L2 learning motivation from a sociocultural theory perspective: Theory, concepts, and empirical evidence

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L2 Learning Motivation from a Sociocultural Theory Perspective: Theory, Concepts, and Empirical Evidence*

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In this 10-month interview study, I focus on five Korean adult ESL visa students’ ESL learning motivation from a Vygotskian sociocultural theory perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). The participants were young adults who had been in Toronto, Canada for less than one month at the inception of the study. I regard L2 motivation as an L2 learner’s conscious realization of personal significance of an L2-related activity. The longitudinal emergent case study approach revealed that two distinctive types of motivation exist among the participants: job-related and context-specific motivations. The two motivations have dialectical relationships with the participants’ ESL learning, beliefs, and L2 communities. In some cases, job motivation, however, was the manifestation of Korean societal voice that English is the world language. A new concept, sensitization, is proposed as the typical instances of context-specific motivation and as the transformation point from environments to affordances (van Lier, 2000). The study implies that by adopting an SCT perspective, we focus on the mediational nature of L2 learning motivation and advance from the prevailing reductionistic paradigms in L2 motivation research. (174 Words)

I. INTRODUCTION

The latter half of the 20th century can be summed up as an era of psychometric domination in second language (L2) motivation theory development. For example, Gardner and his associates (e.g., Gardner, 1985, 2001, 2005, 2006; Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003;
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Tremblay & Gardner, 1995) developed and refined a unique socio-educational model based on massive amounts of quantitative data, mainly from L2 learning populations in Canada. However, as Dörnyei (2005) points out, product-oriented research in L2 motivation does not seem to have much compatibility with process-oriented SLA research (e.g., Ellis, 2003). From methodological angles, factor analytic methods and subsequent statistical procedures such as Structural Equation Modeling, used in psychometric research in L2 learning motivation (e.g., Chen, Warden, & Chang, 2005; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006) do not provide a complete picture of the L2 motivational phenomenon because of its cross-sectional or quasi-longitudinal nature, such that we may not be able to fully investigate each L2 learner’s developmental path of L2 motivation. In this regard, however precise the quantitative measures are, by adding or deleting relevant subcomponents such as goal-setting (Locke & Latham, 1990), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), or mastery/performance goals (Ames, 1992) from cognitive educational psychology for the theory construction of L2 motivation, we may end up with contradictory and inconsistent findings (MacIntyre, 2002). From an epistemological point of view, in general, previous L2 motivation studies were based on the reductionistic paradigm (van Lier, 2000), which focuses on each and every subcomponent of a macro theme investigated rather than on irreducible mediations among those subcomponents.

My understanding of L2 learning motivation is that it is not a static final product but a dynamically evolving process which bears dialectical relationships with L2 learners’ previous L2 learning history and their present sociocultural surroundings. It seems evident that even if an L2 learner shows a tendency of instrumental motivation for L2 learning, there is no guarantee that the same person will show the same motivational trait to the same degree in the future.

In order to reflect this conceptualization of L2 motivation into theory and practice, I consider Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT) as a promising alternative paradigm (Tae-Young Kim, 2005). SCT has ecological validity and has the potential to remedy the deep schism in L2 motivation research: between downward and/or upward reductionism (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). Valsiner and van der Veer (2000) warn us about two types of reductionism.

Sociocultural thinkers often counter the tendencies of explaining psychological phenomena by their underlying biophysical substrate (reductionism “downward”) [or] by reducing the complexity of personal psyches to social-explanatory

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1 Explaining child development, Vygotsky (1978, p. 73) states that a 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.”
constructs (texts, discourse, narratives, culture; i.e., reductionism “upward”). Both versions of reductionism are similar in their construction features (p. 6).

From Valsiner and van der Veer’s (2000) viewpoint, Gardner’s (1985, 1988, 2001) previous works based on positivism regard L2 motivation as the sum of manageable subcomponents such as instrumentality, attitudes, and integrative motives. It seems clear that downward reductionism is still prevalent in L2 motivation research (e.g., Goldberg & Noels, 2006; Kissau, 2006). On the contrary, Norton’s (Peirce’s) (1993, 1995, 2000, 2001) feminism/sociology-based research can be understood as upward reductionism. In such research traditions, each L2 learner’s unique experience in L2 communities is linked to the macro concepts such as power differentials (Foucault, 1979), L2 learners’ degree of investment (Norton Peirce, 1995), legitimacy, and cultural/linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1991). That is, researchers in sociology-based research have assumed and pursued the existence of invisible rule(s) transcending individuality. The following excerpt represents Norton Peirce’s (1993) upward reductionistic stance.

Their [her participants’] investment in English and their opportunities to practice English must be understood with reference to the construction of social identity across historical time and social space. This, in turn, must be understood with reference to social processes of gender, ethnicity, and class. (p. 166, italics added)

By putting our prime emphasis on the mediation between the individual and the social in SCT, we can lay a solid groundwork investigating how L2 motivation is generated, maintained, and decreased\(^2\). This is because L2 motivation is a creative construction or dialectical interaction between L2 learners’ agency and their sociocultural surroundings. Moreover, in order not to sacrifice individual L2 learners’ uniqueness, we should pay equal attention to particularization, and not only to generalization (van Lier, 2004).

To my knowledge, only Ushioda (2003) and Tae-Young Kim (2005) have pointed out the usefulness of adopting SCT to L2 motivation in position papers, but no researcher has investigated L2 learning motivation studies from a Vygotskian SCT perspective. In this paper, I analyze five Korean adult students’ English as a second language (ESL) learning

motivation and their longitudinal changes in L2 motivational trajectories from an SCT perspective. The particular data discussed in this paper come from semi-structured interviews conducted over a period of 10 months.

II. THEORETICAL REORIENTATION

For a clear understanding of the following sections, it is crucial to define L2 learning motivation from the perspective of SCT. Gardner (1985) defines motivation as “the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language” (p. 10). In this definition, motivation is operationalized and conceptually divided into three subcomponents: effort, desire, and attitudes. In order to understand the definition above, we need to have further knowledge of each three subcomponents. The understanding of Gardner’s definition then turns into three separate understandings of effort, desire, and attitudes. Likewise, the three subcomponents require three different definitions.

From the perspective of SCT, which aims to attain a holistic understanding of mediation between human agency and its social, historical, and cultural environments, the above defined method seems problematic. That is because we need to go through two (or more) separate steps to define L2 motivation; it starts from what motivation is, and is transformed into the definitions of effort, desire, and attitudes. Defining the whole concept under inquiry brings reductionism downward (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000). Thus, the new definition needs to be sufficiently sensitive to the interdependence between internal and external factors surrounding L2 learners (van Lier, 1996). The complexity in the genesis and actualization of L2 learning motivation precludes such clear-cut distinctions as intrinsic and extrinsic or internal and external motivations.

Even though it is an academic rarity to find a definition befitting sociocultural theory, two previous studies are noteworthy. Ushioda (2003, p. 90) conceptualizes L2 motivation as “a socially mediated phenomenon.” It implies that the genesis of L2 motivation is not from within the individual but from the broader society. In addition, Negueruela (2003), mainly concerning classroom L2 learning settings, mentions that “L2 motivation is not ... a cause of learning the L2 but is an orienting meaning that may become significant for the learner as a result of participating in properly organized instructional activity” (p. 102).

In dealing with Negueruela’s (2003) comment above, three central issues need to be addressed: 1) the orienting meaning that may become significant; 2) its significance as a result of participating; and 3) a properly organized instructional activity. For the first phrase, it will be useful to introduce the concepts of meaning and sense (Kozulin, 1995; van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991).
Meaning preserves the core of the object’s already established characteristics. These characteristics, however, may have marginal importance in a particular situation in which the given object becomes involved in individual thinking. In sense the object is becoming defined by its contextual meanings, but it does not yet exist as an entity of its own apart from its context. (Kozulin, 1995, p. 125, italics original)

Even if a context may seem meaningful in the eyes of others, it may not have any personal significance unless the L2 learner realizes and is willing to accept its significance. An objective meaning needs to be transformed into a subjective sense to obtain full personal meaning. Through such transformational processes from meaning to sense, L2 learning motivation can be enhanced. In this regard, Negueruela’s (2003) phrase, the orienting meaning that may become significant, can be rephrased as the “realization of personal significance of an L2-related activity.”

Second, the meaning of “participating” invites more theoretical refinements. Without either actual or imaginary participation in L2 activity systems, L2 learning motivation is not created. Participation is related not only to physical involvement in the learning situation but also to imaginary involvement. Even before an L2 learner starts to learn the L2, he or she may have mental images of participating in an L2 community with an active use of the L2. Even when an L2 learner does not have any real interlocutor, the learner can imagine interlocutors in various situations. Wenger (1998) mentions that “imagination ... is not just the production of personal fantasies. Far from an individual withdrawal from reality, it is a mode of belonging that always involves the social world to expand the scope of reality and identity” (p. 178).

Negueruela (2003) focuses on instructional settings in L2 learning. Equally important, however, is the nature of life-long processes of L2 learning. L2 learning can occur even in non-instructional settings such as workplaces or everyday verbal interactions. In this regard, for most L2 learners (especially those in the L2 host country) L2-related activities are multiply realized at different times and locations. Therefore, there is no need to conceptually restrict the L2 activity system as a closed, unitary one. L2 activities encompass both instructional and everyday contexts.

The above theoretical considerations lead to a different definition of L2 learning motivation. I regard L2 motivation as an L2 learner’s realization of personal significance of an L2-related activity, resulting from the L2 learner’s sense of participation in L2 activity systems. L2 motivation may not be merely expressed by speech but can be realized in inner or social speech. For example, the active verbalization during verbal protocols asking about L2 learning can lead the L2 learners to realize the personal meaning of L2 learning and thus motivates them (Tae-Young Kim, 2006; Swain, 2006). The L2 learners can be
motivated as they realize that they invested their learning time and efforts in the object of the activity or in the goal(s) of the action. The personal significance stated above also needs to be refined. This means, the more significance an L2 learner places on the L2 learning, the more intense motivation the learner can initially have although the actual development of the motivation must be continually accompanied by learning goals and relevant participation in a variety of L2 communities (e.g., L2 classroom, L2 peer group, etc.) in activity systems.

Given all these theoretical clarifications, in this paper, I investigate 1) the mediational processes between an L2 learner and his or her sociocultural factors and how such processes affect L2 motivation, and 2) the different origins of two major motivational constructs named job-related and context-specific motivations found in two contrasting cases.

III. METHOD

1. Participants

I recruited five young adult Korean ESL learners in Toronto in the fall of 2004 (see Table 1). My participants had all been in Canada for less than one month at the inception of the study. All interviews were conducted in Korean with the assumption that I could elicit in-depth responses from the participants using the shared first language rather than English. They started their ESL learning by taking general full-time ESL courses and moved into more specific ones such as Business English or TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) courses.

Although I collected and analyzed five participants’ data, I focus my discussion in this paper on two male participants: Joon and Woo. The criteria for selecting the core participants were that they needed to share similarities compared to other non-core participants. I wanted to highlight the different nature of L2 learning motivation that is unique to each individual L2 learner. The dialectical development of an individual’s L2 learning motivation transcends superficial similarities among individual participants and presents uniquely different motivational changes, which cannot be predicted through the lens of quantitative research paradigm.

By and large, Joon and Woo showed similar characteristics such as gender, age, perceived socioeconomic status in Korea, and undergraduate majors (Economics and Accounting). Both of them had six-years of English as a Foreign Language instruction, mainly in grammar and reading focused classes in Korea, before they came to Canada. As such, I regarded them as my core participants and aimed to present how their life
experiences, learner goals, and beliefs led to drastic differences in the development of similar motivational components.

TABLE 1
Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name**</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Arrival</th>
<th>Departure</th>
<th>Courses taken in Toronto</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Woo**</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Sept. '04</td>
<td>Aug. '05</td>
<td>General ESL → Business English + Private Tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joon**</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Sept. '04</td>
<td>Jul. '05</td>
<td>General ESL → Study Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PK</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Sept. '04</td>
<td>Aug. '05</td>
<td>General ESL → Business English → Private Tutoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hana</td>
<td>Visa</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Sept. '04</td>
<td>Mar. '05</td>
<td>General ESL → TESL Certificate Program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hyun</td>
<td>Visa - Immigrant</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Oct. '04</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>General ESL → Univ. Prep. Academic ESL + Private Tutoring</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *: all pseudonyms; **: core participant

2. Data Collection and Analyses

For the purpose of developing a systematic interview template for ESL learning motivation, I conducted a pilot study in the summer of 2004 (Tae-Young Kim, 2006). For the pilot study, I recruited 10 different Korean ESL participants in Toronto, Canada and interviewed them once a month from June to September 2004. Each of them was interviewed twice or three times, and I administered 24 interviews in total. Three interview formats – open-ended, semi-structured, and structured interviews – were used for them.

For the main study data collection, I used the semi-structured interview template developed from the pilot study (See Appendix for sample interview questions). Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted in a seminar room at my university at the convenience of my participants. I conducted the interviews once a month for each participant over a period of a maximum of ten months. I asked the participants core questions based on previous L2 motivation literature (e.g., Ushioda, 2001; Williams & Burden, 1999), sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), and the theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). I repeated the same interview questions each month and asked the same set of questions to all five participants. The nature of semi-structured interviews (e.g., Fontana & Frey, 2000) allowed me to ask related questions about their interpersonal relationships with their ESL teacher(s) and peers, their previous language learning experiences, familial influence, and affective factors in learning ESL.

3 Hyun decided to immigrate to Canada.
For the purpose of data triangulation, I also used other techniques in qualitative research such as class observations and language learning autobiography. However, in this paper, I focus on the interview data because they were my primary data source in the sense that I administered the interviews on a monthly basis for 10 months. Immediately after each interview, the recording was transcribed and returned to the participants to check the verity of the transcription. I transcribed the audio-taped data in Korean first. English translations of the data are supplied where necessary in this paper.

As my analytic unit, I used meaning units. Ratner (2002) mentions that “the meaning unit must preserve the psychological integrity of the idea being expressed. It must neither fragment the idea into meaningless, truncated segments nor confuse it with other ideas that express different themes” (p. 169). Thus, meaning units are different from mechanical units such as word, sentence, or paragraph units. In the data, as long as the participant coherently commented on the same salient theme (e.g., motivation to learn English for future job opportunity) without digression, this was coded as one meaning unit. Since I adopted an emerging case study design, each meaning unit was not predetermined but gradually emerged through several distinct readings of the data and analysis procedures. Thus, the analytic focus of the semi-structured interviews was not on whether ESL learners’ motivation and their personal histories fit into previous downward or upward reductionistic L2 learning motivation models but on how ESL learners themselves dialectically constructed and presented these L2 motivations.

3. NVivo Analyses and Reliability of the Coding

I used a computer software, NVivo (Richards & Richards, 2002), for systematic and consistent analysis. The original Korean interview transcripts were entered and coded in using the NVivo program. Since the data were longitudinal, I focused on my participants’ changes in their responses to my interview questions. As a result of the constant comparison of the data and subsequent re-analysis, from the five participants, eight motivational components emerged: 1) job motivation, 2) communicative need, 3) heuristic or information finding motivation, 4) travel motivation, 5) the desire to live abroad or immigration, 6) context-specific motivation, 7) self-satisfaction, and 8) amotivation/demotivation. For the purposes of verification and validity, I contacted the participants through email or by telephone, and explained the eight motivational components to them. I asked them whether or not the data and my coding categories of motivational components represented their ESL learning and life in Toronto. All of them understood and agreed with my motivational components.

The first motivational component is job motivation. This is typically related to the participants’ expectations of increased job opportunities after learning English. All
participants commented on this component. The second one is communicative need, which was also mentioned by all of the participants. My participants expressed their desire to communicate with other members in L2 communities in Toronto with the use of English. The third one is heuristic or information finding motivation. This is related to the expectation of having more access to information written in English. The fourth one is travel motivation. For ESL students, learning English is often considered as having increased opportunities to visit exotic foreign places or to travel abroad. The fifth one is the desire to live abroad or immigration. This motivation is related to the ESL students’ anticipation to reside for an extended period of time in foreign countries or to immigrate to English speaking countries. When long-term residency was not implied in their comments, these comments were coded as travel motivation. The sixth one is context-specific motivation. This component was salient when the participants wished to emulate highly motivated ESL classmates or to emulate ESL immigrants and other NNES co-workers. This component is clearly influenced by social environments such as an L2 classroom atmosphere and L2 peer interactions. The seventh component was self-satisfaction. When the participants expressed their desire to enhance their life conditions in general by learning and/or using English, it was coded as self-satisfaction. It should be noted that this component applies to the participants’ comments on general life conditions. When my participants mentioned a specific job to achieve enhanced living conditions, their comments were not coded as self-satisfaction rather as the first component: job motivation. The eighth one is amotivation/demotivation. This component is the negative side of the seven motivational components explained above. I applied this component when my participants expressed the complete loss or gradual decrease in their L2 learning motivation.

To establish inter-coder reliability, I recruited a Korean-Canadian bilingual graduate student studying linguistics at a major university in North America and asked her to code approximately a quarter of the participants’ interview data. For the training purpose, I provided her with the entire coding scheme, explained it to her, and showed her the participants’ first interview transcripts with the eight motivational components mentioned above. I compared her NVivo coding of the data with my original coding, and through this manual comparison, I obtained the inter-coder reliability of .83. Moreover, during the past three years, I have presented, explained, and refined these categories in various academic venues such as professional conferences, teacher education programs, and class presentations, all of which provide additional trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the coding and interpretation of the data.
IV. FINDINGS: EMERGENT THEMES FROM THE DATA

1. Learner Goal, Belief, and Job Motivation

When I started data collection from the five participants, all of them unanimously and instantly responded to the first interview question (i.e., *Why are you interested in learning English?*) in the same way. As shown in Extract 1, they all expressed a strong desire to learn English for personal benefit. That is, they expected knowledge of English to enhance their ability to find a job. Moreover, Extract 2 shows that such motivation for better jobs in the future through learning English persisted throughout the monthly interviews.

Extract 1.

*Joon:* I need to get a good job in Korea. (Interview 1, October 2004)

*Woo:* I’m not interested in learning English itself. It is rather that I need English. It will make our lives affluent. (Interview 1, October 2004)

*Hana:* I should be an English teacher. (Interview 1, October 2004)

*Hyun:* The reason why I’m interested in learning English is because I’d like to get a job in Korea. Plus, I think English is a basic means of communication to travel around the world. (Interview 2, November 2004)

Extract 2.

*Joon:* To learn English... To get a job in Korea. (Final interview, July 2005)

*Woo:* I had to learn English to have better opportunity to get a job in a steel company in Korea. (Final interview, June 2005)

*Hana:* I would like to be an English teacher. And as you know, to become a teacher, I need to pass the Pre-service Teacher Examination. I need to pass the exam... So I should have high English proficiency. (Final interview, March 2005)

Such comments by the participants seem to reflect the prevailing discourse in South Korea wherein English has been largely equated with the opportunity to social ascendance from the mediocre to the high-status of power elites (Park & Abelmann, 2004). Given this social context, the participants may be repeating what they have heard in their home
country or ventriloquating the voices of social discourse (Bakhtin, 1981; Wertsch, 1991). As previously mentioned, motivation can be defined as an L2 learner’s realization of the personal significance of an L2-related activity. In general, during the initial phase (i.e., the first two or three months) the interview data revealed no clear indication of such a personal significance of learning English arising from active participation in L2 communities. This was perhaps due to the lack of close contacts with other members in the L2 communities among the participants.

However, the job motivation develops differently depending on each participant’s L2 experiences and their life and/or learning goal(s). Joon and Woo’s data show interesting contrasts despite their similar backgrounds. Even though job motivation has been traditionally categorized as either extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) or instrumental orientation (Gardner, 1985), SCT analyses of their longitudinal interview data indicate that similar comments by the two participants are in fact not the same in terms of their origin and their degree of perceived significance.

In Joon’s case, his main goal for staying in Toronto was to socialize with other people and to have multicultural experiences. Especially in the initial phase, Joon’s active participation in L2 communities for the socializing goal exhausted him.

Extract 3.

Joon: I thought I’d be better to live a busy life here. So I made myself terribly busy. But this led me exhausted physically. You know, if we are dead tired, everything becomes a nuisance. I did not want to do anything, not even ESL class. Actually I skipped my class once the other day. I was simply too exhausted. (Interview 2, November 2004)

The Interview data indicated that Joon held a strong but rather naive belief that English (speaking) proficiency would gradually increase through frequent casual interactions. Thus, he did not place much value on formal English study.

Extract 4.

Joon: I’ve never studied English sitting in front of my desk here [in Toronto]. I believe that kind of study I can do anywhere even in Korea. (Interview 3, December 2004)

Therefore, for Joon, job motivation commented in Extracts 1 and 2 above is neither related to his goal for staying in an L2 community in general nor to his learner belief.

Conversely, Woo, another core participant, shows more integration of job motivation, learner goal, and learning belief. Asked about his future goals after completing his English
courses in Toronto, he explains with remarkable clarity:

*Extract 5.*

*Woo: What I would like to do in the future is to work in the field of steel manufacturing. The steel company, XXX [the name of the company] is for sure the top producer of high quality steel. It is important for the company to export steel goods to other countries to make profits. It is not sufficient to sell the steel within Korea. So, I hope I can get a job in the international sales department of that company and be successful.* (Interview 2, November 2004)

Moreover, his job motivation is connected to his life experiences in Korea, which is described in *Extract 6.* Woo attributes his girlfriend’s unemployment to her inability to attain high English proficiency test (i.e., TOEIC) scores, which subsequently gave him another opportunity to critically think about the personal significance of living and studying English in L2 communities.

*Extract 6.*

*Woo: I believe if I can’t speak English, I can’t get a job. Actually, my girlfriend in Korea is going to graduate from her college very soon, but her TOEIC score is really low. So because of her poor English score, she has not been offered any job interviews yet. The more I see this situation, the more I feel I need English. If I can’t increase my real English ability, at least I need a good TOEIC score.* (Interview 3, December 2004)

As shown in the comparison of Joon and Woo’s data, even though the two participants’ motivation can be understood as the desire to get a better job for their future, from an SCT perspective, which incorporates a learner’s past and present experiences and goal for life, the similar motivation for a job is in fact the manifestation of two different mental states. That is, for Joon, the job motivation does not seem to have much personal meaning, disintegrated from his future plans and beliefs, whereas for Woo, the same construct seems a more genuine reflection of personal significance arising from the dialectic process of learner history, goal, and belief.

2. Context-specific Motivation

While I could identify job motivation from all the five participants, the emerging case study approach adopted in this paper reveals another major motivational construct among
the L2 learners: context-specific motivation. When my participants’ L2 learning experiences are firmly situated in L2 environments such as the target L2 community, a growing number of context-specific motivation is reported. This motivation emerges from L2-related activities. Extract 7 illustrates exemplary comments of this motivation. In responding to the same interview question (i.e., *Why are you interested in learning English?*), they state:

*Extract 7.*

Joon: Now, I realize English is interesting to learn. I noticed that there are lots of ways of English expression even for one thing. (Interview 4, January 2005)

Woo: It is really wonderful. Before I came here, I didn’t know whether or not I could actually live without speaking Korean. Although it is a little bit inconvenient, I’m thrilled to find myself still surviving here. (Interview 3, December 2004)

PK: Hmm… Nowadays, English learning itself became interesting to me. (Interview 5, February 2005)

In their comments, special attention needs to be paid to the words ‘interesting’ (Joon and PK), and ‘wonderful’ (Woo). These words reflect their emotional evaluations and at the same time, represent the mutual relationship between L2 learning experiences and motivation. The participants’ positive evaluation of their experiences in ESL contexts (i.e., Toronto), and the new experiences different from their EFL experiences in South Korea evoke the satisfactory feeling of authentic communication with so-called native English speakers in their L2 communities.

Traditionally, the comments in Extract 7 have been categorized as either intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000) or the representation of an acculturation process (Schumann, 1977). However, if we conceptualize L2 learning motivation as an L2 learner’s realization of personal significance of an L2-related activity by participating in L2 communities, these previous categories are inadequate in that they do not explain the phenomenon per se but have only descriptive values. Previous terms like these do not seem to sufficiently address the reasons for this new emerging interest from the participants, and the following questions are largely unanswered: *Why did Joon and PK think English was interesting? Why did Woo think living in Toronto was wonderful?*

For this, I use a different term, context-specific motivation, which focuses on the dialectical process between an L2 learner’s life experiences and his or her signification of the experience regarding their motivation. In order to answer the reasons for context-
specific motivation, I elaborate on the notion of sensitization point in the next section.

3. Sensitization Point

By the time the participants have taken and completed several ESL courses in the L2 host country, they gradually increased the number of close ESL peers and English speakers (at least ESL teachers) in L2 communities. It seems logical that the more they have diverse L2 communities to use English, the more they come to recognize the gap between their current English proficiency and that of other native English speakers in L2 communities. However, the interview data did not support this assumption. Even though they were surrounded by an increased number of English speakers, their recognition of the English gap did not necessarily increase. Instead, the data indicated that when their experiences related to L2 deficiency paralleled their (sub)goal of the L2 learning activity, they became more sensitive to the experience, which led to their recognition. For example, Joon reports his recognition of L2 gap during English tutoring.

Extract 8.

Joon: I thought the most important factor for English learning was to meet as many people [native speakers of English] as possible and talk a lot. Uh, now I think I need to write a lot. I mean, of course, meeting many people is important, but I would like to focus more on vocabulary. I realized that even though I met many people, I always used the same words that I felt comfortable with. So, it is important to use various English words, I think. While I was with my English tutor, I realized my lack of English words a lot. You know, when I was talking with my tutor more than an hour, I couldn’t continue the conversation by simply using the words that I have been using. So, I believe it’s time for me to learn more words, write a lot, and read a lot. (Interview 4, January 2005)

In the situation he recalls, both Joon and his ESL teacher had a clear goal for tutoring: to have extensive and extended conversations in English for more than an hour. Also, the activity is instruction oriented. Given this, Joon’s growing recognition that he does not have sufficient vocabulary to continue lengthy conversations described in Extract 8 represents the alignment of learner goal and its contexts. In other words, if his context was not in an instructional setting and his goal was not geared toward L2 proficiency, those experiences may not have triggered his recognition of his lack of L2 proficiency.

Since all five participants stayed in the L2 host country for more than six months, the interview data show many English-related episodes. However, it should be noted that not all episodes bring about an L2 learner’s recognition of his or her current L2 proficiency.
When they are engaged in L2 instructional activities and their goal is directly related to L2 learning, they become more sensitive to the subtle L2 cues signaling their lack of L2 proficiency. In such cases, their remarks on context-specific motivation increase.

The moment an L2 learner critically recognizes the L2 gap seems to have lasting effects on L2 learning. As illustrated in Extract 4, Joon does not appreciate the value of studying English in an L2 classroom in his initial interviews. Extract 9 from his fourth month data (the same set as Extract 8), however, shows drastic changes in his L2 learning belief and behaviour, which can be attributed to his specific experience in Extract 8. The changes were first mentioned in his fourth month and maintained until he left Toronto in early July 2005.

Extract 9.

Joon: Hmm... After I finish my part-time job, almost every hour, uh, well.. It’s not all the time, but anyhow, I studied English a lot after having my dinner. From the first day of this year [this interview was conducted on January 22, 2005], I studied a lot. I went to the library almost every day. (Interview 4, January 2005)

Based on Extracts 8 and 9, I propose a concept, sensitization point, which is linked to context-specific motivation. A sensitization point is the moment when an L2 learner recognizes the gap between his or her current L2 proficiency and the desirable L2 proficiency to be attained. Sensitization occurs when 1) the L2 learner is aware of his or her participation in an L2-involved activity, 2) the learner’s learning goal and learning belief are related to the experience of participation, and 3) the L2 learner perceives the gap as being able to be resolved by a conscious action of L2 learning. The sensitization found in Joon’s data is an indicator of context-specific motivation because it is the microgenetic moment4 of recognizing a gap between L2 ability and L2 goal resulting from the lived experiences in a specific L2 context.

4. Challenges in Sensitization

L2 learners’ sensitization and context-specific motivation are not predictable in the sense that each L2 learner’s previous L2 learning history and the social contexts have idiosyncratic characteristics. Each L2 learner’s sensitization is a unique dialectical process, which involves the learner’s learning and/or life goals and personal signification, which

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4 Ohta (2000) defines microgenesis as “cognitive development that occurs moment by moment in social interaction” (p. 54).
precludes such a prediction. Nevertheless, in regards to sensitization, I think that at least two factors have a negative effect: routinization and the perceived negative influence of Korean peer community members.

First, routinization seems the prime factor for the decrease in sensitization and in context-specific motivation. As their stay in Toronto becomes longer, they formulate take-it-for-granted attitudes toward their ESL contexts. Their initial excitement even from a simple (but perceived authentic) exchange such as buying coffee at a coffee house and asking for or being asked for directions on the street dissipates rapidly. Extract 10 exemplifies Joon’s decrease in L2 learning behaviour due to the routinization effect.

**Extract 10.**

Joon: (...) Quite a while ago, I jotted down all unfamiliar words and tried to use an English dictionary. But nowadays I rarely do it. (...) When I read newspapers, I just skip English words I don’t know. I only try to remember the essential words to live my life here. I don’t think I make particular efforts to learn English. (Interview 7, April 2005)

This growing boredom is also related to the participants’ perceived lack of opportunity for meaningful L2 communication. They gradually realize that in their daily routine, except for their homestay and ESL schools, it is relatively difficult to find occasions to speak and practice English with fluent English speakers.

The second factor, the influence of the ethnic community, is also important. This is closely related to the L2 learners’ changes in their accommodations and ESL schools. It is a common practice to find a homestay in Canada even before they come to Canada. Approximately 60 percent of ESL students rely on private ESL agencies (Language and Travel Magazine, 2006) in their home country, and the agencies also give advice on homestay selection or even find accommodations based on each ESL student’s specific needs. Since the minimum period of registration for both accommodations and ESL school is usually three months, L2 learners need to make decisions on their school and accommodations again after three months in Canada. In many cases, L2 learners change their living arrangements to save cost even if they know that opportunities to use their L2 may decrease after their accommodation changes from homestay to other types. Many Korean ESL learners opt to share accommodations instead of continuing with the homestay, where meal plans are included. Usually, their roommates are other ESL compatriots.

In this case, peer influence becomes another major challenge. It has been reported that for adolescent or early adulthood learners, the peer network exerts substantial influence for learning success (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002). As L2 learners increasingly spend time in ESL classes in Toronto, they create diverse peer networks. Among those networks, the ethnic
group becomes the most powerful network. They share the same first language, Korean, and the ethnic culture both of which other ESL peers of different nationalities do not have. Extract 11 exemplifies the negative effect of peer influence on ESL proficiency development.

Extract 11.

Interviewer: Do you think your exposure to English increased throughout your stay in Toronto?

Joon: No. It’s just... Instead, exposure to Koreans increased. As I stayed here longer, although I got to know some foreigners [i.e., Canadians and international ESL students], I came to know many more Koreans. For example, in my room rental and part-time workplaces... (Interview 9, June 2005)

V. DISCUSSION

Overall, this longitudinal sociocultural theory approach to L2 learners’ ESL learning motivation demonstrates that there are two distinctive types of motivation: job-related and context-specific motivations. However, as shown in Joon’s case, when job motivation is not aligned with an L2 learner’s life or learning goals, we cannot consider it to be a potential candidate for a motivational component. Context-specific motivation arises from an L2 learner’s linguistic activities in L2 communities, and it typically arises from a sensitization point.

In educational psychology, Deci and Ryan’s (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) self-determination theory (SDT) has based its theoretical ground on the distinction of intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. If a learner’s motivation is generated from inside for various reasons such as interest, or purely the pleasure of learning, it is categorized as intrinsic motivation. If the source of motivation comes from external factors such as expectation from peer group or parents, social pressure, financial rewards, opportunities for advancement, it is understood as extrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) further develop extrinsic motivation into three different categories: external regulation, introjected regulation, and identified regulation, depending on the degree of learners’ internalization of external motivational stimuli. In the field of L2 motivation, Noels et al. (2003) elaborate intrinsic motivation depending on the source of motivation: knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation. Noels (2001) concludes that despite some short-term merits in extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation should be fostered in L2 classrooms because it promotes L2 learners’ autonomy and self-regulation toward the learning.
The general findings in this study suggest a need to elaborate upon Noels’ (2001) argument. As shown in the above sections, although job motivation seems to share conceptual similarities with extrinsic motivation (especially with external regulation by Ryan and Deci [2000]), the source of motivation does not always come from external surroundings. As Joon’s case indicates, in some cases, comments categorized as job motivation may be the reflection of dominant social discourse perpetuating English as the global language (cf. Crystal, 2003; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006). When aligned with learner goal and belief, job motivation can be the legitimate candidate for motivational components. Given this, despite the superficial similarity of job motivation expressed in Joon and Woo’s comments, in fact, for Joon, it may not be motivation per se but the representation of a Korean societal voice, whereas, for Woo, it is a valid motivational component. From an SCT perspective, L2 learning motivation is not a passive repetition of a commonsensical belief that English is important for employment but an L2 learner’s realization of personal significance of an L2-related activity.

In the previous sections, I have treated and discussed job-related and context-specific motivations on a differential basis because the latter arises from an L2 learner’s present life experiences in an L2 community. Nonetheless, these two motivations also overlap in that an L2 learner perceives these motivations meaningful when they are dialectically engaged in the L2 learner’s life/learning goals and beliefs. Woo’s job motivation was continuously maintained through his communication with his girlfriend in Korea. In this sense, Woo’s job motivation has duality in its sequence. In terms of its generation, it is clearly past-oriented because Woo had this kind of motivation even before he arrived in Toronto. In terms of its maintenance, it is present-oriented because it is continuously confirmed by his life experiences including his telecommunications with his girlfriend. Accordingly, at least for Woo, his job motivation mentioned throughout the interview data has context-specificity in that it is firmly embedded in and channelled throughout his experiences in Toronto.

Then the focal point seems not on the dualistic distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic but on the degree of integration among learner goal, belief, and L2 learning environments. As shown in Extract 8, sensitization is possible when an L2 learner’s goal and belief corresponds with his or her perceived objective of an L2 activity. Sensitization is the moment of recognizing an L2 gap from an L2 interaction in environments. When an L2 learner accurately calibrates his or her goal and belief, such contextual L2 cues gain uniquely personal meaning.

In this regard, we also need to draw our attention to the concept of affordance defined as “a particular property of the environment that is relevant - for good or for ill - to an active, perceiving organism in that environment. An affordance affords further action (but does not cause it or trigger it). What becomes an affordance depends on what the organism does,
what it wants, and what is useful for it” (van Lier, 2000, p. 252). Gibson (1979), who first used the term affordance, underscores that all such environments are not necessarily perceived important to the individual and only meaningfully perceived environments to individuals become affordances. Joon, for example, talked about his ESL tutoring experience and how sensitization during the session changed his learning belief and behaviour. The proposed concept, sensitization, captures the transformation from environments to affordances or from meaning to sense (Kozulin, 1995). Before the epiphany from ESL tutoring, Joon’s rich and varied L2 interaction contexts were largely environments or backdrops to his main goal of socializing with others. After sensitization, his environments began to be seen as meaningful affordances for Joon.

VI. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND SUGGESTIONS

The dynamic nature of L2 learning motivation can only be captured with the efforts to combine highly refined statistical procedures in quantitative research and in-depth information obtained from well-grounded interview data. This study should be understood as an attempt to balance the research orientation in the field of L2 motivation. In order to advance the theory of L2 motivation, Vygotskian SCT provides pivotal conceptual tools in that they focus on mediation, which can remedy the deep schism in modern science struggling between downward reductionism and upward reductionism (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In the interview data collected for this study, the L2 learner’s past history and their current life in the L2 host country deserves the focus on analyses.

This paper implies L2 teachers and researchers need to focus on fostering more personally meaningful L2 activities for each L2 learner. The data suggest that even though each L2 learner is located in similar L2 contexts, which should be qualitatively different in terms of both the quality and quantity of L2 interaction compared to foreign language learning settings, this may not provide a higher level of motivation to all L2 learners in the same L2 context. Unless L2 learners find that their L2 learning and using activities are efficacious and meaningful to their L2 development, L2 environments per se may not be transformed into affordances (van Lier, 2004). Accordingly, L2 teaching methodology (e.g., Richards & Renandya, 2002) needs to be expanded to the inclusion of L2 “learning” methodology centering on how to enhance L2 learners’ motivation to learn the L2, or more precisely, on how each L2 learner finds a way to make connections between the L2 environments and his or her unique L2 learning motivation.

Despite the above implications, this study has the following limitations. First, since the primary source of data was monthly semi-structured interviews, other data such as ESL class observation and language learning autobiography were not included. In order to make
the findings of this paper generalizable to other short-term international ESL students, complementing data sources mentioned above should have been analyzed and included. A fuller explanation of those data excluded in this paper is provided elsewhere (Tae-Young Kim, in progress). Second, as with other case studies in SLA, the findings in this paper may not be applicable to other populations in different locations and time. A wider range of participants with different ages and nationalities need to be recruited for future research.

In his recent book, *the psychology of the language learner*, Dörnyei (2005) proposes a stimulating L2 motivation model: L2 Motivational Self System. This model is made up of three dimensions: *ideal L2 self*, *ought to L2 self*, and *L2 learning experience* (p. 106). Future research may be directed towards finding the compatibility between L2 motivation in an SCT paradigm and an L2 Motivational Self System. For example, the voices of “ought to L2 self” seems to resonate in job motivation for Joon, whereas “ideal L2 self” seems to be activated and reinforced on the solid foundation of social affordances, which are significantly related to context-specific motivation.

Another suggestion for future research is the need for more longitudinal study on L2 motivation. Longitudinal investigations are still academic rarities in the field of L2 motivation with only a few exceptions (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2005; Ushioda, 2001). As Ortega and Iberri-Shea (2005, p. 42) emphasize, “ultimately, longitudinal findings can have a central place in advancing our SLA theories and research programs.” L2 motivation research is no exception.

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APPENDIX
Sample Interview Questions

The ESL Motivation
- Why are you interested in learning English?
- To what degree are you committed to learn 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?

Life History
- (During the past one month,) What is your most pleasant memory as a language learner? Please describe it.
  - What is your most unpleasant memory as a language learner? Please describe it.
- (During the past one month,) as a language learner, who has been the most influential person? And what personal or family incidents have affected you most in your English learning?
The Context (only asked in the first interview)
- How do you feel about the changes that have taken place in your country over the past 5 years or so?
  - How have the changes affected your life as an English learner?
- What are the major differences in English language learning between your country and Canada?

The Participants’ ESL Learning Expectations
- What is your expected English proficiency level?
- Among the four areas (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, writing) in English, what is the most needed and important area for you?

Applicable levels: university, adults
Key words: L2 learning motivation, sociocultural theory (SCT), job motivation, context-specific motivation, sensitization, affordances

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