



## Demotivating Factors in English Language Learning Among Non-English Major University Students in Vietnam: A Quantitative Study

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**Abstract**

*This study investigates demotivating factors in English language learning among 479 non-English major undergraduate students at a public university in Vietnam, drawing on Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as its theoretical framework. A quantitative survey design was employed, using a researcher-developed 23-item questionnaire organized around five SDT-informed factors: lack of autonomy, low perceived competence, lack of relatedness, irrelevance of English to personal goals, and external pressure and amotivation. Descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests were conducted using SPSS 27. The results indicate that the irrelevance of English to personal goals was the most prominent demotivating factor ( $M = 4.00$ ), followed by lack of autonomy ( $M = 3.97$ ) and lack of relatedness ( $M = 3.79$ ), while low perceived competence ( $M = 3.02$ ) and external pressure ( $M = 3.00$ ) were least salient. Gender differences were statistically significant on three factors, with female students reporting higher demotivation related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, though the difference for relatedness would not survive Bonferroni correction. These findings suggest that curriculum reform to enhance the perceived relevance of English and instructional approaches that support learner autonomy and belonging may help reduce demotivation in compulsory EFL programmes.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

English has become an indispensable skill in Vietnam's rapidly globalizing higher education landscape. As the country deepens its engagement with international academic and professional networks, universities have made English language education a compulsory requirement for undergraduate students across all disciplines, including those enrolled in non-English majors (Le & Dang, 2019). These students are expected to attain a defined level of English proficiency before graduation, regardless of the field they are studying. However, sustaining the motivation necessary to meet this expectation has proven difficult for many learners. Research conducted in the Vietnamese context indicates that a considerable number

of non-English major students experience a gradual decline in engagement with English over the course of their studies, a phenomenon widely referred to as demotivation (Ngoc & Trinh, 2021).

Demotivation in English language learning is a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by a combination of external and internal forces (Dörnyei, 2001). It is not simply the absence of motivation but a measurable reduction in students' willingness and effort to engage in learning, triggered by specific experiences within the learning context. Understanding what causes demotivation among non-English major students is particularly important, as this group is often compelled to study a language they may perceive as peripheral to their academic and career goals. While previous studies have examined this issue in various Asian contexts (Ngoc & Trinh, 2021; Zhou et al., 2023; Shoeib, 2022), research focusing specifically on Vietnamese non-English major undergraduates and grounded in a systematic theoretical framework remains limited. Furthermore, whether male and female students experience demotivation differently in this context has received little scholarly attention, despite mixed findings on this question in the broader literature.

This study, therefore, investigates demotivating factors in English language learning among non-English major undergraduate students at a public university in Vietnam, using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as its theoretical lens. The study identifies which factors are most and least prominent among this population and examines whether meaningful differences exist between male and female students. The findings are intended to offer practical insight for instructors, curriculum designers, and institutional policymakers seeking to improve student engagement in compulsory English programmes. The study is guided by the following research questions:

**Research Questions:**

1. What are the most and least prominent demotivating factors in English language learning among non-English major EFL students at a public university in Vietnam?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in demotivating factors between male and female non-English major EFL students at the same university?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Definition of Demotivation**

Demotivation is a concept that has attracted growing scholarly attention in applied linguistics and second language acquisition research, particularly as researchers have sought to understand why learners who initially appear motivated eventually disengage from the language learning process. The foundational definition most widely cited in the field is that of Dörnyei (2001), who described demotivation as specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action. This early formulation placed emphasis on external sources, suggesting that demotivation originates primarily from factors in the learner's environment rather than from within the learner.

Subsequent scholarship broadened this conceptualization to include internal psychological factors as well. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013) acknowledged that demotivation could also arise from internal states such as anxiety, low self-confidence, and a diminished sense of personal relevance attached to the learning task. This expanded understanding recognizes that the boundary between external and internal demotivators is not fixed; external experiences such as negative feedback or an unsupportive classroom atmosphere can internalize over time, gradually reshaping a learner's beliefs about their own competence and the value of continued effort. Kikuchi (2009) further contributed to this discussion by distinguishing between demotivation as a temporary dip in motivation and remotivation, the potential recovery of motivation following demotivating experiences. This distinction is important because it implies that demotivation need not be permanent and that targeted intervention may help restore engagement. In the EFL context, demotivation is of particular

concern because learners frequently encounter English in institutional settings where they have limited agency over content, pace, or purpose, making the conditions for sustained engagement structurally fragile (Ngoc & Trinh, 2021).

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework: Self-Determination Theory**

The present study is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT), a macro-theory of human motivation originally developed by Deci and Ryan (1985) and elaborated across educational and psychological contexts by Ryan and Deci (2000). SDT distinguishes between different qualities of motivation rather than treating motivation as a single undifferentiated construct. The theory proposes a continuum ranging from amotivation, in which an individual lacks any intentional basis for action, through various forms of extrinsic motivation regulated by external pressures or rewards, to intrinsic motivation, which is driven by inherent interest and enjoyment in the activity itself. Movement along this continuum is governed by the degree to which three basic psychological needs are satisfied or frustrated within a given context.

The three basic psychological needs identified by SDT are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the experience of volition and self-endorsement, that is, the sense that one is acting out of genuine choice rather than external compulsion. Competence refers to the experience of effectiveness and mastery, encompassing the belief that one is capable of achieving desired outcomes through sustained effort. Relatedness refers to the sense of belonging and meaningful connection with others in the learning community, including both peers and instructors. Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that the satisfaction of these needs promotes internalization, the process by which externally imposed goals become personally valued, thereby sustaining motivation over time. Conversely, the frustration of any of these needs creates conditions conducive to demotivation and, in more severe cases, amotivation. Applied to EFL learning, Noels et al. (2000) demonstrated that learners whose autonomy was restricted, whose competence was undermined by repeated failure, or whose relatedness was compromised by impersonal classroom environments consistently exhibited lower levels of self-determined motivation. These three need-thwarting conditions, alongside the absence of identified regulation and the experience of purely external compulsion, form the theoretical basis for the five demotivation factors examined in the present study.

## **2.3 Previous Studies**

A growing body of empirical research has examined demotivation among EFL learners at the university level, particularly across Asia. These studies consistently identify both external and internal factors that reduce students' motivation to engage with English and have begun to explore whether gender moderates these effects.

In the Vietnamese context, Ngoc and Trinh (2021) investigated demotivation among 100 non-English major undergraduates using a 35-item Likert-scale questionnaire. Their findings revealed that unclear personal goals, low interest, and poor academic performance were the most prominent internal sources of demotivation, while inexperienced teaching and overcrowded classrooms constituted the key external factors. Importantly, no significant gender differences were detected, suggesting that male and female students in this Vietnamese setting were similarly affected by the identified demotivating conditions. Truong et al. (2025), studying motivational orientations among 320 English-major students at a private university in southern Vietnam, found that students were predominantly extrinsically motivated, driven largely by career advancement and communication with international communities, and that female students demonstrated significantly higher extrinsic motivation than their male counterparts. Although focused on motivation rather than demotivation, this finding implies that gender may interact with motivational processes in ways relevant to the present investigation.

In the Chinese EFL context, Zhou et al. (2023) surveyed 272 university students in a blended learning environment using a 34-item scale. Five demotivation factors were identified

through factor analysis, with an inappropriate learning environment emerging as the most influential, followed by negative teacher behavior and low expectancy of success, while loss of task value ranked lowest. No statistically significant gender differences were found across any of the five factors. Ren and Abhakorn (2022), using a mixed-methods approach with Chinese college students, identified three internal demotivation pathways: a perceived gap between actual and required English proficiency, low perceived value of English, and a limited sense of the institutional importance of English. Their emphasis on psychological and cognitive processes complements the more structural analysis offered by Zhou et al. (2023) and underscores the need to examine both dimensions when investigating demotivation.

Research in the Middle Eastern context has further contributed to understanding gender's role in demotivation. Shoeib (2022) examined demotivation among 60 EFL students at a Saudi university using an adapted version of the Sakai and Kikuchi Demotivation Questionnaire for EFL Learners. Female students rated learning contents and materials as well as teacher competence and teaching styles as significantly more demotivating than male students did, representing one of the few studies to report a gender-based difference in demotivation patterns. In contrast, Alqasham (2022) found no significant gender differences among 80 Saudi preparatory-year students, with sociocultural factors and course instructor quality identified as the primary demotivators. Similarly, Huwari et al. (2023) found that the classroom environment was the most demotivating factor among 110 Jordanian undergraduates, while lack of self-confidence and interest were rated least demotivating; this study did not examine gender differences.

Taken together, these studies reveal that environmental and instructional factors are among the most consistently identified demotivators across contexts. On the question of gender, the evidence is mixed: the majority of studies report no significant differences between male and female students (Ngoc & Trinh, 2021; Alqasham, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023), while a smaller number identify specific factors where gender differences are apparent (Shoeib, 2022; Truong et al., 2025). A further gap in the literature is the limited use of an established motivational theory as an organizing framework. The present study addresses these gaps by applying SDT systematically to demotivation among non-English major students in Vietnam and by explicitly testing for gender differences using inferential statistics.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

This study adopted a quantitative research design to investigate demotivation factors in English language learning among non-English major university students in Vietnam. A survey-based approach was employed, as it allows for the systematic collection of numerical data from a relatively large sample within a structured framework (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative methods are particularly appropriate when the aim is to measure the prevalence and magnitude of specific constructs across a defined population (Dörnyei, 2007). The theoretical foundation of this study is rooted in SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000), and the questionnaire was constructed to operationalize the three basic psychological needs as demotivating factors, with additional factors capturing the absence of identified regulation and the experience of purely external compulsion. A five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree) was used to measure participants' level of agreement with each statement, a format widely adopted in motivational research in language learning due to its reliability and suitability for parametric statistical analysis (Brown, 2011).

#### **3.2 Participants**

The participants were non-English major undergraduate students at a public university in Vietnam. A total of 479 students completed the online questionnaire, comprising 260 males (54.3%) and 219 females (45.7%). All participants were enrolled in compulsory English courses as part of their degree programmes but were pursuing majors in fields other than

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English language or linguistics. Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that all respondents met the core criterion of being non-English major students with direct experience of compulsory English instruction in a Vietnamese university context. Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the participants.

**Table 1. Demographic Profile of Participants (N = 479)**

Characteristic	Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	260	54.3
	Female	219	45.7
Total		479	100.0

### **3.3 Data Collection Procedure**

Data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed via Google Forms. The survey link was shared with target participants through institutional communication channels. Before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and assured that their responses would remain anonymous and be used solely for academic research purposes. Participation was entirely voluntary. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot study was conducted with 20 non-English major students who shared similar characteristics with the target population but were not included in the main sample. Following the pilot, the questionnaire was reviewed, and minor refinements were made before being administered to the main sample of 479 participants.

### **3.4 Data Analysis**

All quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive statistics, specifically means and standard deviations, were computed for each of the five factors and for each individual statement. Mean scores were used to rank the factors from most to least demotivating. An independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether statistically significant differences existed between male and female students on each factor. Prior to the main analysis, the internal consistency of each factor was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with values of .70 or above considered acceptable for social science research (Nunnally, 1978; George & Mallery, 2003). Table 2 presents the reliability coefficients for both the pilot and main study.

**Table 2. Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients for All Factors: Pilot and Main Study**

Factor	Items (Pilot)	$\alpha$ (Pilot N=20)	Items (Main)	$\alpha$ (Main N=479)
Lack of Autonomy in English Learning	5	.723	5	.794
Low Perceived Competence in English	5	.745	5	.827
Lack of Relatedness in the Learning Environment	4	.763	4	.771
Irrelevance of English to Personal Goals	4	.784	4	.801
External Pressure and Amotivation	5	.799	5	.833

As shown in Table 2, all five factors demonstrated acceptable to good internal consistency in both the pilot study (alpha range: .723 to .799) and the main study (alpha range: .771 to .833), confirming that the instrument was sufficiently reliable for the main data analysis.

## **4. RESULTS**

This chapter presents the descriptive statistics from 479 participants, first at the factor level to address Research Question 1, and then at the item level for each factor. An independent samples t-test summary addressing Research Question 2 is included at the end of the chapter.

#### 4.1 Overview of Demotivation Factors

Table 3 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for all five demotivation factors, ranked from highest to lowest.

**Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for All Demotivation Factors (N = 479)**

Factor	Mean	SD	Rank
Factor 4: Irrelevance of English to Personal Goals	4.00	.716	1st (Highest)
Factor 1: Lack of Autonomy in English Learning	3.97	.688	2nd
Factor 3: Lack of Relatedness in the Learning Environment	3.79	.710	3rd
Factor 2: Low Perceived Competence in English	3.02	.686	4th
Factor 5: External Pressure and Amotivation	3.00	.729	5th (Lowest)

Factor 4 (Irrelevance of English to Personal Goals) received the highest mean score ( $M = 4.00$ ,  $SD = .716$ ), indicating the strongest overall agreement among participants. Factor 1 (Lack of Autonomy,  $M = 3.97$ ,  $SD = .688$ ) ranked second, followed by Factor 3 (Lack of Relatedness,  $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = .710$ ) in third place. All three factors yielded means above 3.50. Factor 2 (Low Perceived Competence,  $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = .686$ ) and Factor 5 (External Pressure and Amotivation,  $M = 3.00$ ,  $SD = .729$ ) ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, both approaching the neutral midpoint.

#### 4.2 Factor 1: Lack of Autonomy in English Learning

Table 4 presents the item-level descriptive statistics for Factor 1.

**Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Factor 1**

Statement	N	Mean	SD
S1. I feel like I have no choice in how I study English because the curriculum is strictly fixed.	479	4.22	.886
S2. I do not have any say in the topics or materials used in my English classes.	479	4.05	.924
S3. My English teacher makes all the decisions about what and how I should learn, leaving me no freedom.	479	3.88	.970
S4. I feel pressured to learn English in a way that does not match my personal learning style.	479	3.94	.928
S5. I lose motivation to study English because I cannot choose learning activities that interest me.	479	3.78	.936

All five statements in Factor 1 received mean scores above 3.78. Statement 1 obtained the highest mean ( $M = 4.22$ ,  $SD = .886$ ), indicating that the perception of a fixed curriculum with no learner choice was the most strongly endorsed autonomy-related demotivator. Statement 2 followed ( $M = 4.05$ ,  $SD = .924$ ), with Statement 4 third ( $M = 3.94$ ,  $SD = .928$ ). Statement 5 obtained the lowest mean within this factor ( $M = 3.78$ ,  $SD = .936$ ), though this still reflects a relatively high level of agreement.

#### 4.3 Factor 2: Low Perceived Competence in English

Table 5 presents the item-level descriptive statistics for Factor 2.

**Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Factor 2**

Statement	N	Mean	SD
S6. I feel that my English proficiency is too low to make meaningful progress.	479	2.77	.954

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S7. I often feel incompetent when using English in class because I make too many mistakes.	479	3.09	.931
S8. Receiving consistently low grades in English makes me feel incapable of ever improving.	479	3.04	.895
S9. I compare my English ability to that of my classmates and feel discouraged by how much better they are.	479	3.36	.733
S10. I believe I lack the talent for learning English, which reduces my desire to keep trying.	479	2.84	.932

Mean scores for Factor 2 ranged from 2.77 to 3.36. Statement 9 received the highest mean ( $M = 3.36$ ,  $SD = .733$ ), suggesting that social comparison with more proficient classmates was the most commonly experienced competence-related demotivator. Statements 7 and 8 clustered around the neutral midpoint at  $M = 3.09$  and  $M = 3.04$  respectively. Statement 6 yielded the lowest mean in this factor ( $M = 2.77$ ,  $SD = .954$ ), indicating that students were less inclined to attribute their demotivation to an inability to make progress.

#### **4.4 Factor 3: Lack of Relatedness in the Learning Environment**

Table 6 presents the item-level descriptive statistics for Factor 3.

**Table 6. Descriptive Statistics for Factor 3**

Statement	N	Mean	SD
S11. I feel isolated in my English class because I do not connect with my classmates during activities.	479	3.96	.912
S12. My English teacher does not seem to care about my individual progress or difficulties.	479	3.66	.938
S13. I feel disconnected from my English class because the topics discussed are not relevant to my life or major.	479	3.81	.942
S14. The competitive atmosphere in my English class makes me feel unwelcome and anxious.	479	3.74	.900

All four statements in Factor 3 yielded means above 3.66. Statement 11 obtained the highest mean ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = .912$ ), indicating that social isolation in the classroom was the most widely endorsed relatedness-related demotivator. Statement 13 followed ( $M = 3.81$ ,  $SD = .942$ ), suggesting that the perceived irrelevance of class content to students' lives and majors contributed substantially to a sense of disconnection. Statement 12 obtained the lowest mean within this factor ( $M = 3.66$ ,  $SD = .938$ ), though still above the agree threshold.

#### **4.5 Factor 4: Irrelevance of English to Personal Goals**

Table 7 presents the item-level descriptive statistics for Factor 4.

**Table 7. Descriptive Statistics for Factor 4**

Statement	N	Mean	SD
S15. I do not see how studying English will benefit my future career in my own field of study.	479	4.25	.911
S16. English is a compulsory subject for me, so I study it only to fulfil graduation requirements, not because I value it.	479	3.99	.893
S17. I find it difficult to stay motivated because the English content taught in class has no connection to my major.	479	4.05	.899

S18. Studying English feels like a waste of time because it has no practical relevance to what I want to do in life.	479	3.73	.921
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Factor 4 contained the single highest-rated statement in the entire questionnaire. Statement 15 received a mean of 4.25 (SD = .911), indicating that the inability to connect English study with future career prospects was the most strongly endorsed demotivating experience across all 23 items. Statement 17 followed closely (M = 4.05, SD = .899), and Statement 16 recorded M = 3.99 (SD = .893). Statement 18 obtained the lowest mean within this factor (M = 3.73, SD = .921), though this remains above the agree threshold.

#### 4.6 Factor 5: External Pressure and Amotivation

Table 8 presents the item-level descriptive statistics for Factor 5.

**Table 8. Descriptive Statistics for Factor 5**

Statement	N	Mean	SD
S19. I study English only because I am required to, not because I want to.	479	2.67	.932
S20. The pressure from parents or teachers to pass English exams makes me dislike studying English even more.	479	3.17	.933
S21. I feel that no matter how hard I try, my English will never meet the expectations set by my university.	479	3.21	.974
S22. Knowing that English is mandatory but unrelated to my major makes me feel resentful toward the subject.	479	3.04	.929
S23. I often feel helpless and see no point in putting effort into English because the workload is overwhelming.	479	2.93	.939

Mean scores for Factor 5 ranged from 2.67 to 3.21, the lowest range of any factor. Statement 21 received the highest mean (M = 3.21, SD = .974), suggesting that a sense of futility about meeting institutional English expectations was the most common form of amotivation. Statement 19 yielded the lowest mean in the entire questionnaire (M = 2.67, SD = .932), indicating that studying English purely under obligation with no internalised value was the least endorsed demotivating experience in this sample.

#### 4.7 Gender Differences: Independent Samples T-Test

Table 9 presents the results of the independent samples t-test comparing male and female students across the five factors.

**Table 9. Independent Samples T-Test Results by Gender**

Factor	M (Male)	M (Female)	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Factor 1: Lack of Autonomy	3.86	4.11	-4.125	477	.000*
Factor 2: Low Perceived Competence	2.91	3.16	-4.018	477	.000*
Factor 3: Lack of Relatedness	3.72	3.88	-2.452	477	.015*
Factor 4: Irrelevance to Personal Goals	3.96	4.06	-1.485	477	.138
Factor 5: External Pressure & Amotivation	2.95	3.06	-1.596	477	.111

As shown in Table 9, statistically significant gender differences were found for three of the five factors. Female students reported significantly higher demotivation than male students on Factor 1 (M = 4.11 vs. 3.86,  $t = -4.125$ ,  $p < .001$ ), Factor 2 (M = 3.16 vs. 2.91,  $t = -4.018$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and Factor 3 (M = 3.88 vs. 3.72,  $t = -2.452$ ,  $p = .015$ ). No statistically significant differences were observed for Factor 4 ( $t = -1.485$ ,  $p = .138$ ) or Factor 5 ( $t = -1.596$ ,  $p = .111$ ),

indicating that both male and female students perceived the irrelevance of English to personal goals and external pressure as equally demotivating.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

### **5.1 Most and Least Prominent Demotivating Factors**

The results of this study reveal a clear pattern in which demotivation is most strongly associated with factors that reflect a disconnect between the institutional demands of English learning and students' personal goals, values, and agency. Factor 4 (Irrelevance of English to Personal Goals,  $M = 4.00$ ) ranked highest overall, with Statement 15 obtaining the highest mean of any item in the questionnaire ( $M = 4.25$ ). This finding is consistent with SDT's concept of identified regulation, which holds that motivation is sustained when learners can endorse the value of an activity as personally meaningful (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When this connection appears to be absent, as the data suggest may be the case for many non-English major students at this institution, the activity is likely experienced as externally imposed and therefore demotivating. This result aligns with the findings of Zhou et al. (2023), whose loss of task value factor also reflected a perceived absence of personal relevance, and with Ren and Abhakorn (2022), who identified low perceived value of English as one of the primary internal demotivation pathways among Chinese college students. In the Vietnamese setting, where English is mandated across all undergraduate programmes regardless of students' majors, this disconnection may be particularly difficult to address through instructional means alone.

Factor 1 (Lack of Autonomy,  $M = 3.97$ ) ranked second, a finding that is broadly consistent with SDT's proposition that the frustration of the need for autonomy may contribute to demotivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Students' relatively high agreement that the curriculum offers limited choice in how, what, or with what materials they study English may reflect a learning environment in which external regulation is prominent and opportunities for internalisation are limited. This finding resonates with the broader literature on autonomy in EFL settings; Noels et al. (2000) demonstrated that learners in controlling instructional environments consistently reported lower levels of self-determined motivation. Factor 3 (Lack of Relatedness,  $M = 3.79$ ) ranked third, with feelings of social isolation and perceived teacher indifference being most prominent. This pattern is broadly consistent with SDT's argument that the need for relatedness, understood as a sense of belonging and meaningful connection with others in the learning community, plays an important role in sustaining engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The finding that Statement 11 (classroom isolation) and Statement 13 (content irrelevance to students' lives) both scored above 3.80 may suggest that the relatedness deficit operates at both the social and curricular level, though this interpretation warrants further investigation.

In contrast, Factor 2 (Low Perceived Competence,  $M = 3.02$ ) and Factor 5 (External Pressure and Amotivation,  $M = 3.00$ ) ranked fourth and fifth, respectively, both approaching the neutral midpoint. The relatively modest scores on Factor 2 suggest that self-doubt and social comparison may have contributed to demotivation for some students in this sample, though these concerns did not appear to be as prominent as autonomy- or relevance-related factors. This is somewhat at variance with findings from Huwari et al. (2023), who reported competence-related demotivation as particularly salient among Jordanian students, and may reflect contextual differences in how Vietnamese students attribute academic difficulties. For Factor 5, Statement 19 obtained the lowest mean across the entire questionnaire ( $M = 2.67$ ), suggesting that outright amotivation driven purely by external compulsion was the least prevalent condition in this sample. This is consistent with Ren and Abhakorn (2022), who found that the complete absence of internalised motivation was less common than a partial, fragile form of engagement sustained by weak external regulation.

### **5.2 Gender Differences in Demotivation**

The t-test results present a nuanced picture of gender's role in demotivation that neither fully supports nor fully refutes the existing literature. On Factors 4 and 5, no statistically significant gender differences were found, which is consistent with the majority of prior studies reporting that male and female students are similarly affected by issues of task value and external pressure (Ngoc & Trinh, 2021; Alqasham, 2022; Zhou et al., 2023). This convergence suggests that the experience of studying a compulsory language perceived as irrelevant to one's career, and the resentment generated by purely obligatory study, may be largely universal among non-English major students regardless of gender.

Statistically significant differences were observed on three factors, with female students reporting higher mean scores than male students in each case. On Factor 1 (Autonomy), female students recorded a higher mean ( $M = 4.11$  vs.  $3.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which may indicate that autonomy-related demotivation was somewhat more pronounced among female respondents in this sample. On Factor 2 (Competence), female students also reported higher scores ( $M = 3.16$  vs.  $2.91$ ,  $p < .001$ ), suggesting that experiences of self-doubt and social comparison may have weighed more heavily for female students. On Factor 3 (Relatedness), female students scored higher ( $M = 3.88$  vs.  $3.72$ ,  $p = .015$ ), though this difference was smaller and, it should be noted, would not reach statistical significance under a Bonferroni-corrected threshold of  $p < .01$  for five simultaneous comparisons. These patterns are partially consistent with Shoeib (2022), who found that female EFL learners rated certain demotivating factors more strongly than male learners, and with Truong et al. (2025), who found that female Vietnamese students exhibited stronger extrinsic motivational orientations. It is important to interpret these differences cautiously, however. The present study did not measure mediating variables, psychological sensitivity, or learner perceptions through qualitative means, and as such the data do not allow firm conclusions about why these differences exist. One tentative possibility, consistent with SDT, is that autonomy and relatedness frustration may manifest differently across genders in this institutional context, but this remains a hypothesis rather than a finding. Taken together, the results suggest that gender may be a relevant moderating variable in some dimensions of EFL demotivation, warranting more targeted investigation in future research.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study examined demotivating factors in English language learning among 479 non-English major undergraduates at a public university in Vietnam, guided by Self-Determination Theory. The findings indicate that the irrelevance of English to personal goals was the most prominent demotivating factor, followed by a lack of learner autonomy and a deficit in classroom relatedness, while low perceived competence and external pressure were least salient. The t-test results revealed that gender does play a partial role: female students reported significantly higher demotivation on factors related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness, while no significant gender differences were found for perceived irrelevance or external pressure. These findings contribute to the growing body of EFL demotivation research in Vietnam by providing a theoretically grounded, empirically tested account of why non-English major students disengage from compulsory English study, and by demonstrating that gender modulates some but not all dimensions of this disengagement.

The practical implications of this study point in two complementary directions: curriculum reform and teaching quality. On the curriculum side, the dominance of Factor 4 across the sample indicates that universities need to reconsider how compulsory English programmes are designed and positioned for non-English major students. Integrating English-for-Specific-Purposes components that connect language instruction to students' fields of study could increase perceived relevance and strengthen identified regulation, thereby reducing the most prevalent form of demotivation observed here. On the teaching side, the high scores on autonomy and relatedness factors suggest that instructors can meaningfully reduce demotivation by offering learners greater choice in tasks and materials, fostering a more collaborative and inclusive classroom climate, and demonstrating attentiveness to individual

students' progress. For female students in particular, greater attention to the social and interpersonal quality of the classroom environment may be warranted, given their significantly higher sensitivity to relatedness and autonomy frustration.

This study has several limitations that should inform future research. The sample was drawn from a single public university, which constrains the generalizability of the findings to other institutional types, regions, or socioeconomic contexts within Vietnam. The reliance on a self-report questionnaire, while appropriate for measuring subjective motivational states, cannot fully capture the dynamic and situated nature of demotivation as it unfolds over time. Furthermore, the cross-sectional design prevents any conclusions about the temporal sequencing of demotivating experiences or their cumulative effects on language achievement. Future studies should consider adopting a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative measurement with qualitative interviews or classroom observations to provide deeper insight into the mechanisms by which need frustration translates into sustained disengagement. Longitudinal designs and comparative studies across multiple institutions and regions of Vietnam would also strengthen the evidence base and help determine whether the patterns observed here are representative of the broader national context.

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