EFL Students’ ‘Unmotivation’ Toward Writing Classroom: Bangladeshi University Teachers’ Narrative Reflections

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ABSTRACT
In L2 research tradition worldwide the concept of motivation has evolved as a well researched, theoretical construct. On the contrary, the notion “unmotivation” (Sakui & Cowie, 2012) has remained equally underresearched as an area of study. The present study is an attempt to embark on scholarly investigation on learner unmotivation in the context of Bangladesh. Here, four EFL teachers from three different universities offer narratives on student writers’ unmotivation in writing class. The participants reveal the factors causing learner unmotivation as well as share the strategies for handling unmotivation. According to the participant teachers, factors yielding unmotivation in student writers include personal, social, and national level factors, alongside teachers’ lesson planning and teaching. To address these factors actions such as reinforcing students positively, offering them freedom during learning, notifying them early about a lesson’s significance and objectives, and revising the approach to providing feedback can be effective. On the basis of these findings, derived through Narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen, Benson, & Chik, 2014), the research offers some pedagogical and research implications at the end.

Keywords: Narrative inquiry, unmotivation, amotivation, demotivation, EFL writing class

1. Introduction

Did you ponder about your students’ indifference to classroom learning? Language-learning-failure is although a widespread and massively shared phenomenon around the globe, researchers tend to show more interest in what motivate(s) learners and how to motivate them further (for example, Cheng
& Dörnyei, 2007; Ginsberg & Wlodkowski, 2000; Dörnyei, 2006; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998 etc.). Perhaps this is a reason why a historical overview of theories, dating back since 1959 till the turn of the century, on motivation to learn second or foreign language is available in L2 literature (see Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011 for details). In contrast, the notion of learner ‘unmotivation’—the negative counterpart of learner motivation—appears to be fairly underresearched in language education (Sakui & Cowie, 2012). Moreover, because of the dearth of knowledge regarding the concept, academics have less control over it; and these render unmotivation “the dark side of motivation” (p. 205).

The term “unmotivation”, proposed by Sakui and Cowie (2012), refers to the similar but subtly different ideas named “amotivation” and “demotivation” together. Amotivation means that condition in which a learner lacks motivation to do any task due to nervousness and feeling of inability (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Noels, Pelletier, Clément, and Vallerand (2000) believe that people can feel amotivated when they

…see no relation between their actions and consequences of those actions…In such a situation, people have no reason, intrinsic or extrinsic, for performing the activity, and they would be expected to quit the activity as soon as possible. (p. 40)

On the other hand, demotivation, according to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), refers to a situation in which a learner loses his/her motivation to any task due to various external forces. One being demotivated means that the person used to be motivated earlier but has lost his/her interest or commitment for certain reasons. In a nutshell, “‘amotivation’ is related to general outcome expectations that are unrealistic for some reason, whereas ‘demotivation’ is related to specific external causes” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 140).
Brophy (2010) informs that in general education the phenomenon of student unmotivation is of significant concern; sadly, it is yet to receive much care in motivation research within language teaching (Nikolov, 2001). Scarcity of research on unmotivation is a definite shortcoming for EFL teachers in comprehensively addressing their learner unmotivation, let alone EFL student writer unmotivation, in foreign language contexts such as Bangladesh. So that language teachers can effectively guide students through the dark path of unmotivation toward motivation, the present qualitative study taps on EFL teachers’ experiences of learner unmotivation in writing classroom in Bangladesh. Specifically, answers to the following questions are sought in this inquiry:

1. What factors contribute to learner unmotivation in EFL writing class?
2. How do teachers handle student writers’ unmotivation?

2. Students’ Unmotivation in Literature

The L2 literature archives a vast quantity of studies on various aspects of learners’ motivation, but a limited number on unmotivation, to learn a second or foreign language. Dornyei and Ushioda’s (2011, p. 39) overview of L2 motivation theories testifies that “…the study of L2 motivation has evolved as a rich and largely independent research field, originating in a concern to address the unique social, psychological, behavioural and cultural complexities that acquiring a new communication code entails”. To further illustrate, a good number of longitudinal studies focus on the global change in motivation and report a general decline in students’ motivational level (see Chambers, 1999; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Inbar, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Shohamy, 2001; Tachibana, Matsukawa, & Zhong, 1996; Wild, Enzle, & Hawkins, 1992 for details). Other inquiries such as Dornyei and Csizer (1998) and Guilloteaux and Dornyei (2008)
unveil the effective teaching strategies for motivating learners. However, Babad (2009) criticizes all for being unable to explain and find a way out to learners’ unmotivation in academic set up.

Only a few studies are pragmatic in this vein which attempt to understand students’ academic unmotivation, particularly in the context of language classroom, with a view to finding solutions. These researches consider teachers as the primary agent who can drive learners away from unmotivation. Falout, Elwood, and Hood (2009), for instance, research how to handle language learners’ unmotivation in classroom; in doing so, they consider teachers’ adopted strategies for managing unmotivated students. Sakui and Cowie’s (2008) study reports two Japanese teachers’ contrasting experiences of success and failure in dealing with learners’ unmotivation. The narrative research shows how one of the teachers successfully handled language learner unmotivation in class whilst the other witnessed perplexity and failure due to the differing results of employed motivational strategies.

Reflecting on Bangladeshi students’ motivational aspects in writing, Khan and Rahaman (this issue) write that those students, who are reluctant to think and write in English language class, suffer from the effect of colonialism in the corresponding context. However, to understand Bangladeshi learners’ unmotivation in EFL writing class empirical investigation is essential as many of the ELT research in Bangladesh are intuition based (Rahaman, 2015). Dash (2002) insists conducting further inquiry on intuitive observations instead of taking them for granted. The current study, in a way, is a venture to address, what Rahaman (2015, p. 525) terms as, “creative impotency” in Bangladesh’s ELT research practice.
3. Method of the Study

In the present research I resort to the principle of narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) for data elicitation and analysis. Narrative inquiry is an “...umbrella term for research involving stories” which “...brings storytelling and research together either by using stories as research data or by using storytelling as a tool for data analysis or presentation of findings” (Barkhuizen et al., 2014, p. 3). The narrative frame of research, through various unique qualitative research instruments such as narrative interview (Jupp, 2006), narrative reflective writing (Barkhuizen & Benson, 2008), narrative frame (Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008), and so forth, accurately captures teachers’ experiences (see Menard-Warwick, 2008; Tsui, 2007; Liu & Xu, 2011 for example). In this study I particularly use narrative interview to obtain the participating EFL teachers’ experiences as well as understandings regarding student-writers’ unmotivation.

Initially I contacted four local teachers of English, namely Mina, Raju, Mithu, and Rita (pseudonyms being used for ethical reasons). They teach English language to first year undergraduates in three different universities in Dhaka. All of them hold MA degree; except Raju, who specializes in English literature; the rest of the three participants are TESOL/ELT experts. The teachers’ experience of teaching ranges between two to twelve years. Two of these teachers are male and the other two are female; they are also diverse in terms of employment type: the junior-most one being a probationary teacher and the rest being confirmed employees.

The teachers were briefed about the research objective in the first place and were requested to participate in it. Though they were known to me, thus conveniently sampled (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007), I assured them about the anonymous presentation of their experiences while reporting
data. I also obtained their consent to audio-record the conversations for transcription purpose. Then I sat with individual teachers for one-to-one narrative interview. The narrative instrument is particularly beneficial to generate “detailed ‘stories’ of experience” (Riessman, 2006, p. 189); and in learning about “experience in all its complexity, details count: specific incidents, not general evaluations of experience” (p. 190). However, each participant was interviewed twice; and the interview sessions generally lasted between 25-40 minutes. The second round of conversation was particularly useful as it offered scope to ask the participant teachers pertinent probing questions that arose after the first round of interview. In between interviews I observed their classes to triangulate data. To ensure the best representation of participant teachers’ responses, their quotations and excerpts are incorporated to the findings of the research. This, I believe, should assist readers to relate with the teachers’ experiences of learner unmotivation in Bangladesh’s EFL writing class.

In this study a thematic approach to data analysis (see Benson, 2014 for details) is adopted to describe the narrative data. First I read the transcribed interview data thoroughly to develop an initial understanding of the participant teachers’ experiences. This “preliminary exploratory analysis” (Cresswell, 2005, p. 237) also helped trace the potential thematic codes. Next, I arranged the codes to compare and find out their relationships with each other. As the thematic codes became apparent, I reorganized and merged similar codes based on inter code relationships to identify the potential themes. During this process, I recursively visited the data corpus and meticulously scrutinized coding within each theme. Finally, I compared the derived themes, elucidated in the following section, with one another and assessed their representativeness of the overall data set.
4. Findings

4.1 Causes of Unmotivation in Learners: Amotivation in Focus

Teachers’ views about why students go to EFL writing class with no motivation are multifarious in nature. Mina, for example, presumes that Bangladeshi learners’ absence of motivation toward writing skill is rooted in the corresponding education system. She reports that none of “…English medium schools, Bangla medium schools…encourage students to write. They memorize an essay and write that down in the exam—SSC, HSC, even in O levels, A levels”. In adding how writing as a language skill is treated in schools where English is the medium of instruction, Rita reveals:

I have taught in English medium schools. They are focused on their academic course books, on what would come in exam…We don’t actually encourage them to write. Even if you think about the writing competitions, once in a year they are held; sometimes not even once in a year they are held. English medium schools are so much corrupted in that sense...So if we don’t encourage students to write on their own, if we don’t have this scope of creative writing, how will they develop their skills? Why will they do it coming to the university level? Why will they develop any kind of interest?

Mithu observes that students’ absence of motivation in writing class is caused by their surrounding social forces. He specifically refers to the influence of community in which learners live in. Formal learning in the community if remains undervalued, there is ample possibility for the practice to be transmitted into young minds growing up in that milieu. Thus, the individuals grow up without realizing the significance of formal education and subsequently step in various stages of academic learning having no enthusiasm to learn. Students can also lose motivation to learn if their resident community overstresses the significance of formal education. The heightened social expectations to attain academic success
burden learners immensely and erode their overall learning motivation.

Students’ personal laziness is another factor that makes them resistant to learning writing in classroom. According to Mithu,

Writing is relatively a laborious cognitive task. Hence, some learners bear negative feelings about it and show reluctance to undergo the process. This is indeed a significant pathological problem and requires researching to find out how the pathological crisis arouses.

Raju informs that learners’ certain life events do have stake in their tattered motivational outfit. The memories of the events can be so long lasting that even after quite a while the students might remain involved in the experience and be resistant to move forward from it:

I have a student in my writing class who is very good at writing, but looks detached from the class. I called him in my office and inquired about his indifference. He told, he got undergraduate admission at a US university off late; but he was extremely frustrated not being able to be there only for visa restriction.

Mithu marks these students, who visit classroom without any motivation, as a “generic category”. This category of learners “...do not go only to the writing class amotivated; they go to every class with zero motivation. Students as such have no interest in any subject of study. Formal education itself is disturbing to them”.

4.2 Causes of Unmotivation in Learners: Demotivation in Focus

Conversation with teachers suggests, the reasons why students arrive at EFL writing class with certain degree of motivation but lose that eventually have direct correspondence with
teachers’ classroom planning and teaching. To illustrate, lessons that are poorly planned and delivered do demotivate students in the learning process. Raju points out that if a writing lesson sets unrealistic goals, such as improving learners’ language as well as teaching them structure of an academic essay in the same class, it is likely to frustrate them. Alongside, a lesson that lacks variation in terms of activities reduces student writers’ attention to class procedures. For Mithu, lessons that do not pay heed to learners’ interest mount demotivation in them. He says, for example, “…if a lesson asks students to write essay on a topic that does not match their taste, the student writers will certainly behave passively in accomplishing the task”. Rita adds that teachers’ vague instructions leave students perplexed during the learning process which is also responsible for crumbling their motivation level.

Learners get demotivated in English writing class when the lesson being taught appears irrelevant to them. Rita opines that learners always seek pertinence of the taught lesson with their learning needs since

…they do not have a clear conception about the need to improve writing in English in different genres. They consider investing effort in writing as meaningless. The process of developing and improving in writing is unclear and hazy to them.

Therefore, any form of mismatch between classroom task and their immediate necessity raises doubt in students’ mind and make them less attached to the writing class. Mithu experiences similar learner demotivation while teaching writing to a group of engineering professionals:

In my class students follow the system of reading followed by critical writing. Initially they did it with interest. After a few classes they appeared low in motivation to do the critical writing. When I explicitly asked them about their altered learning behavior,
they replied, the knowledge of critical writing was not fulfilling their immediate professional need of writing report.

Mithu further maintains that incompatible teaching method is another reason why student writers find EFL writing class demotivating. Besides assessing the relevance of a lesson, learners tend to weigh the suitability of the method being used to teach a particular lesson. To exemplify,

Students might go to the English language class with the purpose of building up a good stock of vocabularies...to use those later in their writing. If the teacher conducts the vocabulary lesson through lots of contextualization and reading, that would reduce learners’ interest in the lesson. They would feel demotivated as the teaching method is inapt to enlarge vocabulary stock within a short period.

Adverse learning experience is also a factor responsible for students’ loss of motivation toward the writing class. Raju specifically mentions teachers’ unfriendly attitude, coupled with harsh criticisms instead of encouragement, creates a horrid learning atmosphere. Learners’ motivation further deteriorates when they have to accomplish challenging tasks without any assistance and afterwards receive no feedback, only negative if any. Mithu supplements:

If a student is disinterested in English writing class and, let say, interested in math class, it might be because of the fact that his/her desired learning style in the language class does not match with the teaching style. Perhaps the learner’s understanding of the concept of learning mismatches with the existing practice...This badly harms their motivation during learning.

4.3 Strategies of Handling Unmotivated Students

The tactics teachers use to handle unmotivated students and their unmotivation are mostly overlapping in nature. Teachers’ knowledge and experience derived these strategies were applied and tested by the participant teachers in their writing classrooms. The strategy that is unanimously considered most
effective in dealing with learner unmotivation is reinforcing students positively by putting some extra effort. Raju, for instance, constantly tries to encourage unmotivated students in the class by instilling positive thinking in them. In doing so, he exemplifies students from previous batches who initially struggled to write but finally passed with flying colors, simply by diligence. The teacher stretches that it is equally important to remind students, particularly the unmotivated ones, about the benefit of practicing writing regularly, to praise the tiniest of their effort, to offer regular assistance, and to motivate beyond classroom. Overall, maintaining a friendly and approachable relationship with students is peremptory.

Mithu emphasizes on counseling and building up rapport with unmotivated students as a way to reinforce them positively:

Counseling outside the class is useful. If learners can be convinced about writing as a process, which can be developed over time, they would realize the true meaning of writing. Also, things like providing additional learning materials, referring to reference books during counseling period do show a teacher’s caring attitude. It motivates them immensely. You know, personalizing is crucial in handling unmotivated learners.

Teachers also advocate designing writing lessons in such a way that offers students a significant degree of, in Mithu’s words, “creative liberty”. By this he means to say that learners should enjoy freedom to participate in the writing process so that they can exhibit all their creativities, let say, in “choosing their own topic for paragraph or essay writing, in expressing opinion during class discussion”, and so forth. Mithu furthers how he offers creative liberty to his students in the writing class to address their unmotivation:

I try to select materials according to learners’ interest; for example, if a group of learners is interested in automobile engineering, I select related materials for pre-writing activity. Thus they feel the
ownership of the tasks, enjoy freedom, and find their interest and previous knowledge being recognized by the teacher and the peers. Being motivated, they come out of the inert, drowsy state.

As a third strategy of preventing students’ motivation from getting diluted, Rita suggests informing students about significance and objectives of the lesson early in the class.

There are a lot of ways which a teacher can follow to motivate students. One could be telling the importance of a lesson. It might be that sometimes students do not realize why they are doing that (a particular task). Sometimes they are pretty much skeptical about what they are doing…So before teaching summary writing if we tell them that they will need to summarize very big texts in their future professional life…, I think that will motivate them…For the time being they are motivated; but of course they will think about the long run.

Another way thorough which learners’ unmotivation can be minimized, as Mina feels, is revising teachers’ approach to feedback. She believes, if feedback initially abounds in students’ writing and if they are mostly negative, student writers lose confidence drastically. This is why the teacher believes:

…feedback should be concise, less at the beginning. It can be a very few things. It can be on the major grammatical points at the beginning, and there should be more positive feedback…If we can motivate them through positive feedback and positive reinforcement that they have good content or good skill of language or good grammatical skills, they will feel like…I have these good things in me; so I can further work on it and, may be, I can be benefitted from it somehow…They will automatically feel motivated because they will think that their writing was not judged so much critically.

Handling of students’ unmotivation in writing classroom has seen success through frequent philosophizing and highlighting of writing process as an organism as well. Frequently reminding students about what writing is and why writing is important, about the role of thinking in writing, and
about the value of cognitive growth makes them conscious about the living mechanism of writing. Mithu adds, “It would be more rewarding if the ideas are discussed relating with their life instead of being discussed exclusively theoretically…A five-minute-discussion can be done in every class when students settle down and start paying attention to the class procedures”.

5. Discussion and Implications

Results of the study indicate that learner unmotivation, just like learner motivation (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011), is a complex phenomenon. While students’ amotivation originates from a number of inter-related personal, social, and national factors, demotivation has its stem in teachers’ lesson planning and teaching. Notably, none of the factors that amotivate learners, such as flawed education system, influence of community of practice, pathological phenomenon of students’ personal lethargy, and their certain life events, cannot be directly controlled by teachers; thus they are teacher external factors. On the other hand, the factors that instrument learner demotivation—defective planning and delivery of lessons, lessons lacking relevance to students, incompatible teaching method, and adverse learning experience—can largely be regulated by teachers; thus they are teacher internal factors.

Since teachers have barely any grip over the external factors, they can stretch their empathetic hand toward amotivated learners. In this regard, teachers’ passion for their profession is the only intrinsic asset they can look forward to. Teachers’ enthusiastic, compassionate role would surely motivate students intrinsically as “enthusiasm does not merely provide a momentary “high” that immediately dissipates” (Patrick et al., 2000, p. 232). This is supported by empirical research as well (see Wild et al., 1992; Carbonneau, Vallerand, Fernet, & Guay, 2008 for details). However, researchers have
the scope to investigate whether amotivated students’ personal laziness is pathological or not; and if it is a pathological problem, what its source is. In this vein, case studies, life history narratives, and even ethnographies can richly inform personnel in the academia regarding individual learners’ distinct amotivational backdrop for future reference.

Teacher internal factors of demotivation can largely be addressed under teachers’ discretion. As the data show, due to academics’ inappropriate judgment and decision making while designing and delivering lessons many of the students are left displaying apathy toward writing lessons. Their motivation level further deteriorates and they finally withdraw themselves from the learning process as “…increasing cognitive, linguistic and curricular demands and social pressures set in” (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011, pp. 142-43). Hence, academics can consider planning and designing multilayered but mutually connected writing classes. This would allow learners to self assess their progress after completion of every stage of writing and set personal target for the next stage to keep pace with the overall lesson objective. Importantly, the lessons ought to be learner inclusive in which students can sense belongingness to as well as ownership of the classes. Beside this, offering them tutorial support outside the class as additional assistance to classroom learning can potentially enhance learner motivation when they find their teachers working hard selflessly.

While teachers would step up to deal with learner unmotivation in EFL writing class, the institutions have a role to play simultaneously. They should design curricula in such a way that serves students’ specific needs and interest. In this regard, specialized programs such as English for specific purpose (ESP), English for academic purpose (EAP), English for general purpose (EGP), and the like are a few of many options that institutions can offer their students. Moreover, instead of making all such courses compulsory, educational
bodies can give students the liberty to register in any one or two of them. This would largely prevent unmotivation to creep up in learners, which would have happened if they were forced to enroll in programs of their disinterest. However, teachers have to conduct the advisory role here. Many students might not have the prior knowledge to estimate the relevance and significance of a particular language course. Teachers’ counseling and guidance would assist individual students to select appropriate course(s) according to their immediate and long term goals.

6. Conclusion

Whereas motivation has already emerged as a distinct theory in L2 research, unmotivation is still at its infancy as a field of study. This prompted the current inquiry to intervene and investigate EFL student writers’ unmotivation in Bangladeshi context. As the findings suggest, learner unmotivation is a complex phenomenon, the solutions to which are equally complex and challenging to attain. Only dedicated research focus on unmotivation from a wide spectrum and diverse classroom context can offer good harvest to the field of inquiry in the long run. At this stage, it is essential to develop a deep, clear, and non-generalized understanding regarding the concept of unmotivation. Particularly, what factors unmotivate teachers in motivating learners and how teachers deal with those factors can be considered for immediate scholarly attention. In this vein, findings from the current study can potentially illuminate future research practice as such in EFL/ESL contexts similar to Bangladesh.
References


