Demotivating sociocultural influences among English majors in China

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In this paper, I share the results of a year-long panel study of undergraduate English majors (N = 30) at two universities in Mainland China that explored the motivational consequences of the dynamic relationship between the individual learner and context. Using Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System as a theoretical framework, I collected data through three rounds of interviews, during which time students completed and extended reflective motivational timelines. I focus in this paper on the processes through which sociocultural influences became integrated into these English majors’ L2 self and eventually affected their motivation to learn English.

A key finding I share is the impact that demotivating contextual factors can have on the learner. English ability in the workplace has long been the competitive advantage of English majors in China; however, because of rising English proficiency levels among the general population of Chinese undergraduates, English majors are increasingly looked upon as lacking in specialized vocational qualifications and career prospects compared with peers in more job-promising disciplines (e.g., economics or finance). Consequently, majoring in English has lost much of its former cachet. Many of my participants, most whom had not actively chosen the English major but were instead allocated it by the university, internalized this sentiment and developed a negative self-perception regarding their status as English majors. “These days, English major equals no major” was a frequent lament. This disillusionment weakened their L2 self-concept, created dissonance in their L2 self, and negatively impacted their English learning motivation.

Throughout East Asia and beyond, English majors and their departments are facing similar motivational and existential crises. I conclude with curricular reforms and pedagogical strategies that could help inoculate students’ L2 self-concept against the pervasive "English major equals no major" message.

Keywords: Demotivation, China, Self.