

Demotivation and Dropout in Adult EFL Learners

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Abstract

This study assesses the reasons behind learner dropout in adult EFL environments. Differences between two groups – dropouts (N=154) and persistent learners (N=106) – are examined using a questionnaire with qualitative and quantitative components. The study focussed on three areas: characteristics of the two groups (such as age and proficiency), their attitudes (self-efficacy, attitude to the language), and dropouts' perceptions of their language-learning experience. Significant differences were found in age and proficiency, among others, as well as in attitudes to the teacher and the language. When degree of demotivation is considered, further differences arise in attitudes to the course and in learners' perceived need to learn English for work.

Dropouts tend to retain negative views of their teacher and of the course, showing that in-class factors are powerful demotives in adult language learning. Demotivated learners tended to attribute dropout to external factors, commonly mentioning poor teaching practice, a lack of speaking practice, and a discrepancy between their desired level and their perceived 'stagnant' level. The findings from this study inform teacher and administrator attitudes and behaviour in FL academies, helping them to identify learners who may be susceptible to, or who have already started down, the path to dropout.

Keywords: *Dropout; motivation; demotivation; demotives; adult learners; plateau*

In second language (L2) learning, motivation has come to be considered as a major factor in student success, with numerous studies showing that less motivated students are less likely to succeed. As part of the recent resurgence in motivation studies, research has shown student demotivation to play a large role in learning outcomes (e.g., Falout et al., 2005; Kikuchi, 2015; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Demotivation, or the "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or on ongoing action" (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2011, p.143) is known to have had a negative effect on the learning outcomes of high-school students in compulsory education settings (Hasegawa, 2004; Kikuchi, 2015).

The effects of demotivation in adult learners, however, have not been so well researched; of particular interest is the mostly non-compulsory nature of adult EFL study. When the requirement to learn English as a compulsory subject is removed, what demotivational factors remain? When students have signed up to study English on a largely voluntary basis, what causes them to later become demotivated? And, perhaps most importantly of all, what are the demotivational factors that cause an adult student to exercise the one option that is not open to high-school EFL students – to discontinue their language study?

As well as having focused on compulsory education settings, another key characteristic of previous EFL demotivation studies is that they have typically taken place in Japan and South Korea, where a grammar-translation approach dominates and language learning is generally orientated toward college entrance exams (Cho, 2004; Yook, 2010). Accordingly, studies such as Kikuchi & Sakai (2009) have found the traditional teacher-centred approach to be the main demotivator among EFL students.

In Spanish language academies, as in much of Europe, a communicative approach to language teaching (CLT) is far more common, meaning that classes are or should be more student focused (Verhelst et al., 2009). Nevertheless, there persist problems of demotivation and dropout in ELT; most Spanish adults value foreign language as an important economic asset, but 54% of the population report not being able to speak any foreign language (Eurobarometer, 2012; Robbins, 2015). Given this situation, the present study seeks to identify some characteristics of demotivated Spanish learners, focusing on adult students in a language academy. Further, the study explores the experiences of learners whose demotivation led them to discontinue their language study. The findings from this research will provide some insight into the main demotivators acting in adult language learning, widening our understanding of dropout from language learning.

Literature Review

Demotivation

While motivation studies have a relatively long and detailed history in SLA, the ‘darker side’ of motivation is somewhat more recent and underexplored. As Dörnyei noted in 2001, motivation research all too typically focuses on measuring the positive aspects of the construct, without considering how much demotives subtract from positive inducements (Dörnyei, 2001).

It may be useful to provide a clear definition of the term, as it is important to distinguish demotivation from negative affect, or a complete lack of motivation (amotivation). Dörnyei states that demotivation “concerns various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation,” but notes that the forces are necessarily external in nature, and act to “reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioural intention or an ongoing action” (p. 143). He clarifies that demotivation does not result from (1) powerful distractions or a more attractive option; (2) gradual loss of interest; or (3) an internal process of deliberation without any specific external trigger. The implication of this definition for the adult FL context is clear: students who choose to switch academies, or drop language study for a strong personal motive such as the birth of a child, cannot be considered to have become demotivated. In contrast, a student who drops out of a school because of a poor test score, or a humiliating incident with a teacher or fellow student, can clearly be said to have become demotivated.

The relatively short history of learner demotivation in SLA began with the observation of factors that could negatively affect motivation; Bacon and Finnemann (1990) identified *Frustration* and *Unwillingness to Participate* as discrete factors, and later, in line with the shift into a more situated approach, Christophel and Gorham (1995) noted that *teacher behaviour* and *course structure* were factors negatively affecting motivation.

Dörnyei (1998b) later conducted a survey of demotivated learners in Budapest, characterizing some factors common to demotivated learners. In order of most common to least, they are: (1) **Teacher** – personality, commitment, competence, teaching method; (2) **School facilities** – group size, level, frequency of teacher change; (3) **Self-confidence** – experience of failure or lack of success; (4) **Negative attitude to the L2**; (5) **Compulsory nature of L2 study**; (6) **Interference of studying another FL**; (7) **Negative attitude to L2 community**; (8) **Attitude of group members**; (9) **Coursebook**. Falout and Maruyama (2004) adapted the questionnaire used by Dörnyei, removing factors such as (6) which were deemed not relevant to the Japanese context, and applied it to 164 undergraduates in a Tokyo university. Falout and Maruyama found that high- and low-proficiency students were demotivated by different factors, with teachers being the only constant.

Self-confidence also played a large role for the high-proficiency group, with learners tending to internalize the reasons for their perceived difficulties. Low-proficiency learners, meanwhile, were found to be demotivated by attitudes toward the language, teacher, materials, and group members. In addition, a number of students cited a previous negative learning experience as having set them on a path to demotivation. Similarly, Ushioda (1998) asked university-age students about the factors they found to be demotivating in FL classes, finding the most oft-cited to be related to the institutionalized learning context, such as *teaching methods* and *learning tasks*. Interestingly, participants seemed to attribute loss of motivation only to external causes, separating it from an internal process. While the Ushioda, Falout and Dörnyei studies provide an excellent description of the profiles of demotivated FL students, these are perhaps less relevant to adults studying voluntarily at a language school; factor 5 in Dörnyei's study, for example, may be a less powerful demotive for adults who feel that they ought to learn English to improve their job prospects, as opposed to high-school students who really do have little choice in the matter. Further, the institutionalized learning framework of high schools and universities will clearly provoke different demotives to private language academies, where teacher behaviours and methods are likely to differ (Prabhu, 1987; Woods, 1996).

In the private language academy context, Ghanizadeh and Jahedizadeh (2015) employed a version of Sakai and Kikuchi's 35-item demotivation questionnaire (2009), adapted and translated into Persian. They sampled 250 adult EFL learners, 125 of whom were studying at universities and 125 at private language institutes. There were significant differences between the two groups, most prominently in *lack of interest*, *classroom materials*, and *classroom environment*, with students at private academies tending to be more motivated. Although the results were not followed up with interviews, the authors suggest that academy students may be more susceptible to 'burnout', given that they typically study and work at the same time.

Kormos and Csizér (2008) designed a 76-item survey to investigate the motivational characteristics of three groups of EFL learners in Budapest, Hungary. From the 621 respondents (secondary school, university, and private language academy students), they found that the Ideal L2 self was a key predictor of motivated learning behaviour across all groups, but that adult learners in academies were less dependent on teacher and classroom experiences. Attitude to the language was a major predictor for school and university students, but was less so for adults enrolled in private schools. Further, the private academy group showed higher overall levels of motivated behaviour. The implication of this study is that adults in language academies may be more resilient to in-class demotives, as they generally have clear goals for their language learning that are already incorporated into their Ideal L2 self; they may overcome conventional demotives such as course content, pace, and difficulty of lessons (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009).

Owing to the relatively small number of empirical studies in this field, the present study does not assume that adult learners are naturally more resistant to in-class demotives. As Kormos and Csizér

state in their 2008 study, it is probably impossible to devise a universally applicable theory of motivation; not only do fixed sets of factors play different roles in L2 motivation at different ages, but some factors are not even meaningful in certain contexts or for certain age groups. The same is surely true for demotivation, meaning that in-depth examination of the demotivational profiles of learners, along with a rich description of the context, is a requirement in any attempt to understand the reasons behind FL dropout.

Learner Dropout

For as long as students have been enrolling in voluntary education, educators have tried to understand what it is that causes a student to lose motivation and ultimately drop out from a course. A great deal of this research takes place in further education contexts, and is firmly rooted in educational psychology. Tinto's (1975) now classic synthesis of previous research in the area bemoaned the lack of theoretical models to describe learner dropout, noting that studies tended to be descriptive and context-specific. He developed the Student Integration Model (SIM), which is longitudinal in nature and regards dropout behaviour as primarily a function of the quality of the student's interaction with the academic and social systems of the higher education institute. Importantly, Tinto also differentiated between different types of dropout behaviour; until then, students choosing not to continue with education had simply been grouped under the rubric 'dropout'. Tinto identified *academic failure*, *voluntary withdrawal*, *permanent dropout*, *temporary dropout*, and *transfer* as dropout behaviours. Although this model was intended for higher education, there are clear parallels with adult FL learning; a number of SLA researchers (Rivers, 1987; Prabhu, 1992; Chambers, 1991; Çelik, 2004) have subsequently identified student interaction and class dynamic as important variables in learner motivation. In addition, it follows that neither is there simply one type of dropout behaviour for adults in an FL environment; the present study will therefore distinguish between students who consider themselves to have dropped out *permanently* or *temporarily*.

Studies of dropout in foreign language learning are not as numerous as in mainstream education, but Bartley's (1970) descriptive study of different attitudes and their effect on motivation in FL learning can perhaps be given as a starting point. Bartley attempted to show that dropout behaviour among US high-school students could, to an extent, be predicted by assessing their attitude toward the foreign language. She found that, in students who ultimately dropped study of the foreign language, attitude towards that language diminished over the course of the academic year. Later, Gardner and Smythe (1975) integrated the value of aptitude in their model of motivation, arguing that it was heavily linked to persistence (a term they used as the antonym of dropout behaviour). Matsumoto and Obana (2001) assessed the motivational factors that characterized persistent learners (hereafter referred to as 'continuers') and dropouts in Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) students at three Australian universities. They found that continuers and dropouts had different interests and motivational orientations, adding that it was an integrative orientation that kept students engaged in the actual learning. Interestingly, they noted an interaction with proficiency: "At the beginning of learning, students resort to teachers and class dynamics because they do not have enough resources to arouse integrative or intrinsic motives" (Matsumoto & Obana, 2001, p.82).

A crucial difference between teen/university student and adult foreign language education, however, is that adults undertaking a language course can be presumed to have had an initial high state of motivation, as enrolment is generally voluntary. In this sense, adult dropout rates from online courses (eLearning) have received some attention, being much higher than in conventional learning environments (as high as 70%, according to Flood, 2002). Kember (1989) points out that the factors affecting mature (25+) adult dropout are more varied than for younger learners, with persistence in the course depending on, among other things, their ability to "...integrate the demands of part-time

study with family, work and social commitments.” (Kember, 1989, p. 294). Tyler-Smith (2006) examined the factors contributing to dropout in mature learners from eLearning classes, finding that cognitive and psychological factors had a role to play; among these, cognitive load and locus of control were key features. Although the present study does not consider dropout from eLearning environments, some of the factors identified from this field are likely to be relevant to the present study (time available to study, cognitive load) and will be considered, while others (problems with technology, insufficient peer interaction) are not and will be disregarded.

Research Questions

Following the research mentioned in the literature review, the following research questions are proposed:

1. What are the key differences between dropouts and continuers at a Spanish EFL academy?
2. What are the salient demotivators among adult EFL students at a Spanish academy?
3. Which of these demotivators are most linked to cases of dropout?

Method

Participants

This study was conducted in the modern language school of a public university in Barcelona, Spain. Students at the school are typically also bachelor or master students at the university, but not exclusively – enrolment at the school is open to the public, and the school advertises its courses around the city. The target population for this study was adult learners (in this study, aged 21+) who had dropped out from an English as a foreign language course in the past four years. Here, the term ‘dropout’ was used to refer to those who had either discontinued a language course midway through, or who had not re-enrolled after their last course finished. The sample of dropouts was complemented by a sample of continuers who were either currently enrolled in a language course, or who had recently (<1 month) completed a programme and were due to re-enrol. The researchers contacted 1,700 dropouts and 980 continuers, receiving 313 responses. Fifty-three of these respondents were found to be ineligible for the study for reasons explained later, leaving a final sample of 106 continuers and 154 dropouts.

Data Collection

Two questionnaires were designed to be administered to current and ex-language learners at the same school. The dropout questionnaire comprised four sections and the continuer version three, with the general design of both guided by the principles laid out in Dörnyei and Taguchi (2009). The questionnaires contain some original items, with others adapted or taken from previous authors (see below), as suggested by Sudman and Bradburn (1983). The dropout questionnaire is reproduced as an appendix to this article; what follows here is short description and justification of their major components.

Respondents to both questionnaires were presented with 24 Likert-scale items, intended to represent 8 multi-item scales: variables related to attitudes and characteristics in demotivation and learner dropout that had been identified from previous research:

- **Contact with English;** Items 11, 12, 13. The amount of contact with English that learners felt they had through exposure to films, music, L2 speakers (Wu, Yen & Marek, 2011; Hussin, Maarof & D’Cruz, 2001).
- **Course Factors;** Items 14, 15, 16. Learners’ feelings toward the pace, challenge, and resources used in their English course (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009).

- **Teacher Factors;** Items 17, 18, 19. Learners' attitudes toward their teacher and the teacher's style (Dörnyei, 2001; Falout & Maruyama, 2004).
- **Motives: Work;** Items 20, 33, 34. The degree to which learners signed up for the course in order to fulfil work obligations (Wimolmas, 2013; Gardner, 2004)
- **Motives: Intrinsic;** Items 21, 22, 23. Learner ratings of how much they enjoyed or felt satisfied by the learning process (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009).
- **Attitude to English;** Items 26, 27, 28. Learners' feelings toward the phonemic and structural attractiveness of English (Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide & Shimizu, 2004; Clement, Gardner & Smythe, 1977)
- **International Posture;** Items 29, 30, 31. Contrasted with ethnocentrism, this represents learner attitudes to an international community, and is not specific to any one culture or language (Yashima, 2009; Ryan, 2009).
- **Self-Efficacy;** Items 24, 25, 32. Learners' belief in their own ability to succeed at learning English (Zimmerman, 2000; Gahungu, 2007; Ikeno, 2002)

Reliability coefficients were established for each group of items ($\alpha > .75$ in all cases, considered acceptable (Pallant, 2003)).

Then, in the dropout questionnaire only, participants were asked to select from a 10-item checklist the factors that had affected their decision to stop studying English; these demotives were assembled from previous findings, mentioned in the literature review, by Dörnyei (1998), Ushioda (1998), and Falout and Maruyama (2004). Participants could select more than one demotive. An open-ended option was included for other factors that participants wished to note, and the checklist was followed by an optional, open-ended clarification question.

In the last section, participants were asked whether they intended to return to English study, and what they would change if they did. A further open-ended question was added inviting participants to share their thoughts on the school and the language, which researchers used to gauge participants' attitudes toward their learning experience. The continuer questionnaire followed the same design, except that instead of being asked to list the reasons for their dropout, participants were asked to rate their motivation level both at the beginning of the course and at the time of completing the survey.

Both questionnaires were made available online; respondents were sent an email containing an invitation to take part in the study, as well as a link to the relevant survey. Participants could choose to complete the survey anonymously, or leave details for further communication.

Demotivation Groups

As mentioned in the literature review, the causes of learner dropout are many and varied. It would be unreasonable to expect a student to continue in EFL study for the entirety of their adult life, and many ($n = 39$) respondents to the survey stated that they had dropped out because they had achieved their learning goals. These respondents, as well as those who had completed the survey incorrectly ($n = 14$), were therefore omitted from the final sample.

In order to distinguish between students who had dropped out due to demotivation and those who had not re-enrolled for other reasons, respondents were divided into four groups based largely on their responses to the aforementioned open-ended questions:

- **Dropout and demotivated:** Had dropped out of language study, and did not intend to return. Expressed negative feelings toward the language, school, culture, or classmates ($n = 42$)

- **Dropout and motivated:** Had dropped out of language study, but indicated that they would return in future. Expressed positive or neutral feelings (n = 112)
- **Continuer and demotivated:** A current student at the school who expressed negative feelings, and reported a fall in motivation since starting to study (a loss of 2 or more points on a 7-point scale) (n = 9)
- **Continuer and motivated:** A current student at the school who expressed positive or neutral feelings, and reported stable or increasing motivation since starting to study (a loss of one point, no change, or any gain on a 7-point scale) (n = 97)

To ensure coding reliability, participants were sorted into one of the four groups first by the researcher, then by an Applied Linguistics doctoral candidate. Inter-rater reliability was 92%; where inconsistencies arose, the cases were discussed and resolved to achieve 100% agreement.

Results

Dropout Characteristics

Table 1 shows the demographics and levels of the survey participants, split into two groups of ‘dropout’ and ‘continuer’. The age of the participants differed significantly across the two groups ($\chi^2(5) = 20.086, p = < .001$), with more younger participants in the dropout group than in the continuers (under-25s made up 34.4% of the dropout group, compared with 18.7% of continuers).

There were significant differences in level, or proficiency, between dropouts and continuers ($\chi^2(6) = 28.301, p = < .001$). Dropouts were generally higher-level (86.7% at Intermediate or above, compared with 65% of continuers), with a far smaller representation of novice learners (4.5% compared to 20.6% of continuers).

Table 1. Age and Level Characteristics of Participants, Split into Dropouts and Continuers

| | | Dropouts (%) | Continuers (%) | Total (% of sample) |
|-------|--------------------|--------------|----------------|---------------------|
| Age | 21-25 | 53 (34.4) | 20 (18.7) | 73 (28) |
| | 26-35 | 38 (24.6) | 22 (20.5) | 60 (23) |
| | 36-45 | 32 (20.7) | 17 (15.9) | 49 (18.8) |
| | 46-55 | 15 (9.7) | 27 (25.2) | 42 (16.1) |
| | 56-65 | 11 (7.1) | 14 (13.1) | 25 (9.6) |
| | 65+ | 5 (3.2) | 7 (6.5) | 12 (4.6) |
| Level | Elementary | 7 (4.5) | 22 (20.5) | 29 (11.1) |
| | Pre-intermediate | 13 (8.4) | 15 (14) | 28 (10.7) |
| | Intermediate | 38 (24.7) | 24 (22.4) | 62 (23.8) |
| | Upper-Intermediate | 31 (20.1) | 8 (7.5) | 39 (14.9) |
| | FCE | 33 (21.4) | 12 (11.2) | 45 (17.2) |
| | CAE/Advanced | 24 (15.6) | 22 (20.5) | 46 (17.6) |
| | CPE/Proficiency | 8 (5.2) | 4 (3.7) | 12 (4.6) |
| Total | | 154 | 107 | 261 (100) |

There was no significant difference across groups in level of education, with most participants (94.1%) having completed, or being in the process of completing, a higher education degree.

Chi-square tests were also run for other binary choice items, such as having lived abroad ($\chi^2(2) = 2.518, p = n.s$) belief in whether any adult can learn a second language ($\chi^2(2) = 2.084, p = n.s$), and mono/multilingualism ($\chi^2(2) = 11.498, p < .009$, significant).

In terms of learner attitudes, differences were first examined between dropouts/continuers, and then among the four demotivation groups. The results are presented in Table 2, below.

Table 2. Independent Samples t-test Showing Differences between Dropouts and Continuers
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

| | t-test for Equality of Means (Dropout and Continuer) | | One-way ANOVA (Demotivation Groups) | |
|-----------------------|---|-----|--|----|
| | T | df | F | df |
| Contact with English | .808 | 259 | .725 | 3 |
| Course Factors | .495 | 259 | 16.090** | 3 |
| Teacher Factors | 1.419* | 259 | 17.553** | 3 |
| Motives: Work | -1453.00 | 259 | 1654* | 3 |
| Intrinsic Motivation | -.030 | 259 | .662 | 3 |
| Attitude to English | -1.467** | 259 | 1.046* | 3 |
| International Posture | 1107.00 | 259 | .596 | 3 |
| Self-Efficacy | -1.257 | 259 | 1.664 | 3 |

Between demotivation groups, there were significant differences in participant ratings of the course [$F(2, 257) = 16.090, p = 0.00$], ratings of teacher [$F(2, 257) = 17.553, p = 0.00$], learning English for work [$F(2, 257) = 1654, p = 0.042$], and attitude to English [$F(2, 257) = 1.046, p = 0.02$].

Ratings of the course were significantly lower for demotivated dropouts ($M = 4.16, SD = .$) than for motivated dropouts ($M = 5.46, SD = 1.12$). There was no significant difference between motivated dropouts, motivated continuers ($M = 5.89, SD = 1.12$) and demotivated continuers ($M = 5.11, SD = 1.04$).

A similar pattern emerged in the mean participant ratings of their teacher, where demotivated dropouts gave significantly lower ratings for their teacher than for the other three groups ($M = 4.02, SD = 1.26$), compared to ($M = 5.57, SD = 1.23$) for motivated dropouts). Full details of significant differences between means are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Mean Ratings by Group for Factors Shown to Differ Significantly

| Demotivation Group | Course Factors | | Teacher Factors | | Motives: Work | | Attitude to English | |
|---------------------------|----------------|------|-----------------|------|---------------|------|---------------------|------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD | M | SD |
| Dropout and Demotivated | 4.16 | .92 | 4.02 | 1.26 | 5.05 | 1.6 | 4.77 | 1.09 |
| Dropout and Motivated | 5.46 | 1.04 | 5.57 | 1.23 | 5.20 | 1.44 | 4.94 | 1.32 |
| Continuer and Demotivated | 5.43 | 1.04 | 5.33 | 1.18 | 4.79 | .91 | 4.4 | 1.28 |
| Continuer and Motivated | 5.11 | 1.18 | 5.83 | 1.21 | 5.66 | 1.83 | 4.69 | 1.22 |

Dropout Reasons

From a list of 10 possible items, the following nine reasons were given as having been instrumental in the students' dropout (participants who selected the tenth item, *fully accomplished my language goals*, were excluded from the study). Although an open-ended question was used to allow for additional responses, the only reason to emerge (ceiling, e.g. "I felt that I'd reached the highest level I could reach") was deemed to be too similar to 'fully accomplished one's language goals'. Results are divided between the two dropout groups and ranked in Table 4.

Table 4a. Dropout Reasons, Ranked

| Dropout Reasons (Total) n = 259 N (% of total) | |
|--|-----------|
| Lack of time | 69 (26.6) |
| Not relevant for work | 40 (15.4) |
| Personal reasons | 37 (14.3) |
| Cost of classes | 36 (13.9) |
| Method used in class | 31 (11.9) |
| Lack of progress | 16 (6.1) |
| Teacher | 15 (5.7) |
| Language difficulty | 9 (3.5) |
| Resources | 6 (2.3) |

Table 4b. Dropout Reasons for Demotivated and Motivated Groups, Ranked

| Rank | Dropout Reasons (Dropout and Demotivated) n = 118 | N (% of total) | Rank | Dropout Reasons (Dropout and Motivated) n = 141 | N (% of total) |
|------|---|----------------|------|---|----------------|
| 1 | Lack of time | 23 (19.5) | 1 | Lack of time | 46 (32.6) |
| 2 | Method used in class | 21 (17.7) | 2 | Personal reasons | 35 (24.8) |
| 3 | Not relevant for work | 20 (16.9) | 3 | Not relevant for work | 20 (14.2) |
| 4 | Cost of classes | 17 (14.4) | 4 | Cost of classes | 19 (13.5) |
| 5 | Lack of progress | 13 (11) | 5 | Method used in class | 10 (7) |
| 6 | Teacher | 11 (9.3) | 6 | Teacher | 4 (2.8) |
| 7 | Language difficulty | 8 (6.7) | 7 | Lack of progress | 3 (2.1) |
| 8 | Resources | 3 (2.5) | 8 | Resources | 3 (2.1) |
| 9 | Personal reasons | 2 (1.7) | 9 | Language difficulty | 1 (0.7) |

'Lack of time' was the most commonly cited reason for dropout across both groups; however, it represented a greater portion of the total reasons given for the dropout and motivated group (32.6%, dropout and demotivated 19.5%). For the dropout and demotivated group, there were some reasons that ranked notably higher than when all dropouts were considered as a whole: 'method used in class', 'teacher', and 'lack of progress' were all more commonly cited by demotivated dropouts. In the overall dropout group, 9 participants cited 'difficulty with the language' as a factor in dropout; 8 of these were in the dropout and demotivated group. Conversely, 'personal reasons' were cited by almost a quarter of the motivated dropout group, but by less than 2% of the demotivated group.

As well as a lack of time, there were some other dropout reasons that were similarly common for both groups: ‘cost of classes’, ‘resources’, and ‘not relevant for work’.

Responses from both dropout groups to open-ended questions were also taken into account (though not quantified). The data from Table 4 are considered in the light of these responses in the following section.

Discussion

The first aim of this study was to identify any differences between dropouts and continuers at a Spanish EFL academy. This academy attracts a wide range of ages, as seen in the demographic data, however the distribution of younger adults is skewed toward the dropout group, in which the majority are under 45 years old. Considered alongside the reasons for dropout collected for Research Question 3, among which work and time pressures prevailed, it is reasonable to conclude that young and middle-age students face greater competition from commitments that are more numerous and powerful than their older counterparts. The pressures of juggling multiple commitments were an oft-cited reason in open-ended responses:

Participant #27 (age 26-35): “I was working more or less full-time, as well as studying and doing some volunteering and other activities that took precedence over English.”

While this observation may be important in that it may contribute to any ‘profile’ of an adult language dropout, at this stage it cannot be said that younger or middle-aged learners are more at risk of dropout – especially considering the limitations of this particular study (it is possible that the younger dropouts responded more actively to requests to complete the questionnaire).

The dropout group also appeared to be characterized by non-novice learners. This resonates with well-established links between motivation and fossilization, or the learning plateau (Long, 1985; Xu, 2009); progress is less salient at higher levels and learners are more likely to lose enthusiasm over what they see as a lack of improvement. Indeed, several dropouts made comments to the same effect:

Participant #33: “In the past few years I seemed to have reached a plateau.”

Participant #48: “The methodology the school used wasn’t helping me to improve. The effort I was putting in wasn’t reflected in my progress.”

In addition, the continuer group included a higher percentage of multilingual learners than did the dropout group. There is a well-researched link between multilingualism and strategy-use in language learning (Nayak et al. 1990; Cenoz, 2003), whereby multilingual learners are able to take advantage of metalinguistic knowledge and tried-and-tested methods to progress at a faster rate than their monolingual peers. Such an advantage would naturally bring about greater intrinsic motivational boons, as well as mitigate the threat posed by a plateau which might seem, to monolingual learners, impassable.

Despite these observations, there is no pattern of differences strong enough to convincingly label one group as more ‘at-risk’ than any other. As Park & Choi (2009) noted, individual characteristics such as age and proficiency should not be ignored as they may well play a role in dropout and demotivated behaviour. Taken alone, however, they are unlikely to have a strong influence on a learner’s decision to drop out or continue.

In the same vein, Willing and Johnson (2009) noted that adults face external challenges such as financial problems and [lack of] organizational support, and suggested that these have a greater role to play than demographics in the complex phenomenon of dropout. Nevertheless, these

demographic data are important, and are a strong starting point from which to explore the learner attitudes that may have a more direct effect on a learner's decision to drop out.

In this sense, several significant differences emerged in a statistical comparison of learner internal and external attitudes. Attitudes toward the teacher and the language itself proved to be notably different between the groups, with demotivated dropouts giving more negative ratings than those that remained motivated. Interestingly, demotivated continuers expressed more negative feelings toward the language than did demotivated dropouts. Significant differences also arose in attitudes toward the need to learn English for work purposes and to the course itself, with the most demotivated groups reporting less of a need to learn English for work or career prospects, as well as a more general dissatisfaction with the course. Indeed, the course and the teacher were two themes that frequently arose in open-ended questions:

Participant #29 (dropout and demotivated): "I didn't like how the new teacher explained things; they didn't do any exciting activities or anything."

Participant #19 (dropout and demotivated): "The teacher's method was awful; instead of motivating the students, it ended up demotivating them."

Participant #132 (dropout and demotivated): "Every two hours felt like an eternity. The pace of the course and the teacher's explanations were terrible."

Though attitudes toward the teacher have been found to act as a strong demotive for young learners and teenagers in previous research (Oxford, 2003; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Ushioda, 1998), this result confirms that they are also a salient demotive for adults. Adult learners are typically understood to be more strongly motivated by internal pressures, being less easily affected by their learning environment (Bernat, 2006). The teacher's attitude and behaviour can clearly have a lasting effect on adult student motivation, though, as noted by one 65+ aged participant two years after their decision to drop out:

Participant #140 (dropout and motivated): "One teacher treated me terribly because of my age...they thought we were imbeciles. If we knew the language, we wouldn't be there."

While the learners in Ushioda's (1998) were successful in limiting the negative effect of teacher demotives by re-taking control of their motivation (a process referred to as self-motivation) it is clear that, for some learners at least, negative attitudes toward the classroom environment are not dealt with in such a way and can lead to dropout.

Interestingly, there was also a difference between demotivation groups for work as a motive for learning English. Those participants found in the 'dropout and demotivated' and 'continuer and demotivated' groups gave lower mean ratings to statements connecting English with work or employment opportunities. Again, this resonates with findings from Park and Choi's study (2009), in which it was determined that students with a stronger organizational framework were more motivated and therefore more likely to persist. Continuing students in this study frequently made mention of their need to speak English for work:

Participant #212 (continuer and motivated): "I'm able to practice what I learn in class at work, so I can feel myself progressing very fast."

Learners who had dropped out also had, perhaps surprisingly, more positive feelings toward the English language than did continuers. The lowest mean rating was from those who were currently studying but were judged to be demotivated, while the highest mean rating was from those who had dropped out but remained motivated. Although this may be due to the recency (or lack thereof) of these participants' exposure to the language, it is worth noting that, unlike the teacher and the

course, a student's attitude to the language is more of an internal than an external factor. As Ushioda (2001) found, language-learning success is commonly attributed to internal factors, while lack of it is ascribed to external factors like the teaching method, learning task, or course. This theme, of attribution to external factors, is recurrent in the analysis of students' reasons for dropping out.

The second aim of this study was to identify the salient demotives listed by participants, and the third to identify which of these could be linked to cases of dropout. The most common reason given by dropouts, across both groups, was a perceived lack of time. Care should be taken when interpreting this as a cause; apart from being a victimless external factor onto which dropouts can attribute their dropout, research has shown that adults tend to overestimate the time spent on activities that they see as menial or laborious (Robinson et al., 2011). Is lack of time, then, a cause of demotivated and dropout behaviour, or merely an indicator? The answer may be found in responses to open-ended questions.

Participant #51 (dropout and demotivated): "My university degree has an in-company component, which didn't leave a lot of time for study. I also wanted to study another language, so I took up German."

Participant #18: (dropout and motivated): "I was working full-time and had little time to study. I didn't pass the exam... I don't know why they were using that methodology. So in the end I decided that I'd go somewhere else to learn English."

Participant #46 (dropout and demotivated): "They ask for 8 or 10 hours a week...but a lot of it is working with the book. What about speaking and correcting errors?"

These responses, though few in comparison to the number that cited genuine problems with conflicting schedules, nevertheless indicate that lack of time alone does not account for dropout behaviour (unless arising from a sudden, external change in circumstances, as noted by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013)). What is abundantly clear in any interpretation of the responses, however, is that students who lack time to study or attend class are particularly at risk of dropout, and should be recognized as such by teachers and administrators.

Considering that differences in attitudes toward the course and the teacher were found between groups of dropouts and continuers, it is unsurprising to find that, when asked what affected their decision to stop studying English, demotivated dropouts cited these same two factors more frequently than did their motivated counterparts. Again, the L2 learning environment proves to be the common mark for what students perceive to be the cause of their demotivation, as previously shown by Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) and Song and Kim (2017). Although 'lack of progress' and 'difficulty with the language' were cited by few dropouts in comparison with the reasons mentioned previously, it is interesting to note that these internal factors were given mainly by those in the demotivated group – in the case of 'difficulty with the language', only one participant who intended to study again admitted to finding the language troubling, compared with 8 in the demotivated group. The 'lack of progress' noted here by demotivated dropouts resonates with findings from the first research question, in which non-novice learners were found to comprise a larger portion of the dropout group. Taken together, the results from this study reveal a discrepancy between learners' language *objectives* and their *outcomes* – although learners acknowledged that they had not reached their proficiency ceiling, they still found the stagnation of their ability frustrating enough drop out from their language study, at best temporarily and at worst, permanently.

Participant #51 (dropout and demotivated): "I got to the advanced level, and I felt that my level had stalled. The grade I was given (excellent, I think) didn't correspond with my impression of my ability. I felt like I was much worse."

Finally, the differences between two groups of dropout can help us to understand which demotives are more likely to lead to cases of demotivation and permanent dropout. Some of these reasons (cost of classes, lack of time) were not only similarly cited by both groups, but also tend to be static for the duration of the course or courses. Others, such as ‘personal reasons’ were cited in the majority by participants who retained positive feelings toward the study of English, and are therefore unlikely to lead to demotivated dropout behaviour. With reasons such as ‘method used in class’, ‘teacher’, and ‘lack of progress’, there is reason to believe that temporary dissatisfaction may provoke more permanent demotivation, and ultimately cause the student to drop language learning altogether. When considering the practical applications of these findings, therefore, we might keep in mind this apparent impact of in-class factors on student motivation.

Applications and Conclusions

The results from this study have given some important insight into what learners perceive to be the reasons for their dropout. While it is important to remember that learners have a tendency (particularly in a retrospective sense) to project their decisions onto external factors, there are nevertheless some helpful indicators for researchers and practitioners. Principal among these is the affirmation of the role of the teacher and the course in adult learners – although adult learners are generally thought to have a wider array of learning strategies and motives outside of the L2 learning environment itself, it is important for practitioners to keep in mind that a teacher and their course can still be a decisive factor in an adult learner’s motivation. More precisely, there appears to be a need for practitioners to consider learners’ lack of time, real or perceived, when designing and implementing courses. Similarly, practitioners may play a greater part in helping to resolve the discrepancy between a learner’s plateau and their ceiling – Richards (2008) suggests a course for higher levels based on highlighting the gap in higher-level learners’ knowledge, and showing progress at every stage. Equally, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2017) explore some practical ways in which adult motivation to learn may be enhanced in general terms; further research, however, is needed in the area of adult language learning, and more specifically into the intermediate plateau.

The demotivated learners in this study have also highlighted the negative effect on the learning experience of a disconnect between course content and future goals. Students who were enrolled in classes for work or university purposes reported more positive feelings toward their experience, while those who enrolled with the objective of ‘improving communication’ or ‘reinforcing knowledge’ were more likely to be found in the dropout group. One such learner, who gave ‘knowing other languages’ as their reason for enrolling, reported the following when asked about the cause of their dropout:

Participant #121 (dropout and demotivated): “I felt like I wasn’t making any progress, and the classes didn’t seem to be focussed enough.”

In this respect, strategies for scaffolding learners towards more specific and rigorous goal-setting, such as those suggested by Marshall (2002), may prove to be a useful tool – not only at the start of the course, but as a periodic reflection exercise.

Perhaps the most fitting conclusion to draw from this research is that there is no one type of dropout student, nor any one dropout behaviour. The adult language learning experience is typified by the competing pressures of work, family, and social life, the need to reconcile their desire to learn with the strains of the classroom environment, and, perhaps most importantly of all, the ever-present knowledge that partaking in a voluntary activity and that they could be doing something else – in this respect it is fundamentally different from child and teenage language learning.

The sample of this study was selected from one Spanish academy, whose students tend to be educated to degree level or higher. Therefore, the results presented here may not be generalizable to adult learners in other institutions or countries, or who do not have a university education. Further, this study was conducted in an entirely retrospective manner, meaning that the participant attitudes must be understood to involve the inevitable modification of hindsight. As Ushioda (2013) states, any such qualitative study is limited “to what the participant might rationalise retrospectively.” There is therefore a clear need for a longitudinal study into demotivated and dropout behaviour, in order to validate or reject these retrospective findings and to offer practitioners more insight into the practical ways to tackle student demotivation.

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Appendix

English Translation of Dropout Survey

We are interested in what motivates a person when they decide to learn a language. This questionnaire is divided into four parts, contains 55 questions, and takes about 15 minutes to complete. All responses will be made completely anonymous. Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project.

1. Are you currently studying English? Y/N
2. If so, how are you studying? *Check all that apply*
 - A. Private classes

- B. Self-study
 - C. Language Academy
 - D. Official school of languages
 - E. Through your work
 - F. Online classes
 - G. University course
 - H. Study abroad programme
 - I. Other: _____
3. How have you studied before? *Check all that apply*
 - A. Private classes
 - B. Self-study
 - C. Language Academy
 - D. Official school of languages
 - E. Through your work
 - F. Online classes
 - G. University course
 - H. Study abroad programme
 - I. Other: _____
 4. Approximately when did you stop learning English at (insert school name here)? *Short answer*
 5. How long had you been learning English when you stopped studying at (insert school name here)?
 - A. Less than a year
 - B. 1-2 years
 - C. 3-6 years
 - D. 7-10 years
 - E. 10+ years
 6. Which level did you study at (insert school name here)?
 - A. Elementary
 - B. Pre-Intermediate
 - C. Intermediate
 - D. Upper-intermediate
 - E. FCE
 - F. CAE
 - G. CPE
 7. When you started studying English, how motivated were you? *7-Point Likert*
 8. What was your motivation for studying English when you started? *Short answer*
 9. Which factors influenced your decision to stop learning English?
 - A. The teacher
 - B. The learning method
 - C. The resources (books and materials)
 - D. Work-related issues
 - E. Lack of time available to study
 - F. Personal reasons
 - G. Lack of progress
 - H. Cost of classes
 - I. I had reached my desired level
 - J. Difficulty of learning the language
 - K. Others
 10. Please briefly explain your answer to the previous question, e.g. *I was working full-time and studying at the weekends. Long answer*
 11. When you were studying at (insert school name here) how much contact with English did you have outside of school (films, songs, internet)? *7-Point Likert*

12. When you were studying at (insert school name here) how often did you speak English outside of school? *7-Point Likert*
13. When you were studying at (insert school name here) did you have any friends that spoke mainly English? *7-Point Likert*
14. The pace of the course at (insert school name here) was suitable for me. *7-Point Likert*
15. The level of challenge was suitable for me. *7-Point Likert*
16. I liked the books and materials used. *7-Point Likert*
17. I had a good relationship with my teacher. *7-Point Likert*
18. The teacher covered what I want to learn. *7-Point Likert*
19. I liked the teacher's method. *7-Point Likert*
20. I wanted to learn English to help me in my career. *7-Point Likert*
21. I enjoyed the process of learning English. *7-Point Likert*
22. I signed up for classes because I wanted to learn, not because I felt obliged to. *7-Point Likert*
23. When I learned a new word or structure, I felt satisfied. *7-Point Likert*
24. Learning English came naturally to me. *7-Point Likert*
25. I felt that I spoke better English than my classmates. *7-Point Likert*
26. I liked the sound of spoken English. *7-Point Likert*
27. I liked how English grammar is constructed. *7-Point Likert*
28. I think that English is an easy language to learn. *7-Point Likert*
29. I'm interested in international news. *7-Point Likert*
30. I like being with people from other countries. *7-Point Likert*
31. I can see myself working for an international company in future. *7-Point Likert*
32. If I had to, I could reach a good level of English. *7-Point Likert*
33. I can see myself using English at work in future. *7-Point Likert*
34. Having a good level of English helps to get a good job. *7-Point Likert*
35. Do you think that anyone can learn a second language? Why, why not? *Long answer*
36. Do you think you will study English again someday? Why/Why not? *Short answer*
37. If you decide to study again, what will you change? *Long answer*
38. Would you like to add anything else about your decision to stop studying English? *Long answer*
39. How old are you?
 - A. 16-20
 - B. 21-25
 - C. 26-35
 - D. 36-45
 - E. 46-55
 - F. 56-65
 - G. 65+
40. What is your native language? *Short answer*
41. Do you speak any other languages? To what level? *Short answer*
42. Which languages did you study at school? *Short answer*
43. At what age did you start learning English at school?
 - A. 4-7
 - B. 8-11
 - C. 12-15
 - D. 15-18
44. Have you ever lived abroad? If so, please give details (country, duration, reasons) *Long answer*
45. *Short answer*
46. What is your highest level of education?
 - A. Primary school
 - B. Secondary school
 - C. 16+ college/vocational college

- D. University or professional degree
 - E. Master/PhD
47. *Short answer*
48. We are interested in speaking to some respondents about their answers to the questionnaire. Would you be available for a 10-minute follow-up interview?
- A. Yes, I'm available
 - B. No, I'm not available
49. Email address. *Short answer*

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