Sociocultural dynamics of ESL learning (de)motivation: An activity theory analysis of two adult Korean immigrants

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Sociocultural Dynamics of ESL Learning (De)Motivation: An Activity Theory Analysis of Two Adult Korean Immigrants

Tae-Young Kim

Abstract: This study examines the longitudinal trajectories of two Korean ESL immigrants’ L2 learning motivation from an Activity Theory perspective. Two highly skilled immigrants participated in monthly semi-structured interviews over a period of 10 months. The research questions are as follows: (1) How does the relationship between ESL learners and their perceived social contexts affect and shape the way in which their ESL learning motivation develops? (2) How can the factors affecting the changes in ESL learning motivation be explained from an Activity Theory perspective? The recurring themes in the monthly interview data were coded and aligned to Engeström’s (1999a) activity-system model; important interactions among the subcomponents of the model are presented and discussed. The results indicate that (1) the dynamism in ESL learning (de)motivation can be coherently explained in a series of longitudinal activity-system models; and (2) that it is not the ESL context per se but each participant’s recognition of it that plays a pivotal role in creating, maintaining, and terminating ESL learning motivation.

Keywords: ESL learning motivation, demotivation, amotivation, Activity Theory, longitudinal interviews

Résumé : Cette étude porte sur la trajectoire longitudinale de la motivation envers l’apprentissage de l’anglais langue seconde (AL2) de deux immigrants Coréens, dans la perspective de la théorie scandinave de l’activité. Sur une période de dix mois, deux immigrants hautement qualifiés sont participé à des entrevues mensuelles semi-structurées. La recherche visait à répondre aux questions suivantes : (1) Comment la relation des apprenants d’AL2 avec le contexte social perçu où ils évoluent influence-t-elle leur motivation envers l’apprentissage de la langue ? (2) Comment la théorie de l’activité peut-elle rendre compte des facteurs qui provoquent des changements dans la motivation envers l’apprentissage de la langue ? Les thèmes récurrents parmi les données obtenues lors des entrevues mensuelles sont été codés et répartis selon le modèle du système d’activité d’Engeström (1999a); des interactions importantes entre les sous-composantes du modèle sont présentées et discutées. Les résultats indiquent (1) que l’évolution de la (dé)motivation envers l’apprentissage de
This paper investigates individual uniqueness in L2 learning motivation and shows how Activity Theory (AT; Engeström, 1987, 1999a; Leont’ev, 1978) may be applied to the longitudinal study of L2 learning motivation. This paper focuses on (a) longitudinal changes in L2 learning motivation, (b) the dialectical1 interplay between L2 learners as historical agents (i.e., ‘individuals acting with mediational means’ [Wertsch, 1998, p. 26]) and the contexts in which they live, and (c) the relationship between this interplay and fluctuations in L2 learning motivation.

AT is the theoretical framework used to analyze the data. AT is ‘a philosophical and cross-disciplinary framework for studying different kinds of human practices as development processes, with both individual and social levels interlinked at the same time’ (Kuutti, 1995, p. 25). In this study, the AT lens is used to highlight the dynamically evolving nature of L2 motivation as well as its collaborating factors such as the role of communities and each L2 learner’s perceptions of these communities. By adopting an AT approach, the dialectical nature of L2 motivation is also highlighted. It is constantly (re)shaped by L2 learners’ life experiences in various locations, such as the L2 classroom and part-time or full-time workplaces for immigrant ESL speakers, and experiences with peer groups or colleagues.

As Ratner (2000) argued, an L2 learner functions based on his or her own unique individual history, and this history evolves through interactions between the learner as an agent and perceived meaningful environments or affordances (van Lier, 2000). As such, previous frameworks in L2 learning motivation (e.g., Gardner, 1985; Norton, 1995, 2000) can be helpful in investigating either micro-psychometric or macro-sociological phenomena but may not be as helpful in delving into L2 learners’ dialectical process of mediation, defined as ‘the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate ... the material world or their own and each other’s social and mental activity’ (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 79), and the influence of this dialectical process of mediation on

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To complement this traditional approach and to obtain a more diverse and complete understanding of L2 learning motivation, the present study assumes a longitudinal approach in collecting and analyzing data and reports on the longitudinal changes of two adult Korean immigrants’ ESL learning motivation from October 2004 to July 2005.

Theoretical framework: Activity theory

The present study is guided by AT (Engeström, 1978, 1999a; Leont’ev, 1978), which was developed under the realm of Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (SCT). As such, this paper assumes that the nexus of an individual’s L2 motivation and social affordances can be adequately investigated through the lens of SCT. SCT prioritizes the mediational potential of culture and history in psychological phenomena and pursues a coherent explanation, not an ex post facto description, of it (Eskola, 1999). Vygotsky (1978), in a similar vein, underscored that ‘mere description does not reveal the actual causal-dynamic relations that underlie phenomenon’ (p. 62).

The mediation of L2 learning motivation between L2 learners and their perceived contexts has not been fully addressed from an AT perspective. Prior research has not fully highlighted the dynamics under which the relationship between L2 learners and their perceived social contexts affects the development of their L2 motivation. Vygotsky (1978, 1979a, 1979b, 1987) and Leont’ev (1978, 1979, 1981) emphasize that L2 learners’ language-learning motivation can be entirely different depending on the nature of the mediation. Any one given environment cannot influence L2 learners in exactly the same manner. In addition, an L2 learner cannot exhibit the same motivation
to the same degree in the same environment on more than one occasion. For example, a student’s present high level of L2 learning motivation cannot guarantee that the same student will be highly motivated in the future simply because of the different mediational consequences between the student’s agency and unpredictable life experiences, health conditions, and emotional stability.

Activity is defined as a system of purposive behaviour; that is, only the purposive behaviour that brings recognizable changes through the behaviour would become activity (Davydov, 1999). Leont’ev (1978) clarified activity as follows:

Activity is a molar, not an additive unit of the life of the physical, material subject. ... [A]t the psychological level, it is a unit of life, mediated by psychic reflection, the real function of which is that it orients the subject in the objective world. In other words, activity is not a reaction and not a totality of reactions but a system that has structure, its own internal transitions and transformations, its own development.

(50)

Engeström (1987) developed a complex model of an activity system (see Figure 1). Each of the six elements included in the model (i.e., subject, object, instrument, rule, community, and division of labour) has multiple relations with other elements (Cole, 1996). Multiple relations mean that, for example, L2 learners can perceive their L2 instructor as an important mediational tool or instrument as long as

![FIGURE 1](image)

A complex model of an activity system
they believe in the L2 instructor’s efficacy in helping them develop L2 proficiency. At the same time, L2 instructors may be perceived as desirable native speakers of the L2 with a level of language proficiency that reflects the ultimate goal or the object of the L2 learning activity (Engeström, 1999b; Miettinen, 2005). An L2 instructor can be both an instrument and an object, and this results in multiple relationships with the subject (i.e., an L2 learner) in an activity system.

L2 learning motivation can be reanalyzed from an AT perspective. L2 learners, as individual agents, endeavour to attain satisfactory L2 proficiency (i.e., the object in Engeström’s model). In this continual learning process, which always involves mediation between L2 learners and the object of learning, mediational tools can facilitate or hinder the process. Explaining higher human development, Vygotsky (1978) emphasized the indirect, meditational nature of higher human cognition. Engeström’s (1987, 1999a) AT model extends beyond Vygotsky’s to show that mediation also occurs between the subject (i.e., an L2 learner) and lower elements such as rules, communities, and the division of labour. If the mediation occurs without any serious tension among the elements in Engeström’s model, L2 motivation can be maintained. Otherwise, motivation may not be maintained, it may decrease (i.e., demotivation), or it may even disappear (i.e., amotivation). In this paper, L2 learners’ L2 motivation is closely investigated by adopting a series of longitudinal activity system models; that is, the learners’ interview data are aligned with Engeström’s AT model, and the important interactions among the sub-components of the AT model are visually presented and discussed.

Lantolf and Genung (2002) and Kim (2009) proposed the applicability of AT to L2 motivation. By looking at a seemingly failed American learner of Chinese at the university level, Lantolf and Genung illustrated that the learner’s motive and goals were constantly reshaped ‘under specific historical material circumstances (i.e., division of labour, rules of interaction, and the community of practice that emerges from these)’ (p. 191). They delved into the issue of power and resistance often found in teacher-centred L2 classrooms. Through the lens of AT, they showed that in the case of a conflict between an L2 learner’s initial expectation of L2 learning and the artefacts available to him or her, the learner may modify L2 learning motivation and goals. The learner in Lantolf and Genung’s study was not able to fully develop communicative competence in Chinese, which was the learner’s initial goal, but she soon accepted the L2 instructor’s guidance and changed her learning goal, the new goal being to memorize grammar rules and phrases in Chinese. In this regard, the learner
did not in fact fail in L2 learning but successfully completed a manda-
tory L2 class by adjusting her learning goal.

Based on Engeström’s (1999a) AT system, Kim (2009) demonstrated
the compatibility of Dörnyei’s (2009) L2 motivational self-system with
AT. By analyzing longitudinal data obtained from two young Korean
ESL students, he argued that L2 learners’ ideal L2 self (i.e., one’s pros-
perous future image after attaining sufficient L2 proficiency) can be
created if there is no tension in the elements of Engeström’s AT
system.

However, despite these notable exceptions, research focusing on
dynamically changing L2 learning motivation from the perspective
of AT has remained rare in applied linguistics. Lantolf and Genung’s
(2002) analyses, for example, were primarily based on the participant’s
retrospective accounts, which focused on the overall discrepancy
between the instructional structure and the L2 learner’s historically
formed motives and goals. As such, the dynamically changing
nature of L2 motivation was not sufficiently highlighted. In addition,
although Kim’s (2009) research adopted Engeström’s (1999a) AT
system, the main focus was on the theoretical interconnection
between the L2 motivational self-system and SCT-based L2 motivation
research. Longitudinal fluctuations of each individual’s L2 motivation
from an AT perspective were not fully addressed in Kim’s previous
research.

**Research questions**

By focusing on longitudinal motivational changes in adult Korean
immigrants, this study highlights the uniqueness of L2 learning motiv-
ation among L2 learners who have different sociocultural histories and
affordances. Specifically, drawing from Engeström’s AT model, this
article analyzes cases in which the mediational process upholds or
deters individual learners’ L2 motivation. To date, the AT orientation
in L2 motivation research is still in a developing stage (Allen & Kim,
2010), and in this regard, the following exploratory research questions
have been set:

1. How does the dialectical interplay between L2 learners and their
   perceived social contexts affect and shape the way in which their
   L2 motivation develops?
2. How can the factors that affect the changes in L2 learning motiv-
   ation be explained from an AT perspective?
Methodology

Research context and participants

The Korean Consulate General in Toronto (2006) estimated the Korean population of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) at approximately 82,100, comprising 1.6% of the total GTA population (Heisz, 2006). A large number of Korean immigrants have settled in the Yonge and Finch neighbourhood, in the north end of Toronto. Korean-owned grocery stores, restaurants, and recreation facilities are commonly found in this area.

For data collection, Korean immigrants who were registered in Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) programs in the GTA were selected. A total of five adult immigrants in Toronto were recruited, but for the sake of an in-depth analysis from an AT perspective, only the cases of two recent immigrants, Paul and Sandra (both pseudonyms), are detailed in this paper. Hereafter, Paul and Sandra are referred to as core participants (as opposed to non-core participants). Paul and Sandra were of similar ages and academic backgrounds, had similar previous work experiences, and resided in the same area in Toronto. Focusing only on these two core participants allows this study to better illustrate the ways in which individual agency can be firmly rooted in past and present personal history and to present their unique development in L2 learning motivation from an AT perspective. Both Paul and Sandra were in their thirties at the time that the research was conducted, had graduated from a university in South Korea, and had worked in highly skilled areas for approximately five years (see Table 1). At the beginning of this study, they had lived in Toronto for less than three months.

Data collection and analysis

As this paper investigates dynamically evolving L2 motivation in two immigrant ESL learners, research was conducted using longitudinal, qualitative methods rather than cross-sectional, quantitative ones. Although four complementary methods (i.e., monthly semi-structured interviews, language-learning autobiographies, stimulated recall tasks, and classroom observations) were used for the entire study, only data collected from the semi-structured interviews are presented in this particular article. The interviews were conducted on a monthly basis, whereas the other data were collected when necessary.
The participants were interviewed monthly, for one hour and a half each time, to discuss their L2 learning motivation. Each participant was thus interviewed 10 times between October 2004 and July 2005. A semi-structured interview format (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002) was adopted for consistent analysis. In applying the interview template created after the pilot study (see Appendix), special attention was paid to the participants’ unique sociocultural contexts and their connection to their L2 learning motivation. To enable comparisons between the participants and over time, the same questions were asked in each interview. In addition, efforts were made to maintain the same sequence of questions for both participants. All interviews were conducted in Korean, the participants and researcher’s first language, because it was assumed that the researcher would be able to elicit more in-depth responses from the participants if they were allowed to use their native language.

After extracting recurring themes (Adler & Adler, 1994), the data were categorized by using qualitative software and the connections between the observed phenomena and SCT were then made. In order to expedite the systematic analysis of the interview data, the researcher used the commercial qualitative software NVivo (Richards & Richards, 2002), grouping coding strips (coded parts) into nodes, a node being ‘a place in the project database, representing a different category’ (Fraser, 1999, p. 37). During the first round of coding, relevant parts in each interview were highlighted, given a code name based on the theme they expressed, and stored as free nodes (i.e., coding strips unconnected

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**TABLE 1**
Two recent Korean immigrants’ profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Arrival</th>
<th>Previous education</th>
<th>Previous occupation</th>
<th>Courses taken in Toronto and work experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Aug. 2004</td>
<td>Master's degree</td>
<td>Financial manager</td>
<td>LINC* 4 → ESL → LINC 5 → Co-op program → full-time work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Aug. 2004</td>
<td>Bachelor's degree and Certificate in Film Editing</td>
<td>Video/film editor</td>
<td>LINC 5 → ESL (TOEFL) → part-time work → Adult school (Grade 10) → Certificate program in college (1 year)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note:* * The highest Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) level is 5 and the lowest is 1 (see Note 2 for detailed explanations of LINC).
to one another). After the coding of each interview was completed, the free nodes were extracted from the interview transcript. The free nodes were then compared, renamed, or deleted as necessary and clustered according to their thematic affinities. These thematic clusters received a higher-level code name and became a tree node (i.e., a coding strip that has category/subcategory relationships). All of the free nodes and the tree nodes were compared across the participants’ interviews and also within each participant’s monthly interviews. Through the use of this program, emergent themes were categorized and subjected to frequency analyses.

For NVivo coding, meaning units were used, which ‘preserve the psychological integrity of the idea being expressed’ and ‘must neither fragment the idea into meaningless truncated segments nor confuse it with other ideas that express different themes’ (Ratner, 2002, p. 169). Accordingly, coherent, related comments in the interviews were coded as one meaning unit. The participants’ comments were always included in a meaning unit and, if necessary, the researcher’s clarifying questions or related comments were also considered in this process. In some cases, if a participant combined two themes in one sentence, the researcher would code the sentence twice and place it in two categories.

From the NVivo analyses of the interview data, four motivational components emerged. The first component, job motivation, typically relates to participants’ expectations of increased job opportunities after learning ESL. The second motivational component is communicative need, which is a desire to communicate in English with members of L2 communities in Toronto. The third component is self-satisfaction, which was determined when the participants expressed a desire to enhance their living conditions in general by learning and/or using English. If participants mentioned specific jobs that could enhance their living conditions, their comments would be coded as job motivation and not as self-satisfaction. The fourth component is amotivation or demotivation. As opposed to the three motivational components explained above, the fourth component was applied when the participants expressed either a complete loss of or a gradual decrease in their L2 learning motivation. It is vital for this component to be considered because, as Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasized, the generality of reports on qualitative data can be improved by ‘checking the meaning of outliers’ (p. 269).

To establish inter-coder reliability, the researcher hired and trained a bilingual, Korean-Canadian, linguistics graduate student from a Canadian university, who was asked to code approximately a quarter
of the core-participant interview data. Her NVivo coding results were compared with those of the researcher, and 83% of the time the coder and the researcher agreed on the categories they selected for the responses. The major area of disagreement was the distinction between job motivation and self-satisfaction, and the disagreement arose primarily because both of these components contributed to the participants’ motivation at times and thus created a certain degree of ambiguity that was reflected in the coders’ different results. Generally, in cases of disagreement, the researcher coded the participants’ specific comments on future jobs as job motivation, whereas the graduate student coded these comments as self-satisfaction. After the initial coding, the coder and the researcher discussed the areas of ambiguity and resolved their disagreements. As a result, they arrived at the same conclusions 97% of the time.

In order to conduct the member check, the researcher contacted the participants by e-mail or telephone, explained the four motivational components to them, sent them their coded transcripts, and asked whether the data and the researcher’s motivation coding categories represented their ESL learning and experiences in Toronto. Both participants understood the categories and agreed with the coding.

Findings and discussion

As stated above, this paper focuses on the data obtained from the two core participants, Paul and Sandra, and presents their longitudinal changes in L2 learning motivation and demotivation or amotivation, which are inseparable from their personal histories. Motivational themes that emerged from the data are presented with close reference to Paul and Sandra’s perceived environments and the longitudinal changes in their personal goals for ESL learning and for living in Toronto.

Paul: An ardent job seeker

Paul’s life history

In Paul’s first interview, he mentioned that his main reason for immigrating was to pursue a doctoral degree at one of the major universities in Canada. Because he was aware that tuition fees are much lower for Canadian citizens and permanent residents than they are for
international students, he thought that it would be better for him to arrive in Canada as a landed immigrant. He visited two professors at a Canadian university in the summer and fall of 2004 to discuss his options. According to Paul, the professors he met did not show much interest in the excellent GPA he obtained in his MBA program in South Korea and were only impressed by his U.S. Chartered Financial Analyst licence. Paul believed that his status had changed on the spot from that of an expert in corporate finance and MBA graduate to that of a mere, non-native English speaker with mediocre foreign credentials.

During the middle-phase interviews, Paul, faced with unfavourable academic prospects, started working part-time as a telemarketer (he sold international phone cards) to support his wife and himself. In addition, after his LINC graduation, he enrolled in a co-op program that focused on job-search strategies and job-interview skills and that was designed primarily for new immigrants to Canada.

When Paul was interviewed for the sixth time, he explained that the telemarketing job was not providing sufficient income and that he had taken on additional weekend work at a pizza shop, where he was delivering pizzas and helping to clean the restaurant. In the latter phase of the interviews (the summer of 2005), however, Paul was focusing his job search on Korean companies based in Canada. By that time, he had come to believe that Canadian companies would not fully appreciate his educational background and work experience. This change in Paul’s belief also affected his interview data. He refused to believe that English proficiency has any value for future jobs and concluded that Canadian experience was more important than English proficiency.

Figure 2, an NVivo frequency chart, shows the decrease in Paul’s job motivation (as well as the decrease in his other motivational components). The decrease was a result of his experiences in Toronto. As his attempts to secure a Canadian job in his field proved increasingly futile, the number of times he mentioned job motivation had gradually decreased to zero from the fourth interview onward.

Paul’s transition from job motivation to amotivation

Paul’s predominant need for high English proficiency was directly linked to his expectation of better job prospects. Paul commented as follows in response to the question ‘Do you think you need English for your job?’: 

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Excerpt 1 (Interview 1, October 2004)

1.164. Paul (P) Of course. And I worry that my job will actually require English. If I want to continue doing the work I did in Korea, … like being a financial manager or financial, uh … analyst, then I need English. I need to discuss things with other people, and I may also need to present the results of qualitative analysis like what you [the researcher] are doing right now [audio recording, transcription, and analysis].

However, over time, Paul’s job motivation changed considerably. Despite his exhaustive search for a job, he was not invited to any on-site interviews. He was becoming increasingly suspicious of the assumption that acquiring English proficiency results in job opportunities.

By his fifth interview, Paul attended LINC only in the morning and spent more time searching for a full-time job that would allow him to continue the work he did in Korea. Despite his growing suspicions about the link between English and job opportunities, Paul still adhered to his belief that fluent English, or at least functional English, would lead him to the job he wanted.

At the same time, however, Paul became pessimistic about his job prospects in Toronto (see Excerpt 2), but although he acknowledged...
the difficulty of finding employment related to his previous work in Korea, Paul still retained his belief that better English could be the route to his ideal job.

**Excerpt 2 (Interview 5, February 2005)**

5.322. Interviewer I do hope you get the right job soon.
5.323. P Well, no. If I had a slightest chance [of getting a job in Toronto], I would not be this gloomy. I’m now a bit, um no, actually very depressed. Why am I so blue? Well, uh, I have some hope still. That’s the reason why I’m hanging in there. I still hope I can somehow get a better opportunity here in Toronto. . . .

As Paul’s attempts continued to fail, his job motivation plummeted (see Figure 2) along with his belief in English as a tool for better job prospects. Paul stated that potential Canadian employers would not be able to judge his English proficiency from his résumé, which had been proofread by several experts in the field of finance, and he further stated that the only way for potential employers to judge his proficiency would be to interview him in person. Paul believed that his previous work experience and educational background were at least as strong as those of other Canadian applicants interested in the same job. Paul questioned why, despite his expertise and academic background in his specialized field, he did not receive any response from Canadian companies. In the sixth interview, he presented another possibility: a lack of Canadian work experience, which has also been identified as a negative factor that impacts skilled immigrants’ employment (Alboim, Finnie, & Meng, 2005; Basran & Zong, 1998; Hart & Cumming, 1997; Statistics Canada, 2005).

**Excerpt 3 (Interview 6, March 2005)**

6.100. P I can use the phrase stuck in the middle for my current situation. I am stuck in the middle of the job market. I don’t have sufficient English to work in major job markets, and I’m sure they’ll think that I don’t have any Canadian work experience, plus the English problem. From their point of view, I’m just fresh off the flight, and I didn’t graduate from a Canadian university either . . . After all, they [potential Canadian employers] may not want to take a risk by choosing me. . . .
In Excerpt 3, even though he still mentioned his lack of English proficiency, Paul also expressed his concern about his lack of Canadian work experience. As shown in Excerpt 4, his concern grew as the interviews progressed.

Excerpt 4 (Interview 7, April 2005)

7.106. P The English problem is not the first thing to worry about. I didn’t graduate from a Canadian university or an American one. They [job agency] said that if I had graduated in the States, the company would have considered me because the academic system is similar. But that wasn’t the case for me.

From the seventh interview onward, Paul no longer mentioned his positive belief in English learning. For the first time, he mentioned that a Canadian background is much more important than English proficiency (see Excerpt 4). His unsuccessful search for employment in Toronto intensified his conviction.

In his eighth and ninth interviews, Paul expressed neither job motivation nor amotivation/demotivation, which might have ‘cancelled out existing motivation’ (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 142). As such, the interview data analysis through NVivo did not reveal amotivation or demotivation in Paul’s eighth or ninth interviews. In terms of his failure to mention motivation, it may simply be due to the nature of interviews (which capture participants’ verbal responses, not their non-verbalized thoughts).

However, in his 10th interview, Paul expressed his deep frustration by vehemently refusing to acknowledge his original belief in the link between English proficiency and job prospects; this is well represented in Figure 2 by the surge of amotivation in the last month considered in this study. Although Paul did not comment directly on motivational components in this interview (which resulted in no NVivo coding), over the course of his interviews he gradually became disillusioned with his belief that English proficiency was the key to successful employment. In this regard, the absence of motivational components in his eighth and ninth interview data should not be interpreted simply as the absence of motivation. Rather, Paul’s amotivation intensified until it came to the fore of his verbal recounts. In Excerpt 5, Paul explicitly denounced the merit of English learning in finding a job in Canada and re-affirmed his conviction that the key to obtaining work
was not English proficiency but Canadian work experience or academic credentials.

Excerpt 5 (Interview 10, July 2005)
10.32. P Even if I have problems with English, I should have been contacted for job interviews. You know what? Andy [Paul’s close Canadian friend] and his brother in the financial field have proofread my résumé, and the job agent said there’s nothing more to revise in my résumé. I heard that crystal clear, which means my résumé is almost perfect. But so far, I haven’t had any contact from anywhere else. What does that mean? Uh? It’s not my English problem. It’s my background problem. I’m just an immigrant, and when they take a look at my résumé, they can catch that. For that reason, they must not have contacted me.

To summarize, Paul’s unsuccessful job search negatively impacted his job motivation. Paul was highly educated and had obtained an internationally accredited certificate in his profession. However, Paul believed that he could not find an appropriate, regular, full-time job because of his lack of Canadian academic credentials and work experience. Initially, Paul equated English proficiency with an enhanced opportunity to find a job, but, as Figure 2 clearly illustrates, this initial assumption gradually waned. What is even more problematic is that, in his 10th interview, Paul explicitly negated this link, a negation that is reflected in the frequency of his amotivation/demotivation in his 10th interview in Figure 2. Paul concluded that the key to successful employment in Canada is not English proficiency but relevant Canadian work experience and academic credentials.

Paul’s changes in L2-motivation activity systems

Paul’s objective, which was evident in the first interview, was to secure a job in Canada. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, his specific goals reflected this objective. During the time that Paul spent at LINC, Stage A, he had maintained his belief in English as the key to employment, and this had functioned as a mediational tool (Alanen, 2005). At this stage, because he had just begun preparing to seek employment in Toronto, he had not yet encountered the major frustration that he would later experience from successive job search failures beyond
the initial job screening process. In this sense, Stage A can be interpreted as the stage of maintaining job motivation, something that is confirmed by the relatively frequent mention of job motivation (see Figure 2). No major tension among the elements was found in Stage A.

In Stage B, when Paul had actively submitted his résumé to potential employers in Toronto, he had gradually abandoned his belief in English as the key for employment because of the low number of responses that he had received from potential employers. We can identify some tension between the mediational tool and the community in Stage B (see Figure 4) because the aim of the co-op program was to match job-seeking immigrants with employment opportunities in their fields, not to increase immigrants’ English proficiency. In addition, the
telemarketing job did not support but opposed Paul’s belief in the efficacy of English for future jobs. At this part-time workplace, Paul used mostly Korean, his L1, with other Korean immigrants to sell international phone cards. The tension between Paul’s belief as a mediatational tool and the community is reflected in the decrease in job motivation as well as other motivational themes (see Figure 2). Because he attended the co-op program, Paul had two concrete goals: English learning and preparation for possible job interviews at the workplaces to which he was introduced by the co-op program. Therefore, the outcome of Paul’s Stage B activity was the submission of high-quality résumés to numerous potential employers.

Stage C is Paul’s amotivation phase, during which no longer believed in the merit of English proficiency. Paul became convinced that having Canadian experience was the most crucial factor in finding employment. It seemed to him that his background and expertise in corporate finance, his MBA, and his CFA licence could not change his unstable, part-time worker status. Given this conviction, Paul’s L2 activity system had no object. Because human activity is an object-oriented phenomenon (Kaptelinin, 2005; Leont’ev, 1978), the lack of an object in Paul’s Stage C created serious conflicts with other elements. Although Paul might have still had an extant motive to learn English to communicate in his daily life with fluent English speakers, such a motive could not be connected to specific goals. Accordingly, Paul’s amotivation occurred in Stage C because he lacked an object.

FIGURE 5
Paul’s L2-motivation activity system (Stage C): Part-time jobs only, Month 7 onward

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Sandra: A conscientious urbanite

Sandra’s life history

Sandra immigrated to Canada with her husband in August 2004. She had majored in journalism as an undergraduate student and worked at a broadcasting company for more than four years in South Korea. The main reason behind their move was their desire to experience the intangible, life-enriching cultural diversity of a foreign country. Sandra and her husband started attending a LINC program after a one-month waiting period. She enrolled at LINC Level 5, the highest level in the school, and her husband enrolled at LINC Level 4. After her graduation from the LINC program in late November 2004, she started taking TOEFL courses at other ESL schools funded by the provincial government.

Sandra expressed increasing concerns regarding her future and her ability to find a Canadian job where her previous credentials would be fully acknowledged. By the seventh interview (April 2005), she had obtained a job and worked for three months in a Korean-owned, Japanese sushi restaurant. It should be noted that the main reason that she took the part-time job was to increase her opportunity to practise English in everyday settings, not to support herself and her husband financially.

Before beginning to work in the restaurant, Sandra had prepared for the TOEFL, on which she achieved a high score in February 2005. She then decided to apply for a certificate program in video/film editing, a field with which she had become familiar by working at the broadcasting company in South Korea. She submitted her college application in March 2005 and was accepted in May. The program began in September 2005. After she was accepted into the program, she stopped working as a server and started taking credit courses offered to adult Canadians who did not complete high school. Sandra did this in order to practise speaking English, make Canadian friends, and become familiar with Canadian culture.

Through her participation in L2 communities of practice, Sandra gradually made a diverse group of friends. Some of them were new immigrants (who she met through LINC), others were immigrants who had been in Canada for a long time (she met them in TOEFL classes), and others were native, English-speaking Canadians (who she met while taking credit courses and working part-time). Moreover, the certificate program in video/film editing provided her with another opportunity to make friends and practise English.
When asked about L2 learning motivation, Sandra specified job motivation as the most crucial reason to learn English (e.g., in Interview 1, Sandra said, ‘Why do I learn English? It’s for my job and to live here’). This dominance of job motivation for learning an L2 is shown in Figure 6 below.

Sandra’s maintenance of job motivation

Sandra’s long-term goal for ESL learning was to secure a job, but the job would be her means to a better life or an enhanced sense of well-being (Lu & Gilmour, 2006). In Excerpt 6, Sandra explained the complexity of her L2 learning motivation.

*Excerpt 6 (Interview 3, December 2004)*

3.110. Sandra (S) It [English] is not only related to my job, and I haven’t tried to get a job yet. Well... Uh... If I can get a job now, it will be fantastic, but honestly, I think it will be bit difficult right now. And even if I get one, it will be quite tough to keep it... On second thought, we [Sandra and her husband] came here for a different reason compared with other Korean immigrants. We came here to invest time in our future. If I had wanted to get a job just to earn money, then I would not have come here. . . .

Unlike Paul, for whom job motivation clearly dominated in the first phase of interviews and amotivation dominated in the last, Sandra’s
job motivation was integrated with her sense of well-being in Toronto and was maintained through the last phase, despite the fluctuation shown in Figure 6. Like Paul, Sandra’s job motivation for L2 learning reflected her belief that English proficiency was the key to a permanent job that would be the equivalent of the one she held in Korea. However, Excerpt 7 contrasts greatly with Paul’s data. Sandra underscored that Canadian experience, which Paul cited as the most crucial factor for employment, was simply an excuse to hide Canadian employers’ real message: non-native, English-speaking job applicants need to practise speaking English more.

Excerpt 7 (Interview 1, October 2004)
1.126. S I think the problem is my English proficiency. Above all, I am not sure whether I can succeed in job interviews. And, with proficient English skill, I could explain my career in Korea. … Someone said that Canadian employers saying ‘you need Canadian experience’ is mostly an excuse. They are simply saying that the job applicant’s English is not strong enough. So, we [Sandra and her husband] think that such explanations are just excuses and that what we need are English skills, rather than Canadian work experience.

ESL immigrants’ unique life experiences also influence the retention and reinforcement or rejection and modification of their initial L2 learning motivation. For example, Paul’s ongoing failure to obtain job interviews had gradually led him to change his belief in the value of English and English learning, a change that eventually led to his amotivation. In contrast, Sandra’s life experience as an ESL learner and a non-native, English-speaking immigrant continually confirmed her belief in English as the key to getting a job and helped to maintain her L2 motivation. A typical case is found in her fifth interview. Responding enthusiastically to the question about the most influential person in her English learning, she recalled her husband’s job interview at a major broadcasting company in Toronto.

Excerpt 8 (Interview 5, February 2005)
5.120. S … The [name of company] application was his first try here. That means, if we were to have an adequate level of
English proficiency, we would be exposed to many opportunities. So, that was a good lesson for us [to learn English]. I realize I should try more to learn English.

Sandra’s belief in English as the key to finding a job had been further strengthened by the invitation her husband received to this job interview. In fact, her husband’s LINC level was one level lower than hers, and even though she had not applied for a job, Sandra believed that there was a strong possibility that she would be invited to similar job interviews in the future.

In addition, Excerpt 8 shows how Sandra’s L2 motivation had been boosted by her life experiences. Sandra’s statements in this excerpt reflect her awareness, which she gained from her husband’s experience, of the personal meaning that L2 learning has. Sandra’s last utterance at Turn 5.120 (‘I realize I should try more to learn English.’) supports this. The job interview had provided her with an opportunity to consolidate her belief in the importance of L2 learning for obtaining a job.

Challenges in L2 learning motivation

By the eighth interview, Sandra had enrolled in credit courses for adult Canadian students who did not complete their high school education. She made new acquaintances in the courses, and they presented her with an additional opportunity (i.e., in addition to her part-time job) to use English. However, as shown in Excerpt 9, she was still concerned with her L2 development.

Excerpt 9 (Interview 8, May 2005)

8.156. S [Nowadays] I can’t find anyone who can correct my errors in English.
8.157. Interviewer Is there any possibility that it’s because you are generally making correct sentences?
8.158. S Well, maybe that’s right. But I don’t think I’m making a lot of progress in my English. I hope I have someone to talk to and rely on to upgrade my English skills. Unfortunately, however, I can’t find anyone.
In May, Sandra took credit courses that she thought would be interesting and beneficial for her future in Canada. She took courses in English, computers, and drawing on a full-time basis (8:30 to 3:30, Monday to Friday). In comparison with her previous ESL learning experiences, Sandra was now exposed more often to L2 interaction with native English speakers. However, a problem soon presented itself and Sandra became aware that she lacked corrective L2 feedback (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Nassaji & Swain, 2000). She was no longer regarded as an ESL learner but as a subject content learner. In naturalistic settings, despite social interactions in English, new immigrants like Sandra generally receive inadequate corrective feedback on their English. As long as Sandra’s English was comprehensible to other members in L2 communities, she rarely received feedback.

Although Sandra was physically present in the credit courses and immersed in ‘authentic’ English interactions, the contextual difference between the ESL school and credit courses and, consequently, Sandra’s loss of corrective feedback had led to the demotivation she had evinced in the ninth and tenth interviews. As shown in Figure 6 above, even though Sandra’s comments on job motivation in her ninth interview were the same as those in her eighth interview, her demotivation increased.

In sum, Sandra actively participated in L2 communities of practice (e.g., LINC, the TOEFL course, the credit course, and the part-time workplace). More importantly, she appreciated and enjoyed such opportunities. Although her dominant L2 learning motivation was job motivation, her data also showed fluctuations in communicative need, self-satisfaction, and demotivation, depending on her sociocultural surroundings and her perceptions of them.

Sandra’s changes in L2-motivation activity systems

In comparison with the conflicts found in Paul’s activity systems (especially in Stage C), Sandra did not exhibit such major conflicts in her activity systems. As described in Excerpt 6, her main motive was to enhance her sense of well-being, and this was maintained throughout all stages. Her L2 communities had changed from LINC in Stage A to the TOEFL class in Stage B, which was followed by the part-time workplace in Stage C and the adult-school credit courses in Stage D. The gradual increase in the number of Sandra’s meaningful L2 communities is noteworthy. These are highlighted in bold, under the heading Community at each stage of her activity system. Her husband was also one of her L2 communities because Sandra and her husband formed a
collaborative peer relationship in developing each other’s English proficiency and providing emotional support. Excerpt 8 above, in which Sandra talks about her husband’s job interview experience, provides evidence for this.

The conflicts in Sandra’s Stages C and D need further elaboration. Figure 6, an NVivo frequency chart, shows that Sandra had mentioned demotivation three times in her ninth interview. This might have been related to the inadequate L2 feedback that she had received at the adult high school. As her comments in Excerpt 9 show, she was concerned about the lack of error correction. In Stage C, she did not attend any ESL classes and worked as a waitress in a sushi restaurant. Although she gained work experience as an immigrant and was able to converse with her customers, she rarely received corrective feedback while at work. Sandra gradually came to believe that she needed instruction-focused corrective feedback; Excerpt 9 provides the evidence. Therefore, in Stages C and D, she began to believe in the effectiveness of corrective feedback from fluent target-language speakers. However,
her L2 communities in Stages C and D precluded this opportunity. As long as her customers in Stage C or her adult high school classmates in Stage D understood Sandra’s spoken English, they would not give her feedback. In this sense, the demotivation she evinced in the ninth interview did not immediately surface in the interviews; rather, as illustrated in Stages C and D, it had long incubated within her activity systems.

Summary and implications

This paper analyzes longitudinal and uniquely individual changes in L2 motivation by using qualitative methods and AT (Engeström, 1987, 1999a; Leont’ev, 1978). Drawing on AT, this paper presents a new possibility of conceptualizing L2 motivation, which is different from previous psychometric and sociological L2 learning-motivation models. In general, previous L2 motivation research that adopted AT focused either on participants’ retrospective accounts after the

FIGURE 8
Sandra’s L2-motivational activity systems (Stages C and D)

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completion of L2 instruction (Lantolf & Genung, 2002) or on the compatibility with another L2 motivation theory (Kim, 2009). In this regard, the current study’s longitudinal approach to L2 motivation based on Engeström’s (1999a) second generation AT model represents conceptual and analytical progress. The central arguments are as follows:

1. L2 learning motivation, demotivation, and amotivation can be coherently explained through a series of longitudinal activity system models.
2. We should not interpret participants’ data solely based on their face value; rather, the participants’ unique socio-historical contexts at different times should be considered, and the data should be compared with those of other participants.

The results of this study suggest that even if L2 learners were located within similar L2 contexts (which should be better that foreign-language contexts in terms of both the quality and quantity of potential L2 interactions), the achievement of higher levels of L2 learning motivation by all of the L2 learners could not be guaranteed. Unless L2 learners understand that their L2 learning activities are efficacious and meaningful to their L2 development, interaction-rich L2 contexts per se may not lead to higher levels of L2 learning motivation. Also noteworthy is the difficulty Sandra, an advanced L2 learner, experienced in receiving corrective feedback outside of ESL classes. Springer and Collins (2008) reported similar findings when they compared two advanced L2 learners/users’ reception of language assistance in and out of the L2 classroom. Springer and Collins found that the advanced learners received significantly less L2 feedback outside of their L2 classroom and that the feedback was mostly concerned with vocabulary choice, which may impede the overall communication. The present study found that Sandra’s data suggest that if an L2 learner were to perceive a gap between his or her L2 motivational belief and its related communities, the tension created within the learner’s activity system would generate demotivation or amotivation.

As stated earlier, this paper extends the scope of L2 motivation research to an SCT-based AT model. As this line of research is relatively new in SLA, several issues invite further refinements. First, L2 learners’ L2 proficiency development needs to be precisely compared with their activity systems. It has been argued that demotivation arises when tensions exist between the components in an activity system; however, the influence of demotivation on learners’ L2 proficiency should be addressed in detail in future research. Moreover, the relationship
between L2 motivation and L2 proficiency deserves a more robust investigation. The current study did not measure the two core participants’ English proficiency throughout the data collection period. Although we may assume that L2 learners can achieve a higher degree of L2 proficiency by retaining L2 motivation through their close collaboration with the AT elements developed by Engeström (1999a), confirmatory research is necessary. Second, the role of L2 instructors should be addressed. Because L2 learners, from an AT perspective, act within a web of multiple inter- and intra-psychological mediation, changes that L2 learners make to their L2 learning following L2 instructors’ intervention and scaffolding should be further researched. Finally, the methods used in this paper need to be complemented by more grounded data. For example, ESL instructor interviews, field notes, and English test administration results need to be meticulously compared with the L2 learners’ verbal accounts reported in this study. By utilizing these multiple sources, we would be able to pinpoint the microgenetic moments of L2 motivational arousal, maintenance, and termination.

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Notes

1 In his explanation of child development, Vygotsky (1978) stated that this dialectical process is ‘characterized by periodicity, unevenness in the development of different functions, metamorphosis or qualitative transformation of one form into another, intertwining of external and internal factors, and adaptive processes which overcome impediments that
the child encounters’ (p. 73). In addition, Cole and Scribner (1978) stated that a central tenet of the dialectical method is ‘that all phenomena be studied as processes in motion and in change. . . . Not only does every phenomenon have its history, but this history is characterized by changes both qualitative (changes in form and structure and basic characteristics) and quantitative’ (pp. 6–7).

LINC is a government-funded second language (i.e., mostly English as a second language [ESL]) education program for new immigrants to Canada. The LINC school from which the participants were recruited offers five different levels of language instruction, Level 1 being a level for beginners and Level 5 being a level for relatively advanced students. Before enrolment, all potential students are tested by using the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment and are given a score from 1 to 9 in four sections: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The students are then assigned to one of the five LINC levels based on the average of their four scores.

The transcription conventions used in this study are as follows:

1.164 Interview 1. Turn 164
**Bold** Emphasis added by the researcher
*Italics* Utterance in English (i.e., not in Korean)
... Short pause, lasting more than 3 seconds
[ ] Phrases or words inserted by the researcher for clarification purposes.

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**Appendix**

*Longitudinal semi-structured interview template (sample)*

**ESL motivation**

- Why are you interested in learning English?
To what degree are you committed to learning English? Please give examples.

How do you feel when you are learning English as a Korean ESL learner in Toronto?

What is your goal for learning English?
  - What are your goals for learning English today?
  - What is your long-term goal for learning English?

What are your perceived challenges in achieving a high level of English proficiency?

How do you feel about English-speaking people and the community you live in now?

Who are you studying English for? Yourself? Your parents? Or someone else?

Life history

(During the past one month)
  - What is your most pleasant memory as a language learner? Please describe.
  - What is your most unpleasant memory as a language learner? Please describe.

(During the past one month) as a language learner, who has been the most influential person?

(During the past one month) what personal or family incidents have affected you the most in your English learning? (e.g., marriage, divorce, and bereavement)

Tool use

What tools do you use in learning English? (e.g., materials such as dictionaries, books, computer software, and audio-tapes; mental strategies such as mental outlines and heuristics; and human resources)
  - How and why do you use them? Please give examples.
  - Has the Internet been helpful in learning English? If so, please give examples.
Participants’ ESL learning expectations

- What is your expected English proficiency level?
- Among the four areas (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in English, what is the most needed and important area for you?
- To develop the prioritized area mentioned above, what efforts do you make?

Participants’ perceptions and emotions regarding interview methods

- How do you feel about the interviews? (participants’ emotions)
- Were there things that you wanted to say in the interviews but didn’t get a chance to say them?
  - What were those things?
  - Why weren’t you able to say them during the interviews?