



Coming to Grips with Demotivating Factors for Postgraduate Students: Puzzle-Based Instruction as a Lens on Learning English

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Original Research Abstract

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The present study aimed to explore the factors that demotivate postgraduate students in learning English and to consider how Puzzle-Based Instruction (PBI) may provide an alternative framework to mitigate such challenges. Specifically, it investigated differences in demotivation levels and related factors among Iranian EFL students pursuing M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). To this end, 30 postgraduate TEFL learners participated in the study by completing a demotivation questionnaire designed by Sakai and Kikuchi (2009). The collected data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test. The findings revealed a significant difference in demotivation levels between M.A. and Ph.D. students. Moreover, several prominent demotivating factors were identified within the Iranian EFL context, including unsuitable course materials, inadequate educational facilities, test-related pressures, non-communicative teaching methods, and teachers' competence and teaching styles. By situating these results within the lens of PBI—an approach that emphasizes problem-solving, active learning, and engagement—the study highlights possible pedagogical shifts to counteract demotivation. These findings offer valuable implications for language teachers, materials developers, and teacher trainers, contributing to a deeper understanding of motivational challenges and providing insights for enhancing learning outcomes in EFL settings through more interactive and learner-centered methods such as PBI.

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1. Introduction

English is recognized as an international language, used by people from diverse nations, cultures, and backgrounds. It has emerged as a vital means of

communication in fields such as business, education, and entertainment (Sak, 2022). As a global language, English plays a significant role in daily life (Al-Jarf, 2022). As the language of globalization, English is a vital skill for those seeking international opportunities.

Additionally, it is the language of science and technology, making it essential for professionals in these fields (Huang et al., 2022). It significantly affects students by enhancing their communication skills, career prospects, and cultural understanding. Learning English expands opportunities for studying, working, and traveling abroad (Aukerman & Chambers Schuldt, 2021). Furthermore, it improves communication abilities, aids success in various fields, and broadens cultural awareness, promoting tolerance and acceptance (Sak, 2022). Accordingly, professional literature on second language acquisition and learning emphasizes various internal factors that influence the language learning process (A'zamjonovna & Murotovna, 2023; Isaee & Barjesteh, 2025; Tai & Zhao, 2024). Numerous studies have demonstrated that internal elements such as learners' beliefs, aptitude, anxiety, and motivation can significantly enhance learning outcomes (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Rochmawati et al., 2023).

However, what is often considered a crucial factor in the language acquisition process is a learner's orientation and their disposition to learn a language (Meshkat & Hassani, 2012). The professional preparation of future specialists depends on multiple factors, with motivation, attitudes, cognitive needs and interests, determination, and volitional qualities playing a central role (Pivneva et al., 2022). The structure of a student's motives, which are formed during higher education, is the core of the personality of a future specialist, consisting of intrinsic and extrinsic motives (Panikarova et al., 2021). Students with higher motivation have a greater possibility of a successful outcome (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Those who are demotivated find learning difficult (Ortega, 2009). Even talented language learners with no motivational orientation are not able to meet such objectives despite taking advantage of a good curriculum and teachers (Meshkat & Hassani, 2012). Motivation significantly influences language learning. It has long been acknowledged as a fundamental component of education, including the teaching of English. Over the years, research has predominantly concentrated on teacher-related factors, such as pedagogical approaches and instructional resources. Motivated learners often achieve great results, driven by clear goals and a desire to succeed (Ortega-Auquilla et al., 2025). They tend to be more engaged in the material, practice regularly, and persevere through challenges. Conversely, learners who are demotivated may struggle, lacking the enthusiasm and perseverance needed to overcome difficulties. Their progress can be hindered by a lack of interest or confidence, which may lead to poorer overall outcomes (Ochwangi et al., 2023). As noted by Christophel and Gorham (1995), the most substantial impact on

motivation is not the presence of motivators in the classroom, but rather the absence of demotivators (Alharbi, 2023). Contextual motivation factors are referred to as learner preconditions, which include general performance orientation, self-concept, attitude towards the subject, learning environment, desire for competence, and expectations of success (Zhou et al., 2023). They argue that negative preconditions can be improved by motivation from the course structure and teacher behavior. However, a lack of teacher attitude can lead to learner disengagement. Similarly, Harmer (2012) believes that students are more likely to remain motivated when teachers demonstrate a professional attitude, when teachers engage students in enjoyable activities, and when they establish good relationships in the classroom. In other words, he emphasized sustained motivation as the basis for the study of motivation. Harmer postulates that students' motivation can be influenced positively or negatively by various factors such as (a) the attitude of policy makers towards foreign languages, (b) the importance that people around the students attach to learning a foreign language, (c) whether they have specific learning goals, and d) the students' natural curiosity. Although motivation is an internal factor, teachers can have a significant influence on their students (Zou et al., 2024). Dörnyei (2001) describes de-motivation as external factors that diminish the motivational foundation of "a behavioral intention or an ongoing action" (p.143). As put by Dörnyei and Csizer (1998), motivation is fundamental to language learning (Zulfa & Zahidah, 2023). Demotivating factors adversely affect students' learning outcomes. Dörnyei (2005) categorized motivation research into three stages: a) the social psychological period (1959–1990), b) the cognitive-situated period (during the 1990s), and c) the process-oriented period. Early research on L2 motivation was conducted by social psychologists in Canada (Ortega, 2009). They recognized L2 as bridging various ethnolinguistic communities, considering the motivation to learn another community's language as crucial for improving or obstructing intercultural communication and relationships. They utilized a social psychological framework quantified by motivational intensity, and the desire to learn. However, this model faced criticism for not keeping pace with broader developments in psychology (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). According to Dörnyei (2005), the cognitive-situated period featured two main trends: a) motivational psychologists from a cognitive perspective emphasized the importance of how individuals think about their abilities, potentials, limitations, and past performances, as well as task-related aspects like values, benefits, and difficulties, as crucial to

motivation; and b) there was a move to refine the broad, community-focused perspective of L2 motivation in specific learning situation, such as language classrooms (Mayumi & Zheng, 2023). In the 1990s, the cognitive-situated approach highlighted the often overlooked dynamic and temporal aspects of motivation. Dörnyei (2001) argued for a process-oriented approach to account for the fluctuations in motivation over time. He divides this process into three stages: a) Pre-actional Stage: This phase involves generating motivation, known as choice motivation, which leads to selecting a goal or task. b) Actional Stage referred to as executive motivation. This is crucial for sustained activities like studying a second language, where students face various distractions and challenges. c) Post-actional Stage: After completing the task, motivational retrospection involves evaluating the experience and understanding what activities help sustain motivation for future tasks. The social environment has a profound influence on learning and motivation in the classroom. Classrooms typically consist of a teacher and diverse students, and their interactions can significantly impact motivation in positive and negative aspects. The social context significantly impacts student engagement, academic effort, and overall academic success. To foster optimal motivation, it is crucial to create a supportive classroom climate where teachers support their students and students encourage one another. This environment helps students not only strive for their success but also care about their peers' achievements (Dörnyei 1998; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Isae & Barjesteh, 2023; Manoochehrzadeh & Barjesteh, 2024; Ohki & Cross, 2024; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). Schools and teachers must create an environment that fosters a sense of belonging while respecting students' cultural and social identities. Classrooms with high engagement levels are typically led by self-assured, independent, and highly motivated teachers. Active student involvement in the classroom is not something that occurs spontaneously (Daniel et al., 2024; Watt & Richardson, 2008). Christophel and Gorham (1995) found that students often cited a lack of teacher interest and ineffective presentation as primary causes of their demotivation (Ojong, 2024).

Demotivation is defined broadly as “various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation,” and particularly as “external forces that reduce or diminish the motivation basis of behavior, intention, or an ongoing action” (Dörnyei, 2001, p.143). Ojong (2024) believes that demotivating factors were related to teachers' unpleasant personalities and teaching methods. According to Dörnyei (2001), teachers directly contribute to learners' demotivation, while

issues with material and pedagogy indirectly affect motivation.

2. This Study

In Iran, the motivation of EFL learners can be influenced positively or negatively by their societal environment, classroom setting, and teachers. Understanding these factors can enhance the likelihood of success (Ashkani & Namaziandost, 2024). While extensive research has explored motivational factors in L2 learning (Hasanzadeh et al., 2024; Amini et al., 2023), the negative aspects of motivation have been largely overlooked.

Researchers generally agree that increased motivation tends to have a positive impact on the learning process. However, there is a lack of studies addressing demotivating factors among postgraduate EFL learners in Iran.

Despite the growing body of research on motivation and demotivation in EFL learning, limited attention has been given to innovative pedagogical approaches that may alleviate these challenges. One promising method is PBI, which emphasizes active engagement, problem-solving, and collaborative learning through structured puzzles and tasks. Unlike traditional lecture-based or test-driven methods, PBI encourages learners to approach language learning as an interactive and enjoyable process, thereby fostering autonomy, critical thinking, and sustained motivation. However, within the Iranian postgraduate EFL context, the potential of PBI to counteract demotivating factors—such as monotonous teaching methods, lack of communicative opportunities, and exam pressure—remains largely unexplored.

Addressing this gap, the present study not only investigates demotivating factors but also frames its discussion through the lens of PBI, offering insights into how learner-centered, puzzle-driven strategies could transform postgraduate English learning. This study aims to identify demotivating factors at the postgraduate level and examine any differences between EFL M.A. and Ph.D. students regarding these factors.

To achieve this, the study formulated the following research questions:

RQ1: Is there any significant difference between EFL learners' level of demotivation at the postgraduate level, and how might Puzzle-Based Instruction (PBI) provide a framework to address these differences?

RQ2: What are the key factors contributing to demotivation among M.A. and Ph.D. students, and in what ways could Puzzle-Based Instruction (PBI) be leveraged to mitigate these factors concerning their educational level?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A total of 30 Iranian postgraduate students majoring in TEFL participated in this study. Participants were selected through a purposive sampling procedure from three branches of Islamic Azad University. The sample consisted of 15 undergraduate students and 15 graduate students (M.A. and Ph.D. levels). The sample included 10 males and 20 females, aged 30–40 years ($M = 35.2$, $SD = 3.1$). Regarding university affiliation, six students were from the Department of English Language Learning at Karaj University, 14 students from the North Tehran branch (NTB), and 10 students from the Science and Research Branch (SRB), Islamic Azad University.

Table 1. Demographic overview of the Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Education Level	Undergraduate	15	50.0
	Graduate (M.A./Ph.D.)	15	50.0
Gender	Male	10	33.3
	Female	20	66.7
Age Range	30–40 years	—	—
University	Karaj	6	20.0
	NTB	14	46.7
	SRB	10	33.3

3.2. Instrumentation

3.2.1. *D-motivational questionnaire*

The demotivating factors were identified using Sakai and Kikuchi's (2009) demotivation questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 35 items in a five-point Likert-type questionnaire. The survey aimed to assess five factors contributing to demotivation: course materials, insufficient school resources, exam performance, non-communicative teaching methods, and teachers' competence and instructional styles. From not true for me (1) to true for me (5), the subjects were tasked with selecting an option. There were five points for the most demotivation and one point for the least. The stronger the de-motivating factor will be, the higher the score will be. The author screened the questionnaire among EFL. The result had a relative high reliability of .89 among the factors in the questionnaire. To check the reliability within the EFL context of Iran, three experts with Ph.D. degrees in the field were consulted to verify its suitability within the country.

3.3. Data Collection Procedure

The present study was undertaken after obtaining consent from the Education office of the target universities. Following the official authorization, a questionnaire comprising of 35-point Lickert scale items on motivating factors, as developed by Sakai & Kikuchi (2009), was utilized in the present investigation. The study was carried out during class time during the academic year. It was distributed to postgraduate students who had successfully completed their master or Ph.D. courses in three branches of Islamic Azad universities, namely Karaj, NTB, and SRB. During the field work, ethical considerations were taken into account, such as confidentiality and voluntary participation. They were informed that their personal information would not be disclosed. All questionnaires were delivered both personally and by mail to each participant. The questionnaires were administered by the researchers. A total of 30 questionnaires were usable for data analysis since the researcher handed out a consent form to the participants. The valid response rate for these surveys was 92% which met the Cohen, Manion, and Morrison's (2000) adequate response range between 40% and 50%.

3.4. Design and Data Analysis

An exploratory survey research design was used to uncover demotivating factors for learning English among postgraduate students.

A quantitative questionnaire is employed as a means of gathering data. Survey methods are capable of providing answers to a diverse range of research inquiries, ranging from the 'who' and 'what' to the 'how' and 'why.' To assess the normality of the data, the Shapiro-Wilk test was used. Accordingly, the mean, standard deviation, and significance level were calculated. The outcome indicates that the significance level is less than .05. In order to analyze the data, a descriptive statistics analysis and a Mann Whitney U test were conducted.

4. Results

To screen differences between EFL learners' levels of de-motivation, a non-parametric test of Mann-Whitney U was run. To check the differences a descriptive statistic was run. Table 2 below shows the result. As indicated in the Table 2, the mean ranks for the MA and Ph.D. students are 25.38 and 15.62, respectively. It is found that there is a difference between the mean rank of the two groups of participants. To examine whether this difference is statistically significant, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted (Table 3).

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for EFL learners' levels of de-motivation

participants	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
MA	15	25.38	507.50
Score PHD	15	15.62	312.50
Total	30		

Table 3. Mann Whitney U Test for EFL learners' levels of de-motivation

Test Statistics ^b	Score
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	0.008
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	0.007 ^a
Mann-Whitney U	102.500
Wilcoxon W	312.500
Z	-2.673

a. Grouping Variable: participants
b. Not corrected for ties.

As indicated in [Table 3](#), since the p-value is less than 0.05 ($p = 0.008$), the result is statistically significant. Thus, it can be concluded that a significant difference exists between MA and PhD students concerning the variable examined. The higher mean rank of MA students (25.38) compared to Ph.D. students (15.62) suggests that MA students scored significantly higher

on the measured variable. This implies that the two groups do not share similar perceptions or experiences concerning the target factor. [Figure 1](#) illustrates the Mean Rank Comparison between MA and PhD students. To explore whether a significant difference exists between MA and Ph.D. students regarding their responses, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted.

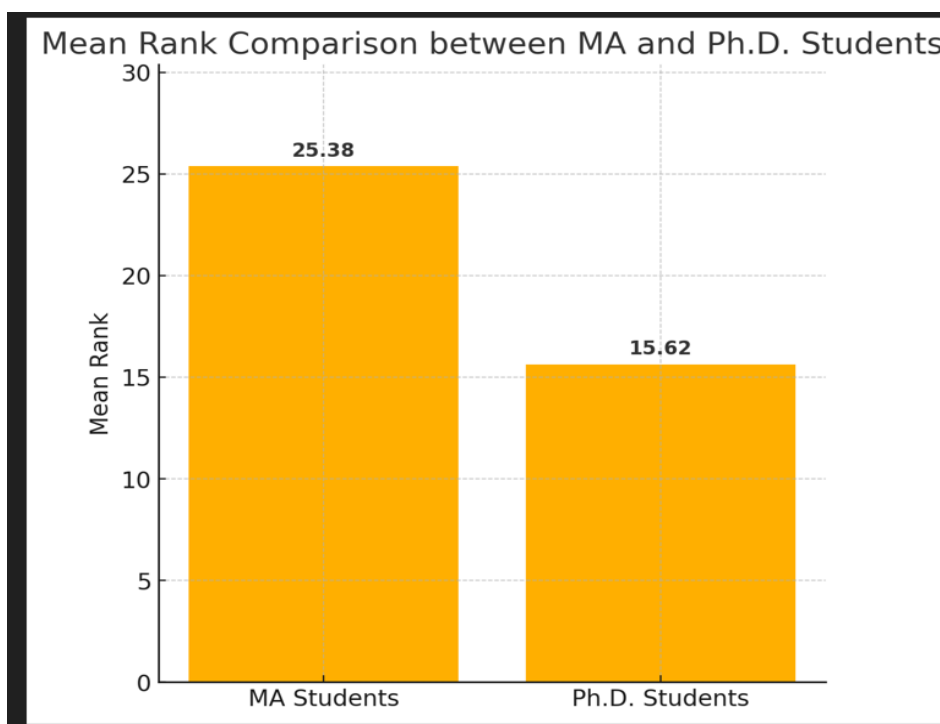


Figure 1. Mean rank comparative diagram between MA and PhD students

To explore whether a significant difference exists between MA and Ph.D. students regarding their responses, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. The results revealed that the mean rank for MA students was 25.38, whereas the mean rank for Ph.D. students was 15.62, suggesting a notable difference between the groups. The test yielded a statistically significant result, $U = 102.50$, $Z = -2.673$, $p = .008$ (two-tailed). The effect size for the test was calculated using the formula $r = Z / \sqrt{N}$, which resulted in $r = 0.45$,

indicating a moderate to large effect. These findings suggest that the academic level (MA vs. Ph.D.) significantly influences the participants' responses to the measured variable, with MA students showing higher rankings on average. To determine the demotivation factors among students concerning their level of education, they were asked to complete the questionnaire. [Table 4](#) below represents the descriptive statistics of students' de-motivation factors.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of students' de-motivation factors

Item	1	2	3	4	5
	F	F	F	F	F
	P	P	P	P	P
1 Audio materials were not used.	11 31.42%	8 22.85%	4 11.42%	4 11.42%	3 8.57%
2 Computer equipment was not used.	4 11.42%	6 17.14%	1 2.85%	3 8.57%	16 45.71%
3 Difficulty in memorizing.	11 31.42%	4 11.42%	3 8.57%	4 11.42%	8 22.85%
4 English questions did not have clear answers.	11 31.42%	7 20%	7 20%	2 5.71%	3 8.57%
5 English was a compulsory subject.	8 22.85%	6 17.14%	11 31.42%	1 2.85%	4 11.42%
6 Entrance examination oriented.	7 20%	6 17.14%	8 22.85%	4 11.42%	5 14.28%
7 Explanations not easy to understand.	9 25.71%	6 17.14%	4 11.42%	4 11.42%	7 20%
8 Focused on grammar.	10 28.5%	5 14.28%	7 20%	5 14.28%	3 8.57%
9 Focused on translation.	12 34.28%	9 25.71%	5 14.28%	9 25.71%	2 5.71%
10 Grammatically correct English.	7 20%	2 5.71%	6 17.14%	6 17.14%	10 28.51%
11 How to self-study.	13 37.14%	2 5.71%	3 8.57%	5 14.28%	7 20%
12 I could not do as well on tests as my friends.	14 40%	11 31.42%	1 2.85%	2 5.71%	2 5.71%
13 I did not like my classmates.	14 40%	4 11.42%	6 17.14%	3 8.57%	3 8.57%
14 I lost my goal to be a speaker of English.	15 42.85%	5 14.28%	5 14.28%	1 2.85%	4 11.42%
15 I lost my interest.	14 40%	5 14.28%	5 14.28%	4 11.42%	2 5.71%
16 I lost the purpose of studying.	14 40%	5 14.28%	2 5.71%	4 11.42%	5 14.28%
17 I was often compared to my friends.	9 25.71%	6 17.14%	6 17.14%	4 11.42%	5 14.28%
18 LL equipment was not used.	2 5.71%	6 17.14%	4 11.42%	6 17.14%	12 34.28%
19 Low scores on tests.	12 34.28%	3 8.57%	5 14.28%	3 8.57%	7 20%
20 My friends did not like English.	7 20%	8 22.85%	6 17.14%	5 14.28%	4 11.42%
21 Old Passages	3 8.57%	8 22.85%	9 25.71%	1 2.85%	9 25.71%
22 One-way explanation.	11 31.42%	7 20%	4 11.42%	4 11.42%	4 11.42%
23 Sentences lessons were difficult to interpret.	9 25.71%	7 20%	7 20%	3 8.57%	4 11.42%
24 Teachers poor pronunciation.	9 25.71%	9 25.71%	5 14.28%	3 8.57%	4 11.42%

Item	1	2	3	4	5
	F P	F P	F P	F P	F P
25 Teachers ridiculed students' mistakes.	10 28.51%	6 17.14%	5 14.28%	4 11.42%	5 14.28%
26 Teachers shouted or got angry.	8 22.14%	5 14.28%	7 20%	6 17.14%	4 11.42%
27 The Internet was not used.	5 14.28%	4 11.42%	4 11.42%	3 8.57%	14 40%
28 The number of students in classes was large.	11 31.42%	9 25.71%	6 17.14%	2 5.71%	2 5.71%
29 The pace not appropriate.	11 31.42%	6 17.14%	6 17.14%	5 14.28%	9 25.71%
30 The textbooks and supplementary readers were assigned.	8 22.85%	5 14.28%	4 11.42%	10 28.57%	3 8.57%
31 The passages were too long.	8 22.85%	11 31.42%	3 8.57%	6 17.14%	2 5.71%
32 to communicate in English.	13 37.14%	6 17.14%	4 11.42%	1 2.85%	6 17.14%
33 to memorize the sentences.	8 22.85%	7 20%	4 11.42%	3 8.57%	8 22.85%
34 Topics were not interesting	5 14.28%	5 14.28%	11 31.42%	5 14.28%	4 11.42%
35 Visual materials were not used.	3 8.57%	8 22.85%	1 2.85%	6 17.14%	12 34.28%

F = Frequency P = Percentage

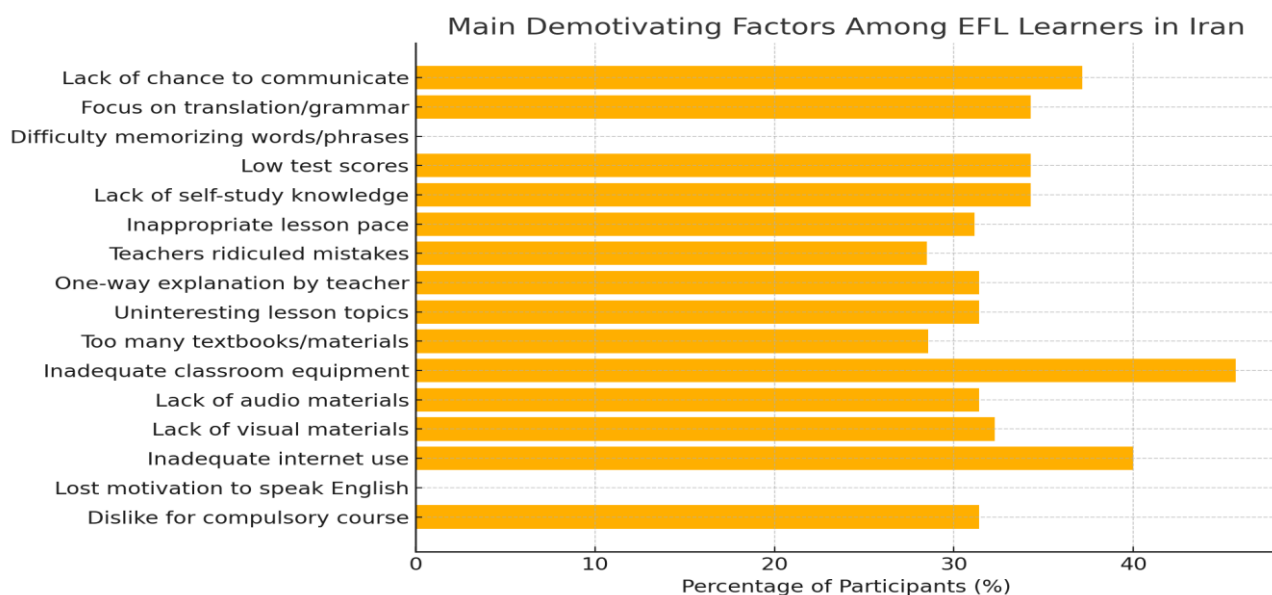


Fig 2. Factors demotivate EFL learners

Table 4 reveals several demotivation factors among students. As indicated in the table, 37.14% of the participants did not have a chance to communicate in English. They (34.28%, 28.5%) believed that most of the lessons focused on the translations and grammar. Of all the participants, 34.28% received low scores on the test. Likewise, 34.28% did not know how to self-study for English lessons. To them, 31.42% believed that the

pace of English lesson was not appropriate. They maintained that teachers' behavior was one of the demotivation factors. 28.51% of the participants argued that their teachers ridiculed them as they made a mistake. Of all the respondents, 31.42% reported that the teacher made a one-way explanation. Additionally, their explanation was not easy to comprehend. To them (31.42%), the themes of the English passages presented

in lessons were unappealing. Of all students, 28.57% reported that they were disappointed due to the many textbooks and supplementary materials assigned to them.

Students also criticized universities for not taking advantage of computers in the classroom. Of all the subjects, 45.71% stated that the equipment was not appropriate in the classroom setting. More precisely, students objected the lack of audio (31.42%) and visual

(32.28%) materials in the classroom. 40% of them found fault with the inadequacy of incorporating the internet in the classroom. They also disagreed with many of their classmates. In addition, the respondent mentioned that they lost their goal to be a speaker of English. They (31.42%) did not like the course to be a compulsory one. The following figure and table illustrate the demotivating factors affecting EFL learners' motivation to study English in Iran.

Table 5. Main demotivating factors among EFL learners in Studying English

Item	Demotivating Factor	Percentage (%)
1	Lack of opportunity to communicate in English	37.14
2	Excessive focus on translation and grammar	34.28
3	Difficulty memorizing words and phrases	28.50
4	Low test scores	34.28
5	Lack of knowledge on how to self-study	34.28
6	Inappropriate pace of English lessons	31.14
7	Teachers ridiculed students for their mistakes	28.51
8	Teacher provided a one-way explanation	31.42
9	The lesson topics were uninteresting	31.42
10	Too many textbooks and supplementary materials	28.57
11	Inadequate classroom equipment	45.71
12	Lack of audio materials	31.42
13	Lack of visual materials	32.28
14	Inadequate incorporation of the internet	40.00
15	Loss of motivation to speak English	31.42
16	Dislike for the compulsory nature of the course	31.42

The eleven factors were extracted through experiences obtained from the participants. The present study divided the data into categories based on the five factors. These factors were a) Course books, b) Inadequate school facilities, c) Test scores, d) non-communicative method, and e) Teachers' competence and Teaching styles. According to [Table 5](#), the lack of interesting topics demotivated students. Therefore, course books were a very important factor in students' demotivation.

Poor computer-assisted language learning showed that inadequate school facility was another factor. Some students had difficulty in learning words and phrases, so, test scores were one factor for EFL learners. Some students mentioned that they had no opportunity to communicate in English, and they had Grammar and translation-based classrooms, which were product-oriented and lacked focus on assessment and learning how to learn. Non-communicative method was a demotivational factor for learning L2. Low building rapport on the teachers' side and teachers' pronunciation were factors that demotivated students.

5. Discussion

This study uncovered demotivating factors among Iranian postgraduate students, including those pursuing M.A. and Ph.D. degrees, concerning five levels of demotivating factors. The results indicated that there was a significant difference between MA and Ph.D. students' level of demotivation. In addition, the findings revealed that students' motivation may be negatively affected by several demotivating factors, including difficulty with vocabulary, a lack of engaging topics, overcrowded classrooms, limited opportunities to communicate in English, grammar-based teaching, poor relationships between teachers and students, inadequate technology-based instruction, and product-oriented classrooms. This finding revealed that teachers had a profound effect on students' motivation. Most of the students reported that a poor relationship between teachers and students demotivates them to learn the materials. They maintained that the teacher is responsible for building a rapport in classroom. In addition, the teacher should motivate the students how

to learn and help them maintain an energetic situation for all the courses. This finding echoes Williams and Burdon's results (1997) who claimed that setting and achieving goals are the cornerstone for sustaining motivation.

Some of the respondents reported that they were demotivated to learning the language for poor technology-based teaching. They held the view that teachers should integrate information and communication technology (ICT) into the classroom. They were demotivated when the teacher refused to adapt their curriculum to incorporate ICT. This finding aligns with Dehqan et al. (2017), who concluded that enhancing teachers' technology skills and digital literacy is essential to fostering their interest and confidence in using ICT.

The result also echoes Young (2003) finding that incorporating ICT in the classroom could foster motivation among the learners. Likewise, Ayres (2002) concluded a positive nexus between high motivation and perceived need of CALL. Inadequate school facilities are one area of concern regarding demotivation (Barjesteh et al., 2025; Isaee et al., 2024; Ohki & Cross, 2024). A lack of technology has long been a concern in classrooms, according to these studies and the current study. The study suggests that, given the rapid progress in almost all areas of life worldwide, the educational system must immediately reassess its educational facilities, not only by formulating guidelines and strategies for incorporating technology into language classrooms but also by providing financial assistance.

Students also criticized the crowded classroom and grammar-based teaching. They maintained that large number of students in the class demotivated them for speaking. This result corresponds to Barjesteh (2017), who claimed that large classroom sizes and limited class times hindered communication and negotiation in the classroom. Despite the new trend in language teaching, some of the teachers still advocate a pre-determined, rigid plan. Barjesteh (2017, p. 45) concluded that "we need a comprehensive mission for our system of education in order to expect the role a teacher has to assume as a learner, negotiator, syllabus designer and the agent of a social change."

The finding echoes Harmer's (2012) assertion that students' motivation can be influenced by the perception of their surroundings regarding the significance of acquiring a foreign language. The results are in line with Hosseini and Jafari (2014), who identified three primary sources of demotivation among Iranian students: (a) inadequate school facilities, (b) unsuitable teaching materials and content, and (c) a lack of intrinsic motivation.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to identify the primary demotivating factors affecting postgraduate students in learning English at the university level. The results demonstrated that various internal and external factors contribute to students' loss of motivation. Key demotivating factors included the course content, learning materials, inadequate school facilities, overly lengthy reading passages, teachers' conduct, competence, and teaching styles. These elements interact with broader institutional and personal factors in a complex, dynamic manner. In this context, the teacher's role emerges as particularly significant, both in fostering students' initial motivation and sustaining their engagement over time. The findings highlight the need for educators to cultivate a supportive learning atmosphere, adopt learner-centered teaching styles, nurture students' internal beliefs about language learning, actively involve them in setting achievable learning goals, and provide constructive, informative feedback. Furthermore, teachers are encouraged to be mindful of their classroom behavior and to consistently work towards enhancing learners' self-image and confidence. Beyond identifying these factors, the study highlights the potential of PBI as a learner-centered pedagogical response. By emphasizing problem-solving, active engagement, and collaborative learning, PBI offers an alternative to traditional, exam-driven, and teacher-centered approaches that often contribute to student demotivation. Incorporating puzzles and structured problem-solving tasks into postgraduate English classrooms could not only reduce demotivation but also enhance critical thinking, autonomy, and sustained interest in learning. The implications of this study extend to language teachers, materials developers, and teacher trainers. Teachers can integrate PBI principles to design more interactive and meaningful tasks, while materials developers can create resources that align with puzzle-driven strategies to promote engagement. For teacher trainers, raising awareness of PBI as a viable method may encourage practitioners to move beyond conventional teaching practices and adopt more motivationally supportive approaches. Ultimately, by linking the identification of demotivating factors with the application of innovative instructional strategies such as PBI, this study contributes to both theoretical understanding and practical improvements in postgraduate EFL education. While this study shed light on demotivating factors and pointed toward PBI as a potential pedagogical response, further empirical research is needed to test the effectiveness of puzzle-based tasks in reducing demotivation among postgraduate EFL learners.

Experimental or longitudinal studies comparing PBI with more traditional methods could provide concrete evidence of its impact on motivation, achievement, and learner engagement. Such research would not only validate the practical applicability of PBI but also enrich the growing conversation on innovative, learner-centered approaches in higher education language learning.

Authors Contribution

All authors have contributed equally to prepare the paper.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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