

**“TOSSING BETWEEN TWO WAVES”: THE NATURE OF  
MOTIVATION AND DEMOTIVATION IN THE PROCESS OF  
LEARNING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE**

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The current Sri Lankan university context can be considered a place where social inequalities and hierarchies are constantly produced and reproduced. In this context, it can be noticed that the importance of learning English has been watered down, and as a result, the process of learning and teaching English has become a failure. The English language has, more or less, become a symbol of all types of negative states of mind such as defeat, oppression and humiliation. However, despite this negative backdrop, motivation to learn English is also present among most target learners of the country. Foregrounding this hierarchized and heterogeneous context, this paper articulates the manner in which the notions of motivation and demotivation operate within undergraduates' efforts in learning English as a second language, and thereby examines their attitudes toward learning English as a second language. In this case, ten special degree students and ten general degree students from the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya were interviewed. The interviews, being the primary source of data, were used alongside with several published work concerning the field of ESL learning and teaching, to explore the effects of motivation and demotivation in learning the second language at undergraduate level. The theoretical framework is based on the scholarly works of linguists and researchers such as R.C. Gardner, S. Krashen, Thiru Kandiah, and Rod Ellis. Analyzed data reveals that motivation and demotivation operates simultaneously in this particular context. Undergraduates' motivation to learn English is mainly determined and shaped by instrumental goals such as gaining 'better' jobs, more privileges and enhanced social mobility. Even though they long to achieve these goals, numerous faults in the entire system of education, certain socio-political and cultural baggage related to the use of English and extra-linguistic factors such as socio-economic status and family background play a vital role in demotivating the undergraduates from developing target language proficiency. Moreover, afternoon/late afternoon lecture hours, 'unfriendly' teachers, complex and 'alien' lesson material, lack of usage/practice/exposure (to) of the language can be referred to as the key factors that directly cause demotivation according to the findings. Conclusions show that the English language has become a tool as well as a weapon in this particular context. Undergraduates' motivation to learn English is both instrumental and integrated, and there is the simultaneous presence of motivation and demotivation within the same learner. The paper also suggests several propositions that can be practically implemented in motivating the undergraduates to master the English language.

**Keywords:** ESL, ELT Practice, Motivation, Demotivation, University context