Elementary school students' foreign language learning demotivation: A mixed methods study of Korean EFL context

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Table of Contents

SPECIAL SECTION ON LEARNING SCIENCES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC COUNTRIES

Editorial: Learning Sciences Research in the Asia Pacific Countries 1
Seng-Chee Tan & Cher-Ping Lim

Learning Sciences Research in Asia Pacific Countries from 1997 to 2010:
A Content Analysis of Publications in Selected Journals 4
Seng-Chee Tan, Ching-Sing Chai, Chin-Chung Tsai, Cher-Ping Lim & Chiou-Hui Chou

A Collaborative Professional Development Model for Rapid Collaborative
Knowledge Improvement in Singapore Schools 15
Yanjie Song, Wenli Chen & Chee-Kit Looi

Design-based Research: Understanding its Application in a Teacher
Professional Development Study in Indonesia 28
Eunice Sari & Cher Ping Lim

A Learning Journey in Problem-based Learning in a Physics Classroom 39
Jennifer Yeo, Seng-Chee Tan & Yew-Jin Lee

Collaborative Mobile Learning in Situ from Knowledge Building Perspectives 51
Hyo-Jeong So, Esther Tan & Jennifer Tay

Locality-Based Science Education in Sociocultural Approach:
‘Scientific Exploration in Culture’ in the Context of Korea 63
Sungmin Im & Sung-Jae Pak

Facilitating Third Graders’ Acquisition of Scientific Concepts through Digital
Game-Based Learning: The Effects of Self-Explanation Principles 71
Chung-Yuan Hsu, Chin-Chung Tsai & Hung-Yuan Wang

Exploring the Structure of Science Self-Efficacy: A Model Built on High School
Students’ Conceptions of Learning and Approaches to Learning in Science 83
Guo-Li Chiou & Jyh-Chong Liang
The Interaction Between Junior-High Students’ Academic and Social Motivations and the Influences of the Motivational Factors on Science Performance
Fang-Ying Yang, Ju-Shi Tseng & Mei-Hsing Lin

Web-Based Assessment with Number Right Elimination Testing (NRE) Scoring for Multiple-Choice Items
Sie-Hoe Lau, Kian-Sam Hong, Ngee-Kiong Lau & Hasbee Usop

Multi-Method, Multi-Theoretical, Multi-Level Research in the Learning Sciences
Kenneth Tobin & Stephen M. Ritchie

REGULAR ARTICLES

A Comparison of the Effects of University Learning Experiences on Student Leadership at Taiwanese General and Technical Universities
Ching-Ling Wu

A Comparison Between Asian and Pacific Islands Students in Their Use of Academic Advising Services
Marcus Henning, Emmanuel Manalo & I'u Tuagalu

How Teacher-Student Relationship Influenced Student Attitude Towards Teachers and School
Vivien S. Huan, Gwendoline Choon Lang Quek, Lay See Yeo, Rebecca P. Ang & Wan Har Chong

Elementary School Students’ Foreign Language Learning Demotivation: A Mixed Methods Study of Korean EFL Context
Tae-Young Kim & Hyo-Sun Seo

Sources and Consequences of Turkish Middle School Students’ Science Self-Efficacy
Dekant Kran & Semra Sungur

Mobile Language Learning: Contribution of Multimedia Messages via Mobile Phones in Consolidating Vocabulary
Murat Saran, Gölge Seferoğlu & Kürşat Çağiltay

An Assessment of Pre-Service Teachers’ Technology Acceptance in Turkey: A Structural Equation Modeling Approach
Timothy Teo, Ömer Faruk Ursavaş & Ekrem Bahçekapili

Are They Efficacious? Exploring Pre-Service Teachers’ Teaching Efficacy Beliefs during the Practicum
Sevgi Aydin, Betül Demirdöğen & Ayşegül Tarkin
Elementary School Students’ Foreign Language Learning Demotivation: A Mixed Methods Study of Korean EFL Context

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This mixed methods study investigates Korean elementary school students’ foreign language learning demotivation and their teachers’ perception of student demotivation. A questionnaire was conducted for 6,301 elementary school students from Grades 3 to 6 to examine their motivational changes. This revealed a decrease in all motivational constructs – instrumental, intrinsic, integrative, parental/academic extrinsic motivations – as the students advanced throughout the school grades. The findings were further analyzed by using interviews and open-ended questionnaires with 17 English teachers. They attributed the students’ demotivation to three elements: 1) the negative impact of the English teacher such as incongruence with students’ needs, teachers’ impatience, and disinterest in teaching and in their students; 2) excessive social expectation of English proficiency; and 3) the widening English proficiency gap among the students.

Keywords: Demotivation, Elementary School Students, Demotivational Factors, Teacher Perception, Mixed Methods Approach

This mixed methods study aims to examine the characteristics and causes of foreign language (FL) learning demotivation among Korean elementary school students and how elementary school FL teachers perceive the students’ gradual motivational decrease as they advance through the school grades. Although language learning demotivation has been investigated recently (Chambers, 1993; Dörnyei, 2001a, 2005; Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Kikuchi, 2009; K.-J. Kim, 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009), little research has been done with the language learning demotivation of young FL learners on the elementary school level. By analyzing the triangulated quantitative and qualitative data, we discuss the general motivational trends of these Korean elementary school students and identify the major demotivational factors of Korean students as recognized by their FL teachers.

Studies on teacher training highlight the interactive relationship between teacher and student motivation (Brophy, 1985; Dörnyei, 2001a; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998; Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008; Stipek, 1996, 2002). For example, when teachers plan a unit or make a decision, the characteristics of their students, including needs, abilities, and motivation are considered to be important (Clark & Peterson, 1986; Schunk et al., 2008). Moreover, Stipek (2002) suggested that students’ motivation and active engagement could be indirectly enhanced by the teachers’ “best practices” (p. 310) and emphasized the effective and appropriate instructional approaches for the needs of learners. Thus, in the light of the interplay between teacher and learner motivation, teachers need to be sensitive of the students’ motivational concerns (Dörnyei, 2001a, 2001b; Stipek, 2002).

English as a foreign language instruction in Korean elementary schools

Since 1997, English as a foreign language (EFL) has been taught as a compulsory subject in South Korea (Korea hereafter). Grades 3 and 4 have one 40-minute EFL class a week, while Grades 5 and 6 have two 40-minute classes. With the increasing emphasis on English input in the EFL classrooms and the importance of learning EFL in Korea, the Korean Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST, 2008) has announced that the learning intensity will
be increased to two classes a week for Grades 3 and 4 from 2010 and to three classes a week for Grades 5 and 6 from 2011. Moreover, an increased number of native English teachers have been recruited overseas and allocated in elementary schools. There were 1,616 native English teachers in the 5,773 elementary schools in Korea in 2007 (MEST, 2008). It has been assumed that these native English teachers will play a significant role in motivating the elementary school students by giving authentic English input and adding multicultural flavor to the classrooms.

As the importance of EFL has continually been emphasized in Korean society and the social pressure to learn EFL is rapidly increasing, private EFL education continues to be a widespread phenomenon in Korea. According to the Korean National Statistical Office (KNSO) (2009), 87.9 percent of Korean elementary school students receive private instruction because most Korean parents consider private instruction for their children’s education to be essential (e.g., Lee, 2005; Lee, Kim, & Yoon, 2004). Among the subjects of private instruction, EFL is the most preferred. The considerable private instruction received by Korean elementary school students includes enrollment in private institutes or hagwons (47.9%), paying for self-study materials, usually combined with regular visits from a private tutor (22.4%), and private group or individual tutoring (10.4% and 10.2%, respectively) (KNSO, 2009). However, despite the constant expansion in Korean private institutes, many Korean scholars have warned against the negative impact of prior learning experience with private education on the students’ motivation (Chung, 2004, 2005; Lee, 2005; Kim, 1999; Lee, 2004). For example, Chung (2004, 2005) reported that even though tutored students outperformed their counterparts on the EFL achievement test, their interest in and curiosity about school English classes atrophied. In addition, Lee (2005) pointed out that “student’s low engagement in classroom teaching and weakening students’ self-directed learning capabilities” (p. 100) as the negative effects of heavy private tutoring under the parental pressure. However, to date, despite the rapid changes in the structure of EFL teaching at the elementary level, few studies have addressed the motivational dynamics in Korean elementary school students and the teachers’ perception of their students’ motivation to learn EFL.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Dörnyei (2001a) defines demotivation as “specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action” (p. 143). For example, a series of bad experience in the FL classroom, such as public humiliation by peers or teachers and severe competition among classmates, may negatively affect students’ motivation. Moreover, studies on teacher training highlight FL teachers’ potential to influence FL learners’ motivation (Brophy, 1985; Dörnyei & Dörnyei, 1998). These issues may be of interest for many teachers who witness their students becoming demotivated, sometimes totally unmotivated (or amotivated), to learn a FL in their daily lessons. In this section, international studies on student demotivation are reported first. Korea-specific motivation studies are summarized in the second section, with the subsequent review of the FL teacher impact on student demotivation.

International studies on FL student demotivation

Even though researchers have consistently investigated the correlation between FL learning motivation and students’ success in developing FL proficiency (e.g., Dörnyei, 2001a, 2005; Gardner, 1985; Oxford & Shearin, 1994), studies in FL learner demotivation have received scant academic attention, especially on the elementary school level. Literature on demotivation can be categorized into two sub-types: studies identifying demotivating factors and those focusing on demotivational trends. The demotivating factors found in the first sub-type include the compulsory nature of FL learning because this attenuates learner autonomy and self-determination. Kikuchi (2009) underscored the negative impact of FL teachers on learners by noting that FL teachers’ old-style, teacher-fronted approach, insufficient class preparation, and inappropriate feedback could be debilitating to FL learners. With regard to the interaction among students in FL classroom, Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998) pointed out that demotivation can be caused not only within the students alone but also within a peer group.

Research focusing on FL students’ demotivational trajectories is further divided into cross-sectional (Chambers, 1999; Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002) and longitudinal studies (Lamb, 2007). For instance, Chambers (1999) found that British FL pupils’ motivation and enthusiasm to learn the FL had waned as they advanced to a higher school grade. Likewise, using a questionnaire and follow-up interviews with middle school students in Grades 7 to 9, Williams et al. (2002) found that students’ integrative orientation and their perceived importance of FL learning decreased as they advanced in school. In a 20-month longitudinal study investigating English learning motivation of Indonesian junior high school students, Lamb (2007) found that the students’ instrumental and extrinsic motivations related to parental expectations and academic success were slightly increased, whereas their integrative and intrinsic motivations in EFL were degraded over the 20 months.
Korean students’ EFL learning motivation

Even though EFL has been taught as a compulsory subject in Korean elementary school since 1997, little research has investigated the elementary school students’ (de)motivation to learn EFL (I.-O. Kim, 2009; Kym, 2008; Lim, 2001). These studies focused on identifying Korean elementary school students’ motivational factors and orientations. For example, Lim categorized types of motivation and motivational intensity among elementary school students through questionnaires. The three most influential motivational types in his study were instrumental, importance of EFL, and communication with other language speakers. With in-depth interviews, Kym examined the motivational structures of Grade 6 students with different levels of EFL proficiency. She identified a positive correlation between learner attitudes and EFL proficiency and the motivational structures are qualitatively different between learners having various levels of EFL proficiency.

Even though researchers have previously determined that Korean students’ motivation, interest, and preference for learning FL show different progressions as they advance throughout the school grades (I.-O. Kim, 2009; Kim, 2002; Lee & Park, 2001), little is known about why students show a decrease in FL learning motivation and exhibit different attitudes toward learning EFL. With a self-report questionnaire, K.-J. Kim (2009) identified internal demotivating factors as well as external factors influencing Korean junior high school students. In her study, the secondary school students identified difficulties in learning EFL as the most salient indicator for their demotivation. In I.-O. Kim’s (2009) study, the motivational intensity was higher in Grades 3 and 4 than in Grades 5 and 6. In the answers to an open-ended questionnaire, responses equivalent to “EFL is getting harder year by year” were salient among Korean elementary school students. In their examination of why students show different attitudes toward FL learning and motivational intensity, Lee and Park (2001) speculated that this attitudinal difference was related to the emphasis on listening and speaking activities in Grade 3 and 4 EFL classes and the lower curiosity of Grades 5 and 6 toward their EFL classes.

FL teacher impact on student demotivation

Although the interplay between teacher motivation to teach and learner motivation to learn has rarely been investigated, “there is ample indirect evidence that the teacher’s own level of motivation... has a significant impact on the students’ learning commitment” (Dörnyei, 2001b, p. 50). For example, teacher expectation of students’ learning potential and teacher behavior influence students’ achievement, either positively or negatively, functioning as a self-fulfilling prophecy (also referred to as the “Pygmalion effect”). For the positive self-fulfilling process, teachers’ consistent expectation of student achievement enhances student performance and impacts “the student’s self-concept, level of aspiration, achievement strivings, classroom conduct and interaction with the teacher. Therefore, cumulative effect of these changes will be a positive change in the students’ achievement” (Dörnyei, 2001a, p.176). Conversely, negative expectancy-driven teacher behaviors, such as low-expectation on student’s potential, inappropriate praising, and interacting with students less frequently, can reduce student motivation (Brophy, 1985). By investigating 50 secondary school students in Hungary, Dörnyei (2001a) reported that more than half of all the demotivating factors could be attributed to the FL teacher. Moreover, studies on the interactive relationship between teacher and student motivation emphasize that the teachers’ enthusiasm to teach can be transferred to the students’ enthusiasm to learn (Deci, Kasser, & Ryan, 1997). In addition, Lee, Yin, and Zhang (2009) also pointed out that a high level of teacher support and involvement are more influential on students’ self-regulated learning. In sum, in order to facilitate students’ FL learning motivation, teachers should enjoy what they are trying to instruct and also inspire students to work harder because the teachers’ sincerity and enthusiasm are transmitted to students and eventually evoke a beneficial impact on their FL learning motivation (Dörnyei, 2001a; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As explained, FL practitioners frequently observe student demotivation as they advance through the school grades. However, little research has focused on the reasons for the students’ learning demotivation in EFL context. Thus, the purpose of this mixed methods study is to investigate Korean elementary school students’ motivational constructs and demotivational trends and to interpret the trends from the perspective of the EFL teachers. By making such a connection, it is hoped that we can emphasize the need to understand students’ motivation as a uniquely individual phenomenon not as a collective one. In this regard, two specific research questions were formulated:

1) How does the Korean elementary school students’ FL learning motivation change as they advance throughout the grades?
2) What are the salient demotivating factors in the Korean elementary school EFL classrooms as perceived by the English teachers in Korea?

METHODS

This paper involves a mixed methods approach (Brannen, 2005; Bryman, 2006; Dörnyei, 2007; Greene, 2008; Moran & Butler, 2001; Moran-Ellis et al., 2006; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). According to Dörnyei (2007), the mixed methods research has particular value in gaining
an in-depth understanding of complex issues embedded in an educational context. In addition, Moran and Butler (2001) have argued that the advantages of the mixed methods are to understand different views from various participants and call into play multiple constructions of the phenomenon. In effect, the mixed methods study corroborates evidence through triangulation, which involves the scrupulous mixing of quantitative and qualitative research methods and obtains diverse meaning and multiple truths by using a variety of data sources, investigators, theories, or research methods. For this reason, data from two complementary sources—students’ quantitative data and teacher’s qualitative data—are compared and contrasted in this paper (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006).

Participants and contexts

The participants for this study were 6,301 Korean elementary school students from 29 different schools in Grades 3 to 6, 15 Korean English teachers (KETs), and two native English teachers (NETs) from a major city in Korea. The number of students in each grade was 1,640 third graders, 1,633 fourth graders, 1,436 fifth graders, and 1,592 sixth graders, respectively. For analyzing the teachers’ perception of the demotivational factors, 10 English teachers, including two NETs, were interviewed while seven other KETs (KETs A to G) responded to an open-ended email questionnaire. Thirteen of the 15 KETs were EFL-subject teachers and two were homeroom teachers. The KETs had an average of 13.3 years of teaching experience but only less than 6 years of English teaching experience, as shown in Table 1. The two NETs had been teaching EFL for eleven months at the time of the data collection.

Data collection and analysis

For the attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of Korean elementary school students’ motivational dynamics, a concurrent design (Dörnyei, 2007), in which two or more methods are combined in a parallel manner and the results are combined in the analysis phase, was used. In this study, the data were collected sequentially by two different phases: students’ quantitative and teachers’ qualitative data collection phases. For the longitudinal changes in EFL learning motivation among the Korean elementary school students, questionnaire data were collected in a major city in Korea from September to November 2008. For the teacher data, the semi-structured interviews and open-ended email questionnaires were administered to KETs and NETs in elementary schools in the same city from February to April 2009.

Students’ closed questionnaire

The questionnaire items were formed by reflecting on Lamb’s (2007) previous research, and were designed and revised by the researchers and experienced elementary school teachers. Korean was the language used in the questionnaire as students are most comfortable with their mother tongue.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>School District</th>
<th>Years of Teaching (year/month)</th>
<th>Years of Teaching English (year/month)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KET A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>8/06</td>
<td>7/06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>21/05</td>
<td>9/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET C</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Doctorate</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>17/00</td>
<td>9/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET D</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>8/06</td>
<td>6/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>Island</td>
<td>20/01</td>
<td>3/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>19/01</td>
<td>7/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET G</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>10/00</td>
<td>3/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET H</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>21/02</td>
<td>7/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET I</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>8/06</td>
<td>3/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET J</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Island</td>
<td>13/00</td>
<td>2/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET K</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>17/00</td>
<td>10/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET L</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>11/00</td>
<td>2/06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>10/00</td>
<td>6/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET N</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>8/00</td>
<td>3/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KET O</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>6/00</td>
<td>3/00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NET A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>0/11</td>
<td>0/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NET B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>North</td>
<td>0/11</td>
<td>0/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>11/08</td>
<td>4/08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Regarding the questionnaire items, Gardner’s (1985, 2001) concepts of instrumentality and integrativeness (Items # 4 and 6) and Ryan and Deci’s (2000) intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (Items # 5, 7, and 8) were incorporated. The Cronbach alpha index was .723, which corroborates the internal consistency of the items. Because the response of each item did not assume a normal distribution or an equal distance between the response choices, the Kruskal Wallis test, a non-parametric test for comparing more than two groups, was used for identifying the effect of students’ school grades on their FL motivational changes throughout the school years.

**Teachers’ open-ended questionnaire**

In order to identify the teachers’ perspectives of the students’ motivational changes through school grades, seven elementary school teachers (KETs A to G) from five school districts in the city responded to the open-ended questionnaire from February to March 2009. Five of the teachers were teaching EFL as a subject teacher. The questionnaire items were about the students’ attitudes and motivation, teachers’ role, and influential factors for the students’ motivation. The questionnaire was sent through email and when finished was returned to the researchers.

**Teachers’ semi-structured interview**

For analyzing the students’ demotivational factors, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight KETs and two NETs from February to April 2009. The eight KETs were EFL specialty teachers. The interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, for about an hour and a half with each teacher. We included detailed questions such as their personal information, students’ attitudes and motivation, teaching experience in Korea, and the teacher’s role as a facilitator of the motivation to learn EFL. For NETs, a slightly different set of interview prompts was used because their personal and educational backgrounds were different from those of the KETs. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the first author. The transcribed data were returned to the participants for the purpose of member-checking (Duff, 2008), and they verified the authenticity of the transcripts.

In order to guarantee systematic and thematic coding, Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) three levels of coding (open, axial, and selective) were utilized. This system involves iterative readings of the interview transcripts and open-ended questionnaire data until generating potential themes by arranging relevant examples from the text. Therefore, individual coding strips were thematized, which then became the unit of a larger theme. The transcribed interviews and the open-ended questionnaire were examined by the researchers with the aim of investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1978) to reveal any patterns pertinent to the students’ demotivational characteristics.

**FINDINGS**

**Korean elementary school students’ EFL demotivation: Quantitative findings**

The overall trends in EFL learning motivation among Korean elementary school students are reported in this section. The quantitative analysis indicates that the students’ satisfaction with the EFL learning experience in a public school (M = 2.54, 2.40, 2.24, and 2.12, respectively) gradually declined (χ² = 436.648**) as they advance to higher grades from Grades 3 to 6. Similarly, students’ satisfaction in a private institute (M = 2.62, 2.59, 2.54, and 2.49, respectively) also showed a decrease throughout their school grades (χ² = 45.733**). As shown in Table 2, the importance of EFL learning showed a decrease as they advanced to high grades as well (χ² = 71.055***). The total mean of the students’ expectation of satisfaction in EFL learning in a private institute (M = 2.54) was higher than that in public school (M = 2.33). The students’ instrumental and integrative motivations (M = 2.35 and 2.32, respectively) were higher than intrinsic (M = 1.95) and extrinsic (parental and academic) motivations (M = 1.75 and 1.71, respectively).

As shown in Figure 1, all motivations, including instrumental (χ² = 42.481**), intrinsic (χ² = 410.181****), integrative (χ² = 232.998****), parental extrinsic (χ² = 57.235****), and academic extrinsic motivation (χ² = 176.358****) consistently decreased as they advanced throughout the school grades. The mean of the students’ response in every one of the five items below declined over the four grades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #3</th>
<th>Total M (s.d.)</th>
<th>Grade (N=6,301)</th>
<th>Kruskall-Wallis test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 3 (n=1,640)</td>
<td>Grade 4 (n=1,633)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General mean scores on the</td>
<td></td>
<td>Grade 3 (2.39) (s.d.)</td>
<td>Grade 4 (2.51) (.57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>importance of EFL learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** p < .001.
two groups according to their experience of private EFL education. The percentage of students who were attending or had attended private institutes increased with advancing grades: 76.28% in Grade 3; 80.77% in Grade 4; 84.40% in Grade 5; 86.37% in Grade 6. Compared with the increased percentage of students with learning experiences in private institutes throughout the school grades, their satisfaction with the EFL learning experience in public school gradually declined ($\chi^2 = 333.936^{***}$) as shown in Table 3. Those without any private learning experience exhibited a similar decline ($\chi^2 = 88.605^{***}$). Thus, Table 3 indicates that the students' satisfaction with their EFL learning experience in public school declined throughout the school grades, regardless of the experience of private education.

**TEACHERS’ PERCEPTION OF THE STUDENTS' DEMOTIVATION: QUALITATIVE FINDINGS**

This section examines KETs' and NETs' perceptions of their students' EFL learning motivation and attitudes. In general, both KETs and NETs agreed on the variation in the students' EFL learning motivation and attitudes based on their school grade, but they presented multifaceted reasons for this student demotivation.

**Table 3**
Satisfaction with EFL Learning Experience in Public School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade 3 (n=1,640)</th>
<th>Grade 4 (n=1,633)</th>
<th>Grade 5 (n=1,436)</th>
<th>Grade 6 (n=1,592)</th>
<th>Kruskall-Wallis test</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$M$ (s.d.)</td>
<td>$M$ (s.d.)</td>
<td>$M$ (s.d.)</td>
<td>$M$ (s.d.)</td>
<td>$\chi^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with private education</td>
<td>2.53 (.61)</td>
<td>2.39 (.59)</td>
<td>2.24 (.63)</td>
<td>2.12 (.61)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students without private education</td>
<td>2.61 (.56)</td>
<td>2.42 (.63)</td>
<td>2.30 (.62)</td>
<td>2.15 (.61)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** *** $p < .001$.

**Teacher impact on student demotivation (10 out of 17 teachers)**

One of the classroom-related demotivational factors stems from the teachers (Chambers, 1993; Kikuchi, 2009). Ten participating teachers attributed the demotivation to teacher-related factors such as a teaching style incongruent with students' needs (KETs H, J, K, and O), teachers' impatience or worry (KETs A, H, I, and K), lack of readiness to teach (KETs A, C, I, and L), and disinterest in teaching (KET H, NETs A and B) and in their students (KETs H, I, and O). As I.-O. Kim (2009) and Lee and Park (2001) stated, the motivational intensity and attitudes toward learning EFL vary among students in different school grades. Ten teachers in this study voiced their concern of some students' negative attitudes toward the EFL teachers throughout the school grades. Compared to Grades 3 and 4, the sixth graders tend to be disobedient to teachers because they think that they are already mature, which is an ironic indication of their immaturity. As shown in Excerpt 1, KET K elaborates that his teaching style may sometimes be in conflict with the students, especially sixth graders. Due to their resistant behavior to teachers, sometimes the teacher tries to implement strict class rules to them. However, as shown in Excerpt 1, the resistance on the sixth graders tends to increase as the teacher implements stricter rules.
I can find many sixth graders who rebel against or defy me, even though I try to control them with strict class rules. I found that the more strict rules I use, the more disobedient they become. Consequently, the relationship between the sixth graders and I worsened and I could not guarantee the students' motivation to learn EFL. (KET K)

The implementation of strict class rules has a negative impact particularly on students having low English proficiency. Compared with the Grades 3 and 4 curricula, that of Grades 5 and 6 puts more emphasis on literacy and does not involve many hands-on fun activities. In such contexts, if the teacher implements stricter class rules, the low-level students are disheartened to find that EFL is less interesting and the EFL teacher is less approachable. As a result, demotivation occurs.

Four participating teachers pointed out that teacher's impatience or worry may demotivate the students. When the teachers are in a hurry to cover all teaching contents in the textbook and do not seem to care about individual students' progress, the students' interests or motivations to learn EFL decline. KET A describes this in Excerpt 2.

What I am thinking is... because of the rush to get through the curriculum, my students are too often left behind... and also I force them to study English hard... I think these kinds of teacher's impatience or worry may negatively influence the students' motivational changes. (KET A)

The differential impact of NETs on students' demotivation is also worth mentioning. With the increasing employment ratio of NETs, they are expected to take a significant role in motivating students by providing them with authentic communication contexts in the EFL classrooms. However, Excerpt 3 warns against such an assumption. If NETs do not pay sufficient attention to their teaching job or their students, their insipid attitude is instantly detected by the students and demotivates them. In Excerpt 3, NET A mentions that NETs need to be sensitive to student motivation. This is not achieved only by talking in English. Instead, the NETs' (and KETs') enthusiasm to teach EFL directly influences their students and increases their EFL learning motivation.

I think that a foreign English teacher cannot facilitate students' motivation if they stand up there and only saying blah, blah, blah talking only in English (...). Native English teachers, who are boring and not interested in the students or in their job, will have a negative impact on the students... and that teacher could definitely decline the motivations. (NET A)

Excerpt 1 (March 19, 2009)

Excessive social expectation of students' EFL proficiency (9 out of 17 teachers)

More than half of the participating teachers in this study also emphasized the externally imposed social pressure as one of the demotivating factors. As noted in Excerpt 4, EFL is a compulsory school subject in Korean elementary schools. As one of the demotivational factors, the teacher participants pointed out that students are not learning a new language for meaningful communication but merely studying one of the major school subjects. They think that rather than students really wanting to learn EFL, the extrinsic social pressure mandates Korean students to study.

Excerpt 4 (March 29, 2009)

Oh... well... they have to study EFL as a school subject. It's part of the curriculum and they have no choice. They have to be here [i.e., in the classroom]. If students really can't picture something [in the future that] they have to look forward to, then EFL doesn't seem like an important subject. (NET A)

NET A in Excerpt 4 indicates that the elementary school students are too young to imagine being at a university or living in a foreign country, which are external goals imposed by teachers and parents. To elementary school students, these are not immediate goals to learn EFL but perceived only as remote and external goals imposed from outside. Another KET also raises a similar concern in Excerpt 5.

In my opinion, it is impossible for students to have immediate goals for learning EFL. Their learning goals are mostly from their parents and they do not have any immediate purpose for the use of English in their daily life. (KET H)

Excessive parents' and teachers' expectations negatively affect the maintenance of the elementary school students' motivation from an early age. Excerpt 6 exemplifies an excessive parental expectation as well as the teachers' and explains the reason why Korean elementary students lack goals for learning EFL.

By having great expectations of students' EFL learning, teachers in public and private institutes, as well as parents, emphasize the importance of English as the students advance to a higher school level because they believe that their children cannot go on to prestigious universities unless they achieve a high score on the English test. So, in my view, students realize the importance of EFL more and more as they advanced through the school grades. (KET C)

Excerpt 6 (March 25, 2009)

Excerpt 6 reveals KET C's assumption that students may think that EFL is an important school subject as they advance through the school years since their parents as well as their teachers emphasize the importance of learning EFL. In the end, such excessive social expectations add pressure and demotivate the students. As Ryan and Deci (2000) underscored, autonomy-supportive parents and
practitioners can facilitate students’ intrinsic motivation, curiosity, interest, and desire for a challenge. In this regard, the previous Excerpts suggest that EFL teachers in Korea need to foster students’ autonomy and help them set up their own goals.

**Widening EFL proficiency gap among students**

(KNSO (2009) reported that 87.9% and 55.6% of elementary school students are taking private lessons and EFL courses in private institutes, respectively. As previously stated, the rate of private education among Korean elementary school students increased as they advance in school. EFL lessons in private institutes mainly focus on testing and homework in reading and writing in English, memorizing as many vocabulary and grammar items as possible (W.-K. Lee, 2004). Moreover, as Kym (2008) has observed, it is recognized that the materials used in private institutes are beyond the students’ current cognitive or linguistic levels. In this educational context, the private education widens the EFL proficiency gap between those with and without private education (Bray, 2006; Chung, 2004, 2005; S.-S. Kim, 1999; Kym, 2008; Lee, 2004).

Out of the 17 teacher participants, seven participating teachers mentioned that the variation of FL proficiency might be perceived differently by the students without private education, who usually show low proficiency in EFL classes in public education. According to the teachers, they are mostly demotivated to learn EFL because of their sense of inferiority compared to their classmates having prior EFL learning experience at private institutes.

**Excerpt 7 (February 25, 2009)**
I think, as they have been studying EFL with the advanced FL learners in the same classroom, they might feel a sense of relative deprivation and deep frustration (...) and also once they start to think that they have no aptitude or talent in learning English, their learning motivation usually declines. (KET O)

**Excerpt 8 (February 25, 2009)**
(...) learning EFL is a burden to fifth and sixth graders who do not attend a private institute. As the English contents become more difficult in those grades, non-tutored students are stressed out easily, or sometimes they easily give up learning EFL. So I can see lots of demotivated, non-tutored students who say something like ‘I’m not good at English, so I feel like giving it up’ in Grade 6. (KET N)

Excerpts 7 and 8 reveal that students’ widening proficiency gap may negatively influence low proficiency learners without private EFL education. Specifically, KET N in Excerpt 8 attributes the demotivation of low proficiency students to the sense of deprivation and frustration compared to their classmates with private EFL education experiences. KET N also indicates that without private education, the non-tutored students become demotivated because the learning contents in the English textbooks become more difficult in Grades 5 and 6. Whereas the tutored students treat the learning contents in their English textbook as simple and unchallenging due to their prior knowledge, the untutored students develop a sense of inferiority and abandon themselves to demotivation.

Regarding Excerpt 7, low proficiency students tend to give up learning English as they advance in school because they think that they have no aptitude or talent in learning English compared with the advanced FL learners who mostly have private EFL education. As a result, they do not see the immediate prospect to learn EFL and become frustrated at an early age (Bray, 2006; Lee, 2004). This also resonates in Excerpt 8, which mentions that it is easy to find demotivated students in EFL classes, especially in Grade 6. Both KETs O and N attributed the demotivation of low proficiency learners to the sense of relative deprivation and deep frustration compared to the tutored students, and to their accumulated negative experience of learning EFL throughout their school grades.

Five participating teachers also commented that the emotional conflict between tutored and untutored groups caused by the EFL proficiency gap has a negative impact, even on highly proficient students’ EFL learning motivation. Excerpts 9 and 10 illustrate the demotivational process of students having a high English proficiency showcased in EFL classes in public school.

**Excerpt 9 (March 26, 2009)**
In Grades 5 and 6, I can easily find a group of students who are taking initiatives in the class and wield some influence over the other students. One day, as soon as I finished my EFL lesson, a homeroom teacher approached me and told that one of the group members said to a highly advanced student in EFL class ‘Don’t be smug. You are not the only person knowing the answer. Do you really think we don’t know the answer?’ (KET H)

**Excerpt 10 (March 27, 2009)**
I think the reasons that sixth graders don’t actively participate in EFL classes include peer pressure and bullying. And I think most of the kids try to fit into the mainstream and then they make fun of the extreme. (NET B)

Excerpts 9 and 10 describe the negative consequences of peer pressure in EFL classes. When the motivated individual learners, with private education, actively participate in the EFL lessons, the other classmates with a lower English proficiency think that they are showing off their abilities, and sometimes they become the target of fierce jealousy. In the end, the students with no or less private education try to outcast the outperforming students, particularly in Grades 5 and 6. As a result, the highly motivated learners, with prior EFL learning at private institutes, are deprived of their opportunities to speak English, silenced, and demotivated.
DISCUSSION

Indeed, FL learning motivation is multifaceted, dynamic, and non-linear (Kim, 2005, 2011), and it may not be easy to capture such dynamics only by relying on a mono-methodological approach (Dörnyey, 2007). This mixed methods study has attempted to delineate the general demotivational trends of Korean elementary school students and to analyze how EFL teachers perceive their student demotivation by using a mixed methods approach.

The study results revealed concurrence and discordance in opinion on student demotivation. On the dimension of concurrence, the participating students and EFL teachers in Korea both agreed that the students’ motivation to learn EFL decreased as they advanced throughout the grades. However, the participating students and teachers differed in their opinions on the perceived importance of English and in the reasons for the importance of studying English, especially with parental and academic extrinsic motivation. As Excerpt 6 indicates, the teacher participants assumed that the students’ perceived importance of EFL may increase throughout the years due to more exposure and social pressure coming from the teachers in public and private institutes and their parents. This is related to the increasing ratio of private education as the students get older. The majority of parents seem to strongly agree on the necessity of private instruction for their children’s education so they enroll their children in extra classes (Hamid, Sussex, & Khan, 2009). However, the students’ responses contradicted this assumption; the perceived importance of EFL declined as they advanced throughout the school grades. Additionally, the participating students and teachers showed a different perspective on the reasons for the importance of studying EFL, especially in parental and academic extrinsic motivations. The students perceived the parental and academic extrinsic motivations to be relatively less important as the reasons for the importance of studying EFL (M = 1.75 and 1.71, respectively), while the teacher participants emphasized the externally imposed social pressure, such as EFL as a compulsory subject, parental as well as teachers’ expectation, with advancing grade.

We propose three potential reasons to explain why the teacher participants misunderstood the student motivation. First, as we have seen, 13 of the 15 participating KETs were English subject teachers. Depending on the school contexts, EFL teachers should teach 10 classes, with up to 20 teaching-hours per week. Since students visit the EFL classroom in ebbs and flows, EFL teachers have great difficulties identifying individual students’ personal interests and motivations compared to the homeroom teachers who take responsibility for managing only one class. Second, the teachers in this study perceived the student motivation as a “grades cluster” (Chung, 2005), not as an individual phenomenon. The teachers’ data indicated that the teachers tended to cluster the students’ grades as lower school grades for Grades 3 and 4, or upper school grades for Grades 5 and 6, and only discussed the general trends of each cluster, rather than centering on an individual student’s unique motivational changes. Third, the teachers misunderstood a class motivational trend for each student’s individual motivation. Put differently, if the class atmosphere was good and the students spoke loudly when the teacher asked instructional questions, the teachers tended to think that all students in the class had a high level of EFL learning motivation.

This identified discordance suggests that teachers need to be aware of the importance of developing their students’ individual motivational constructs, rather than merely recognizing them as a grade cluster or class motivation. For EFL teachers to gain renewed recognition of FL learning motivation on an individual level, creative curriculum innovation may need to be implemented. For instance, teachers can make a lesson plan based on level-differentiated instruction. For this, although difficult due to their large student loads, English teachers should strive to remember each student’s name and their personal interest because it is “a powerful rapport-building tool for the classroom” (Dörnyei & Murphy, 2003, p. 28) affecting student FL performance. Second, there is a need to develop a great deal of effective self-motivating strategies for encouraging learners to take more control over their own learning process (Dörnyei, 2001c; Ushioda, 1996). Recently, researchers are cognizant of the self-regulating power of verbal protocols (e.g., interviews, stimulated recall, and think aloud techniques), which has usually been known as objective research methods (Kim, 2006; Swain, 2006). By reflecting on previous FL learning experience and reconstructing the meaning of the learning activity, demotivated students can internalize the importance of FL learning and better appreciate the opportunity to learn it. This results in an irrevocable change in the FL learners’ mind since “verbalization changes thought, leading to development and learning” (Swain, 2006, p. 110). At a practical level, for example, FL teachers can allocate a short period, once or twice a week, for reflective sessions so each student can think about their own learning. The act of individual’s thinking can function as a pivotal role for maintaining each student’s FL learning motivation. Also, by engaging learners in a discussion about why they are learning languages, students can play a significant role in making interactive FL lessons.

The implementation of such a creative innovation in the Korean elementary school contexts necessitates an administrative support and an intensive, in-service teacher training program as well. Regarding the administrative support, MEST’s (2010) announcement of employing intern teaching assistants seems to enhance low English proficiency students’ motivation. By closely monitoring each student’s progress in school subjects by the help of
the intern teachers, EFL teachers could pay more attention to each student's unique motivational changes. By the same token, as Park, Park, Choi, and Lee (2007) argued, it is homeroom teachers not subject teachers who have in-depth knowledge of their students in terms of the students' cognitive, emotional, and physical development. That is, homeroom teachers know their students' sociocultural contexts such as their economic status, parents, family, and friends. When homeroom teachers' expertise in their students is meticulously integrated into EFL lessons, we can expect a synergistic effect in enhancing students' FL learning motivation. Thus viewed, through systematic, in-service teacher EFL training programs, homeroom teachers may need to teach EFL as well as the other school subjects.

SUMMARY

By utilizing a mixed methods approach, which has rarely been applied in the field of applied linguistics (Dörnyei, 2007), this paper investigated the general trend of Korean elementary school students' demotivation and their teachers' level of understanding of the extent and causes of student demotivation. The main findings are as follows. First, the students' motivational constructs (i.e., instrumental, intrinsic, integrative, parental extrinsic, and academic extrinsic motivations) decreased as they advanced throughout school grades. Second, the teachers in this study attributed their students' demotivation to 1) the negative impact of the EFL teachers on students' motivation, 2) excessive social expectations of English proficiency, and 3) the widening FL proficiency gap among students. Third, most teacher participants perceived their students' EFL learning motivation in terms of a group or class phenomenon and did not understand it on an individual basis, primarily due to their large student loads. Moreover, they had a superficial assumption that students' perceived importance of EFL would increase as they advanced throughout the school grades, which was not supported by the quantitative data obtained from the 6,301 elementary school students.

Despite the novelty of using a mixed methods design, this paper has the following limitations. Its nature is mainly exploratory and descriptive of learner behavior. The teacher sample size was small. The results are limited to the EFL context in Korea and cannot be generalized to other EFL contexts. Additionally, as Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) emphasise, an active co-construction of knowledge is the main characteristic of qualitative verbal protocols, and the interpretation of the interviews and open-ended questionnaire used in the study is no exception. Despite the meticulous member-checking procedure and the series of triangulations, most of the interpretations were made based on the shared opinions of the researchers and the teacher participants. Therefore, the findings and subsequent interpretations may differ for other FL teachers.

It would be worthwhile for future research to conduct extensive, in-depth interviews with a larger pool of elementary school students and teachers, and to analyze the teachers' perception of the students' motivational dynamics. It would also be of value to study the influence of parents and peers on each student's motivational changes (e.g., Wong, 2007). In addition, comparing the perceptions between English-subject teachers and homeroom teachers on students' FL motivation would be a promising future direction.

NOTES

1 Most native English teachers are required to teach students in two or more public schools, and such itinerant teachers are included in the above statistics. Some schools have no native English teacher.

2 According to Dörnyei (2001a), "demotivation" is defined as a decrease or drop in level of motivation, while "amotivation" refers to an absence of any motivation.

3 Kruskal-Wallis test ; *** p < .001

4 The three dots in parenthesis (...) mean an omission of words without distorting the overall meaning.

REFERENCES


