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## Language Tests, Motivation, and Demotivation: A Complex Relationship

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**Abstract:** Tests are an integral part of most formal language learning processes, exerting far-reaching effects on many aspects of language learning. Among other things, tests affect language learning motivation (LLM), an element that is fundamental to many learning contexts. However, little attention has been paid to how tests affect LLM and what the pedagogical implications may be. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews with 20 adolescent Arab learners, this study attempts to explore how and when tests can motivate or demotivate language learners. It also examines the main strategies learners deploy to cope with the demotivating experiences associated with test taking. The data suggest that tests have the potential to both motivate and demotivate learners before, during, and after taking a test. Additionally, the results reveal several strategies that learners employ to cope with demotivation. This leads to a discussion regarding pedagogical implications on how to effectively employ tests to increase learners' motivation and decrease their demotivation.

**Keywords:** Demotivation, language learning motivation, language tests, motivation.

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### Introduction

Test-taking procedures can have great ramifications on the teaching and learning processes, affecting what is learned and how it is learned. This increasingly recognized impact is referred to as the backwash effect, and it can be considered as either negative or positive in educational settings (Hughes, 2003; McNamara, 2001). Language teachers might use tests not only to assess learners' abilities but also as a strategy to increase learners' motivation and to ensure that learners invest an adequate amount of time and effort into language learning. Although the centrality of motivation in language learning has been recognized for decades (Dörnyei, 2005), there is little agreement as to the definition of motivation, the way it operates, or how it should be researched, with a myriad of theories endeavoring to provide a deeper understanding of this area of research (Keblawi, 2009).

Deci and Ryan's (1985) self-determination theory is one of the most influential theories on motivation in general, and it has been well integrated into the study of language learning motivation (LLM) (Boo et al., 2015; Keblawi, 2009). This broad theory, or metatheory, as termed by Legault (2017), draws a distinction between two kinds of motivation: internal and external. When learners are internally motivated, they engage in learning with the expectation of internal rewards such as pleasure, joy, and satisfying their curiosity. However, when externally motivated, learners exert more effort in learning to gain external rewards such as good grades and praise from others or to avoid potential punishment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Legault, 2017). Past research in the field has shown that external motives are less helpful to learners in the long run because they can lead to superficial, rather than deep learning (Keblawi, 2009). This issue has been met with much controversy as it is difficult at times to delineate acute borders between the two types of motivation (Keblawi, 2009), and it has also been noted that external motivators can develop into internal ones, as posed by Ryan and Deci (2000). Following this dichotomy, it is possible to refer to language tests as external motivators because learners often engage in studying for tests because they have to rather than because they want to, limiting the amount of effort they invest (Shih, 2007). Despite this, the significant role of tests as extrinsic motivators has been long recognized as they can provide learners with crucial feedback on their progress and assist them in developing a sense of self-efficacy and an intrinsic interest in learning (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Specifically, in LLM research, there have been very few studies examining how tests are directly related to learners' motivation. As will be examined below, tests have been mainly

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referred to as possible demotivators in some studies without investigating instances of how and when tests can demotivate learners.

### *Tests and Language Learning: Motivating or Demotivating?*

The concepts of motivation and demotivation are quite complex and elusive to define. Keblawi (2009) reviewed a number of studies and publications on motivation and demotivation by discussing particular aspects that have the potential to explain their possible links with tests. This publication notes that both concepts are dynamic, and their strengths may change over time. It is possible to think of motivation as a state or a trait. Motivation as a state refers to learners' motivation at a particular time, while motivation as a trait refers to learners' motivation in general (Keblawi, 2009). The case of demotivation is similar. It can be temporary and relatively easy to overcome, or it can be long-lasting and difficult to overcome. Furthermore, motivation and demotivation are also circular because motivating experiences can lead to more motivation, and demotivating experiences can lead to more demotivation. Keblawi (2009) observes that learners may react differently or in opposition to the same experience, with one learner perhaps reacting differently to the same experience at different times. Facing difficulties, for example, may be seen by some learners as a challenge that must be overcome, leading to an increase in their efforts. For others, difficulties may be seen as an insurmountable challenge that discourages them from making any effort.

One of the main complications in assessing the role of tests in causing demotivation is the lack of conformity in naming and categorizing the different demotivators. For example, both Dörnyei (1998) and Alavinia and Sehat (2012) reported nine categories in their studies; Trang and Baldauf (2005) reported seven; Sakai and Kikuchi (2009), Kaivanpanah and Ghasemi (2011), and Unal and Yelken (2016) all reported five; while Oxford (1998, as cited in Dörnyei, 2001) and Khouya (2018) and Alyousif and Alsuhaibani (2021) reported four. The categories that could relate to tests were labeled or grouped differently by different researchers. For instance, in Dörnyei's (1998) study, the experiences of failure or a lack of success, including notions like marking being too strict, were grouped under the category of reduced self-confidence. In Trang and Baldauf's (2005) study, the demotivating encounters relating to tests were grouped into two large categories: one, getting low marks despite studying hard, related to internal attributions, and the other, dissatisfaction with grading and assessment, related to external attributions.

The negative effects of tests that directly influence language learners can be partially explained by the concept of language learning demotivation (LLD). Chambers' (1993) study is one of the first studies that has directly discussed LLD. Chambers (1993) notes that demotivated learners show little interest in what they are learning, have poor concentration, make little effort, and engage in other undesirable behaviors.

Dörnyei (1998) identified nine categories of demotivating factors which were referred to by at least two of the 50 participants in the study, all of whom were identified as demotivated by their teachers. Factors resulting from experiences of failure or lack of success, as referred to by 11 participants, were second in frequency, after factors related to teachers, referred to by 30 participants (Dörnyei, 1998). Tests as demotivators were identified by fewer participants than in other studies. Falout and Maruyama (2004) developed a 49-item questionnaire that was administered to 164 Japanese freshmen. The results showed that low- and high-proficiency learners experienced similar rates of demotivation. However, students with low proficiency were far less likely to effectively cope with their demotivating experiences as they underwent highly demotivational experiences at an earlier stage of their learning. When the researchers asked learners when they started disliking English studies, only 5% of participants referred to the time when they started to prepare for exams (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). This ostensibly shows that learners were not greatly demotivated by tests. However, approximately a quarter of the low-proficiency students and approximately a sixth of the high-proficiency students attributed their demotivation to the huge amount of vocabulary they had to learn for their college entrance examinations (Falout & Maruyama, 2004).

Trang and Baldauf (2005) examined the reasons for demotivation, the strength of demotivators, and the strategies deployed to overcome them using recall essays from 100 Vietnamese university students. Their study showed that the extent of demotivation was large, as 88 students reported experiencing different levels of demotivation. A total of 372 external and internal attributions were encountered, but only eight directly referred to experiences of failure related to tests, and only five related to dissatisfaction with grading and assessment (Trang & Baldauf, 2005). The students also reported the use of internal and external strategies to overcome their negative experiences. The former included strategies such as reminding oneself of the importance of English and one's abilities to improve. The latter included factors related to improvement in the learning context, such as positive changes in teachers' behavior.

Keblawi (2005) analyzed 296 essays on demotivating experiences written by 296 English learners in their penultimate and ultimate year of high school. This was followed by interviews with 20 learners selected from the same sample. The analysis revealed that students were demotivated by both contextual factors and by factors related to perceived difficulties in learning grammar and vocabulary. Dissatisfaction with test results was referred to by about 10% of the respondents. This category ranked far behind factors related to other contextual or subject matters. Nevertheless, the magnitude of the negative effects of tests could not be overlooked. When the results of a test are not as expected, it appears the consequences can be quite harmful.

Sakai and Kikuchi's (2009) quantitative study shed more light on the influence of tests on LLD. After performing factor analysis on the 35 items in their questionnaire, they extracted five demotivating factors, test scores being one of them. Unsatisfactory test scores were even perceived to be more demotivating than the teachers' competence and style. These findings were true for all demotivated learners, although they were more salient among those with the lowest levels of motivation. Kikuchi (2009) used interviews and open-ended questionnaires to determine the causes of demotivation among 42 Japanese high school students. Five demotivating causes were found, with tests and university entrance exams being among them.

Experiences of failure, including low or disappointing test scores, were found as a demotivating factor in several other studies. Kaivanpanah and Ghasemi (2011) investigated the demotivating factors of 327 Iranian learners of English. Using factorial analysis, they extracted five demotivating factors: learning materials and facilities, attitudes toward speakers of English, the teacher, experiences of failure, and attitudes toward second language learning.

Using a 50-item questionnaire to elicit data from 165 Iranian high school students, Alavinia and Sehat (2012) identified nine demotivating factors with experience of failure ranking fifth. However, not all participants regarded experiences of failure as a source of demotivation, and the experiences varied from one class to another. Within a Turkish context, Unal and Yelken (2016) found experiences of failure to rank fifth as a demotivating factor after teacher characteristics, lack of interest in the English language and English classes, class environment, and class materials.

Han et al. (2019) conducted a study of 469 male and female Turkish students to establish the primary demotivating factors they experienced while studying English as a foreign language. The results of both the qualitative and quantitative methods of examination showed that anxiety connected to tests affected 10.93% of the participants and was pinpointed as one of the primary sources of demotivation among the respondents.

More recently, Kikuchi (2019) tracked the changes in motivation and demotivation among four female Japanese students studying at a private university majoring in international studies who wanted to study abroad for a short time. The study showed that there was much diversity in how the participants' motivation and demotivation fluctuated over time and under different personal and environmental circumstances. However, one salient finding was that tests, although being an external motive, played a major role in motivating at least two of the participants who were preparing for their standardized English proficiency tests, with one of them being a "test-driven student". Alyousif and Alsuhaibani (2021) conducted a study on the demotivating factors reported by Saudi Arabian high school students. They reported their findings using four main categories: demotivating factors that related to the teacher, the learner, the learning context, or the subject. Tests were ranked second, just after the difficulty with learning vocabulary, which was the main learner-related demotivator. The researchers chose to group tests under the category *learners' demotivating factors*, i.e., being within the learners' control, even though tests are mostly controlled by teachers.

As indicated earlier, there are few studies that have directly examined the relationship between language testing and language motivation and demotivation. Most studies focus on the potential factors that affect students' motivation and demotivation, with tests only referred to if they were mentioned by students. An exception to this might be a study by Haggerty and Fox (2015), who examined, among other things, the effect that standardized language tests might have on students' motivation. Their quantitative study involved students aged 12-15 preparing for a high-stakes English university entrance test. One of their main findings showed that setting performance standards that are too high for students might demotivate them. This conclusion is in line with research findings on LLM based on goal theories of motivation (Lee & Bong, 2019). Haggerty and Fox (2015) also observed that students who were preparing for standardized tests were more motivated than students who were not. This is to be expected, as students seeking university admission and better careers would be more extrinsically motivated than those who are not.

### *Coping Strategies*

In addition to exploring motivating and demotivating factors for learners, studies have also investigated the coping strategies that learners employ to tackle demotivation and regain their motivation. This psychological process is often referred to as remotivation (Falout, 2012). Falout's (2012) study directly examined this process using an analytical framework developed by Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck (2007) to examine the coping strategies employed by language learners to eliminate the demotivating experiences they faced. The strategies reported by the 157 Japanese university students in the study included positive adaptive processes that helped them regain their motivation. These strategies included problem-solving (e.g., planning), information-seeking (e.g., observing how others cope with the demands), self-reliance, support-seeking, accommodation, and negotiation (Falout, 2012). Such strategies were used more frequently by high-proficiency students who already had positive self-concepts. Maladaptive strategies, such as withdrawal and helplessness which are counter-productive to motivation, were more frequent among low-proficiency learners, who hold negative self-concepts.

Carpenter et al. (2009) examined the fluctuation of motivational experiences in a sample group of 285 college students. They looked at the antecedent conditions of the learner (ACL), i.e., the past emotional "baggage" that learners carry into the present, and the potential this has to affect a variety of psychological variables, such as attitudes, goal orientations, and self-concepts. The top demotivators reported, in decreasing order of frequency, were: the difficulty of the classes

(~30%), dissatisfaction with teaching methods (18%), dissatisfaction with teachers (17%), boredom with lessons (13%), entrance exam focus (12%), a negative view of their own learning ability (~9%), and having no interest in the subject (7%). The high-level positive ACL group, who held positive views of themselves, the subject, and their abilities, experienced fewer demotivating factors in general. However, they reported more demotivating experiences related to dissatisfaction with their teacher and the focus on entrance exams. The top five categories of intentional strategies participants applied to regain their motivation were out-of-class self-regulated action, cognitive/affective modification, in-class self-regulated action, goal focus, and demotivator avoidance. One key finding noted that the positive ACL groups had more remotivation strategies at their disposal and applied them more frequently than the negative ACL ones.

More recently, Albalawi and Al-Hoorie (2021) conducted a mixed-approach study that explored the complexity of demotivation and the interrelations among the different preceding factors. In the first qualitative phase of the study, the researchers interviewed 13 female university students studying English as an L2 to find out what demotivated and remotivated them. They did not aim to name discrete motivating factors but instead focused on analyzing the language-learning mindsets of the participants. They found that the lower-achieving students tended to have a fixed mindset; they attributed their failure to a lack of ability, had negative images of their L2 selves, and were more easily disappointed by failure. The more successful students tended to attribute their failure to insufficient effort and to the use of ineffective strategies; they imagined themselves as successful users of the language and tended to feel less disappointed when encountering challenges. These findings were reiterated by the second quantitative phase of the study that involved 2044 university students of whom 90% were female. Again, the students with fixed, negative mindsets, a weak L2 self, and a predisposition to disappointment were more likely to become demotivated. Albalawi and Al-Hoorie (2021) also found that what mattered more was not the demotivating experiences that the students encountered but how these were perceived and how the learners reacted to them.

The exploration of the literature above has demonstrated that language tests may have a very profound impact on learners' motivation and may contribute to demotivation for many. It has also been shown that students employ different strategies to cope with the different demotivating experiences they face. The present exploratory study, therefore, examines *how* and *when* tests affect learners' motivation and demotivation. The research questions used in this study highlight the complex sociocultural and sociocognitive processes being investigated and do not only address the question of whether tests affect LLM and LLD. To examine such complex processes, the use of qualitative data becomes essential (Haggerty & Fox, 2015). The research questions are:

- When and how can language tests motivate language learners?
- When and how can language tests demotivate language learners?
- What strategies do language learners follow to cope with the demotivating experiences caused by tests?

## Methodology

### *Study Perspective, Sampling, and Procedure*

Data was collected using qualitative semi-structured interviews with 20 high school learners over approximately one month. The cohort was made up of Arab learners, aged 14 to 15 years old, and from several schools. To examine the students' perceptions of the relationship between language learning motivation and test-taking, all selected participants were studying English as a second language at the time of the interviews. This study made use of a non-probability sampling method, specifically Robinson's (2014) quota sampling, in which the researcher worked with the students' teachers to identify potential participants from a specific English as a Second Language program. The sample group was divided equally between males and females and included students with varying levels of English language ability: five had a high level of proficiency, 9 had an average level, and 6 were considered low level.

### *Analyzing of Data*

The interview questions were developed in English and translated into Arabic. The students were individually interviewed once in Arabic within the confines of each of their schools. The recordings of the interviews were later transcribed and analyzed via a generic inductive thematic analysis (Liu, 2016) to find recurring patterns to establish categories that would make the data more meaningful. As noted by Liu (2016), although the use of a generic inductive thematic approach has not been extensively discussed in past literature, it has gained popularity in the last decade as a result of its flexibility. The principal investigator could not locate any previous research publications that had specifically targeted the effects of tests on both English language learning motivation and demotivation. Hence, there were no pre-determined categories and a generic inductive thematic approach (Guest et al., 2012) was used to identify, code, and interpret the themes that emerged from the data.

To ensure reliability, the following steps were taken by the researcher and two other teachers: First, all interviews were transcribed. Then, three of these interviews were randomly selected and thoroughly analyzed to elicit possible themes. Once themes were identified, all transcripts (including the original three used to identify the themes) were analyzed independently by the researcher and the same two teachers to organize the relevant data into the research themes. Next,

the analyses were compared to find and resolve any discrepancies. These steps were of the utmost importance, as some statements needed further interpretation, which allowed clarification of the final categories. This resulted in some categories being merged into others and some being separated into individual categories. Finally, each statement, including the re-interpreted statements, could be placed confidently into their appropriate category.

### *Ethical Considerations*

This study was conducted in compliance with the accepted ethical considerations in education research, stressing confidentiality, consent, and safety of the participants. (Felzmann, 2009). All aspects of the research held to national, local, and institutional laws and requirements. This included adherence to strict confidentiality and anonymity of the participants throughout the research process. Hence, each participant was provided with a pseudonym that recorded their participant number, ranging from S1 to S20. Each participant was provided with an explanation of the purpose of the interview before the research took place. Additionally, it was required that the guardians of each of the participants sign a consent form. The interviews were only recorded after securing the consent of the participants and their guardians. All participants and guardians were informed that involvement in the study was voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice.

### **Findings / Results**

This study aimed to find out how language tests affect students' motivation and demotivation and what strategies they employ to cope with the demotivating experiences they might face in regard to testing. The thematic analysis of the findings revealed a number of ways in which tests motivate or demotivate students. It also revealed a variety of strategies employed by students to deal with the demotivating experiences they encounter. It should be emphasized that this is an exploratory, qualitative study that aims to better understand the dynamics involved in the processes of test motivation and demotivation for students and their subsequent coping strategies. Reporting the number of students who refer to each finding is not intended as a statistical measurement but as a hint of the possible magnitude of reported phenomena.

### *Tests as Motivators*

The participants reported three ways in which tests could motivate them. These were noted in terms of whether the motivation occurred *before*, *during*, or *after* taking the test as illustrated in Table 1. Interestingly, it was using the qualitative research method in this study that allowed us to discover that the students perceived motivation as occurring before, during, or after the event in question (in this case, English language tests). As this categorization has not been previously suggested by research to the best knowledge of the author, we took an innovative approach and categorized our findings on the impact of tests on motivation as occurring before, during, or after the test.

*Table 1. Motivating Factors of Tests*

No.	Motivating Factor	Time of Motivation	Students	
			Total	%
1.	Do not study unless they have tests	Before	12	60
2.	Enjoy doing tests or even feel happy about tests	During	3	15
3.	Enjoy the high scores they receive	After	3	15

More than half the participants (12 out of 20) claimed that tests are crucial motivators for them because they would not exert any effort into studying unless they were assigned tests. This claim was made across proficiency levels, although only two low-proficiency students claimed this. Very few (three) students reported enjoying tests or described the high scores they received as possible motivators, and all of these students were considered high-level.

### *Tests as Demotivators*

In a similar manner, the demotivating experiences that students attributed to tests also revealed three categories that could also be classified by when they occur in the testing process: *before*, *during*, or *after*. The demotivating factors experienced before a test was reported by slightly more than half the participants (N=11) with most of them either of average (N=7) or low proficiency (N=3). These participants reported feeling helpless (N=3) and not being ready (N=8). Feelings of helplessness were caused by a lack of belief in their own abilities (N=2) or by the belief that doing well is a matter of chance (N=1). The eight students who reported not being ready for a test as a demotivating factor attributed their unreadiness to a lack of time to prepare (N=2), having too much material to study (N=3), having unclear or difficult test materials (N=1), a lack of knowledge of the test format (N=1), or feeling unwell before a test (N=1).

Table 2. Demotivating Factors of Tests

No.	Demotivating Factor	Time of Demotivation	Students	
			Total	%
1.	Feeling helpless or not ready	Before	11	55%
2.	Negative feelings about the test or the testing environment	During	10	50%
3.	Scoring, results showing repeated failure, feeling helpless	After	10	50%

Half the students (N=10) reported demotivating factors occurring during a test (negative feelings about the test itself or the testing environment). Negative feelings about the test itself came from unexpected questions or question format (N=2); difficult or ill-formed test questions (N=2); and tests that were too long, exhausting, or boring (N=3). Two students reported negative feelings about unfair or uncomfortable test conditions, such as a noisy environment and rude observers, as being demotivating, while one reported negative comments from peers about the test to be demotivating.

### Coping Strategies

The learners were also asked to report the strategies they applied to deal with the demotivating experiences they had undergone. Six strategies were reported (Table 3), the most frequent being “escaping or ignoring the result and trying to forget it.” This strategy seemed to be common across all proficiency levels, as three high, seven average, and four low-proficiency students reported using it. All other strategies were referred to by only two or three participants, as shown in Table 3. It should be noted that reflecting on one’s own performance and working on one’s own self-esteem were reported only by either high- or average-proficiency students; no low-level students reported using this strategy.

Table 3. Students’ Coping Strategies for Demotivation

No		Students	
		Total	%
1	Escaping or ignoring the result and trying to forget it, sometimes by occupying oneself with other things	14	70%
2	‘Letting it out’ by crying, cursing, or tearing up the exam papers	3	15%
3	Reflecting on one’s performance and attempting to learn from mistakes in order to do better in subsequent attempts	3	15%
4	Enduring negative feelings about test results	2	10%
5	Working on one’s self-esteem and convincing one they can do better in subsequent tests	2	10%
6	Seeking help from others	2	10%

## Discussion

### Tests as Motivators

In line with the previous studies in the field (Haggerty & Fox, 2015; Kikuchi, 2019), tests were mainly referred to as external motivators by most learners. For such learners, the absence of tests might lead to little or no effort invested in language studying. On the other hand, students who had to prepare for tests were more motivated to study than those who were not. When probed, most participants opposed the idea of abolishing tests altogether, claiming that tests were their only motivation for studying English. These students seemed fundamentally interested in meeting the course requirements or obtaining high scores in order to achieve another goal, such as being admitted to a university. In such instances, it becomes quite evident that tests can motivate learners to study *before* a test, although the effectiveness of such external motives might be quite limited as demonstrated by previous research in the field (Kebrawi, 2009). Studying for a test might lead to superficial learning, and it has long been claimed that this type of studying motivation is hard to sustain in the long run and might have a limited effect on students’ progress.

But here, as claimed by Kebrawi (2009), the boundaries between the extrinsic and intrinsic motives become blurred, as students, especially the proficient ones, may also feel great enjoyment and satisfaction *during* the time of the test. Out of the sample, three high-level students claimed that they enjoyed doing tests because they could, “secure a high score in the tests” (S2). All three of these students reported being good at English. For them, tests were a *challenge* that they enjoyed overcoming. As some students reported, obtaining a high score on a test is “always a good treat,” “it pleases you,” “it proves to you and to others that you are good at English” (S15), “others show you more respect,” and “you know that you’re up to the challenge” (S14). In other words, doing well on tests can be thought of as a *proximal* goal that, upon achievement, can boost learners’ sense of self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation. As has long been claimed by Bandura and Schunk (1981), achieving proximal goals can positively affect students’ self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation.

Performing well on a test is likely to further increase motivation and readiness to invest more time and effort in preparing for subsequent tests. This occurs *after* taking a test and as a result of performing well on it. This can be referred to as

resultative motivation (Keblawi, 2009). One good student (S2) explained, “I had a test in which I got a very high score. I was very pleased, and I thought that I should study even harder, not only for English but also for other subjects.” Success might lead to a love for the subject and this, in turn, might lead to the exertion of added effort, which is likely to bring about further success. In such cases, the dynamicity of motivation might allow an external motive to develop into an intrinsic one. Even failing the test under some conditions, as will be shown below, can lead to exerting more effort. Thus, what starts as a demotivating experience, may change into a source of motivation that increases the learner’s level of effort and helps them improve academically.

### *Tests as Demotivators*

As found in the results from previous studies reported here (Alavinia & Sehat, 2012; Keblawi, 2005; Kikuchi, 2009, 2019; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Unal & Yelken, 2016), tests were referred to as potential demotivators. As in the case of the few studies that addressed the relationship between tests and LLM, studies on LLD have not directly indicated *how* and *when* tests can be demotivating to students. The findings discussed below illustrate some of the complex aspects of the relationship between language tests and LLD and show how and when tests can be demotivating to students.

### *Demotivators Before Tests*

When students start preparing for tests, they do not do so in a vacuum. Their attitudes toward tests and the way they approach them are largely influenced by their general attitudes toward studying the language and by their past experiences with tests. Students who find studying the language demotivating will most likely find preparing for the tests even more demotivating: “When I have an English test, I feel discouraged [because] I need to study for a subject that I hate. I utterly hate it!” (S8).

Additionally, the results show that students who experience repeated failures may become fully or partially demotivated (S7, S12, S17). Such feelings may create a sense of helplessness or amotivation that may eventually discourage them from making any further effort to prepare for tests or learn the language (Dörnyei, 2005). When one student was probed about how she prepared for her tests, she said that she did not intend to study anymore since she would “get a low score anyway” (S12). Getting low scores could be the outcome of language tests that are “always difficult” (S12). These beliefs are usually based on past experiences with tests in which learners are presented with tasks that they are not familiar with or that are perceived as too difficult. S7 best illustrates this notion:

We can cope very well with the texts we read in class and those we are asked to read at home. But in tests, we are given texts which are too difficult. I look up all the unfamiliar words, but I can’t understand the text. At other times, I do feel that I understand the text, but the questions are too difficult to answer... Sometimes I don’t know the answer because I do not understand the questions! (S7)

One student reported feeling helpless because of the belief that “chance plays a role,” and thus “studying more doesn’t mean having a higher score” because “such tests do not reflect one’s true abilities” (S20).

Moreover, learners reported experiencing demotivation when they felt inadequately prepared for their tests (S11 & S20). They had little time to study, didn’t feel well before the test, had difficulty understanding the test topics, or were not cognizant of the test format. Some learners expressed how they were under unbearable pressure as a result of the limited time allocated for test preparation. S11 reported having “no time to sleep or socialize” and forgetting “about themselves and their surroundings.” At times, they only managed to cursorily review the test topics, making them feel like they did not properly study for the tests. This may be especially true during final tests when the exam schedule is crowded. Tension, mixed with fatigue, can accumulate, and the students had fewer chances to perform well in tests:

The last two days were like hell. I had little time to sleep, and I was daunted by the sheer amount of texts that I had to study... [Can you explain more?] Well... We had 10 texts to study within two days, [to say nothing of] the grammar topics we had to review and the writing practice we had to do. You know... mm... it was like a nightmare that did not seem to end. (S20)

### *Demotivators during tests*

The factors mentioned above may ostensibly seem trivial, but they can have detrimental consequences on students’ performance. Long tests held in a noisy environment or unexpected items and question patterns might all be sources of demotivation. One student explained in detail how she felt so bad during one test because of the terrible noise made by her classmates and the failure of the observing teacher to control the class:

This was not a test; it was chaotic group work! It caused me a terrible headache. The teacher could not discipline the class and the students did as they desired. I could not focus at all and my performance was so bad. (S18)

*Demotivators after tests*

Learners' problems with tests may not be over once the test ends. When learners get their exam papers back, they might experience demotivation as a result of:

- unfair scoring (2)
- an unexpected (low) score (3)
- repeated experiences of failure (2)
- lasting feelings of helplessness (3)

When students get their exam papers back, they may be disappointed by the score they receive, especially if they had expected to obtain a higher result. Students may feel that the score they received was a result of unfair marking, although the test itself could be perceived as fair. Failing tests or obtaining unexpectedly low scores can be demotivating experiences and, when repeated, can lead to a state of lasting demotivation that is likely to transform demotivation from a *state* into a *trait* (Kebalawi, 2009).

*Coping strategies*

The more successful students tended to report more coping strategies than the less successful students, as was the case with participants in the Carpenter et al. (2009) study. They also had more positive images of themselves and their abilities in comparison to the lower-achieving students, which is similar to what Albalawi and Al-Hoorie (2021) reported. This is comparable to both Falout's (2012) and Falout and Maruyama's (2004) studies, where some of the strategies deployed helped learners regain their motivation, whereas other strategies had a counter-productive effect. Here, escaping or trying to ignore the demotivating experiences is the main strategy most referred to by learners. Looking at the ways in which students explain this notion reveals different aspects of this strategy. Some students explained that they try to ignore the unpleasant experience in order to be able to move forward. This can be referred to as *positive escape* and was reportedly employed by the more successful students. Ignoring would be their first strategy, and they may later apply other strategies. S5, for example, explained: "The first thing is that I try to forget and then I tell myself that I... I mean... I can achieve [a better score] and that this score does not reflect [what I know]." However, ignoring the experience could reflect learners' state of demotivation or tendency to become demotivated as well. This in turn can be labeled as a *negative escape*, and it is often employed by less successful students. Such students simply expressed little care for the low results they obtained because whatever efforts they exert "will not make a difference" (S17).

Following this, three other students reported that they overcame their demotivating experiences by letting out their feelings and expressing their emotions (S6, S19, & S20). They "simply cry" (S19) or "curse the test and the language" (S20) or even "tear up the exam papers" once they get them back (S20). These are involuntary reactions that do not help learners in the long run, as was also found by Falout (2012). Another student claimed that they reflected on their performance in an attempt to see what went wrong and to learn from their mistakes (S4), while another claimed that they had to endure the results and accept them as they were (S6). They perceived their low scores as "a destiny that they had to meet" (S19). This group seemed to be different from the group of students who demonstrated a negative escape because they were not demotivated and did care about the results they received; instead, they simply accepted it as a part of their learning process.

Another coping strategy involved working on their self-esteem and confidence. Such students tried to ease their negative experiences by thinking positively about their abilities and their chances of doing well in their next attempts, e.g., "I tell myself that I can, and I try to convince myself that I will do better in the next test" (S20). There was not much reference to seeking help from others, but learners reported being relieved when their teachers showed "understanding and support" (S20) and seemed to care about them. This is often referred to as teachers' immediacy, and it has been long established as something that positively affects students' motivation (Liu, 2021).

As can be noted, students' strategies in coping with the demotivating experiences they encounter with tests vary considerably, mainly as a factor of students' abilities. The more able students apply strategies that can be quite successful in helping them eliminate the demotivating feelings they undergo, while the less able students apply fewer effective strategies and may apply strategies that can even be counter-productive and could lead to withdrawal or a sense of amotivation.

### Conclusion

The present study explored the possible links between language tests and learners' experiences with motivation and demotivation. This discussion included the associated strategies learners employed to cope with the demotivating experiences they encountered. The results suggest that the ways in which tests can affect students' motivation and demotivation vary a lot and are quite complex. Tests were found to be mostly extrinsically motivating to learners, although intrinsic motives could be found as well, especially with more successful students. Many learners claimed that they would not study if they didn't have any tests, and others felt that tests were a challenge that they enjoyed



overcoming. This shows that tests can motivate students *before* and *during* test taking. It has also been found that tests can affect students' motivation even *after* they take them, as they might motivate high achievers and demotivate low achievers, although this effect might be more complex as discussed earlier.

It has been found that tests can demotivate learners before, during, and after taking them. A number of ways in which tests may cause demotivating experiences were reported by learners. Considering the dynamicity of motivation and demotivation (Keblawi, 2009; Kikuchi, 2019), the demotivating experiences that tests may cause were found to have different effects on different learners or on the same learners at different times, rendering the relationship between tests and demotivation more complex. For example, failing tests could potentially be demotivating at first, but upon reflecting on these experiences, students may learn from it and become more motivated to prepare better for future tests. To deal with these complications, learners reported the use of different coping strategies that they themselves had developed, with ignoring the result being the strategy most often employed. It should also be noted that the more successful learners applied strategies that were more effective in coping with demotivation caused by tests in comparison to the less successful learners. There was little reference to adults or peers being considered as a source of assistance in such situations. However, these conclusions should be taken with caution due to the exploratory nature of this study and the small number of participants.

### Recommendations

Although the small number of participants and the specific population do not allow for the generalization of the results, it is still possible to make some common-sense recommendations. Besides being valid and reliable, tests should be perceived to be fair and should be properly administered with much attention to the fine technical issues related to the test design and administration. Elements that may ostensibly look trivial, like how the test is administrated and the conditions of the testing environment, could have a crucial impact on students' performances and consequently, on their motivation to learn. Teachers should thus be aware that tests may have great ramifications on their students' motivation and that they need to be cognizant of the myriad of complex ways in which tests can demotivate students. In addition, learners should be presented with all the possible coping strategies at their disposal and should be guided in how to choose the positive strategies that best suit them.

Further research with larger numbers of participants is needed to consolidate the findings of this research and to widen our understanding of the issues it tackles. Future research specifically regarding how tests can affect the motivation/demotivation experiences in students with different levels of proficiency, age groups, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds may yield more insight into this field of study.

### Limitations

The main limitation of the study stems from the relatively small number of participants, as it is meant to be an exploratory study into how tests might influence learners' motivation and demotivation to learn a second language. In addition, the study did not address other possible effects of important factors, such as the student's age, gender, socioeconomic background, and overall academic level. It could be the case that such factors may alter the way in which tests can affect learners' motivation and demotivation. In addition, the study only examined learners' perspectives. Exploring the perspectives of other stakeholders, like teachers, school principals, and language policy makers, may yield more insight into the issues investigated in this study.

### Ethics Statements

The research involving human participants underwent thorough review and approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Al-Qasemi Academy. Prior to participating in the study, all participants provided written informed consent, indicating their voluntary agreement to participate.

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