I like to be a know-it-all and all of my answers are always correct. But I have never received any kind of stimulation for it in the past two years, and now I have no more interest in taking part in the lessons. I don't care about As, I got plenty of them, but why is everyone else being rewarded but me? Does the teacher think that I don't have to be further motivated to participate just because I'm good in English? She refers to me only when new words we haven't seen before pop out in texts. Only then she asks me: "Perhaps YOU know the meaning of this word?" Yes, I do, but I won't tell you. Go ahead and ask the students you are always giving As to!

It seems that favoritism works both ways: high-proficiency students sometimes feel neglected in favor of their less proficient peers and *vice versa*. Favoritism has been emphasized as one of the strong demotivational factors related to teacher behavior from the very beginning of demotivation research (7, 8, 13, 19).

The second most common source of demotivation concerning teachers' personality and behavior was teachers' uninterested and indifferent attitude towards the subject and the students. This demotivator was mentioned 18 times. One student (S4 G3) stated that the teacher noticed that he was not participating in class, but did nothing to address it. Another (S5 G3) said:

My elementary school English teacher wasn't very much interested in teaching. She didn't really care if students understood what she was saying or if they could keep up with the lesson.

This type of attitude from teachers made students perceive the class as irrelevant, leading them to lose interest in it. Another frequently mentioned issue was that some teachers were undemanding – a demotivator mentioned 18 times in the essays. One student (S6 G3) reported that her teacher maintained low standards, allowing students to pass the class without putting in much effort. While many students took advantage of this and did the bare minimum, others found the lack of academic challenge and stimulation very demotivating. For example, one student (S15 G3) admitted to giving up on the idea of studying English at the university level because her teacher never demanded her regular engagement on her part, which led to her stagnating in her language studies. Another (S7 G3) noted that the teacher's indifference can have serious consequences for the language learning process:

The teacher's low standards have influenced my whole language learning process, from falling behind with my studies, up to completely losing my will to study.

As mentioned above, some students in the present study felt demotivated due to having an undemanding teacher. On the other hand, seven students (1.8%) revealed that they did not benefit from a strict teacher either, whom they often perceived as the main source of demotivation. This characteristic was often closely connected to students' transition from elementary to secondary school when the tone and method of teaching changed and became more serious.

One student (S8 G3) described this perceived contrast between amicable elementary teachers and more distant secondary school teachers as follows:

Our elementary school teacher had a genuinely friendly attitude with all of her students and we knew that we could always turn to her for help. Coming to secondary school, ever since our first language lesson, our new English teacher made it clear that she is going to be pretty strict. By now, I realised that she is actually quite good at teaching and explaining English but I still cannot get myself to be more comfortable and relaxed in her classes, not nearly the way I was in elementary school.

Alongside favoritism, a lack of interest or enthusiasm for teaching and overly strict behavior have been identified as significant themes in demotivation research since its early development. Gorham and Christophel (1992) describe demotivating teachers as boring, lacking dynamism, egotistical, rigid, in addition to displaying favoritism (19). Similarly, Kearney and colleagues describe such teacher behavior as incompetence, with apathy – characterized by a lack of concern for students or the course – considered one of the sub-

categories of incompetence (20). Trang and Baldauf also point out favoritism (alongside a lack of care and enthusiasm) as one of the more frequently cited instances of teacher-related demotivating factors (7). Participants in our study likewise pointed to the influence of transitioning from primary to secondary education and the resulting change in teachers. Hamada describes a similar situation in Japanese schools for learners of similar age, stating that “building a bridge” between high school and junior high school is an important task for teachers (in Croatia, junior high school corresponds to final two years of primary school, while high school corresponds to secondary school (grades 1 to 4)) ((21), p. 17). Learners in junior high school are often described as learning English joyfully, while the stereotype of high school learners is of studying in desperation. This shift is echoed in the responses of students in our study.

Teaching styles and methods

According to the data, besides their teachers’ personality and behavior, the respondents were influenced the most by the methods their teachers employed in their language classes. In 76 cases (19.4%) students claimed that they were demotivated by their English teacher’s outdated and uninteresting teaching style. This finding aligns with Trang and Baldauf’s study, in which the teaching method was the most frequently cited teacher-related demotivating factor, mentioned 97 times out of 140 instances in which a demotivating encounter with a teacher was reported (7).

In our research, the most numerous demotivator related to teaching styles referred to teachers’ inability to stick to the point and their tendency to wander off to topics unrelated to English. In 13 essays (3.3% of the total number of demotivators), students described how they lost their motivation when their language teacher talked about matters which were not closely connected to the English language. One student (S11 G3) wrote:

When our teacher got back from the graduation trip she was supervising, she talked about it every English lesson for two weeks. She talked about all the details of the trip, which obviously didn't interest us much, so we spent most of our time on our phones, doing nothing, as usual.

Another student (S12 G4) described that her teacher and her lessons constantly go off-topic to talk about things that are not connected to the English language at all. The student indicated that her excellent grades in English did not mean anything when she was constantly losing her interest in English on account of these demotivating lessons. One student (S5 G3) reported losing his motivation as early as in elementary school when, during their English lessons, they hardly ever engaged in activities which would develop their language skills, which resulted in his interest turning to science subjects which were, in his opinion, better organized:

Most of the time we focused on activities which were not specifically related to the English language, like colouring and drawing. Later, we would get grades for these drawings which were not even remotely related to what really counts – our English knowledge.

Teachers going off-topic is yet another issue which appeared early on within the broader field of classroom pedagogy research. In Kearney and colleagues (1991), “strays from subject” appears as one of the teacher misbehavior categories, under the heading “indolence.” A teacher who “strays” from subject “uses the class as a forum for his/her personal opin-

ions, goes off on tangents, talks about family and personal life and/or generally wastes class time” ((20), p. 36) – most of which are comments reflected in our participants’ responses.

Ten cases of demotivation were related to outdated teaching methods, individual work, and a focus on memorization, which students emphasized as negative influences on their motivation to learn English. They believed that they did not profit from these teaching methods, which did nothing to prepare them for actual language use or provide the knowledge they would be able to apply in the ‘real world’. One student (S13 G3) gave his criticism of language lessons as well as suggestions for how to improve them:

I often find my language lessons quite boring, and then I start to wonder if I will ever benefit from them. I prefer watching movies or reading books in English to listening to boring classes that put me to sleep. I believe that English classes can include a little bit of both, but they should deal more with communication and language use than memorization. It is possible to put our language knowledge to all sorts of uses, through things such as social networks and websites, communication with foreigners, different projects, which could all help us to successfully apply what we have learnt. Unfortunately, the ways of language teaching and learning today are outdated. It is high time for introducing new teaching methods, more interesting learning materials and taking a step forward towards a new educational system that will allow us to acquire the English language in a way that we are able to use it properly.

Two participants objected to a general lack of reading, asking for additional book reports to independently enrich their vocabulary and step out of their daily language learning routine. Based on the students’ comments, it seemed that they were quite frustrated about the outdated teaching and learning methods being based solely on memorization and drilling, which did not prepare them for any kind of creative or independent use of the English language. Two students complained about a teacher who did not encourage or permit independence, imagination, or creativity in students’ answers, with one (S14 G3) opining:

I believe that during our English classes we should communicate more, instead of always rereading and translating texts of similar nature. The majority of new vocabulary items we have learnt were memorised by heart, without us actually knowing how to use them in a sentence.

Students felt that they were not capable of producing a sentence of their own making, but only of using other people’s words and reproducing them. Although they were exposed to the language by listening to their teachers talk, they were not actively using it; therefore, it was hard to develop it beyond a beginner level. One student (S15 G3) gave her view of how group work could benefit their language learning:

I actually mind the constant individual work during language lessons. I believe that we should do more group work and communicate in English more, so that those who are good at it could help out the weaker students. I think that students can explain a complex concept to each other in a more understandable and relatable way than a teacher can.

Eight students described teachers who, in their opinion, possessed excellent knowledge of the matter, but were not able to pass it on to their students. One student (S16 G3) shared her experience:

Our secondary school first-grade English teacher usually worked in elementary schools so she had problems with explaining things in a way that we can understand them. Everybody knows that first-grade grammar basics are extremely important, learning when to use a certain tense, but she didn’t bother to explain it well or to give us tasks and exercises to practise their use. The teacher’s lack of interest in this topic discouraged us from trying to make sense of it, and today I can feel the consequences. I’m bad at verb tense consistency and mixed tenses because I lack previous knowledge about their basics.

The above comments from our participants can be subsumed under the “boring lectures” subcategory, which is yet another part of the broader category of teacher incompetence (20). Trang and Baldauf talked about “uncreative, boring ways of conveying knowledge” and “teaching language skills incomprehensively” (7). On a more general level, this teaching style can be described as “*ex cathedra*” (i.e., lecture-style lesson delivery with little student interaction), a pattern noted by Hamada’s participants, who talked about non-communicative lessons (21). A similar style of teaching was described as a “one-way type of teaching”, which can be defined as language lessons in which language is explained directly to learners without expecting immediate contribution or interaction from them (8, 12, 14). As Hamada puts it, “when learners doubt the comprehensibility and the effectiveness of the teacher’s style, learners easily get demotivated, and end up not making efforts to learn” ((21), p. 14).

Whether it was the excessive use of L1 or L2, seven students (1.8% of all respondents) reported having issues with the language of instruction in their English classes. Students pointed out that English teachers use their mother tongue (L1) when teaching elementary school students, while in secondary school, English as an L2 is used almost exclusively. The data showed that in some cases, students perceived this transition between the two educational levels as too intense and found it to be demotivating. Four students expressed being displeased with teachers explaining complex concepts in L2. One of them (S18 G3) stated:

In elementary school I loved both the English language and its classes, especially those concerning grammar, given that the teacher used to explain all the rules in detail in CROATIAN. Coming to secondary school was frustrating because the new English teacher explained everything, even the grammar theoretical basics (which are extremely important), in English. I understand that we are a high-achieving school, but I believe that we would be more likely to understand and remember something if it were explained to us in our native language.

On the other hand, three students commented on the lack of L2 and the teacher’s constant use of L1. For instance, one student (S19 G3) became aware of her progress in English that resulted from increased exposure to the English language in secondary school when compared to the previous undemanding language lessons.

In elementary school we didn’t talk much in English. So it wasn’t until secondary school that my problems started. The teacher is quite strict and I respect that. Ever since our first lesson she always talked in English and I barely understood anything. At first, it was awful because I never encountered that way of teaching before. But now, I have grown accustomed to this teacher’s methods and I believe that I have learnt more English in two years of secondary school than I did in eight years of elementary school.

The comments above align with the subcategory described as “ineffective distribution of L1 and L2 use” (7). Similar concerns were raised by Bednářová’s students, who also criticized teachers for relying too heavily on L1 at the expense of L2 (13). On a broader level, these comments also reveal difficulties learners might have when transitioning from primary to secondary school, thus also changing teachers and having to adapt to different approaches to foreign language teaching (22).

Talking about differences in students’ abilities, one student (S20 G3) found it demotivating that teachers hardly ever considered that students function in different ways and that not everyone takes the same time to answer a question. She explained that her teacher’s short wait times during oral exams made her feel rushed to reply right away, leading the teacher

to assume she did not know the answer, while in reality, she just needed a little extra time to express her thoughts and ideas. An influence which no student disputed was the demotivating power of the teacher's criticism. This demotivator also appeared in two other research studies, under the label of "hypercriticism" (1, 10). Six students' answers (1.5%) in our study pointed to a feeling of demotivation resulting from their teachers' constant critical remarks, and an additional 1% (four students) described the negative effects of punishment on language learning motivation. One can see how the persistent focus on the negative could result in a generally unfavorable image of the learning process itself. One student (S9 G3) indicated how the lack of praise and positive energy during her English classes affected her motivation to learn the language:

The teacher rarely compliments her students and almost never jokes and laughs with us, and that is why I have no will to actively take part in her classes.

This kind of negative attitude only intensified when the criticism turns to punishment. Three students told the same story of what they perceived as "punishment" that resulted not only in a bad grade but also in the transformation of the teacher's behavior towards them. One student (S22 G3) specifically observed:

The strongest negative influence on my language learning process I have ever experienced was when a couple of us missed our English test (because of a football competition) and were awarded an unexcused absence, a bad grade, and the day after we had to retake that same test. After that, the teacher started behaving differently around us. She changed the way she treated us during her classes, as well as in examinations. This kind of behavior greatly affected my motivation to learn English.

This change in the teacher's behavior negatively impacted all three students. They felt affected by the lack of trust displayed by the teacher, who doubted their participation in a school football competition and suspected them of planning to avoid the test scheduled for that day. However, what the students resented the most was not the negative grades or any form of punishment, but the alteration in their relationship with the teacher, which was never the same afterward. This type of teacher behavior is described by Kearney and colleagues under the category of "offensiveness", referring to teachers who impose unreasonable or arbitrary rules (20). Similarly, participants in Bednářová's study reported feeling unfairly treated, pointing out how such behavior can have lasting negative impacts on students' motivation and classroom engagement (13).

Testing and assessment

The "testing and assessment" category revolved around perceived inequalities in teachers' assessments and the lack of organization in the grading and examination process. In our study, 13 essays (3.3% of all demotivators) depicted situations where students believed the grades assigned by language teachers were not an objective reflection of their knowledge. This discrepancy was most commonly linked to undemanding, uninterested teachers whose oral examination questions were described as unimaginative and repetitive. Students could prepare their answers in advance and simply memorize them by listening to their classmates' responses. Consequently, the grades they received were often not a "legitimate" reflection of their language abilities and knowledge, as highlighted by a student (S11 G3):

Everybody knows that getting an A in English is a piece of cake. All you have to do is to read a short paragraph from one of the texts from the textbook. Sometimes the teacher even lets you choose the one you want to read.

Although three students believed they benefited from this “easy way out”, the data revealed that others recognized such grades meant little if they did not reflect their actual language ability. These students noted that this type of assessment had a demotivating effect on their desire to learn the language because it failed to encourage or monitor their progress in English.

According to the data, one of the most common grading “injustices” experienced by students was their English teachers’ tendency to assign grades based on “habits.” In eight situations, as described by the participants, it was observed that students’ initial grades in English significantly influenced how their language teacher perceived them. This made it exceedingly challenging for students to improve their grades in subsequent assessments. This phenomenon appeared to work in both directions. Students asserted that those who had invested considerable effort into their initial grade could later get by with significantly less work than their peers. Conversely, students who left a ‘bad’ first impression found improving upon their initial negative grade nearly impossible, with one of them (S23 G3) reporting the following:

Even when I try really hard and prepare well for an examination, I always end up with the same grade I had before, without the teacher even noticing that I have put in extra effort. At the same time, a student with good previous grades would get a better grade than me, not because he/she deserved it, but as a ‘habit’.

Eight students claimed that they were demotivated after experiencing a feeling of discouragement and hopelessness as they saw that their efforts to improve their grades were in vain. They were discouraged from putting in further effort since they saw that they were being judged only by their previous actions which seemed to prevail over their current attempts of progress. The demotivating experience of this student (S17 G3) best depicted the situation:

The greatest demotivating influence I experienced was the teacher’s unjust assessment. Students became categorised and labelled according to their previous grades in English, and there was no way to move up or down from them. The evaluation of our current knowledge was based exclusively on our previous grades.

Through their essays, students demonstrated that over time, they learned to respect their teacher’s grading standards, even if they were strict, as long as they were consistent and applied universally. However, it appears that there were teachers who did not keep to their word or establish any clear ground rules regarding their assessment methods. Several students mentioned a teacher whose grading system depended solely on her mood and temperament on any given day. One student (S24 G3) expressed feeling demotivated because his grade seemed more influenced by his teacher’s current state of mind than by his actual knowledge of English:

A couple of us that were taking the oral exam that day got a bad grade because the teacher was in a bad mood. The day after, when the teacher came around and was in a better mood, even the students that performed much worse than us, got the same or even better grades than we did the day before.

Whether students can make unbiased judgements about the quality of their teachers' assessment and their knowledge level is arguable. Their perception of some grades as "undeserved" might not always be true. However, these perceived inequalities likely had a negative influence on their language learning motivation. Our data show that students often drew parallels between their knowledge and that of their classmates. They resented how easily their hard-earned grades were assigned to other students who, in their opinion, did not make the same effort they did. One student (S25 G3) felt this kind of demotivating influence after an oral exam, when both she and her classmate got the same grade, even though (in her view) she demonstrated far superior knowledge.

The first situation which negatively influenced my attitude towards English took place in the first grade of secondary school during an oral exam, when our language teacher called on a student who did not know any of the answers to the questions the teacher had posed, and he still got a D for no reason at all. After that, it was my turn to take the exam. Unlike him, I had knowledge about the topic we were talking about and knew the answers to most of the teacher's questions, but still she said that it was a D. I was really disappointed because I felt that I deserved more, and my classmates agreed with me.

She believed that this situation was linked to the teacher's favoritism towards the boy. In four instances (1%), students described the negative consequences on their language learning motivation after observing that "teacher's pets" tended to receive better grades regardless of the effort they put into studying or their proficiency in the language. Students perceived that their grades were predetermined by their teacher's personal preferences. Consequently, they felt that their efforts in language learning were undervalued and ultimately lost the motivation to continue investing in them. One student (S26 G3) shared her frustration in the following manner:

The new teacher was slowly forming a group of her favorite students, and no matter their language knowledge, she would always give them good grades. For the rest of us, these grades were unobtainable, regardless of all our efforts.

The differences in proficiency levels among students might explain why some students perceive their teacher's expectations as too high. In six instances, students assigned their demotivation to tests which they rated "difficult", while three additional cases of demotivation resulted from their teachers' "high standards." One student (S27 G3) claimed that her demotivation goes back to elementary school English lessons, more precisely, to English exams. She was discouraged by language tests which, in her opinion, were too difficult considering that they spent too little time studying and preparing for them during language classes:

The teacher would put all the tenses in one test, which was too challenging for our elementary school level, especially for those who were not so talented in English.

Students found these "unrealistic" demands demotivating, which resulted in them losing the will to try and fulfil them, given that they did not see themselves as capable of doing so. They reported giving up on their efforts to study when they knew that it would not be enough to meet the teacher's requirements, so they turned their focus to other interests and activities.

While some students perceived the teacher's standards as too high, others objected to their unevenness. Students complained that one English teacher's grading standard differed completely from the one set by another language teacher, which often had a demotivating effect on their L2 learning. The teachers' non-uniform standards simultaneously confused

and angered students, as they were not able to properly assess their language knowledge, which different teachers had estimated to be on different levels. This is how one student (S17 G3) expressed her frustration with her teachers' varying standards:

One thing that negatively influenced my motivation was my language teachers' different standards, which made me question how truly proficient I am in the English language. A number of language teachers changed during my education, and some of these judged my knowledge and proficiency in English as extraordinary, while others found it as just plain.

The student stated that these differences in her teachers' standards confused her and made her question the validity and impartiality of her grades as well as the whole grading system, given that an excellent student in one teacher's class could be no more than average for a stricter teacher.

The above comments reflect yet another topic which appeared early in demotivation research – the category which was described as “dissatisfaction with grading and assignments, unclear instructions, irrelevant assignments, and grading that was too hard or too easy” (19). Kearney and colleagues also mention “unfair testing” as a subcategory of teachers' “indolence” (20), a sentiment echoed strongly in our participants' examples. Moreover, Tang and Hu talk about how students expect their teacher to be competent and teach in an interesting, logical, reason-based, easy to follow, and less demanding way (23). They add that “students always have some expectations about their teachers... However, when their expectations about their teacher and methods of teaching remained unmet, they become highly disappointed, which is a negative emotional reaction” ((23), p. 8–9).

Conclusions

This study aimed to investigate the presence and frequency of demotivators in secondary school EFL classrooms in Croatia. The results showed a strong prominence of external demotivators when compared to internal ones, which is in accordance with the findings of other demotivational studies (10, 13, 24). Students tend to ascribe their demotivation to external causes rather than internal ones (25), so that they can treat them as isolated incidents instead of parts of their personality. They try to dissociate these negative experiences from their enduring motivation and seek to limit the motivational damage by doing so (25). Students perceive external factors as easier to modify when compared to internal influences (such as character traits or anxiety).

The data collected for this study revealed that teacher-related factors were especially influential in students' demotivating experiences, amounting to more than half of all examples of demotivation described by the participants. The issues that students were most affected by were their teachers' negative personality and behavior, uninteresting teaching styles and methods, and unfair ways of testing and assessment. These results align with those of numerous previous studies on L2 demotivation (8, 10, 13, 14, 21, 24, 26). For instance, Kikuchi reflected on his own experience, stating that the “(...) first demotivator I can easily think of is a specific teacher” and later on describing his experiences with this teacher's specific teaching methods as “humiliating” ((8), p. xi). This personal experience is analogous to the significant impact that teacher-related factors had in our study.

One of the limitations of this study concerns the procedure used to collect the data, as a certain degree of subjectivity was necessarily involved in the procedure. Namely, it was nearly impossible to explain the research topic to the participants without giving them suggestions on what to write about. A warm-up activity was used to get the students interested and involved and to avoid answers unrelated to the research goal. However, the ideas shared by one student during the brainstorming activity later reappeared in a number of essays.

Based on the observations and limitations of this study, some suggestions for further research can be made. First, it would be interesting to investigate the dynamic nature of demotivation and extend the research to different educational levels in Croatia (elementary school, secondary school and maybe even university) to see how demotivation changes over time. For example, although participants in this study were close in age, the impression was that the slightly older students showed more disappointment in the school system and less faith in the possibility that something might change. They got demotivated more easily compared to younger students, who still believed there was “a silver lining.” Besides the temporal aspect, more extensive research could analyse the data according to gender and school achievement. The research method could be improved by complementing the essay with an interview.

To conclude, this study explored and described demotivators among secondary school EFL students in the Croatian context. Within this framework, the results could encourage a discussion on the possibilities for changing internal and external factors that negatively influence L2 students’ motivation.

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