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Sources of Motivation and Demotivation in BA Students of English Translation: The Students' Perspective[1]

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Abstract

This study sought to explore the sources of both motivation and demotivation among BA students of English Translation from their own perspective. Employing a qualitative, exploratory research design, this study gathered data from fifty volunteer undergraduate translation students, through a structured written interview. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze the students' responses. The results showed that the participants' motivation and demotivation were justifiable within the Self-Determination Theory framework. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors were identified with extrinsic elements being more frequently stated by the students as the reason to choose translation as a specialization. In addition, regarding their academic experience throughout their studies, factors such as the existence of engaging and relevant pedagogy, inspirational and supportive instructors, and positive peer interaction were reported as strong motivators that supported students' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Conversely, the most significant demotivating factors were outdated and impractical curricula and ineffective teaching methods, which were particularly characterized by the lack of attention to technology-related concerns of the students such as CAT and AI tool integration. Moreover, shortage of meaningful feedback, pressures from anxiety-inducing assessments, and job market concerns in the age of AI were also identified as demotivating.

Keywords: Motivation, Demotivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

1. Introduction

Fundamentally, motivation explains why individuals decide to undertake an activity, how much effort they invest in pursuing it, and how long they are willing to sustain that effort (Dörnyei, 2001). Dörnyei defined demotivation as "specific external forces that reduce or

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diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action" or as "various negative influences that cancel out existing motivation" (p. 27). Ryan and Deci (2000) stated that "to be motivated means to be moved to do something" (p. 54). Motivation refers to the energy and forces that initiate and direct behavior; those who do not have the forces to act are considered unmotivated, while someone who has the energy and direction to act is considered motivated. A distinction has been made between two different forms of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is defined as "the inherent tendency to seek out novelty and challenges, to extend and exercise one's capacities, to explore, and to learn" (p. 70). In contrast, extrinsic motivation includes a broad range of behaviors and activities that individuals engage in, not for reasons inherent in them, but for instrumental reasons.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (1985), has been considered as a major theory of motivation by many researchers. Distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is central to SDT. According to SDT, motivations range from amotivation to intrinsic motivation in the four forms of external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulation as the increasing levels of internalization. Moreover, SDT emphasizes examining individuals' experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as the three basic psychological needs. If these needs are satisfied, individuals will be able to achieve and enjoy psychological growth, integrity, and well-being, while frustration of these psychological needs could undermine motivation and well-being. When individuals lack the intention to act, amotivation might occur because they have not found a meaningful connection between their actions and the outcomes or felt incapable of achieving their desired outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The role of educational context in motivation had been highlighted by Vallerand (1997). He proposed a three-level hierarchical model for motivation including situational, contextual and global levels. According to his model, repeated demotivating experiences in educational situations could, through a bottom-up effect, contribute to changes in the students' broader motivational orientation toward education and result in contextual amotivation.

Previous studies have investigated various motivational factors in English language learning among Iranian learners. Kashefian-Naeeini et al. (2024) indicated that contextual factors such as age, field of study, and employment status did not have a significant impact on the type of motivation. Learners predominantly favored intrinsic motivation, considering it the primary driver of their engagement, while Vakilifard et al. (2021) demonstrated that integrative motivation played a lesser role in the language learning process compared to instrumental motivation. Bagheri Nevisi and Farhani (2022) examined motivational orientations of Iranian EFL learners across different proficiency levels. The findings indicated that extrinsic motivation is dominant at beginner and intermediate levels, whereas at advanced levels, intrinsic motivational factors—such as personal enjoyment and social challenge—become more influential.

As discussed above, there have been numerous studies conducted on Iranian EFL students' motivation, whereas students' motivation toward degree completion, and their

decision to study English translation in Iran have received relatively little attention. Ameri and Ghahari (2018) found that extrinsic motivation drove translation trainees toward academic achievement and course completion, whereas factors related to their teachers, educational administration and university facilities acted as demotivators. Fadakar (2014) showed that translation students decided to study English translation at university for at least one of these reasons: future job opportunities, interest in translation or learning English to communicate with people around the world, the social status of the field English translation, family support and encouragement. These factors also were reported earlier in non-Iranian contexts. For example, Kelly (2005) also identified future job opportunity as a translator as a motivator along with other extrinsic factors. Calvo (2009) also stated that the employability prospect of translation as a university field was a major extrinsic motivator among undergraduate students of translation studies; however, a study of the undergraduate translation students' motivations and expectations by Hubscher-Davidson (2007) found that students had quite different interests and expectations. While few had considered translation as a career, many did not expect the university program to make them a professional translator. According to Hubscher-Davidson, keeping all the students motivated could be challenging where they have various needs; nevertheless, the educator is accountable for ensuring that students acquire the relevant skills for their respective career. She concluded that "the students—as well as the teachers—need to be listened to, and mutual feedback and communication need to be a feature of the training process so as to ensure student satisfaction" (para. 20). The importance of implementing authentic, experiential learning in translator education to bridge the gap between academic training and professional practice has been emphasized by Kiraly (2016), as well.

Given the gap in research on the motivation of English translation students in Iran, the present study sought to investigate the sources of motivation and demotivation among BA students of English Translation from their own perspective. Consequently, this study aimed to discover the variables that form the initial motivation driving learners to choose English translation as a specialization in Iran. More importantly, its second objective was to explore the dynamics underlying the (de)motivation of these students during a Bachelor's program—they had once chosen as their future field of study and career— to provide a detailed, student-centered perspective on the complex interplay of forces that shape the educational journey of translation students. Thus, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the most powerful contributing factors that lead BA students of English translation to opt for translation as a specialization?

2. What do BA students of English translation regard as the most motivating and demotivating factors during their undergraduate studies?

2. Method

The following sections describe and justify the steps taken to address the research questions of this study.

2.1 Participants

Fifty undergraduate volunteer students at Qaemshahr Islamic Azad University participated in the study. The sample (16 male and 34 female students, aged 20–35) was selected from the junior and senior students of English translation based on convenience sampling from the population of the undergraduate students in Qaemshahr Islamic Azad University during the first semester of the 2025-2026 academic year.

2.2 Instrumentation

To achieve the dual objectives of this study, a qualitative data collection method was employed. The instrument used was a structured written interview, designed to elicit rich, detailed, and personal accounts from the participants' experience. The answers as well as prompts were written in Persian to ensure participants could express their thoughts with maximum fluency and detail.

Open-ended questions were developed with special care to allow the participants to highlight any aspect they found de/motivating freely. The questionnaire was administered in face-to-face classes held for regular courses which the participants attended. The participants were allotted 45 minutes to complete the questionnaire. This was believed to encourage them to respond immediately and instinctively; however, there was no word limit to encourage free expression of ideas. It is worth mentioning that the time limit was set based on the pilot study of the questionnaire on seven undergraduate students of English translation.

The structured written-interview (questionnaire) consisted of 17 questions in Persian, designed to comprehensively address both research questions. The initial questions (1–6) were meticulously crafted to explore the sources of students' initial motivation, probing the reasons for selecting the translation major, the role of personal interest, career prospects, and influential figures (e.g., teachers, family, professional translators), as well as their awareness of the job market and alternatives they might have considered.

Questions 7 to 11 explored motivating factors in participants' academic environment. The focus was on factors like preferred aspects of classes, specific motivational experiences, and the positive role of instructors, peers, and feedbacks. Questions 12 to 16 were developed to elicit the demotivating factors from the participants' point of view. Question 17, the final question, was a broad question which invited the participants to share any additional insights not captured by the previous questions.

2.3 Procedure

The data for this qualitative study were collected through distributing a questionnaire which was developed after consulting with some translation professors. Then, in a small-scale pilot study, it was executed to a group of 7 undergraduate students of translation who did not take part in the main data collection phase. The pilot study aimed to assess the clarity and comprehensibility of the items. Based on the responses received, some minor revisions were made in the wordings of some questions and one additional question was added as a separate item. The pilot study was also conducted to estimate the approximate time needed to complete the questionnaire.

Afterward, the revised questionnaire was reviewed by a panel of five experts in Translation Studies and English language Teaching (ELT) to assess the content validity index (CVI) of the questionnaire which was found to be .86. Having confirmed the practicality of the questionnaire and its validity, it was distributed among the volunteering students of English translation.

To administer the written interview, the volunteering students were invited not to leave their classes after the scheduled lecture. The paper questionnaires were distributed and the instructions were delivered verbally. It was particularly emphasized that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions. The participants were asked to respond honestly in Persian and as in-depth and as comprehensive as possible. Although a time limit of 45 minutes was set, the participants were told that they could take slightly longer if they needed to.

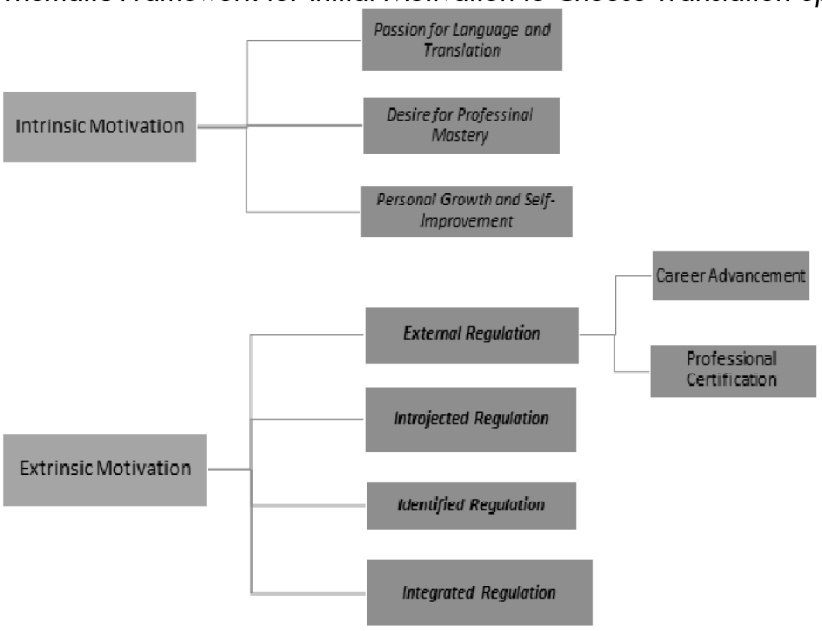
Considering the nature of the data in this study which was qualitative, thematic analysis was used as the main data analysis technique. To do so, the texts from the questionnaires were taken into consideration. The data were coded twice by one researcher with a two-week interval. After the intra-coder reliability of coding was confirmed using Cohen's kappa (k = .94), the researchers employed an inductive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) proposed framework and thematized the codes. The frequency of each theme was calculated based on the number of the participants who referred to the theme in their responses, regardless of how frequently a particular theme was mentioned by one participant. The findings were then discussed by the researchers. Notably, the thematic analysis was conducted on the original Persian accounts of the participants; the quotations cited in the Result section were subsequently translated into English for reporting purpose after the translations had been collaboratively cross-checked and refined by the researchers.

3. Results

To answer the first research question, thematic analysis was applied to the students' retrospective accounts of their decision-making process. The analysis revealed a complex interplay of motivations. In analyzing the data, there were cases where making distinction between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations based solely on the content of the motivation was

challenging. In such cases, the underlying reasons expressed by the students were illuminating; Motivations were classified as extrinsic where they were driven by external rewards, recognition, or pressure. The summary of the themes identified is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Thematic Framework for Initial Motivation to Choose Translation Specialization



Intrinsic Motivation

The intrinsic motivators that led BA students of English translation to opt for translation as a specialization were identified and classified in three themes:

A Passion for Language and Translation: One of the most dominant intrinsic motivators was the students' interest in or passion for learning English and doing translation itself. 29 students expressed that they enjoyed working with words, and acting as a bridge between cultures. That is, becoming a professional translator was not a means to an end for them, but was an end in itself for these students, as stated by Participant 9:

"*Translation makes me feel I am alive. I am here … it gives me a sense of being.*"

Desire for Professional Mastery: This subtheme was expressed by 21 participants, expressing their desire to deepen their knowledge of translation as a craft, and to understand the theoretical underpinnings of translation as a professional practice, as stated by Participant 2:

> *"I think what I have acquired [before university] was not enough … I have a personal goal to be a translator and if I want to achieve my goal I need to know more the fundamentals."*

Personal Growth and Self-Improvement: For 18 participants, the decision to study English translation was a matter of a broader goal of self-development. To them, challenges of the translation program they had faced were part of a pilgrimage to expand horizons and to achieve a sense of personal accomplishment, as noted by Participant 3:

> *"Well, we learned something in previous years. However, I think I need to know more. The more, the merrier."*

Extrinsic Motivation

Alongside intrinsic drives, powerful extrinsic factors significantly influenced students' decisions.

External Regulation: Eexternal regulation can be described with regard to the students' pursuit of tangible rewards and requirements. 36 students were primarily motivated by the pursuit of separable outcomes or external pressures. Two major sub-themes were Career Advancement and the need for Professional Certification, where the degree was seen as a direct tool for improving job prospects, as explicitly stated by the following participants:

> *"I am going to have my own translation office… so I think I need to have a PhD or at least an MA in translation."*
>
> *"…it is necessary for becoming a faculty member".*

Introjected Regulation: This less internalized form of extrinsic motivation involves acting to avoid guilt or anxiety or to bolster ego. Social or Familial Pressure was mentioned by ten participants as a key factor. Participant 6's account is telling:

> *"My siblings are… a physician and a faculty member … my parents insist I study hard and hold at least an MA … I liked it … but I might not study MA right after I graduate."*

This suggests that while there was some personal interest, family expectations and the pressure caused by being compared with one's siblings might also have affected the decision.

Identified Regulation: Eleven students identified the practical value of the degree for Skill Development, seeing it as crucial for acquiring specialized competencies. As stated by Participant 4:

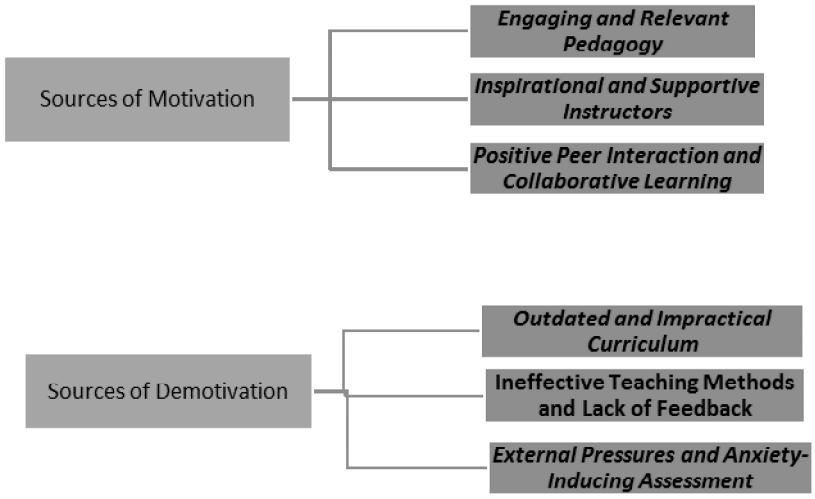
> *"University education can help me become a better translator."*

Integrated Regulation: This subtheme included the most autonomous forms of extrinsic motivation. Six students have assimilated the translation degree into their sense of self and long-term life goals. In other words, the participants with this type of motivation viewed studying English translation as integral to their future identity. According to Participant 11:

> *"Becoming a highly qualified translator is who I always wanted to be. That has been my long-term aspiration."*

A similar procedure was followed to answer the second research question. A list of the identified themes is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2
Motivating and Demotivating Factors in the Academic Environment



Sources of Motivation

Several elements within the participants' academic environment were identified as sources of motivation during their study as an undergraduate translation student.

Engaging and Relevant Pedagogy: A predominant motivator, as reported by 38 students, was the existence of dynamic, practical, and student-centered instructional methods. Incorporating interactive workshops, and hands-on translation projects in classes rather than theoretical lecturing motivate the students to indulge themselves in their studies. Furthermore, the use of authentic materials (e.g., translating real-world documents, films, or websites), as noted by eleven participants is noteworthy with this regard. Participant 17 stated that:

> *"The classes where we actually translate something challenging and then discuss our choices together are the ones I look forward to. It feels like real practice, not just theory."*

Inspirational and Supportive Instructors: The instructors play a critical role in motivating the students, as noted by 24 students. They were described as not only a source of knowledge but also a source of passion. As Participant 29 noted, teacher-student relationship is significant as it satisfies the need for relatedness and informative feedback that build the students' competence.

> *"My motivation soars when a teacher takes the time to explain why my translation choice was good or how I could make it sound more natural in Persian. It shows they care about my growth."*

Positive Peer Interaction and Collaborative Learning: A further motivator identified by 23 students was the existence of community and constructive collaboration with classmates. The prevalence of group projects, and peer-review sessions in and out of classes, or simply being in a cohort of like-minded individuals can create a supportive learning environment; reduces anxiety and increases enjoyment, as stated by Participant 28:

> *"Working with my peers on a difficult text motivates me. We learn from each other's different perspectives, and it doesn't feel so overwhelming."*

Sources of Demotivation

The sources of demotivation included factors that wiped out the students' initial enthusiasm they brought to the course, creating feelings of boredom and frustration.

Outdated and Impractical Curriculum: 39 students perceived the disconnect between the curriculum and the realities of the modern translation profession as the key source of demotivation. These students were frustrated with the teachers' over-reliance on outdated (literary) texts. They believed that the exclusion of practical genres (e.g., technical, legal, or commercial translation), and a lack of training in essential translation technologies frustrated them and thwarted their need for competence, as Participant 21 lamented:

> *"We are taught like it's the 1990s, how will I get a job if I've never even seen the software professionals use?"*

21 students also emphasized the emerging role of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in real-world translation, which is neglected in the courses. They perceived that they are deprived of essential professional skills that they inevitably need in the near future. This is reflected in the following quotes from the participants.

> *"We have courses like Emerging Areas in Translation and The Translation Market, but in practice, in other classes—and even in exams where we still have to lug around heavy paper dictionaries because they say they can't prevent cheating otherwise—there's no trace of any of these new concepts." (Participant 50)*

> *"You wonder what the real translation skill actually is: is it the one still being tested with these paper dictionaries, or the one happening out there in the real-world market using a thousand different assistive tools?" (Participant 43)*

> *"Professors have differing views on using AI. Usually, the older professors act as if using it in translation is an absolute sin. These contradictions really drain your motivation and the joy out of learning. On top of all that, add the underlying anxiety of what's going to happen to our job market with the rise of AI." (Participant 37)*

As reflected in the excerpts above, the students' frustration comes from the fact that the curriculum is not updated and there is no unity of administration with regard to employing modern technologies, especially AI in the department. Moreover, the academic regulations have not been updated with regard to applying AI or other modern tools within exam sessions. That is, they feel demotivated since they do not perceive the current courses they are passing to be promising in terms of arming them to succeed in the future competitive market of translation and interpretation. Such an environment threats the development of students' autonomy and competence in English translation.

Ineffective Teaching Methods and Lack of Feedback: 23 students pointed out that the regular passive learning experiences they had in their classes were ineffective and demotivating. They particularly enumerated monotonous lectures of teachers as demotivating elements of English translation courses. As 9 students emphasized, if it is compounded by insufficient meaningful feedback, it becomes even more demotivating. From their perspective, insufficient feedback is particularly characterized by over-reliance on grading translation performance or proposing corrections without explanation, as emphasized by Participant 15:

> *"When you just get a red mark without knowing how to improve, you stop caring. You feel like your effort is pointless."*

External Pressures and Anxiety-Inducing Assessment: As stated by 19 participants, part of students' demotivation is rooted in their perceived anxiety. The emotional pressure caused by academic procedures such as heavy load of assignments, as well as exams that test memorization rather than practical skill, scratch students' motivation to pursue their studies constantly. This is amalgamated by their pervasive anxiety about their future job prospects which acts as an external demotivator which, as reported by 15 students, can even decline their engagement. It seems that such a demotivator as an external pressure, could destabilizes intrinsic interest and autonomy of the students, as noted by Participant 26:

> *"Sometimes I sit in class and think, 'Will this even help me find a job? That thought alone can kill my motivation to participate."*

The identified themes and their frequencies in relation to both research questions are presented in Table 1, below:

Table 1

Themes Related to Students' Motivation and Demotivation and Their Frequencies

	Themes	Frequency
Intrinsic Motivations to choose translation specialization	*A Passion for Language and Translation*	29
	Desire for Professional Mastery	21
	Personal Growth and Self-Improvement	18
Extrinsic Motivations to choose translation specialization	*External Regulation*	36
	Introjected Regulation	10
	Identified Regulation	11

	Integrated Regulation	6
Motivating factors	*Engaging and Relevant Pedagogy*	38
	Inspirational and Supportive Instructors	24
	Positive Peer Interaction and Collaborative Learning	23
Demotivating factors	*Outdated and Impractical Curriculum*	39
	Ineffective Teaching Methods and Lack of Feedback	23
	External Pressures and Anxiety-Inducing Assessment	19

Note: Frequencies are based on the number of participants who mentioned each theme, regardless of how many times each student mentioned it.

4. Discussion

The results of the thematic analysis conducted in this study indicated that several intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation and demotivation led BA students of English translation to opt for translation as a specialization. First and foremost, the results reported above confirmed that the translation students' motivation is a dynamic and multifaceted construct which is a function of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. This complex interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is at the core of SDT (Deci & Ryan,1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The results showed that the most frequently cited intrinsic motivation to choose translation specialization was the students' genuine passion for learning English and translation as a skill per se which has been documented in previous studies such as Fadakar (2014) in Iran and Kelly (2005) in non-Iranian contexts. In other words, entering English translation studies as a university field is, according to Ryan and Deci (2000), for its inherent satisfaction which reflects the autonomous prototype where rather than external contingencies, the inherent pleasure, curiosity, and perceived internal causality lead to engagement.

However, it was found that extrinsic motivations were more frequently cited by the participants as the factors affecting their decisions to opt for English translation and pursue their studies. This has been recurrently seen in previous related studies, too (e.g., Ameri & Ghahari, 2018; Calvo, 2009; Gao et al., 2004; Lin, 2013; Noori et al., 2025; Rezaeian et al., 2021; and Vakilifard et al., 2021). This confirms that the pragmatic realities of educational and career choices outweigh personal inclinations. The results of the analysis in this study showed that career advancement, professional certification, and social or familial expectations were among the key factors which have been emphasized in previous studies, as well (e.g., Calvo, 2009; Gao et al., 2004; Lin, 2013). Fitting these findings within the SDT framework, it can be argued that the external regulation outweighs the identified regulation in deciding on studying English translation. However, while social pressures represent pure external regulation, career prospects and certification often indicate identified and introjected

regulation as external values could be partially internalized for achieving the long-term goals which are also personally valued.

In response to the second research question which aimed at exploring the (de)motivators in the course of education among the BA students majoring in English translation, engaging pedagogy, supportive instructors, and collaborative learning were found to be highly motivating. This is in alignment with the basic psychological needs outlined in SDT: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Interactive and practical teaching methods, and providing opportunities for mastery and authentic practice pave the way for higher competence and autonomy, which shift translation students from passive recipients to active agents in their translation decisions. Supportive cognitive and emotional feedbacks from instructors, which is also consistent with Dörnyei's (2001) emphasis on the teacher's role in motivation, nurture the students' relatedness and competence. These findings resonate Ramos and dela Cruz St Tondo's (2019), in terms of the significance of external regulation (constructive feedback and teacher support) as a strong motivator.

With regard to demotivating factors—the factors that reduce or undermine the existing motivation as conceptualized by Dorneyi (2001)—outdated curricula, passive teaching methods, and lack of meaningful feedback were found to thwart the students by reinforcing the feelings of irrelevance and incompetence. Although the identified demotivating factors are not taken as evidence of amotivation as conceptualized in SDT, they might indicate limited support for students' psychological needs; Students expressed their frustration with their teachers' theoretical and impractical instruction, which, to them, is disconnected from real-world professional demands they most likely face in the near future. Also, outdatedness of the curricular content and instructional methods, especially, in terms of ignoring technological innovations such as AI which is revolutionizing the field of translation practically and professionally, were of the major demotivation themes. Such a concern was also recurrently stated in previous research (e.g., Alordiah 2023; An et al. 2023; Koka, 2023; and Chounta, 2022). Elbamna and Armstrong (2023) pointed out that AI is not integrated to curricular activities and assessment due to ethical issues, but students interpret lack of AI presence as backwardness and perceived injustice as they find themselves deprived of enough training in integrating AI into translation practice and profession; this perception may also have contributed to another finding of the study, which indicated that a considerable proportion of the students considered the existing curriculum outdated and impractical. Although the fact that the sample was limited to the students of a single university might reduce the generalizability of the findings, these findings still suggest a dire need for further research on the relevance and effectiveness of the current curricula in BA programs in English translation in Iran. Moreover, the fact that only volunteer students participated in this study, may have influenced the findings; however, voluntary participation was preferred to respect students' autonomy as a basic psychological need.

Insufficient peer interactions and weak communal bond with classmates and peers were also identified as demotivators, reinforcing the importance of relatedness in SDT, as echoed by Falout et al. (2009), who emphasized the social dimensions of (de)motivation. Unfulfilled relatedness deprives the students of interpersonal scaffolding and emotional safety which is necessary to sustain intrinsic motivation.

Despite the valuable insights gained from applying SDT to interpret the findings, limitations of the framework should also be acknowledged. One of the main challenges was making distinction between different types of motivation; some responses could be interpreted in more than one way. The researchers discussed these ambiguities, taking into account the underlying reasons expressed by the students, until a consensus was attained.

One practical implication of the present study, grounded in the findings, is that the intersection of students' needs for relatedness through peer collaboration, and the integration of technology suggests that implementing collaborative project-based tasks replicating authentic market conditions might play a pivotal role in satisfying the psychological needs for competence (through mastering relevant technologies), autonomy (through taking agency over a realistic translation workflow), and relatedness (through peer interaction to attain a shared goal), an experience which can enhance internalized motivation and nourish self-efficacy in students.

Given that students identified their teachers' inconsistent approaches to technology use, particularly AI, in translation as a demotivating factor, translation teachers are required to critically reflect on their own perceptions and resolve their uncertainties regarding the appropriate use of AI in translation classes. This is also in line with The European Master's in Translation (EMT) Competence Framework, which emphasizes preparing translation students for a highly technologized workplace and continuously updating curricula to adapt to the changes in the translation industry (European Commission, 2022).

The findings also highlight that translation teachers as well as the university administrators must recognize the students' growing awareness of and needs to integrate technology into their academic experience. Accordingly, the curriculum, the design of the exam questions, exam settings, as well as assessment methods are required to be revisited to support the students' needs.

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