Korean EFL Students' Amotivation to Learn English: An Activity Theory Analysis

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I. Introduction: Confounding findings from Korean EFL students

II. Vygotskian activity theory (AT) and L2 motivational self-system
   - Leont’ev’s (1978) Activity theory model
   - Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 motivational self system
     Ideal L2 self / ought-to L2 self

III. The study: qualitative interview data

IV. Findings: L2 selves and amotivation from AT

V. Discussion
   - English as a tool for internal competition
   - motivation as an *ex post facto* phenomenon

VI. Implications
I. Introduction: Confounding interview data (I)

- I(interviewer): Have you had any changes in your attitude toward English learning?
- P1: I had some interest in English, but I have only pressure to learn English now.
- I: Do you think you must learn it?
- P1: Yes.
- I: What about your parents or teachers? Do they say anything about English?
- P1: They say I have to learn it.
- I: You mean your parents?
- P1: Yes, for my university admission.
- I: Do you have any particular subject you would like to study in college?
- P1: No.

Extrinsic motivation
Ought-to L2 self
No specific learning goal
Social pressure

Our Expectation:
Low level of L2 motivation
Low English test score
I. Introduction: Confounding interview data (II)

- I: In your view, why is learning English important to you?
- P2: It is because we now live in a global village and we need to follow this trend.
- I: Mmm. What is your future career plan?
- P2: To become a pediatrician.
- I: I see. Then what would be the relationship between your becoming a pediatrician and your learning English?
- P2: English is doctors’ language. Also, I need to communicate in English once I do medical volunteering.

Internalized extrinsic motivation
Ideal L2 self

A specific learning goal
(pediatrician)

Imagined participation (doctor’s community)

High level of L2 motivation

Our Expectation
High English test score
I. Introduction: Basic assumptions in L2 motivation

- Their English test scores? : P1>P2

- Common Assumptions
  - Motivation leads to motivated behavior which will result in a positive, visible effect on L2 learners’ L2 proficiency.
    - High level of L2 learning motivation → High L2 proficiency
    - Low level of L2 learning motivation → Low L2 proficiency

- Is it possible to identify amotivated learners with relatively high English proficiency?  Yes (in Korean context)
II. Vygotskian activity theory (AT)

  - Activity → Action → Operations
  - (Motive) (Goal) (Conditions)

- Attending on/offline classes
- Making native speaking friends
- Doing homework
- Rote memorization
- Adopting effective strategies
- Participating in group discussions
- Preparing for an exam

- Physical conditions: weather, classroom, technical devices, class-size
- Manner: tutoring, collaborative learning, distance learning
II. L2 learning motivation from an AT perspective

- Engeström (1999): Object (long-term) vs. Goal (short-term)
- Leont‘ev (1978): Motive + Goal + Condition = Full enactment of motivation
- Future direction should be on motivation not on motive.
II. L2 motivational self-system (L2MSS) (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009)

• Critical stance toward Gardner’s socioeducational model
  • No reference group to be assimilated into in the era of English as a global language → The myth of Integrativeness

• Study of the future, possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986):
  • Ideal self, expected (default) self, feared self

• L2 motivational self-system (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 106)
  • Ideal L2 self: L2 learners’ mental representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess
  • Ought-to L2 self: The attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e., various duties, obligations, or responsibilities) in order to avoid possible negative outcomes
  • L2 learning experience: influences situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience
II. Interface between L2MSS and AT

- Ideal L2 self: Fully enacted motivation
- Ought-to L2 self: External origin (e.g., parental expectation, peer pressure, filial duty)

- Taguchi, Magid, & Papi (2009, p. 80): Ever since the only child policy was enforced in 1978 [in PRC], young people have had a heavy burden placed on their shoulders to support their ageing parents. People retire at a relatively early age in China, usually with extremely low pensions, so their children have the responsibility and obligations to take care of them as they become the sole breadwinners of the family.

Revised interactive paradigm between the L2 motivational self-system and SCT-based L2 motivation theory
III. The study: Rationale

- Not many studies on L2 learning *amotivation*
- Refining the definition
  - Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p. 140): A lack of motivation caused by the realization that ‘There is no point..’ or ‘It’s beyond me…’
  - Deci and Ryan (1985): the relative absence of motivation that is not caused by a lack of initial interest but rather by the individual’s experiencing feelings of incompetence and helplessness when faced with the activity.
- The relationship between ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self, and their relationship with motive/motivation/amotivation in Leont’ev’s (1978) activity theory frameworks
III. The study (Nov. 2010 – Jan. 2011)

- Participants: 4 students (out of 39 school-aged Korean students)
  - 15 elementary students (grades 3-6)
  - 11 middle school students (grades 7-9)
  - 13 high school students (grades 10-12)
- Maximum variation sampling: English test score, SES, age
- In Seoul or Gyeonggi province (vicinity of Seoul)

- Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis
  - Pilot interviews for interview question selection
  - Semi-structured interviews for each participant
  - Nvivo analysis: grounded theoretical analysis
IV. Findings: high-achievers with an ideal L2 self

● (Sung-Jin, Grade 6, M)
I: Who do you think influences you the most when you learn English?
S: My dad. He tries to teach me a lot of English. He explains difficult English grammar rules.
I: Oh, I see. Then what do you want to become in the future?
S: A veterinarian.
I: Veterinarian? How is it related to English learning?
S: Well, there are 8 major departments of veterinary medicine in South Korea. Above all, English is the common language among the people in this field. So, it would be good to learn English. Also, who knows? I may want to become a greater man than a vet. I don’t just want to become a vet in my village in Korea. For this future necessity, I’m learning English.

• Goal: Veterinarian
• Participating in an imaginary occupational community

Ideal L2 self: Becoming a veterinarian

Motive + Goal + Participation → Motivation
IV. Findings: low-achievers without an L2 self (Amotivated learner I)

● (Obin, Grade 10, M)
I: Do you think it’s important to learn English?
O: I don’t think it’s that important.
I: Why? Could you say more about that?
O: Uh... We live in Korea, well... I can live well here by speaking Korean only. I don’t want to go abroad, well I mean I would like to stay in Korea. So, I don’t think English is important.

Lacking international posture (Yashima, 2002)
Interest in foreign or international affairs, willingness to go overseas to stay or work, readiness to interact with intercultural partners, and, one hopes, openness or a non-ethnocentric attitude toward different cultures.

- No need
- No ought-to L2 self, no motive: I need to, must, have to, learn English...
- No specific goal
- No intention to participate in an L2 community
IV. Findings: high-achievers with an ought-to L2 self (Amotivated learner II)

- (Yujin, Grade 8, F)

I: What do you want to become when you grow up?
Y: Well, just a teacher, something like that. I don’t know yet.

I: What kind of subject do you want to teach when you become a teacher?
Y: I don’t know that either.

I: Then what will be the relationship between your future career and English learning?
Y: [2 seconds later] well, there should be, well… there must be… I don’t know…

- Object
- No specific goal
- No participation
- Ought-to L2 self
IV. Findings: middle-achievers with an ought-to L2 self (Amotivated learner III)

(Hyun-Ah, Grade 4, F)

I: Why do your parents or teachers say that you should learn English?
H: This is because my parents think that my English skill is not good enough.
I: Then what is the reason for them to say that you should learn English?
H: Um… I don’t know.
I: After you listened to what your parents said, did you study English harder?
H: Um, no. (smiling)

Although no specific goal and participation was stated, sustained L2 learning effort is reported.

- Parental pressure
- No specific goal
- No participation
- Ought-to L2 self

• Motive + Goal + Participation

Motive ✗
Goal ✗
Participation ✗

Motivation ✗
V. Discussion

- **Summary:**
  - When L2 learners created an ideal L2 self, their L2 proficiency tended to show the highest score.
  - However, amotivated learners also showed various level of L2 proficiency (from low to moderately high test score).

Obin (no L2 self)  Yujin, Hyun-Ah (an ought-to L2 self)  Sung-Jin (an ideal L2 self)
V. Discussion: English “War” in Korea

- Why amotivated but sustained L2 learning behavior?
  - Kang (2011): English as a tool for social stratification
  - In 2010, approx. 20 billion dollars for private English learning (including ESL study abroad) [cf. 7 billion dollars (Japan)]
  - Workplace: 64.1% of Korean office workers are stressed out because of English in their workplace. Among the 64.1%, 46.3% of them thought that they would fall behind their colleagues in competition for promotion.
  - Education: goose (penguin, eagle) father syndrome
    - Seoul Academy International School: 101/166 enrolment (60.8%)
V. Discussion: English as a tool for internal competition

- Upward social mobility:
  - English is not an option but a must for students and office workers in South Korea.
  - Limited opportunity to communicate in English / Internal Competition

- Amotivated but sustained English learning is possible.
- Fully motivated (i.e., motive+goal+participation) students’ English test score was the highest.
- Amotivated students’ could also show relatively high English test scores.
Motivation as an Ex Post Facto Phenomenon

Motivated behavior first, reason for doing the behavior is retroactively sought.

Lee (2000, p. 33): An attitude of resignation

(see the handout) The 'why' of something is not that important to Koreans and rarely interests them. If they are asked a ‘how’ question, they can easily provide an answer, but ‘why’ questions are most likely to confuse them.

Limitation of interview method – verbal protocol

Opportunities for recognizing their own motivation through languaging (Swain, 2006, Swain et al., 2009) - Motivational languaging activity (critical participatory looping, motivational intervention)
VI. Conclusion & future directions

**Conclusion**

- In AT framework, amotivation does not simply mean a lack of motivation. Instead, it means either a lack of initial need or a motive dissociated from a goal and a sense of participation.

- An ought-to L2 self shares interface with L2 learning motive, whereas an ideal L2 self is related to motivation, not motive.

**Future Directions**

- Demotivation research is rare in L2 motivation research, and amotivation research is even rarer. This presentation is an explorative effort.

- Future research should address 1) the possibility of an activity without a motive, and 2) the interface between amotivation and ought-to L2 self.
Thank you!

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