



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Significant demotivating factors affecting Saudi EFL students: An investigative study with PYP students [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]

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V1 First published: 09 Dec 2022, 11:1459
<https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.125764.1>
Latest published: 09 Dec 2022, 11:1459
<https://doi.org/10.12688/f1000research.125764.1>

Abstract

Background: Motivation has long been seen as a deciding factor in the learning of a foreign language and in ensuring success for the learners. As a corollary to this, demotivation adversely affects learning success and negatively influences learning outcomes. The present study examines the factors that negatively affect Saudi EFL learners. **Methods:** The study subjects are 45 male and 35 female learners, and the data were collected using a 50-item questionnaire. The factors under study are course instructor, course-content and facilities, attitude towards EFL and socio-cultural factors. Data have been analyzed using the SPSS software.

Results: Results show that the factors around socio-cultural, and course instructor (M=4.06, 3.67) respectively were the most influential in aggravating the student's demotivation. Furthermore, experience of failure is at play as a moderate factor (M=2.84) whereas the course content and facilities and attitude towards EFL factors, (M=2.57; M=1.83) are perceived as less influential factors in demotivating the EFL students. Findings also show a marginal non-significant difference between male and female participants regarding perceptions of the demotivating factors (males = 5.30, females= 5.70); the difference is not significant, $P = .834$.

Conclusions: It is presumed that the findings of this study might be helpful for EFL learners and instructors of Saudi Arabia in devising coping strategies to overcome demotivation.

Keywords

Demotivation, EFL Learners, Foreign Language, gender, Motivation, PYP students

Open Peer Review

Approval Status *AWAITING PEER REVIEW*

Any reports and responses or comments on the article can be found at the end of the article.

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Author roles: Alqasham FH: Conceptualization, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, Writing – Review & Editing

Competing interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Grant information: The author(s) declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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How to cite this article: Alqasham FH. **Significant demotivating factors affecting Saudi EFL students: An investigative study with PYP students [version 1; peer review: awaiting peer review]** F1000Research 2022, 11:1459
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Introduction

Mastering English as a foreign language is an overt goal for students in Saudi Arabia. However, the actual proficiency level in English is far from satisfactory in this country irrespective of which school or university is under scrutiny. As per the findings of Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EFL, 2019), the status of Saudi Arabia was 98th out of 100 non-native English-speaking countries in 2019 but improved to 83rd last year, showing an upward movement of 15 positions. Many scholars have investigated the reasons behind the poor performance of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. They found that the teaching and learning process seems to be imperfect and unsatisfactory owing to various factors (Khan, 2011). They have the opinion that foreign language learning has the direct impact of many positive and negative factors. Among the numerous positive factors is motivation which has been at the center of investigation for a long time.

Motivation researchers focused on the role of motivation in learners' interest enhancement in learning (Al-Hoorie & Macintyre, 2020; Dörnyei, 2020; Reeve, 2013). However, a new concept has taken birth in recent times: the idea of *demotivation* in ESL/EFL acquisition which is taken as another aspect of motivation (Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009). It is important to note that de-motivation has been understood, defined, investigated, and viewed in different ways. Dörnyei (2001) conceptualized these learning-detrimental factors as 'demotivating factors' and they are responsible for derailing the progress of EFL-learners. De-motivation, according to Trang and Baldauf (2007) is now gaining attention in the field of foreign or second language learning. Emphasizing the need for understanding demotivation, Albalawi (2017) remarks that the concept holds great significance for L2 teachers and learners. The present study examined the factors of demotivation prevalent among Saudi EFL learners. The conventional view about de-motivation is that it is signified by low motivation or a third type of motivation rather than a phenomenon in its own rights (Trang & Baldauf, 2007). It is seen as arising out of lack of adequate motivation to accomplish a specific goal (Alahdal & Al Ahdal, 2019; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Soureshjani & Riahipour, 2012).

Lack of zest and zeal, enthusiasm, willingness, excitement, fervor are the symptoms of de-motivation as identified by researchers. It is the lack of effort, need and desire directed towards the learning process (Aydin, 2012). It is the process of the accumulation of negative factors encaging students gradually and steadily. During the process of second language learning, students' motivation may relate to many negative influences, about which Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) stated, 'learning related particular events or experiences, such as performance, anxiety, public humiliation, heavy work demands or poor test results and factors in the social learning environments, such as the personality and the attitude of the teacher or classroom counter-cultures and peer pressures.' Furthermore, Dörnyei (2005) states in this regard that demotivation ultimately hinders the learning, as well as ignoring the positive learning factors.

Demotivated learners are those who were motivated in the past but owing to some negative factors they lose interest in learning. Reasons behind the loss of interest is called de-motives that are the negative counterpart of motives. But it is important to note that all negative factors cannot be labeled as de-motives. Dörnyei (2001) has mentioned three negative factors that are not taken as de-motives as they do not carry negative value. These are factors of distraction instead of reducers for motivation. For example, watching movies instead of doing home-work is not the result of demotivation. Secondly, steady loss of interest is not taken as de-motive because de-motives are the specific factors that reduce motivation. Thirdly, there are some compelling situations that prove detrimental in goal accomplishment. If a person does not join a course, simply because it is time-consuming or very costly then this will not be termed as a de-motive. So, such deliberate action cannot be termed as demotivation. Researchers admit demotivation is 'another side of motivation' (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009).

There is a plethora of de-motives that hinder the EFL learners' language acquisition, and these are also the root cause of demotivation. Pointing out the various factors that marginalized the performance of Saudi EFL learners, Khan (2011) mentions mother tongue interference, inadequate target language exposure, late language exposure, poor learning environments, poor learner autonomy, learners' lifestyle, issues of discipline, punctuality, motivation, needs assessment, social pressure and status, lack of guidance and excessive freedom. Studies related to demotivating factors have brought out many demotivating factors for EFL learners in the length and breadth of the world but research into demotivation factors in the Arab world, in particular, in the Saudi Arabian context seems to be scarce (Alyousif & Al-Suhaibani, 2021).

From the above discussion on demotivation, it is clear that knowledge of demotivating factors may prove to be a boon for EFL learners. It is worthy to note that most of the studies related to demotivation talk about university students (for example, Alyousif & Alsuhaibani, 2021). The present study is related to the students who have just graduated from high school and are enrolled in the preparatory year program (PYP) section of the department of English at university level. It is expected to be of great use to the EFL learners who will join the undergraduate courses in different universities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The participants chosen in this study are those students who could not pass the exam or dropped out due to their failure to pass the exam. The present study aims to realistically highlight the strongest

demotivating factors that may help teachers and institutions in constructing healthy frameworks for motivating learners and promoting learning.

Literature review

Significance, essentiality and vitality of motivation to achieve required and desired success in EFL learning has been unequivocally admitted by many researchers. Motivation is an essential factor in foreign language learning and in learners' target-language proficiency achievement its role is crucial (Ghadirzadeh *et al.*, 2013; Hu, 2011; Zhang, 2007). Likewise, Broussard and Garrison (2004) considered motivation as an attribute that presupposes action or inaction of the learner. Pointing towards the value of motivation, Littlewood (1987) affirmed that "motivation is the critical force which determines whether a learner embarks on a task at all, how much energy he devotes to it and how long he preserves" (p. 53). A good amount of research exists on different aspects of motivation with varied conclusions highlighting both internal and external factors and these, in turn, can start, sustain, intensify, or discourage behaviors (Reeve & Deci, 1996). However, as a consequence of the recent studies in L2 acquisition – a new concept known as demotivation has come to the fore which is taken as another side of motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Falout *et al.*, 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). However, despite of its importance, demotivation needs greater attention from researchers (Dörnyei, 2001).

Demotivation has been defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as the "lack of interest in and enthusiasm about your work" (Cambridge University Press, 2020). Falout and Falout (2005) believed that if motivation pushes learning for life, demotivation cuts learning short. Furthermore, Kaivanpanah and Ghasemi (2011) stated that "any failure to learn a second language may be largely due to the existence of demotivating factors on the part of learners" (p. 90). It proves to be a stumbling block in EFL students' learning success. A great many teachers find learners demotivated in classrooms in various educational contexts (Ghadirzadeh, *et al.*, 2012, p.189). Demotivation has scarcely been investigated in various contexts (Dörnyei, 2001; Falout, 2012; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009; Tsuchiya, 2006). Dörnyei (2005) admitted the absence of research on demotivation, '... in spite of their great significance, demotivation has received very little attention either in mainstream psychology or L2 research.'

Among the important research studies conducted on the topic of demotivation are the studies of Dörnyei (1998), Zhang (2007), Kikuchi and Sakai (2009), Gorham and Millete (1997), Kim (2011), Arai (2004), Falout *et al.* (2009) and Tsuchiya (2006). Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) identified five demotivating factors for Japanese EFL learners namely feeble intrinsic motivation, lackluster school facilities, learning materials and contents, test scores and teachers' methodology. Content, learning material and test score were at the top of the demotivating factors contrary to the teachers' competency and teaching styles which were the main demotivating factors found in several earlier studies. Findings from Zhang (2007) conducted in America, Germany, China and Japan concluded that teachers' inadequate skill and incompetence are the main demotivating factors. Moreover, shortcoming in teachers' behavior was found as the main demotivating factor in the research work of Kim (2011) and others. Other important research on demotivation among EFL learners have been conducted by (Arai, 2004; Dörnyei, 1998; Falout *et al.*, 2009; Tsuchiya, 2006; Ikeno, 2002) who found that the negative attitude towards foreign language, low level of self-confidence, teaching techniques, teachers' competence, personalities, inadequate school facilities, interference of another foreign language, attitude of group members and the compulsory nature of learning the foreign language are the important demotivating factors.

Bekleyen (2011) studied the demotivating factors for Turkish university EFL learners and concluded that the absence of latest teaching technology, course-books, unskilled teachers, and teaching techniques are the main demotivating factors. Furthermore, Kim and Kim (2015) conducted exploratory research for Korean EFL learners and in addition to a few other motivational factors, they found three crucial demotivating factors, namely: negative perceptions towards affordance, difficulties in English learning and pressures of exams. Similar research was carried out by Meshkat and Hassani (2012) to identify the demotivating factors prevalent among Iranian high school EFL learners wherein the study concluded that teaching strategies, unskilled teachers, lack of facilities, dearth of intrinsic motivation, learning context and material and test scores were the visible demotivating factors.

In addition to the above-mentioned studies that were conducted in countries other than the Arab world, here is a birds' eye view of the significant studies that have dealt with the demotivating factors affecting Arabic EFL learners' language learning endeavors (Al-Khasawneh, 2017; Al-Asmari & Javid, 2011; Dhaif-Allah, 2005; Qashoa, 2006; Javid, 2010; Mohammad H. Al-khairy, 2013; Alyousif & Alsuhaibani, 2021). Qashoa (2006) carried out a study to investigate the demotivating and motivating factors for the EFL learners of UAE secondary school students. Findings of this research stated that demotivating factors for the secondary school EFL learners are related to teachers' characteristics, teaching methods, course books, peer pressure, low level of self-confidence, social and religious points of view along with vocabulary, grammar and spelling.

Most recently, [Alyousif & Alsuhaibani \(2021\)](#) investigated the demotivating factors that affected Saudi high school EFL students. The findings showed that subject related and teacher related demotivating factors as the prominent demotivating factors for Saudi EFL learners. In another study of the same nature that was conducted by [Al-Khairi \(2013\)](#) wherein the demotivating factors affecting the Saudi undergraduates were investigated, it was found that ignorance related to the importance of English, negative attitude towards English, the use of Arabic in EFL class, course content, and lack of opportunities for speaking English were the significant demotivating factor.

On the basis of researchers' findings on demotivation among EFL learners, it is crystal clear that it emerges from both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Many researchers such as ([Dörnyei, 2001, 2005](#); [Jomairi, 2011](#)) have considered the extrinsic factors while some other researchers ([Ushioda, 2011](#); [Kim & Seo, 2012](#)) have emphasized the intrinsic factors. Significant findings regarding intrinsic demotivating factors are lack of self-confidence and the negative attitude of learners themselves towards EFL learning ([Ikeno, 2002](#)). Regarding the extrinsic demotivating factors, [Dörnyei \(2005\)](#) identified them as external factors that have an adverse effect on learner motivation and their desire to learn or engage in the learning process.

Tsuchiya's study (2006) highlighted nine demotivating factors comprising both intrinsic and extrinsic factors that compel negative attitudes towards the English-speaking community, negative attitude towards English itself, teachers, classes, negative group attitude, the compulsory nature of English study, reduced self-confidence, ways of learning and lack of English-speaking models. Likely, [Falout and Maruyama \(2004\)](#) studied the causes of demotivation in terms of high and low proficiency students and found that low proficiency learners don't regard extrinsic factors as demotivating as the high proficiency students.

From the above discussion it is clear that most of the studies are silent on the impact of some prominent variables such as gender, culture, economic, social and age factors. The present study aims to examine the causes of demotivation arising out of the gender, social, cultural and environmental issues along with those common issues related to teachers, students, course content and facilities and experience of failure. It is a well-known fact that Saudi Arabia has a specific social-cultural background ([Al-Khairi, 2013](#)) and here the EFL learners could not accomplish and display tangible results as expected ([Al-Khairi, 2013](#); [Al-Jarf, 2008](#)). So, in the present study, special attention has been paid to investigate whether the social and cultural factors play a role in aggravating demotivation among PYP EFL learners of Saudi Arabia to fill the research gap. It answers these two questions:

Research questions

1. What are the chief factors responsible for demotivation amongst the EFL/L2 learners in Saudi Arabia?
2. Do the demotivational factors have the same effect on the Saudi EFL male and female learners?

Methods

Study design

The present research was conducted with the help of ex-post facto design. It was conducted in Saudi Arabia, Methnab, Qassim region during the Academic year (1443 AH; May 2022). This research design was necessitated as the manipulation and selection of the independent variables were beyond the control of the researcher.

Participants

The researcher contacted all the potential participants who could not pass the Intensive Course Program and sent them the questionnaire. These participants were from the registration office data including 120 leavers, however a final sample of 45 males and 35 females participated and responded to the questionnaire. It is to be noted that soon after enrolment, they either dropped or failed in the Intensive Course Program (ICP) of the department of Translation & English in College of Sciences and Arts, Methnab, Qassim University, KSA. Prior verbal consent was obtained for participation. The researcher obtained verbal consent with the help and approval of the Scientific and Ethical Committee in the Department. All participants were adult Saudi nationals, and the age average of the group was 20 years.

Ethical considerations

Anonymity of information was assured, and concealment of identity was guaranteed to the participants in order to maintain research ethics. The researcher obtained ethical approval from the Scientific and Ethical Approval in the Department of English Language and Translation, Methnab College of Sciences and Arts, Qassim University. The consent letter was submitted to the Head of the English Department (May 23, 2022) who subsequently followed up the procedures including scheduling a time for the researcher to meet with the respondents to explain to them the aim of the study; the respondents thus expressed their consent to the publication of their responses.

Table 1. Reliability of the demotivation questionnaire.

Factor	Cronbach's Alpha
Attitude towards EFL	0.623
Experience of failure	0.628
Course content & facilities	0.784
Course Instructor	0.604
Social-ecological factor	0.601
Average	0.648

Instrument

To identify the main demotivating factors found among the EFL learners of KSA, a 50-item questionnaire related to demotivation was prepared by the researcher. A copy of the questionnaire can be found under *Extended data* (Alqasham, 2022). The questionnaire was designed using Google Drive Forms. The link to the questionnaire was shared with the participants. Two weeks were given to them to complete the questionnaire. They were informed that after they complete the questionnaire to press submit at the end of the form. This was modeled as per the questionnaire developed by (Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). The questionnaire was recorded on a 5-point Likert scale with values ranging from 1-5 (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). The items loaded onto five de-motive categories: (1) attitude toward EFL learning, Item 1-5, (2) experience of failure, items 6-19, (3) course content and facilities, item 20-29, items 30-42, (4) course instructor, and (5) social-ecological factors, items 43-50. The reliability coefficients for the demotivation questionnaire are recorded in Table 1 and were found acceptable at (0.601 into 0.784) with an average of (0.648).

Data analysis

Basic statistical tools were applied to test the hypothesis of the present study. Descriptive statistical data were obtained (Mean, Standard deviation and Rank) and compared through statistical software of SPSS, version 26 that was performed for data analysis. Varimax rotation procedure was used as it enables the researcher to examine the frequency and order of importance of demotivating factors affecting the participants' progress in EFL classes of Saudi Arabia. An independent sample t-test was obtained to measure the detect whether there is a difference in demotivation factor attributed to sex.

Results

1. RQ1: What are the chief factors responsible for demotivation amongst the EFL/L2 learners in Saudi Arabia?

Table 2 presents the descriptive data of the students' attitudes towards the five demotivational factors. Table 2 shows that the chief factors are social-cultural and course instructor. Students perceived them to a high extent. They scored for socio-cultural factor $M=4.06$, $Std= 1.18$, and for course instructor $M=3.67$, $Std=1.27$. Furthermore, students' perceived experience of failure as a moderate factor scored $M=2.84$, $Std=1.47$. The course content and facilities ($M=2.57$, $Std=1.32$), and attitude towards EFL ($M=1.83$, $Std=1.05$) were perceived as low factors that had an effect on motivation. The full dataset can be found under *Underlying data* (Alqasham, 2022).

2. RQ2: Do the demotivational factors have the same effect on the Saudi EFL male and female learners?

Table 3 displays the denotational factors effects for male and female learners, parsed gender-wise. An independent sample t-test was performed to analyze the effects of demotivational factors on gender. Table 3 reveals that females scored in all the factors $M=5.70$, $Std=1.168$ whereas males' perceptions reached $M=5.70$, $Std=1.168$. This showed that the

Table 2. Students' attitudes towards demotivation factors.

Factor	Mean	SD	Rank
Attitude towards EFL	1.83	1.05	5
Experience of failure	2.84	1.47	3
Couse content & facilities	2.57	1.32	4
Course instructor	3.67	1.27	2
Socio-cultural factors	4.06	1.18	1

Table 3. Independent sample t-test to check the demotivating factors impact on sex.

Sex	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Sig.
Male	45	5.30	1.214	.834
Female	35	5.70	1.168	

demotivational factors have very few higher effects on female learners, but the effect is not significant statistically. The t-test was used to calculate the difference. This reached .834, $P > .05$.

Discussion

The investigation showed that two demotivational factors impacted learners to a great degree. They are social-cultural, and course instructor ($M=4.06, 3.67$) respectively. Regarding the course instructor factor, lack of skill and competency in course instructors were found to be a major demotivating factor for the EFL learners in many studies. The present study also found many issues related to the teachers are the causes of demotivation. So, this study confirms the findings of much recent research (e.g., [Alqasham, 2022](#); [Arai, 2004](#); [Zhang, 2007](#); [Bekleyen, 2011](#); [Kim and Seo, 2012](#); [Evans & Tragant, 2020](#); [Falout & Maruyama, 2004](#); [Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011](#)). They reported that the social and cultural factors also have a big influence in aggravating demotivation. Furthermore, the socio-cultural factor is also found amongst the chief factors that inhibit EFL students' learning. [Ushioda \(1994\)](#) conducted a study at Trinity College of Dublin in Ireland to investigate the demotivating factors for EFL learners and found that the demotivating experiences were predominated by the external factors associated with the learning environment. This finding is in line with the findings of the present study which found socio-cultural factors to be a great demotivating factor. Saudi society is highly traditional, and it is deeply rooted in the Arabic language. In social gatherings, parks, banks, commercial centers, airports, festivals, banquets, marriages, business, and trade, only Arabic is used. On the contrary, in the department of English, with some rare exceptions, the language of communication is English. Most of the parents do not recognize the importance of English while the students do not use English at all. In Saudi schools, students and teachers do not communicate in English. Teaching of the language is solely for the purpose of examination. English is detached from society so when the students join ICP after completing high school and are asked to speak, listen, read, and write in English (which they have never done in the past), they are likely to fail. In most colleges, seventy to eighty percent of students fail in the intensive English learning course program.

The study found that demotivational factors have a very slight effect on female learners over male learners. However, the effect of such factors was not statistically significant. It was greater than (.005). The higher effect on female learners compared to male learners may be interpreted according to their psyche as well as to the unique experience and upbringing of females in Arabic culture. [Bin-Hady and Al-Tamimi \(2021\)](#) reported that due to the Yemeni heritage as a conservative society where female students are not allowed to talk with male students on social media and in some family, female students were not allowed to own a mobile phone. They are more respected and cared for in the Saudi context, therefore, the same demotivation factors affected female students more than male students. However, as the probability vale ($\text{Sig.} = .834$) is not significant, we cannot be certain in our claim. This finding contradicts [Tavanapour and Chalak's \(2019\)](#) who studied the impact of the motivational factors on sex in the Irani context for both students and teachers. The study showed that both students and teachers were demotivated alike. Furthermore, the study indicated that male learners were more affected by the demotivational factors than female learners.

Conclusions

From the above discussion it is clear that demotivating factors do not arise only out of the factors related to teachers, course content, passive attitude towards EFL and experience of failure, but also from the socio-cultural structure of the highly traditional Saudi society. There is a need to extend the use of English from the classrooms to society. Demotivation arises from the fact that English is not used anywhere as a language of communication in the society. It is left to the mercy of classroom teachers who are doing more harm than good by teaching in a hackneyed way. There is a need to improve both on intrinsic and extrinsic fronts. A healthy environment wherein students, parents and society realize the value of English needs to be created. To change the classroom situation, it is essential to recruit skilled and dynamic teachers. Saudi society is highly civilized, and its students do not point out the instructors' negligence out of respect. There is a need to make the teachers realize the value of new teaching techniques. One important demotivating factor arises from the nature of the Saudi classroom. Generally, in the EFL classes in Saudi Arabia students of various proficiency levels are enrolled, but teachers do not know how to handle the mixed ability classes and, as a consequence, only highly proficient students study. So, there should be some special training for the course instructors by reputed scholars so that they can teach effectively in a class of mixed ability. Class size also should be decreased for better individual attention. Teachers are unable to redress the problems of all the students in a large class, consequently most of the students, especially the low proficiency students, fail to follow the lectures. Also, there is need to revise the course content. The topics of study should

have native elements so that students may enjoy it. Proper attention should be paid on intrinsic and extrinsic factors to divorce demotivation and live with motivation. There is need to bring changes in the environment for the betterment of EFL learners. There should be extra-curricular activities in which English language and its students should be encouraged to participate. Group study should be encouraged in the classroom. Home assignment should be given on a regular basis. There should be monitoring of the EFL classes by the learned teachers and supervision by the higher authorities with appreciation, encouragement, and needful directions.

Limitations

This research was conducted in the Department of English & Translation of the College of Arts & Science (Qassim University of KSA) and a total of 80 EFL learners (45 male and 35 female) from one undergraduate program participated. This hardly depicts a comprehensive view of the different demotivating factors faced by the EFL learners enrolled in different educational institutions in KSA. It is also important to note that this research is based on the descriptive statistics of the quantitative data only which cannot unveil the whole face of demotivation deeply rooted in numerous factors. Limited variables have been studied. Other variables such as age, different academic specialization, and students' level of proficiency should be considered to obtain more comprehensive results.

Recommendations

Future research on the issue of demotivation should be conducted in various institutions applying different research methods so that more demotivating factors may come to the fore. Further, varied factors that affect motivation should be studied and teachers made aware of these. Class size should be reasonable and mixed abilities classes should be avoided as far as possible. Social and cultural background of the Saudi-EFL learners should be studied to find the real causes of general demotivation for EFL learning.

Data availability

Underlying data

Figshare: Significant demotivating factors affecting Saudi EFL Students: An Investigative Study with PYP students. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.20732359.v2> (Alqasham, 2022).

This project contains the following underlying data:

- Demotivates - Underlying Data.xlsx [These data include denotative factors on five axes. The data was loaded onto five de-motive categories: (1) attitude toward EFL learning, Item 1-5, (2) experience of failure, items 6-19, (3) course content and facilities, item 20-29, items 30-42, (4) course instructor, and (5) social-ecological factors, items 43-50]

Extended data

Figshare: Significant demotivating factors affecting Saudi EFL Students: An Investigative Study with PYP students. <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.20732359.v2> (Alqasham, 2022).

This project contains the following extended data:

- Questionnaire

Data are available under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) (CC-BY 4.0).

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