



Making English Personally Meaningful: Meaning-Making Processes and Motivational Variability Among Korean EFL Learners*

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ABSTRACT

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This study explores how Korean university students in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context construct personal meanings around their English learning and how these meaning-making processes influence their motivational variability. A total of 33 Korean university students majoring in linguistics-related subjects wrote a reflective essay and created a bar chart visualizing their motivational trajectories. Based on average motivation levels and standard deviations, four focal participants were selected through scatter plot analysis. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining qualitative analysis of retrospective narratives and bar charts to trace learning experiences across school years. The analysis identified four types of personal meaning: Pre-relevance, Personal Association, Personal Usefulness, and Identification. Learners who developed personal meanings early and integrated English into their broader identities demonstrated stronger and more stable motivation over time. In contrast, learners who experienced delayed or fragmented meaning-making showed greater motivational instability. These findings highlight that early and sustained personal meaning construction is critical for maintaining motivation over time in compulsory learning environments.

KEYWORDS

English as a foreign language, second language learning motivation, personal meaning-making, motivational variability, mixed-methods research

1. Introduction

In the field of second language (L2) studies, learners' autonomy and voluntary participation have long been regarded as the core foundation of L2 learning motivation and their motivated behavior (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021, Ryan and Deci 2017). This perspective assumes that learners are most likely to engage in sustained and effective learning when they perceive the learning experience as self-chosen and aligned with their own values and aspirations. Accordingly, much of the previous research has focused on how learners internalize language learning by developing their ideal L2 selves, setting personal goals, and regulating their behavior to achieve them (Kim 2025a, Ushioda 2011).

However, in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts such as China, Japan, and South Korea (henceforth Korea), learners rarely choose English learning. Instead, English education is often mandated by national curricula and reinforced by high-stakes examinations and broader socio-economic expectations (Gao et al. 2015, Kim 2013, 2021, Yashima 2009). For many EFL learners, English learning begins not as a personal choice but as a mandatory requirement. Over time, English becomes less a matter of personal aspiration but more a compulsory subject linked to academic credentials and prospects for social mobility (Park and Abelman 2004). The intense social pressures surrounding English learning can result in a disconnect between external demands and learners' internal motivation, sometimes leading to surface-level, passive participation, emotional disconnection, or motivational attrition.

This reality exposes a fundamental tension between existing motivational theories, which emphasize autonomy, voluntary learning effort, goal pursuit, and the actual conditions experienced by EFL learners. Unlike Western settings where L2 learning may often be elective or self-initiated, learners in countries such as Korea are under pressure to study English from an early age, including in the private sector before formal schooling in Grade 3. For instance, children as young as four undergo intensive preparation for English kindergarten entrance exams, with some required to write five-paragraph essays or interpret high school-level English texts within minutes far beyond children's developmental levels (Choi 2025, Kim 2025b). These early pressures illustrate how English learning is often shaped by external social and academic pressure (Byun et al. 2012). While models such as the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021) and Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2017) focus on what motivates learners such as autonomy or ideal future selves, they do not sufficiently explain how learners connect L2 learning content to their personal lives. In externally imposed EFL settings, where learners often begin with low autonomy, it becomes more important to understand the process by which personal relevance is constructed and internalized.

One potential mechanism of understanding personal relevance is personal meaning-making—the process by which learners reinterpret externally imposed learning contents and tasks in ways that resonate with their identity, values, and aspirations (Priniski et al. 2018, Ushioda 2011). Priniski et al. (2018) suppose that learners put learning effort when they construct personal relevance. Research in educational psychology suggests that even under low autonomy, motivation can be sustained when learners perceive tasks as personally meaningful (Wu and Kang 2021). In EFL environments, where externally imposed learning is the norm, Priniski et al.'s (2018) framework offers a more grounded and applicable model. Nevertheless, little is known about how meaning-making unfolds in EFL settings and how it relates to motivational variability—the fluctuations in learners' motivation over time.

To address this gap, the present study investigates how Korean university students construct personal meanings in their English learning experiences and how these meanings relate to the level and stability of their L2 motivation. To capture the relationship between personal meaning-making and motivational variability, the study identified four focal participants based on their motivation levels and variability patterns. Specifically, two students with high motivation and low variability (HMLV) and two with low motivation and high variability (LMHV) were

selected for in-depth qualitative analysis and comparison. By focusing on students with contrasting motivational profiles, the study explores psychological mechanisms underlying motivational maintenance in socially pressured contexts through retrospective essays. This approach offers practical insights for designing educational interventions that promote more personally meaningful learning experiences, thereby supporting sustained participation in high-pressure EFL environments.

To address this purpose, the research questions are as follows:

- 1) What kinds of personal meanings have Korean university students constructed in their English learning experiences, particularly as revealed in their retrospective essays?
- 2) How are these meaning-making processes related to learners' motivation levels and patterns of motivational variability?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Approaches to L2 Learning Motivation

Early research on L2 learning motivation primarily focused on the distinction between integrative and instrumental orientations (Gardner 1985). Later developments emphasized learner autonomy and self-regulation through Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2017) and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2021). Self-related studies insist that future-oriented possible selves may not directly translate into academic persistence unless they are accompanied by present-oriented self-regulation and behavior (Lee 2024, Oyserman and Horowitz 2023). These models assume that learners actively choose to engage in L2 learning based on their interests and future goals. Beyond these autonomy-based perspectives, another influential framework would be Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles and Wigfield 2002), which posits that learners' motivation to engage in a task is determined by two key factors: their expectancy for success (i.e., perceived competence) and the subjective value they attach to the task (i.e., how important or useful the task is perceived to be).

The interaction between these two components has been examined in educational psychology and has recently gained increasing attention in L2 learning research (e.g., Wu and Kang 2021). Wu and Kang (2021) found that EFL learners with low expectancy but high attainment value showed notable persistence in their language learning. This highlights the importance of understanding how learners come to construct value in language learning tasks, particularly when external demands dominate their learning environment. Research also indicates that value construction is shaped by social and emotional contexts. Teacher behaviors that communicate care, autonomy support, and meaningful feedback have been shown to influence students' value perceptions (Patall et al. 2013, Yıldırım 2012).

In contrast, language learning is often shaped by external demands rather than personal choice. English learning in Korea is deeply influenced by societal expectations and educational competition, making students feel significant social pressure to succeed in English regardless of their personal interest (Byun et al. 2012, Park and Abelmann 2004). In contexts where English learning begins due to external demands, it is important to distinguish between the reasons that lead learners to start learning and the factors that help them continue their efforts over time. As Kim (2010) pointed out, motive refers to the initial reason that prompts learners to engage in a task, which is often external, such as exam requirements or parental expectations. By contrast, motivation is conceptualized as the sustained effort and commitment that develops when learners set personal goals and engage meaningfully with the learning process. In compulsory EFL learning settings, this distinction becomes crucial, as many learners start

with externally driven motives but gradually transition into more self-relevant and autonomous motivation through experiences of success, relevance, or identity development. This process underscores the importance of exploring how learners make sense of their language learning experiences and how they construct personal meanings that sustain their motivation over time.

This process of meaning-making can also be understood through Vygotsky's (1978, 1987) distinction between meaning and sense. While meaning refers to a fixed, dictionary-like interpretation, sense is shaped by emotional and personal experience. Through internalization, externally imposed tasks can be transformed into subjectively meaningful activities. This aligns with van Lier's (2000, 2004) concept of affordance, which highlights that only elements of the environment perceived as relevant by the learner promote meaningful learning behavior. Although the environment offers a wide range of stimuli, only those subjectively recognized as useful by the learner acquire affordance. Thus, sustained motivation arises not simply from environmental provision, but from the way learners attribute personal relevance to those experiences—when environments acquire sense, not just meaning.

2.2 Personal Meaning-Making in Language Learning

In most EFL contexts, English learning often begins not as a personal choice but as a mandatory requirement shaped by educational policies and societal expectations (Gao et al. 2015, Kim 2013, 2025b, Yashima 2009). In this context, learners often do not construct or assign any personal meaning in their English learning. The absence of personally meaningful engagement creates a gap between external demands and learners' internal motivation, highlighting the need for active personal meaning-making to sustain active participation. Building on this, recent studies have highlighted that personal meaning-making plays a critical role in sustaining motivation.

Priniski et al. (2018) proposed a structured framework for understanding how relevance functions as a motivational construct. They define relevance as “a personally meaningful connection to the individual (p. 12)” emphasizing that relevance is how individuals subjectively connect a stimulus (an object, an activity, a topic) to the self. In this framework, relevance is conceptualized as a continuum of personal meaningfulness, which ranges from weak, indirect associations to deep, identity-based integration. Specifically, they identify three types of relevance: Personal Association, Personal Usefulness, and Identification (see Figure 1). Although significant events or relationships may trigger learners' personal meaning construction and make the shift appear sudden, such changes are often the result of gradual, long-term processes of relevance construction. This continuum-based framework is especially useful in understanding EFL learners in Korea, where formal English education begins in Grade 3.

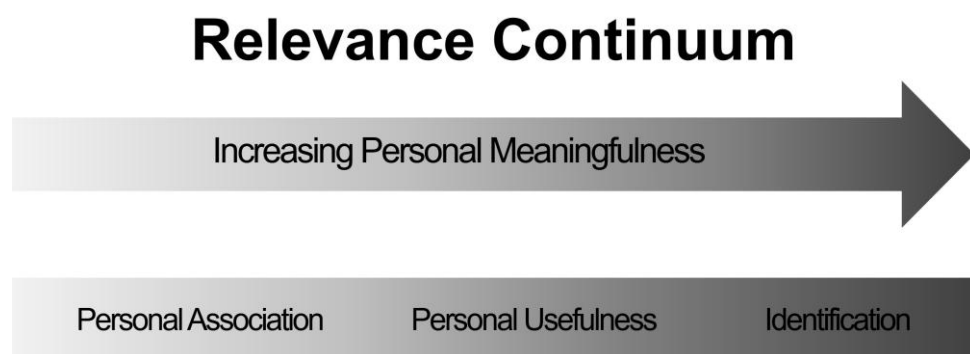


Figure 1. Relevance Continuum Adapted from Priniski et al. (2018, p. 12).

Personal Association occurs when learning content is linked to a learner's memory, interest, or prior experience in a way that fosters personal meaning and encourages engagement. For example, learners may find an English reading assignment enjoyable because the reading included content about their own interests (e.g., a passage about soccer strategies for a student who plays soccer), enabling them to connect prior experience to new vocabulary and concepts in a way that felt personally meaningful and cognitively engaging. In practice, personalization strategies such as tailoring learning materials to students' preferences or backgrounds can foster this type of relevance by triggering situational interest, an initial form of engagement. Personal Usefulness is created when learners perceive the learning content serves their goals or future plans (e.g., using English for travel, employment, or academic advancement). This type of relevance often involves the recognition of utility value, and learning tasks can be more effective when it is connected to intrinsic goals (e.g., personal growth), rather than merely extrinsic goals (e.g., grades or external rewards). In addition, perceived utility is shaped by learners' success expectancy. As Durik et al. (2015) argue, the perception that a task is useful is closely related to one's belief in their ability to perform it. In other words, students are more likely to internalize the value of English learning when they believe they can succeed at it. Lastly, Identification represents the highest level of internalization, where the learning content becomes part of the learner's identity (e.g., "I am an English teacher; English is part of who I am."). At this stage, learners no longer view English as merely instrumental, but as central to their self-concept. Importantly, these three types of relevance are conceptualized as points on a continuum rather than discrete categories. In addition, as they are not exclusive, learners may experience multiple types of relevance simultaneously, or shift dynamically between them depending on their context and experiences.

These three stages in Priniski et al.'s (2018) framework—Personal Association, Personal Usefulness, and Identification—also align meaningfully with established motivational theories. Personal Association, which refers to initial emotional or interest-based engagement, resonates with the concept of situational interest (Hidi and Renninger 2006) and can be seen as an early trigger for task engagement. Personal Usefulness corresponds to utility value in Expectancy-Value Theory (Eccles and Wigfield 2002) and reflects goal-directed motivation as learners begin to recognize instrumental benefits of L2 learning (e.g., career or academic advancement). Identification, the highest level of relevance, is conceptually close to integrated regulation in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2017) and identity-based motivation (Oyserman and Horowitz 2023), where the act of language learning becomes part of the learner's self-definition (e.g., "I am an English learner/teacher").

While Priniski et al.'s (2018) framework offers a powerful lens to understand how externally imposed learning can become personally meaningful, not all learners naturally or easily progress along this continuum. Particularly in rigid, exam-oriented EFL settings, some students may remain at what could be described as a pre-relevance stage, in which no meaningful personal connection to the content is formed. These responses may reflect external regulation with low value, or amotivation. Even if these learners show surface compliance, their engagement is often driven by fear of punishment or social pressure, and such emotions, while intense, do not reflect content-based meaning-making. Given that "the more personal meaning that students perceive, the more they will be motivated to engage with the content" (Priniski et al. 2018 p. 13), it is essential to support learners in constructing meaningful connections to sustain long-term motivation in their English learning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

A total of 33 Korean university students participated in this study. Most were English education majors in their early twenties, enrolled in a required second-year course. Participants retrospectively rated their L2 learning motivation on a scale from 0 to 10 for each grade level, from Grade 3 to Grade 12. Based on these self-reports, each participant's average motivational level and standard deviation (*SD*) across ten school years were calculated to assess both the intensity and stability of their motivation.

To explore contrasting motivational trajectories, four focal participants were purposefully selected from the sample based on their motivational profiles. The group's overall average motivation was 6.38 (*SD* = 1.91). Participants whose scores showed particularly high or low levels and variability were selected for further qualitative analysis. Two participants, Jin ($M = 8.5$, $SD = 1.36$) and Soo ($M = 7.7$, $SD = 1.10$), were selected as cases of high and stable motivation. In contrast, Min ($M = 3.5$, $SD = 2.54$) and Han ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 2.34$) were chosen as cases showing low and unstable motivation. These participants were not intended to represent learners, but were selected as the most contrasting examples to illuminate different motivational patterns. All names used are pseudonyms¹.

3.2 Data Collection

To explore the motivational trajectories and learning experiences of the participants, multiple data collection methods were employed, allowing for triangulation to enhance the validity of the findings (Creswell and Poth 2024). First, participants evaluated their motivation levels for each school year from Grade 3 to Grade 12 on a 0–10 scale. In addition to the motivation ratings, participants provided narrative descriptions of their English learning experiences across elementary school, junior high school, and high school.

To further enrich the dataset, written interviews were conducted, following the procedure of Hiver et al. (2019). These interviews explored critical aspects of participants' learning journeys, including positive and negative experiences, major turning points, challenges encountered, emotional reactions, and evolving perspectives on language learning. Through the triangulation of quantitative data (motivation ratings) and qualitative insights (essays and interviews), the study aimed to construct a comprehensive understanding of how motivational changes over time in relation to meaning-making process.

3.3 Data Analysis

The qualitative data from participants' essays and written interviews were analyzed using a combination of case study and narrative analysis approaches to investigate their motivational development and meaning-making process (Priniski et al. 2018). Following a case study methodology, each participant was treated as a distinct case, allowing for an in-depth exploration of individual motivational trajectories across time (Yin 2018). Additionally, to analyze the personal meaning-making processes that supported sustained L2 learning motivation, Priniski et al.'s (2018) framework was employed. This framework categorizes internalization into three types: Personal Association, Personal Usefulness, and Identification. However, during the analysis, some instances did not fit into

¹ The original dataset overlaps with that used in Kim and Kim (under review), but the current manuscript employs a different research question, analysis, and theoretical framework.

any of the three predefined types of relevance, as participants expressed no meaningful connection to their English learning contents, despite sometimes showing strong emotional reactions (e.g., aversion or confusion). As a result, an additional type, “Pre-relevance,” was added to the analytical framework. This category describes learners who engaged with English out of obligation or external pressure, without forming any self-relevant or content-based meaning. As a result, four types of relevance were identified: Pre-relevance, Personal Association, Personal Usefulness, and Identification.

Pre-relevance refers to a state in which learners engage with English solely out of obligation, without perceiving any personal meaning or connection to the content. This may include moments where learners express negative feelings, such as dislike or anxiety, but do not exhibit content-based engagement or intentional meaning-making (e.g., studying English only for test performance without interest or perceived relevance). Personal Association was coded when learners connected English learning to their past memories or personal interest (e.g., enjoying English songs as a participant likes singing). Personal Usefulness was identified when learners perceive the content as helpful to achieve their intrinsic or extrinsic goals, such as gaining admission to a university or altruistic goal to help others in English. Identification reflected moments when learners described English as part of who they are such as aspiring to become an English teacher or enjoying helping others with English. This lens allowed for an examination of how participants transformed externally mandated English learning into self-relevant and personally meaningful participation, and how different levels of internalization related to patterns of motivational stability or variability.

To ensure consistency in applying the coding framework based on Priniski et al.’s (2018) model, the primary researcher developed a preliminary coding guide based on the three meaning-making levels and conducted trial coding on two non-focal participants. Ambiguities in categorization were discussed and resolved through peer debriefing, enhancing the reliability of the qualitative analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Students with Low Motivation and High Variability (LMHV)

4.1.1 Min: Turning pain into purpose

Min’s motivational changes show a gradual shift (see Figure 2), and it was from external acknowledgment of English importance to personal meaning-making, largely influenced by relationships with significant others and personal interests. Min’s motivational development progressed from Pre-relevance in elementary and junior high school, to Personal Association in Grade 11 in high school, and finally to Personal Usefulness in Grade 12 in high school period.

In elementary and junior high school, Min’s experience is classified as Pre-relevance as she had no personal connection to English learning despite strong emotional reactions. Even though she was surrounded by messages emphasizing the social importance of English and was aware of its academic value, Min did not attribute any personal value to learning the language (see Excerpt 1).

Excerpt 1: Min (elementary school)

Everyone around me kept talking about how important English was, but I decided to just live without it. I thought that even if I couldn’t speak English, it wouldn’t really affect my life. Honestly, I had emotions

that were close to extreme hatred toward English.

This attitude stemmed from a strong negative experience in an English class, where she was publicly embarrassed by a Korean co-teacher for failing to follow the directions given by a native English teacher. Her noncompliance was not out of disrespect, but rather due to a lack of understanding. Her lack of comprehension was misinterpreted as misbehavior, leading to embarrassment and emotional withdrawal. Although her reaction was emotionally intense, it did not reflect a meaningful connection with the content itself. At this stage, she remained motivationally and personally disconnected from English, the subject matter.

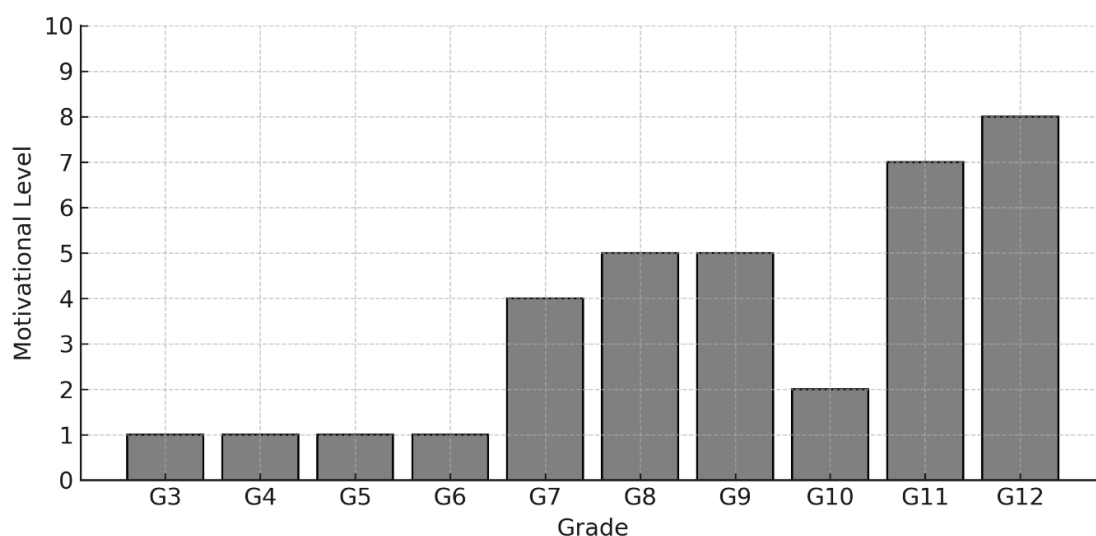


Figure 2. Min's Motivational Pattern

In junior high school, Min's experience was still identified as Pre-relevance type, as her motivation to study English stemmed not from personal interest, but from a desire to express gratitude toward others. She felt a growing sense of responsibility, particularly to her private tutor and her parents (see Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2: Min (junior high school)

I didn't completely give up on English. I wanted to show a good attitude to my private tutor, who was helping me catch up with English lessons, and I wanted to respond to the effort she made to help me overcome my difficulties. Also, I didn't want to disappoint my parents who gave me the opportunity to meet such a tutor.

Min's motivation was no longer purely externally imposed; rather, it was sustained by a sense of appreciation and relational obligation. Crucially, the language itself was not yet personally meaningful; her emotional engagement was directed at people, not at English as a learning content. Thus, this period is still categorized as Pre-relevance, as engagement occurred without internalized or content-based personal relevance.

In Grade 11 in high school, Min's experience was classified as Personal Association. Motivated by a desire to overcome her lingering trauma, she began to engage with English through media she genuinely enjoyed, such as pop music and English-language films (Excerpt 3). Through this effort, English became part of her everyday life, and this

voluntary engagement contributed to a more stable motivational foundation.

Excerpt 3: Min (Grade 11, high school)

To overcome my aversion to English, I decided to connect it with things I liked. Since I enjoyed listening to music, I started listening to pop songs instead of K-pop, and because I loved watching movies, I started watching films from English-speaking countries instead of Korean ones.

For the first time, English was tied to positive aspects of her everyday enjoyment. Min's engagement was no longer solely obligation-driven, but initiated through content-based personal interest and voluntary use.

Finally, in Grade 12 in high school, Min's motivation reached the level of Personal Usefulness as she envisioned being an English teacher as a means to help others, particularly students who struggled with the language, as she once had (see Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4: Min (Grade 12, high school)

I decided to apply to an English education major because of the private tutor who taught me not just English but also life lessons, and the high school English teacher who gave me valuable advice. I wanted to become a teacher who could support and motivate students suffering from English, just like the teachers who helped me.

Min's decision to apply to an English education major was driven by a desire to reciprocate the support she had received from significant teachers, indicating that English became meaningful to her through its utility in serving others, even though it may not yet have been fully integrated into her sense of identity

4.1.2 Han: Briefly encouraged by support, but overtaken by achievement goals

Han's motivation declined from Grade 3 to Grade 5, sharply increased at Grade 6, remained high through Grade 9, and then gradually decreased until Grade 12 (see Figure 3). His motivational trajectory illustrates how early negative experiences with English learning were gradually mitigated through positive relationships and school-based activities, although his ultimate motivation remained largely achievement-driven. Han's motivational development can be divided into three key stages: Pre-relevance until Grade 5 in elementary school, Personal Association in Grade 6 in elementary and junior high school, and Personal Usefulness in high school.

In early childhood, Han was naturally exposed to English at home through posters and alphabet charts. Although this exposure created a sense of familiarity and surface-level interest, it did not involve intentional study or content-based meaning-making.

As Han entered formal schooling and began private tutoring, his motivational experience shifted into a clear case of Pre-relevance. The coercive learning environment, marked by rote memorization and discipline in his private tutoring, led to intense stress and emotional disengagement (see Excerpt 5).

Excerpt 5: Han (elementary school)

The teacher I had for private tutoring forced me to memorize vocabulary words instead of trying to make English interesting. If I couldn't concentrate, the teacher would get angry and scold me. Instead of making English fun and engaging, it became a subject learned in a coercive and oppressive atmosphere. Naturally, as the day of the lesson approached, I felt tremendous stress and dread every time I had to face the teacher.

At this stage, although Han experienced strong negative emotions, they were directed toward the learning context (e.g., the tutor's methods) rather than any meaningful engagement with the English content itself.

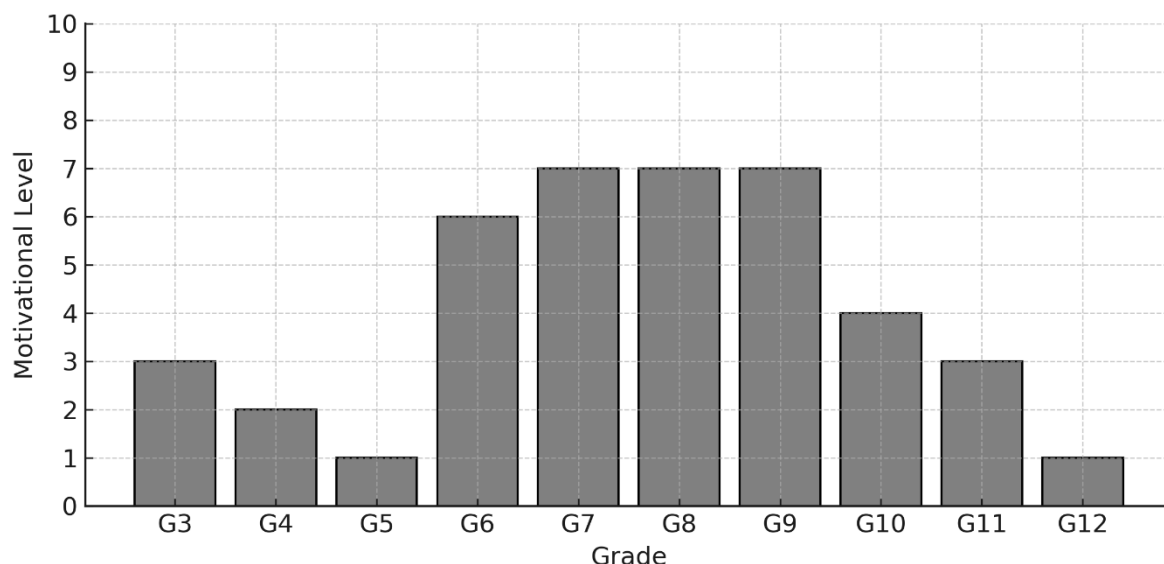


Figure 3. Han's Motivational Pattern

A turning point emerged in Grade 6, when Han encountered a supportive homeroom teacher who facilitated more engaging and trusting classroom experiences (see Excerpt 6).

Excerpt 6: Han (Grade 6, elementary school)

In sixth grade, I regained some interest in English thanks to my homeroom teacher. I still remember the teacher's name because of the positive memories. The teacher let us stay in the classroom after school to engage in different activities instead of rushing home. My classmates and I could really trust and follow the teacher.

As Han noted by stating "I regained some interest in English thanks to my homeroom teacher", the teacher's relational support played a key role, helping to engagement with the content. This marks the beginning of Personal Association, where a learner's relationship with English starts to be shaped by affectively positive experiences.

In junior high school, Han continued to rebuild his relationship with English through school activities, which helped to moderate his earlier aversion (see Excerpt 7).

Excerpt 7: Han (junior high school)

During junior high school, activities like writing diaries in English and preparing for class pop song contests helped relieve some of the negative feelings I had toward English from elementary school. These positive experiences and activities in junior high school provided a foundation that allowed me to continue studying English into high school.

These activities offered enjoyment and helped relieve the lingering aversion he had developed in earlier years. The combination of emotionally supportive relationships and interest-based activities contributed to a more stable and affectively positive engagement with English. Thus, this stage reflects a strengthening of personal association, as English began to be tied to enjoyable and voluntary experiences within a school setting.

In high school, Han's motivation shifted toward personal usefulness. English was pursued for its practical utility in achieving academic goals (Excerpt 8).

Excerpt 8: Han (high school)

Since English was essential for university entrance, I continued to study it. However, in the context of intense competition for college admission in Korea, English turned into a means rather than a goal itself. My high school English study ended in a situation where English was simply a necessary tool for success.

Han perceived English as a functional tool for university entrance, rather than as a part of his evolving sense of self. Unlike previous experiences shaped by interest, this type was driven by necessity and external goals.

4.2 Students with High Motivation and Low Variability (HMLV)

4.2.1 Jin: Growing through teaching and giving

Jin's L2 learning motivation was high and stable from Grade 3 to Grade 6, declined between Grade 7 and Grade 9, and increased again from Grade 10 to Grade 12 (see Figure 4). Her motivational development can be traced through three key stages: Personal Association during early childhood and elementary years, Personal Usefulness in junior high school years, and Identification in a high school period.

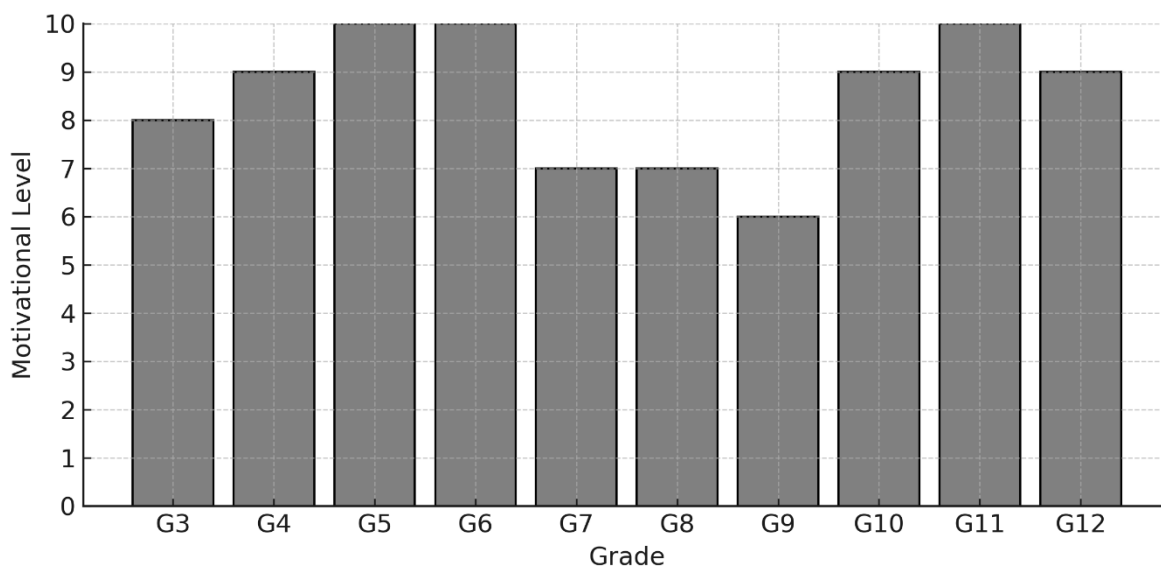


Figure 4. Jin's Motivational Pattern

In early childhood and the lower elementary years, Jin's experience was marked as Personal Association as she

developed an interest in English through natural exposure and parental encouragement. She attended an English immersion kindergarten, and her parents supported her learning by recognizing her aptitude and enthusiasm. This early foundation eventually led her to enroll in a private elementary school specializing in English education (see Excerpt 9).

Excerpt 9: Jin (elementary school)

I always had a strong desire to learn English, and according to my parents, I showed some talent for it. That's why I attended a private elementary school that focused on English education.

These positive experiences helped her form personal connection to English learning, as her motivation was tied to enjoyment and emotionally supportive relationships rather than external rewards.

In junior high school, Jin's learning was identified as Personal Usefulness, as her motivation became driven by the utility goal of meeting high-stakes academic requirements. As she began preparing for admission to a prestigious foreign language high school, English was no longer perceived as an enjoyable subject, but rather as a compulsory tool for academic advancement (see Excerpt 10).

Excerpt 10: Jin (junior high school)

To be admitted to a foreign language high school, I needed to score in the top grade band in English, which meant excelling all types of assessments. That was when my view of English as an enjoyable subject began to crack. I had to memorize reading passages word by word and apply grammar rules mechanically. On top of that, I felt like my English ability was judged only by my test scores, and I got completely sick of it.

This excerpt illustrates how Jin's English learning experience was shaped by the perceived instrumental value of English for future academic goals. Although English retained its relevance, the emotional toll of hyper-competitive learning environments undermined her interest and enjoyment.

In high school, Jin entered a stage of Identification as she began engaging with others through English. Her motivation became more outwardly focused and socially oriented as she began volunteering at a neighborhood library to teach English to younger students (see Excerpt 11).

Excerpt 11: Jin (High school)

I volunteered at a neighborhood library to introduce English-language novels to fourth and fifth-grade elementary school students. The lessons I prepared focused on making the lessons engaging by introducing culture, pronunciation, and commonly used expressions to spark the students' interest in English. While preparing the lessons, I learned about cultural aspects I hadn't known before, and because I had to deliver everything entirely in English, my speaking skills naturally improved. (...) I initially started volunteering to help others using my confidence and English skills, but through this experience, I developed a genuine desire to become an English teacher.

Jin designed and delivered lessons entirely in English in this volunteer program, introducing cultural elements and practical expressions in ways that both deepened her own learning and sparked the children's interest. This stage marks a transition to the highest level of internalization, as Jin's learning was driven by a strong sense of purpose grounded in helping others and contributing through English, rather than simply achieving individual

success. English became a meaningful medium through which she imagined her future role and values taking shape.

4.2.2 Soo: Finding meaning beyond scores through mentoring

Overall, Soo's motivation declined after Grade 3 but recovered by Grade 6 and remained relatively stable with slight fluctuations throughout secondary school. (see Figure 5).

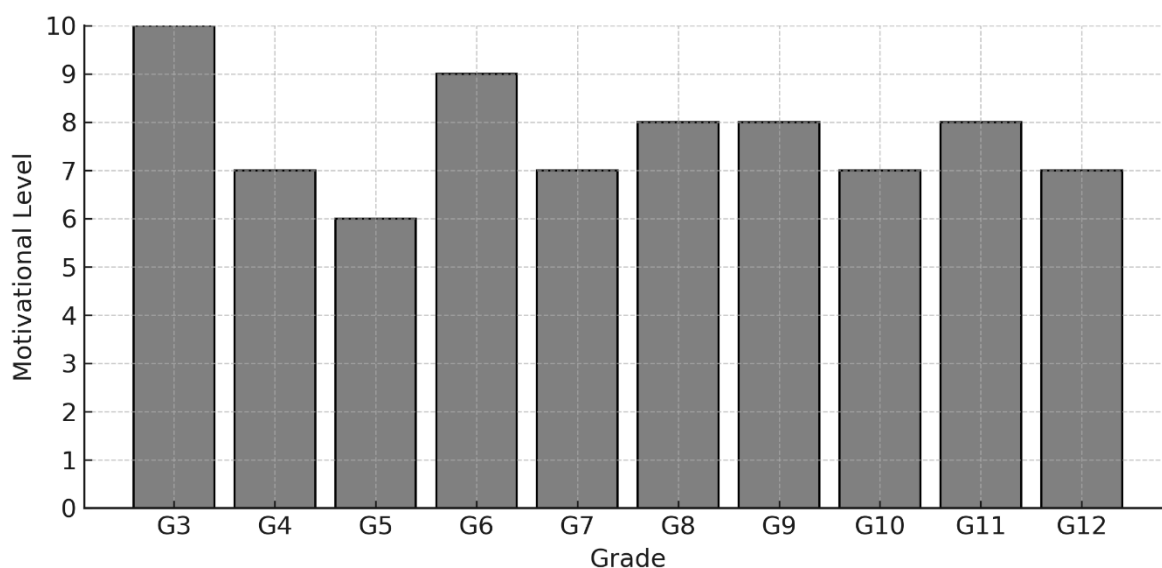


Figure 5. Soo's Motivational Pattern

Soo's motivational development progressed through three key stages: Personal Association in the initial stage of learning, Personal Usefulness in junior high school, and a weak form of Identification in Grade 10 through mentoring experiences.

In the early stages of learning, Soo developed a strong interest in English through enjoyable and confidence-boosting experiences, contributing to construct personal association. Before entering elementary school, she was first introduced to the English alphabet. In elementary school period, she participated in English speaking contest at school in Grade 3, and the winning experience boosted her self-esteem and created a favorable early bond with the language (see Excerpt 12).

Excerpt 12: Soo (elementary school)

When my school held an English storytelling contest, I wasn't very confident, but my academy offered full support, so I gave it a try. I practiced everywhere and received lots of feedback, which helped me improve my pronunciation and stress. In the end, I won first place. For someone like me, who usually wouldn't even try unless I was sure I could succeed, it was a valuable moment that taught me the importance of challenging myself. It also became a turning point that helped me gain confidence in learning English.

Given her enjoyment and early success, this period reflects the formation of personal association, as her

motivation was closely tied to interest and enjoyment.

In junior high school period, particularly by Grade 8, Soo's focus on English became strongly linked to academic performance, marking Personal Usefulness stage. As she noted, memorizing textbook passages led to good results on exams, and she derived satisfaction from the clear correlation between effort and outcome (Excerpt 13).

Excerpt 13: Soo (junior high school)

In junior high school, English classes only covered a few textbook passages, so I didn't find them difficult. During exam periods, I would memorize the entire passage and was able to recite it from start to finish. Interestingly, I didn't hate this memorization-based learning. In the school's grading system, my learning effort almost directly translated into good results. I enjoyed studying English not because I loved the language, but because I was rewarded with good grades. (...) Before entering high school, I started preparing seriously for college entrance exams. I increased the number of vocabulary words I memorized and started practicing mock exams. My goal of getting into a good university became very clear, and English turned into a necessary tool for that goal.

Soo's engagement with English became increasingly goal-oriented, especially as she began preparing for high-stakes university entrance exams in Grade 9. This period is categorized as personal usefulness, as English was primarily valued for its utility in achieving academic success, rather than for any intrinsic or relational meaning.

However, in high school period, Soo experienced a stage of Identification as she began to see English not just as an academic subject but as something connected to her dream. This shift happened when Soo began participating in an English mentoring program. Supporting a younger student who struggled with English brought a new sense of fulfillment and revitalized her own interest in English (see Excerpt 14).

Excerpt 14: Soo (high school)

I began volunteering as an English mentor and was paired with a third-year junior high school student who pronounced "fire" as "Fee-Reh." At the time, I was feeling demotivated about English, tired of rote learning and traditional test preparation. But teaching English to someone else opened up a new world for me. I found genuine joy in creating mentoring materials tailored to my mentee. During our sessions, I sincerely thought about how to teach in easy and fun ways. My mentee, who had often skipped classes before, began attending regularly—perhaps in response to my efforts. Eventually, the supervising teacher assigned me more mentees. Although I felt my English speaking skills were still lacking, I realized I was truly happy when teaching English to others. This experience gave me the motivation to start studying English again and ultimately led me to dream of becoming an English teacher.

Furthermore, this mentoring experience not only deepened Soo's English learning but also help her envision how English could be used to support and uplift others. For Soo, English learning was no longer just a personal or academic endeavor, but it became part of a broader role she could imagine herself fulfilling in the future.

5. Discussion

This study explored how four Korean university students have constructed personal meanings in their English learning experiences across four levels (Pre-relevance, Personal Association, Personal Usefulness, and Identification)

based on Priniski et al.'s (2018) framework. It further examined how the timing and depth of these meaning-making processes were related to their L2 learning motivation levels and patterns of motivational variability. The findings support the idea that relevance develops along a continuum, ranging from emotional engagement to personally meaningful integration (Priniski et al. 2018).²

Despite the high-stakes academic pressure surrounding English learning in Korea (Kim 2013, 2021), participants exhibited different developmental patterns. Min and Han with the LMHV pattern began at the Pre-relevance stage in elementary school. At this stage, they demonstrated neither a personal connection to English nor content-based engagement. Their negative reactions were primarily triggered by coercive instructional methods and emotionally threatening learning contexts (see Excerpts 1, 5), rather than by the English content itself. As a result, they put limited learning effort and showed a low sense of competence in English. However, later “affordances” (van Lier 2000, 2004) such as positive teacher (Han) or tutor relationships (Min) acted as catalytic role in helping learners reapproach English with reduced resistance, or “sense” (Vygotsky 1978, 1987), enabling the formation of Personal Association. What distinguished their eventual shift into Personal Association was not just the presence of supportive people, but their subsequent voluntary engagement with English content that aligned with their personal preferences or interests. For Min, this meant deliberately connecting English with her love for music and movies (see Excerpt 3), while for Han, this involved enjoying classroom-based pop song contests and English diary writing (see Excerpt 7). These activities enabled learners to construct emotional and cognitive links between English and their personal lives. In high school, they developed Personal Usefulness. Min connected English to her aspiration of becoming a supportive teacher (see Excerpt 4), and Han viewed English as necessary for university entrance (see Excerpt 8). Although they had low expectations for success due to their lack of confidence in English, they still made consistent learning efforts, which suggests that the utility value they perceived was sufficiently high to sustain motivation (Wu and Kang 2021).

In contrast, Jin and Soo with the HMLV pattern demonstrated a developmental trajectory that progressed from Personal Association in their elementary school years, to Personal Usefulness in junior high school, and finally to Identification during high school. They formed early emotional connections through positive learning experiences and support (see Excerpts 9, 12), which helped them build a strong foundation in English. Their positive academic performance further enabled them to form personal goals around achievement (see Excerpts 10, 13), discovering utility value in the process. Compared to Min and Han, who struggled to construct Personal Usefulness due to low expectations for success, Jin and Soo were able to internalize utility value more readily, as they had higher success expectancy stemming from their academic confidence. This supports Durik et al.'s (2015) argument that learners are more likely to perceive a task as useful when they believe they can succeed at it. The combination of present engagement and future aspirations helped sustain their motivation (Lee 2024, Oyserman and Horowitz 2023), eventually leading to a deeper sense of purpose through Identification, especially via mentoring experiences (see Excerpts 11, 14).

Overall, while all learners showed a general progression from Personal Association to Usefulness in line with Priniski et al.'s (2018) model, important differences were observed. Min and Han with the LMHV pattern began from a Pre-relevance stage and only later developed personal connection. In contrast, Jin and Soo with the HMLV pattern started meaning making early and gradually deepened their internalization across stages.

The findings suggest that the timing of personal meaning-making plays a critical role in shaping motivational variability in EFL contexts. In particular, forming personally meaningful connections at an early stage appears to

² Although the excerpts may appear that participants suddenly moved from one category to another on the continuum, these moments are better understood as visible turning points within a longer, cumulative trajectory of relevance construction in their EFL learning histories.

buffer against motivational fluctuations and foster greater long-term stability. As Kim (2010, 2025a) argues, a transition from motive to motivation is essential for sustained L2 learning. When viewed in conjunction with Priniski et al.'s (2018) relevance framework, Personal Association may serve as the initial and most critical trigger for this transformation. This study highlights that early experiences of relevance are not just beneficial but potentially decisive in determining whether learners build stable motivation or remain vulnerable to disengagement over time. The contrast between Jin and Soo's motivational stability and Min and Han's variability underscores this point. These findings also call for pedagogical approaches that prioritize emotional resonance and personally meaningful engagement from the outset. Especially in high-pressure EFL environments where learner agency is often constrained, these pedagogical approaches are essential. Early personal meaning-making is not a supplementary feature of motivation in this regard. Instead, it is the foundation for stable and enduring learning motivation in the long term.

6. Conclusion

This study examined how four Korean university students constructed personal meaning in their English learning experiences using an extended framework based on Priniski et al. (2018), which included four levels: Pre-relevance, Personal Association, Personal Usefulness, and Identification. In addition, the relation between personal meaning making and motivational variability in L2 learning was explored. By comparing two different motivational trajectories (LMHV and HMLV) as revealed through the retrospective essays and motivational level changes, the findings indicate that EFL learners generally followed a continuum of personal meaning-making from Personal Association to Personal Usefulness, and eventually to Identification. However, given that English learning is mandatory and closely tied to academic and future success in Korea, the stage of Pre-relevance was also observed, particularly among LMHV learners. While HMLV learners developed personal associations early and deepened their engagement toward identification, LMHV learners initially lacked personal connection and constructed meaning only later, often through utility-based or externally supported experiences. These patterns suggest that fostering personally meaningful connections to English at an early stage is key to reducing variability and promoting more stable motivation in EFL contexts.

Practical implications emerge from these findings. In contexts like Korea, where there is significant social and institutional pressure to succeed in English (Kim 2013, 2021, 2025b), appropriate pedagogical interventions are essential for reducing learners' motivational variability and supporting more stable, long-term engagement. Given that Personal Association is the starting stage in the internalization continuum (Priniski et al. 2018), it is essential to first cultivate learners' emotional connection to English through personally relevant and enjoyable experiences, rather than emphasizing utility-based goals. This approach is particularly important in the early stages of learning, before learners' belief systems about language learning are fully formed. At this stage, designing tasks that draw on students' interests, lived experiences, and cultural backgrounds can help them perceive English as meaningful beyond the classroom (Rosenzweig et al. 2022). Establishing this emotional relevance early on lays the groundwork for deeper internalization and fosters more sustained and stable motivation over time. In addition, fostering supportive teacher–learner relationships is essential, as emotional encouragement can scaffold learners' efforts—especially for those experiencing significant ups and downs in their L2 learning motivation (Yıldırım 2012). Furthermore, integrating goal-setting and reflective activities can promote a deeper sense of agency and help learners reframe challenges as part of their growth. Providing opportunities for learners to be related to others such as through mentoring, tutoring, or helping others using English can further reinforce the integration of English learning into their broader self-concept.

Despite its contributions, this study has a number of limitations. The small number of focal participants limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study relied on retrospective self-reported data, which may be susceptible to recall biases. Participants' reflections on motivational turning points could have been shaped by their current self-perceptions, leading to selective memory emphasis. In addition, the specific role of interpersonal interactions—such as emotionally supportive relationships—was difficult to categorize strictly within the three relevance types, suggesting the need for further refinement or expansion of the framework. As this study analyzed participants' personal meaningfulness construction process based on retrospective self-report, the data are based on their own memory and narrative construction, which casts limitations on interpretation. In this line, future studies may employ other data collection methods such as observation, longitudinal tracking, and quantitative questionnaires to better trace their trajectories of meaning construction. Longitudinal designs that follow learners in real time would also provide a more robust understanding of how motivation and relevance evolve over time.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Languages: English

Applicable Level: Tertiary