

English Learning and Amotivation in South Korea: A Retrospective Construction of Motivation

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Kim, Tae-Young. (2025). English learning and amotivation in South Korea: A retrospective construction of motivation. *English Teaching*, 80(2), 3–27.

This qualitative study examines amotivation in South Korean EFL students through the lens of activity theory. Using semi-structured interviews, data were collected from six elementary and secondary school students, aged 10 to 16 years (Grades 4 to 10), to explore key psychological constructs, including the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, the perceived meaning of English learning, parental expectations, and social pressures. The findings reveal that motivation in L2 learning is contextually constructed and often shaped retrospectively rather than serving as a precursor to proficiency. Notably, some students with minimal motivation still achieved high levels of English proficiency, suggesting that motivation is not necessarily an antecedent of L2 success but rather an outcome shaped by broader socioeducational forces. This challenges conventional models that assume a direct causal link between motivation and achievement. The study underscores the importance of contextual and sociohistorical influences in shaping L2 motivation and calls for a reevaluation of the rigid dichotomy between motivated and amotivated learners in competitive educational settings.

Key words: amotivation, L2 learning motivation, activity theory, motive, interview research

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Received 6 March 2025; Reviewed 27 April 2025; Accepted 10 June 2025



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1. INTRODUCTION

Motivation in language learning is generally understood as a process in which learners establish goals and engage in behaviors to achieve them. Existing research on English learning motivation has largely been based on this perspective, focusing on how individuals autonomously set objectives, sustain motivation, and navigate the learning process. However, in contexts such as South Korea (henceforth Korea), where the necessity of English proficiency is deeply embedded in societal norms and English education is mandated as a core subject, the initiation of English learning often precedes the formation of personal motivation or goal-setting. In such environments, students commence English education not as a voluntary or volitional choice but as an obligatory academic requirement, leading to cases where motivation is subsequently developed—or, conversely, diminished—throughout the learning process. This dynamic necessitates an analytical approach that extends beyond traditional static motivational theories to incorporate sociocultural perspectives, which emphasize the interaction between learners and their educational environment. Understanding the evolution of motivation within this context requires a framework that acknowledges the external pressures, institutional mandates, and socioeducational dynamics that shape students' engagement with English learning. Consequently, a sociocultural approach provides a more comprehensive lens through which to examine the fluctuating nature of motivation in compulsory language learning settings.

In this regard, by examining six Korean EFL students with varying degrees of L2 learning motivation and amotivation, this study explores the relationship between their motivation (or lack thereof) and their English proficiency. In highly competitive educational contexts, motivation may be retrospectively constructed, and even students without a clear L2-related vision or goal can achieve a certain level of proficiency. Drawing on Vygotsky's (1978, 1987) sociocultural theory (SCT), particularly activity theory (AT) (Kim, 2010, 2021a; Leont'ev, 1978; for a contrasting perspective, see Engeström, 1999a), this study highlights the dynamic interplay between learners and their environment in shaping L2 motivation. Given that language learning is a longitudinal process, L2 learners inevitably experience fluctuations in motivation, including phases of demotivation (i.e., a noticeable decline in interest) and amotivation (i.e., a complete lack of motivation) due to external influences. Furthermore, the evolving global status of English necessitates a theoretical lens attuned to the shifting motivational patterns that learners encounter when acquiring English as a *lingua franca*. In this regard, the Vygotskian SCT and AT framework serves as a valuable heuristic tool for analyzing L2 motivation and amotivation.

This sociocultural reality is further exemplified by the educational climate in Korea. At the beginning of the 21st century, Seth (2002) underscored the pervasive educational enthusiasm in Korea by stating that “[e]ducation frequently emerges in everyday

conversation, and the success of a son, daughter, or grandchild in gaining admission to a ‘good’ school is a source of immense pride,” and that “even casual visitors become aware of South Koreans’ intense preoccupation with schooling” (p. 2). At the heart of this phenomenon is the pursuit of English proficiency. A recent report by Hankook Ilbo (2025) indicates that even 7-year-old children face competitive entrance examinations for admission to prestigious private English academies after graduating from English-language kindergartens. This social phenomenon is now colloquially termed *Chilse Gosi*, meaning “7-year-old high-stakes exam.”

Academic credentialism—or the pursuit of admission to a prestigious university through high English proficiency—is particularly significant in Korea. This emphasis on English is intertwined with Korea’s rapid socio-industrial transformation from an underdeveloped agricultural society to an urban, technology-driven soft-power nation over the past seven decades since the Korean War (1950–1953) (Kim & Kim, 2019). Consequently, in 2024, 69.7% of young adults (aged 25–34) in Korea held a college degree, the highest percentage among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Ministry of Education, 2024).

In Korea’s College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), administered annually in the second week of November, English, along with Korean and mathematics, constitutes one of the three core subjects. Despite the diversification of college admissions pathways, CSAT scores remain a crucial determinant of university entrance, prompting most college-bound high school students to dedicate an overwhelming amount of time and energy to exam preparation in pursuit of academic success.

Against this backdrop, to highlight the impact of unique social contexts on EFL students’ (a)motivation from the perspective of L2 Motivational Self System and AT, this study is guided by the following two research questions:

- 1) How can students’ English learning motivation and amotivation be explained and refined from the perspective of AT?
- 2) What is the role of the sociohistorical context in students’ English learning motivation and amotivation?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section consists of two parts. The first part examines how EFL learning motivation can be effectively explained through Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self-System and AT (Engeström, 1999a; Kim, 2009a, 2010, 2021a; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Leont’ev, 1978; Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2011). The second part explores the interrelationship

between the AT framework and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System in explaining amotivation among Korean secondary school students.

2.1. The L2 Self, Activity Theory, and L2 Motivation Research

The significance of “integrativeness,” or L2 learners' desire to be valued members of the L2 community, in fostering and sustaining L2-learning motivation is well established (Gardner, 2019; Dörnyei, 2009). Recent studies (e.g., Kong, Shin, Lee, & Kim, 2020) have confirmed that integrativeness is a crucial factor in successful L2 acquisition, particularly in less-commonly-taught languages. However, as English has increasingly become a global lingua franca for commerce, transportation, and immigration, the conventional distinction between EFL and ESL contexts has blurred. Given this shift, learners today find it increasingly difficult, if not impossible, to conceptualize integrativeness as defined by Gardner (2010) in either an extreme or moderate sense.

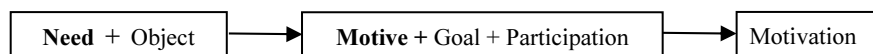
Against this backdrop, Dörnyei's (2009, 2019) L2 Motivational Self-System provides valuable insights for future research. Drawing on Markus and Nurius' (1986) theory of possible selves and Higgins' (1987, 1998) self-discrepancy theory, Dörnyei conceptualized L2 motivation as comprising three key components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experiences. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009), the ideal L2 self represents the attributes one ideally wishes to acquire (i.e., personal aspirations and hopes), while the ought-to L2 self reflects attributes one believes they should possess based on external expectations (i.e., perceived duties and obligations). Lastly, L2 learning experiences encompass situated, ‘executive’ motives related to the immediate learning environment (e.g., teacher influence, curriculum, peer interactions, and personal experiences of success) (Dörnyei, 2009). Empirical studies (e.g., Al-Shehri, 2009; Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Lyons, 2014; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009) have validated the robustness of the L2 Motivational Self-System across various educational contexts.

Beyond Dörnyei's (2009, 2019) framework, the intricate relationship between L2 learners and their socioeducational environment has increasingly been examined through the lens of SCT and AT (e.g., Kim, 2009a, 2021a). Often regarded as a subdiscipline of SCT, AT (Engeström, 1999a, 2009; Leont'ev, 1978) centralizes the volitional aspects of human activity and focuses on motivation as an integral dimension of learning (Kim, 2005, 2021a). AT highlights the dialectical relationship between individuals as active agents—who engage in goal-directed activities driven by biological and sociocultural needs—and their external environments. Leont'ev (1978), a close associate of Vygotsky, posited that human activity is inherently object-directed. For example, in the context of L2 learning, one's aspiration to attain proficiency in an L2—conceptualized as an object within AT—functions as an ultimate desirable state that generates the motivational energy needed to sustain the

learning process (Dörnyei, 2009). The means to achieve this goal involve dedicated learning efforts, culminating in the successful acquisition of the L2 (the end).

Building on these theoretical foundations, Kim (2010) developed a model of L2 motivational development based on SCT and AT. As illustrated in Figure 1, a need becomes a motive when it is directed toward an object, providing a general orientation for behavior. However, for a motive to be fully realized, it must be operationalized through specific goals and active participation in an L2 learning experience. Activities within AT manifest as goal-oriented actions, where goals have clear starting and ending points and translate into specific, observable behaviors (Engeström, 1999b). This distinction between motives and motivation has practical implications: in L2 classroom surveys, students frequently report high motivation, yet their actual behaviors may not reflect meaningful engagement in L2 learning. Such discrepancies may arise due to self-report bias or self-deception. Therefore, capturing the nuances of L2 motivation requires an examination of concrete learning goals and learners' engagement with actual or imagined L2 communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). From this perspective, motivation is best understood as “the realization of motives” (Markova, 1990, p. 28).

FIGURE 1
Relationships Between Learners' Needs, Motives, and Motivation (Kim, 2010)



2.2. Dynamics Across Activity Theory, the L2 Motivational Self-System, and Amotivation

Based on Higgins (1987), Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) proposed that L2 learners' awareness of the gap between their current self and their future desired self is the initial step in fostering motivation. Without recognizing this perceptual gap, learners may perceive the long process of L2 acquisition as arduous and meaningless. In this sense, constructing a future self aligns with Leont'ev's (1978) AT model, in which the object of an activity directs learners toward sustained effort in L2 learning. However, this object must be manageable and within reach, implying that the ideal L2 self should not be abstract but clearly visualized (You & Chan, 2015). Al-Shehri (2009) and Kim (2009b) found a significant positive correlation between L2 learners' visual learning styles and their ideal L2 self, suggesting that the ability to create concrete future images enhances learners' motivational commitment.

From an AT perspective, the object of L2 learning must be operationalized into a series

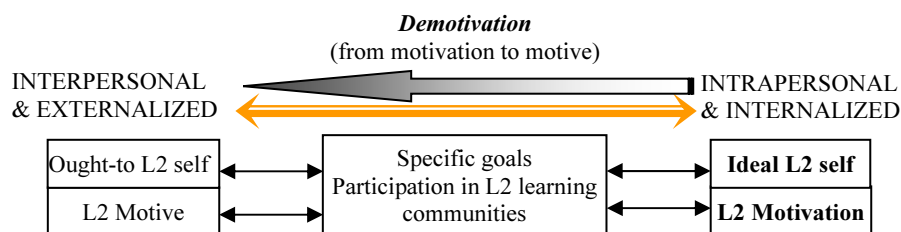
of concrete, achievable goals. By establishing goals with clear starting and ending points, learners can consolidate their future vision and reinforce their ideal L2 self.

As shown in Figure 1, when a vague need for L2 learning is linked to an object, it transforms into an L2 learning motive. Within Dörnyei's (2009, 2019) L2 Motivational Self-System, the ought-to L2 self may correspond to the motives stage in Figure 1, as learners at this stage have not yet attached personal meaning to their learning but may still recognize its external importance. Through various mediational means such as media exposure, school environments, and the influence of significant others (e.g., parents or teachers), learners may superficially acknowledge the necessity of L2 learning but fail to visualize a competent future self without structured educational interventions designed to enhance their ideal L2 self (Kim & Kim, 2024; Sato & Lara, 2019).

In other words, learners who possess only an ought-to L2 self may not have fully internalized their personalized L2 identity (Dörnyei, 2009). However, once this externally driven ought-to L2 self is integrated with specific learning goals and actual or even imagined participation in L2 communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), the ideal L2 self is strengthened (Kim, 2021a). Figure 2 illustrates the conceptual relationship between the L2 Motivational Self-System and AT (Kim, 2009b, 2010).

FIGURE 2

Relationships Between the L2 Motivational Self-System and AT-based L2 Motivation Theory
(adapted from Kim, 2010, 2017)



L2-learning motivation can be sustained or enhanced when the L2 motive is integrated with specific goals and active participation in L2 communities, where the ideal L2 self is developed. Conversely, when motivation becomes fragmented, with motive, goals, and participation failing to align, demotivation occurs (Kim, 2010, 2017). If learners perceive only a vague L2 learning motive, typically shaped by parental or teacher guidance, but fail to establish specific goals or engage in participation, their motivation remains superficial. Consequently, in the demotivation stage, learners' perceptions remain limited to an L2 motive and the ought-to L2 self, without fully internalizing a personal vision for L2 learning. Figure 2 illustrates this gradual retrogressive process, depicting the transition from

the ideal L2 self to the ought-to L2 self as a form of demotivation.

In examining English learning behaviors in collectivist cultures such as Korea and other East Asian societies (Hofstede, 1986), it is essential to consider the concept of fatalistic attribution (Choi & Kim, 2011). Fatalistic attribution refers to the belief that outcomes are determined by external forces beyond individual control, leading learners to accept circumstances passively rather than questioning them. In such sociocultural contexts, students are often compelled to learn English regardless of their personal interest or intrinsic motivation. The collectivist emphasis on group norms—where peers, family members, and society at large rarely challenge the necessity of English learning—enables the persistence of English study even under conditions of amotivation.

In contemporary Korea, English is perceived as an essential requirement for university admission and future employment across all educational stages. The prevailing educational environment discourages students from questioning the purpose or value of learning English, further reinforcing externally driven learning behaviors. These dynamics highlight the need for a focused analysis of amotivation, as English learning in such contexts may proceed independently of students' volition or intrinsic engagement.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

I conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate the EFL learning motivation of elementary and secondary school students in Korea. The participants, ranging from Grade 4 (elementary school) to Grade 10 (high school), resided in Seoul, the capital of Korea. Background information collected before the interviews, which began in 2023, indicated that none of the participants had prior study-abroad experience in ESL/EFL settings (see Table 1). Additionally, all participants came from upper-middle-class socioeconomic backgrounds, with parents employed in various professions.

To assess English proficiency levels, I considered participants' self-reported proficiency and consulted their English-language teachers. Participants reported their average English scores on a 100-point scale, following the standard grading system used in Korea. Scores of 80–100 were classified as high proficiency, 60–79 as intermediate, and below 60 as low. These self-reported scores and proficiency classifications were reviewed and confirmed by the participants' English teachers. To ensure diversity in proficiency levels, I employed theoretical sampling, as outlined by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Theoretical sampling is defined as “a method of data collection based on concepts/themes derived from data” (p. 143). The primary aim of this approach is to collect data from individuals, contexts,

and experiences that maximize opportunities for concept development and deeper analytical insights.

TABLE 1
Participant Profiles

Name (Pseudonym)	Sex	Age	School Grade	Level of English Proficiency	Age at the Start of English Education
Jimin	Male	11	Grade 5	High	6
Changbin	Male	15	Grade 9	Moderate	6
Suho	Male	16	Grade 10	Low	8
Yu-jin	Female	14	Grade 7	High	5
Won-young	Female	14	Grade 8	High	8
Jisoo	Female	10	Grade 4	Moderate	5

3.2. Data Collection Method

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) noted that semi-structured interviews are the most commonly used technique because they grant both interviewers and interviewees a degree of autonomy, facilitating an in-depth exploration of related issues. I adapted Kim's (2011) semi-structured interview questions and clarified any ambiguous responses either during the interviews or through subsequent e-mail correspondence. Each interview lasted approximately 40 minutes. For methodological triangulation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017), I also conducted document analyses focusing on previous research on the L2 Motivational Self-System. Additionally, I held weekly debriefing sessions with a research assistant who visited the research sites and participated in the interviews. Following a pilot study in November 2023, I deleted or modified questions that were overly difficult for elementary school students or that might have biased participants' responses. I organized the questions into four subsections (see the Appendix for sample questions): a) participants' perceptions of their own motivational changes, b) the ideal L2 self, c) the ought-to L2 self, and d) demotivation.

3.3. Analysis Procedure

Since interviews are not merely a process of extracting objective information from participants but rather an interactive co-construction of knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014), transcribing interview data is subject to the interviewer's recall. To minimize recall bias, I transcribed the data immediately after each interview. For data analysis, I used NVivo 12, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, which "greatly assists in managing and organizing one's data" (Baralt, 2012, p. 227). To compare participants' differing perceptions of their L2-learning motivation, I entered their verbal responses to the same interview questions into NVivo 12 and conducted

a comparative analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Following Corbin and Strauss's (2008) coding procedure, I first identified recurring themes in raw data blocks (open coding). After the comparative analysis, I established the hierarchical thematic order of the open-coded blocks, employing axial coding, which "crosscuts or relates concepts to each other" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). I then adopted Miles and Huberman's (1994) cyclical analysis, recursively reviewing transcripts, coding emergent themes, and comparing coded sections in collaboration with the research assistant using NVivo 12.

To ensure intercoder reliability, I randomly selected and anonymized one-fifth of the coded data and sent it to a colleague specializing in TESOL. The initial percentage of agreement was 94.58%; to resolve discrepancies, a post-coding conference was held between the two coders, resulting in 100% agreement after adjusting the categories that showed disparity. The themes and subtitles in the following results section are derived from this systematic coding and analysis procedure.

4. RESULTS

4.1. The Role of the Ideal L2 Self in Shaping English Proficiency: Contrasting Cases

The interview with Jimin, who exhibited a remarkably well-defined ideal L2 self, supports Dörnyei's (2009) and Sato and Lara's (2019) argument that the ideal L2 self is a key predictor of L2 proficiency. Among the participants, Jimin demonstrated the highest level of English proficiency. He began learning English in Grade 1, engaging with English-language storybooks and animations, which positively influenced his sustained interest in language learning. His parents, particularly his father, actively encouraged him to read books in both English and Korean, reinforcing his exposure to the language. Excerpt 1 illustrates Jimin's ideal L2 self as a future pharmacist:

Excerpt 1: Jimin (Grade 5, Male)

Interviewer (I): Who has the greatest influence on you when it comes to learning English?

Jimin (J): My dad. He is good at English and helps me to understand English words and grammar.

I: I see. Then, what would you like to be in the future?

J: A pharmacist.

I: Pharmacist? Then, how is it related to your learning English?

J: Well, there are five big pharmacy schools in Seoul. People in this field often use English. So I think it's good to learn English. Also, maybe in the future, I want to do something more than just work at a pharmacy. That's why I study English.¹

Although Jimin was a Grade 5 elementary school student, Excerpt 1 reveals his detailed understanding of pharmaceutical science. While elementary school students often struggle to distinguish their own opinions from their parents' expectations (Dika & Singh, 2002), Excerpt 1 indicates that Jimin's statements are not merely a reflection of his father's wishes. Instead, he articulates the necessity of English in his future career, suggesting that he has already developed an imagined community of practice in his mind. Consequently, he has successfully enhanced his future vision (Dörnyei, 2020).

As illustrated in Figure 1, motivation emerges from the integration of motives, goals, and participation through L2 learning experiences. In Jimin's case, his motive to learn English became concrete and meaningful because it was directly tied to his academic goal—gaining admission to one of the five major universities offering a pharmacy program. In Excerpt 1, Jimin explicitly describes his aspirations to become part of a pharmacist community, demonstrating his active desire to participate in this professional field. Thus, by constructing and reinforcing his future vision, Jimin successfully transformed a vague motive into a specific and purposeful one. Regarding his future self, he exemplifies an ideal L2 self as a fully engaged pharmacist in a global professional community.

In contrast, the interview with Suho (a Grade 10 male student) presents a counterexample to the positive correlation between the ideal L2 self and English proficiency. Suho lacked a clear motive, goal, or interest in participating in an L2 community. His absence of motivation, concrete learning objectives, and an ideal L2 self resulted in low English proficiency, illustrating the importance of goal-setting and self-vision in language acquisition.

Excerpt 2: Suho (Grade 10, Male)

I: Do you think it's important to learn English?

Suho (S): I don't think it's that important.

I: Why? Can you tell me more?

¹ This study constitutes a theoretical extension of Kim (2010, 2017); thus, excerpts selected for analysis may show content similarities with those from prior research. Accordingly, it should be noted that although Excerpts 1, 4, and 6 are based on interview data collected in 2023, they are similar in content to earlier excerpts.

S: Uh... We live in Korea, well... I can live well here by speaking only Korean.
I don't want to go abroad. Well, I mean I would like to stay in Korea. So, I
don't think English is important.

In Suho's case, there was no indication of L2-learning motivation, which was directly linked to his lack of perceived need for English. As shown in Excerpt 2, he does not associate English proficiency with his future career and explicitly rejects the idea of studying or working abroad, asserting that he intends to use only Korean. This suggests that Suho lacks international posture, defined as "an interest in foreign affairs, a willingness to study or work abroad, and readiness to engage with intercultural partners" (Yashima, 2002, p. 57).

Although he may have understood English's role as a global language, he did not perceive any personal relevance for it within a domestic context. As a result, he saw no compelling reason to learn English, preventing the transition from a basic need to a motive, as illustrated in Figure 1. Under these conditions, neither an ought-to L2 self nor an ideal L2 self was developed in his cognitive framework, further reinforcing his amotivation toward English learning.

4.2. Challenging the L2 Motivational Self-System: High Proficiency Without Motivation

As demonstrated above, both Jimin and Suho exhibited a strong and direct relationship between their ideal L2 self and English proficiency. This suggests that students with a clear future vision of learning and using an L2 tend to achieve higher English proficiency, whereas those without such a vision may struggle. However, the AT-based interviews in this study reveal cases that contradict previous research findings, warranting academic attention.

Notably, some high-achieving students exhibited only an ought-to L2 self, while others lacked a viable L2 self altogether. One such case is Won-young, an eighth-grade female student, who displayed only an ought-to L2 self, unconnected to any personal future aspirations. As an only child, she felt strong parental expectations and social pressure to learn English, which strongly motivated her. However, in Excerpt 3, Won-young expresses no intrinsic interest in learning English; instead, she studies the language solely to conform to societal expectations and meet the demands of those around her.

Excerpt 3: Won-young (Grade 9, Female)

Won-young (W): I don't think I want to learn English.

I: But do you have to learn it?

W: Right.

I: What do your parents or teachers say to you about studying English?

W: They say I must do it.

I: Why? What about your parents?

W: They are all obsessed about the college entrance exam.

I: Do you have any college in your mind?

W: Not really.

I: What comes to your mind when your parents say you should study English hard?

W: Well... If they insist, I must do it.

In Excerpt 3, Won-young comments on her parents' emphasis on the college entrance exam, highlighting the perceived importance of learning English. However, she does not recognize an immediate personal need for English proficiency. This suggests that, while Won-young's parents and teachers emphasized the value of learning English, she did not internalize it as personally meaningful, despite superficially acknowledging its necessity.

Won-young's case warrants the introduction of a conceptual distinction between "sense" and "meaning", as elaborated by Kozulin (1995) and Van der Veer and 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)

From this perspective, Won-young recognized the external, objective meaning of learning English but did not internalize its personally contextualized significance (i.e., sense). As demonstrated in Jimin's case, if she were able to envision herself using English proficiently in a specific occupation, she might have developed a personal attachment to English learning and maintained her ideal L2 self. However, Won-young's understanding of English learning did not evolve into a personalized ideal L2 self but remained within the domain of an ought-to L2 self, reflecting her significant others' "sense of duty, obligations, or responsibilities" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 4). In sum, Jimin's perception of L2 learning reflected "sense," whereas Won-young's perception remained at the level of "meaning."

However, it is important to note that EFL learning motivation does not always directly correlate with English proficiency. In other words, the absence of an ideal L2 self does not necessarily result in low English achievement. Despite lacking intrinsic motivation, Won-young exhibited a high level of English proficiency—comparable to Jimin's, as seen in

Excerpt 1. From an AT perspective, Won-young's motive for learning English stemmed from her parents' expectations regarding college admission, yet this vague motive was not integrated with a specific learning goal or with participation in an existing or imagined L2 community. As illustrated in Figure 2, the ought-to L2 self functions at the level of motives, whereas the ideal L2 self aligns with motivation. Although Won-young lacked motivation and an ideal L2 self, her English proficiency remained high relative to other participants.

Another case of a high achiever without motivation was Yu-jin, a seventh-grade female student. In Excerpt 4, Yu-jin describes her desired self as a future teacher, acknowledging that there should be a connection between her career aspirations and English learning. Like Won-young, Yu-jin ranked among the top students in terms of English proficiency, further illustrating that high achievement in English can occur even in the absence of intrinsic motivation or an ideal L2 self.

Excerpt 4: Yu-jin (Grade 7, Female)

I: What's your dream job?

Yu-jin (Y): Maybe a teacher, but I'm not really sure yet.

I: If you become a teacher, do you want to be an English teacher?

Y: Hmm, I don't know. I haven't decided that yet.

I: Do you think there will be any connection between your dream job and learning English?

Y: [after a short pause] There probably should be... I guess....

This suggests that, without a clear connection between her current English learning and her future career, Yu-jin had only a vague aspiration to become a teacher. Throughout the interview, she did not articulate a specific goal for English learning or describe any active participation in L2-related activities. Instead, she continued her EFL learning as an automatized daily routine. Since she failed to integrate motives, goals, and participation, and did not express an L2 self, her motivation for learning English may have been limited to a basic motive or even a need. In Excerpt 4, Yu-jin does not establish a meaningful link between her future career and English learning, nor does she provide a detailed explanation of her motivation to become a teacher.

Like Won-young, Yu-jin demonstrated high English proficiency, indicating that, in Korea's English-learning context, students' L2 selves may not always exhibit a straightforward or predictable relationship with their L2 proficiency. This challenges the conventional assumption that a well-defined ideal L2 self necessarily leads to higher English proficiency.

Dörnyei (2009) defines the ought-to L2 self as "the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations" (p. 29). The interview findings suggest that elementary

school students often struggle to distinguish their own L2 self from that of their parents, whereas secondary school students tend to be more aware of the difference between their self-created L2 identity and parental expectations. Excerpt 5 illustrates such a case with Changbin, a ninth-grade male student, who exhibited a strong awareness of his parents' expectations regarding English learning.

Excerpt 5: Changbin (Grade 9, Male)

I: What do you want to be in the future?

Changbin (C): I don't have anything special yet.

I: Even so, have you ever thought about your future career path?

C: I'm still thinking about it.

I: Then which profession do your parents recommend?

C: My parents simply say that I should be an international lawyer, the last person I want to be. Not in my dreams! But it's true that this type of lawyer will need good English.

I: What if your parents tell you to study English hard, do you want to study more?

C: Nope.

I: No?

C: I simply don't want to. Perhaps all kids are like that. The more parents say something about it, the less we want to do it. Well, I think the best time for English learning is only when I really want it.

I: Well, then do you think English is important?

C: Yes. It's important in college admission and in applying for a job. English cannot be ignored.

Changbin was aware of his parents' expectations for him to pursue a career in law, yet he did not internalize this aspiration as part of his ought-to L2 self because he did not perceive the necessity of becoming an international lawyer. Similar to Yu-jin, Changbin did not develop an ought-to L2 self, making it unclear whether he had even formed a motive for learning English. His case further demonstrates a non-straightforward relationship between the L2 self and English proficiency, as he exhibited moderate English proficiency despite lacking a defined L2 self.

By contrast, Jisoo, a fourth-grade female student, exemplifies a differential effect of parental influence on L2 learning. Excerpt 6 shows that, despite her parents' frequent reminders to study English, she did not internalize their emphasis on English learning. That is, Jisoo did not comprehend the reasoning behind her parents' insistence on English proficiency, illustrating a scenario in which an ought-to L2 self fails to develop due to the

absence of a perceived need that could evolve into a motive when aligned with an object of learning. Since Jisoo did not recognize the meaning or necessity of learning English, she developed neither an ought-to L2 self nor an ideal L2 self. In this regard, she was amotivated, yet she still displayed a moderate level of English proficiency.

Excerpt 6: Jisoo (Grade 4, Female)

I: Why does your mom encourage you to learn English more?

Jisoo (J): Well, I think she believes my English is still lacking.

I: Did she ever explain why it's important to learn English?

J: Hmm... I'm not really sure.

I: Were such comments good for you to study English more?

J: Not really. (smiling)

An intriguing distinction between Changbin and Jisoo lies in their differing perceptions of English learning. Changbin was aware of the external meaning of learning English but deliberately chose not to attach any personal meaning (or “sense” in the Vygotskian framework) to it. He rejected the imposed expectation without envisioning a future L2 self. In contrast, Jisoo did not understand why she needed to learn English, possibly because her parents had not clearly explained its significance to her. In both cases, their parents attempted to impose externally mandated ought-to L2 selves; however, Changbin resisted this expectation, whereas Jisoo appeared not to have fully perceived it.

5. DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that, within the context of Korean schools, the conventional assumption of a direct relationship between L2-learning motivation and L2 proficiency may require fundamental reconsideration. The results for Jimin (Excerpt 1), a highly motivated learner, and Suho (Excerpt 2), an amotivated learner with low English proficiency, align with the expected positive correlation between L2 motivation and proficiency. However, the cases of the other four students reveal alternative possibilities. Despite varying degrees of amotivation, their English proficiency remained high or at least moderate, challenging the traditional assumption that stronger motivation necessarily leads to higher proficiency.

5.1. Re(de)fining Amotivation from an Activity Theory Perspective

The results highlight the need to refine the conditions of amotivation, particularly regarding when it occurs and how it differs from motivation. According to Dörnyei and

Ushioda (2021), discussions on amotivation have predominantly been framed within Ryan and Deci's (2000) self-determination theory, which underscores the long-term benefits of intrinsic motivation (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1985). Ryan and Deci define amotivation as "a state of lacking an intention to act" (p. 61) and stated that,

When amotivated, a person's behavior lacks intentionality and a sense of personal causation. Amotivation results from not valuing an activity ..., not feeling competent to do it ..., or not believing it will yield a desired outcome ... (p. 61)

A careful review of Ryan and Deci's conceptualization of amotivation reveals two distinct types: one associated with feelings of failure and incompetence, similar to the learned helplessness described by Seligman (1975), and another that arises in the absence of an initial intention to act, under the assumption that no underlying substantial values are present.

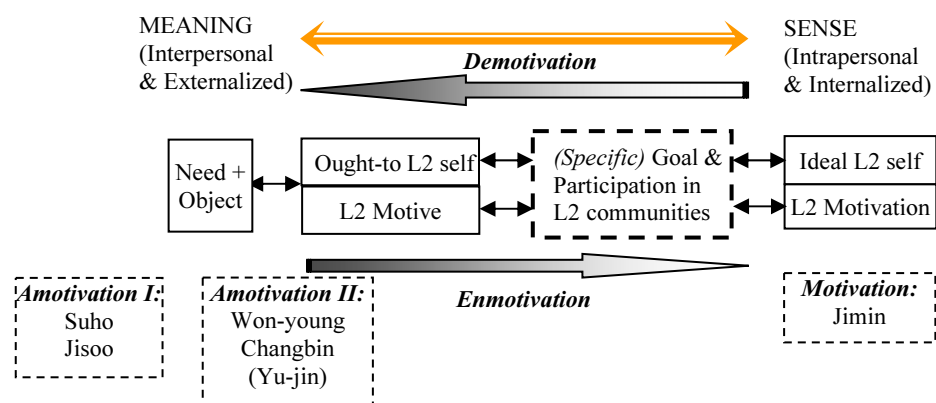
From an AT perspective, these two types must be carefully differentiated. In many countries, English functions as the global language of communication among speakers of different native languages and has, therefore, long been a mandatory subject in school curricula. Consequently, students often experience stress due to prevailing social discourses emphasizing the importance of English for college admissions and job security, leading to a high level of instrumental motivation (Gardner, 2010) or even competitive motivation (Kim, 2021b). In such educational settings, English is often perceived not as a means of global communication, but rather as an academic subject requiring explicit and conscious learning. Regardless of their L2-learning motivation, students are often forced to study English, resulting in widespread demotivation or even amotivation.

While many learners encounter failure to varying degrees, factors such as low self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), inappropriate attributions of failure (Weiner, 2007), and inadequate emotional support from family or school environments (Kim & Seo, 2012) can undermine even the persistence of highly motivated learners, ultimately leading to amotivation. Indeed, most definitions characterize amotivation as a negative, terminal phenomenon following demotivation. In this context, some amotivated students may have already undergone a phase of demotivation—transitioning from genuine motivation to mere motives, as depicted in Figure 1—with amotivation representing the final stage. Conversely, other students may have never perceived a need to learn English in the first place, thereby lacking any initial intentionality to engage in the learning process. This latter form of amotivation is more prototypical, representing an absence of need and object rather than a decline from a previously motivated state (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 distinguishes two distinct types of amotivation: "Amotivation I", which occurs before the left rectangular diagram (i.e., need + object), and "Amotivation II", which

arises between the need and the L2 motive. Amotivation I includes the cases of Suho and Jisoo, whereas Amotivation II encompasses Won-young, Changbin, and possibly Yu-jin. In contrast, Jimin, a highly motivated learner with a well-defined ideal L2 self, is clearly positioned within the L2 motivation diagram.

FIGURE 3
Two Types of Amotivation and Their Relationship with Other Motivational Elements
(adapted from Kim, 2010, 2017)



In Amotivation I, L2 learners neither perceive a need for learning English nor recognize its necessity. For instance, Suho (Excerpt 2) explicitly denied the need for learning English, while Jisoo (Excerpt 6) did not understand why her parents repeatedly emphasized its importance. Since these learners failed to recognize an initial need for English learning, the subsequent steps toward motivation were entirely blocked. As a result, their interview data showed no evidence of an L2 learning motive or an ought-to L2 self.

In Amotivation II, learners perceived a vague need to learn English, indicating some level of awareness of its importance. However, they did not necessarily develop a strong ought-to L2 self. For example, Won-young (Excerpt 3) was aware of her parents' expectations for her to attend college, but this did not actively motivate her to study; rather, she reluctantly complied with their wishes. Similarly, Changbin (Excerpt 5) clearly distinguished his parents' aspirations from his own, although his career path was still uncertain. Unlike Won-young, Changbin at least acknowledged the role of English in university admissions and job applications.

Thus, both Won-young and Changbin demonstrated a weak L2 self—Won-young felt a vague obligation to meet parental expectations, while Changbin was aware of societal expectations yet remained detached from them. In Yu-jin's case, her stated future career did

not necessitate English learning. Consequently, it remains unclear whether her comments reflected an L2 self or merely a prefabricated future self unrelated to an L2.

5.2. Sociohistorical Accounts of High Achievers' Amotivation

What requires further analysis is why amotivated learners achieve relatively high or moderate levels of English proficiency. Kim (2010) conceptualized L2-learning motivation from an AT perspective and posited that students who remain at the motive stage may not attain high L2 proficiency. At this stage, learners' motive is not integrated with a specific goal or participation, preventing them from establishing a clear reference point that can be achieved through visible, manageable efforts. In other words, previous studies based on AT have assumed that only motivated students—not those merely possessing motives—can reach high levels of L2 proficiency. However, in contrast to this assumption, the present study shows that amotivated learners in the need or motive stage (as represented in Figure 3) still achieved high or moderate English proficiency.

As demonstrated in Won-young's case (Excerpt 3), students in Korea are required to learn English because most parents strongly emphasize admission to prestigious universities, which are perceived as crucial credentials for securing future employment opportunities (Kim, 2021b). Given this context, integrative motivation, or "the willingness to be like valued members of the language community" (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 271), may seem abstract and distant to Korean students. Rather than aspiring to become native-like English speakers, they learn English for pragmatic reasons within a competitive, exam-driven educational system.

From an AT perspective (see Figure 3), amotivation can be classified into two distinct types, and a motive can transform into motivation when integrated with a goal and participation. However, strong social pressure emphasizing English proficiency for academic and professional success blurs these distinctions. As a result, learners exhibiting either Amotivation I or Amotivation II may continue studying English without enthusiasm yet still achieve relatively high proficiency.

Participants in this study continued learning English under external, uncontrollable circumstances. In the context of Korea's intense English "fever" (Hankook Ilbo, 2025; Kim & Kim, 2019), amotivated learners have little choice but to persist in English learning, and this forced engagement, even without intrinsic motivation, may still lead to high proficiency. Given this reality, L2 instructors should prioritize sustaining learners' motivation and preventing its regression into demotivation or amotivation. However, students experiencing overwhelming parental and societal pressure, where only the outcome of L2 learning is valued, may adopt a resigned attitude toward English learning. Such learners may persist in studying English despite their lack of motivation, viewing it as a compulsory daily ordeal

rather than a meaningful pursuit.

In this regard, the findings suggest that motivation may not always be a prerequisite for L2 proficiency. Instead, it may be retrospectively constructed as learners initiate and continue their English learning in an *ex post facto* manner. Some Korean students' resigned attitudes raise the possibility that engaging in learning activities without explicit motives or motivation may still be feasible. As demonstrated in Yu-jin's case, once asked about her future self and motivation, she attempted to construct a logical explanation retrospectively. For such students, motivation may not function as a driving force behind their learning behaviors but instead emerge as a *post hoc* rationalization after they have already completed their learning activities.

6. SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

Previous studies have not explored the nature and function of amotivation in L2 education in detail. This study redefines this concept from a Vygotskian AT perspective by examining a sample of six Korean students. The findings suggest that amotivation can be categorized into two distinct types: Amotivation I, in which learners do not develop an initial need to learn English, and Amotivation II, in which learners possess only a weak ought-to L2 self and a motive. Amotivation I represents the absence of both motivation and motives, whereas Amotivation II reflects learners' perceived incompetence and constitutes the final stage of demotivation.

The widespread social recognition of English as an essential skill among students and parents in Korea has created a "no-way-out" condition, compelling students to engage in English learning irrespective of their motivational state. Regardless of whether students experience intrinsic motivation, external motives, or even amotivation, English proficiency is perceived as indispensable for higher education and employment opportunities. A similar phenomenon can be observed in other East Asian contexts, including Japan and neighboring countries, where societal pressures likewise mandate English learning as a prerequisite for academic and professional advancement.

Within such sociocultural conditions, motivation may not necessarily serve as a prerequisite for initiating learning behaviors. Rather, motivation can emerge as a retrospectively constructed, *ex post facto* phenomenon, whereby learners rationalize their engagement through volitional retrospection. This pattern is often evident in students' retrospective verbal accounts during interviews, suggesting that motivation may sometimes be a consequence, rather than a cause, of persistent learning behavior under strong external pressures.

As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) noted, amotivation remains an underexplored area in L2

research. The findings of this study indicate that amotivation is not merely the absence of motivation but rather an outcome shaped by complex interactions among learners' perceived needs, motives, family/school environments, and broader socio-educational contexts.

While amotivated learners may attain comparable levels of L2 proficiency through routinized amotivated behaviors, these findings should not be misinterpreted as evidence that motivation is inconsequential for EFL learners. Although amotivated students can achieve high English proficiency, their learning process is likely to be accompanied by frustration, anxiety, and stress. Conversely, as seen in the case of a highly motivated L2 learner, when learners recognize the significance of L2 learning, establish specific goals, and actively engage in an L2 community, they not only develop a motive but also transform it into sustained motivation. When learners reach this level of motivation, the long journey toward L2 proficiency may no longer feel arduous. Instead, they may frequently experience directed motivational currents, ultimately enhancing their likelihood of success (Henry, 2019; Oh & Kim, 2024). The key question that remains is which path a learner should take—an uncommon but self-regulated, motivated path, or a more common yet amotivated one.

Future research should explore the extent to which individual learners differ in their sensitivity to social pressures to learn English and how these differences influence the formation, maintenance, and possibly termination of learning motivation in EFL contexts. While some students may actively internalize societal expectations and develop strong motivation to study English, others may find such pressures overwhelming, leading to demotivation. Investigating the underlying psychological mechanisms that contribute to these divergent responses—such as personality traits, self-efficacy, or prior L2 learning experiences—would provide a more comprehensive understanding of motivational processes. Additionally, future studies could examine the role of self-concept in shaping English learning motivation, particularly in East Asian societies like Korea, where academic achievement holds significant cultural value. In such contexts, English learning is often intertwined with broader aspirations for academic success and family honor, reflecting collectivist cultural tendencies such as alter-ego familism (Kim, 2021b, *in press*). Given that some students are driven more by the desire to maintain their self-perception as high-achieving students rather than by intrinsic interest in English as a subject, it would be valuable to investigate the relationship between students' English learning motivation and their overall academic motivation. Understanding these dynamics could offer deeper insights into how students' broader educational commitments shape their engagement with English learning.

Applicable levels: Elementary, secondary

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APPENDIX

Sample Interview Questions

- 1) Opening question and students' perception of changes in motivation:
 - When you started to learn English for the first time, was it fun?
 - How about now? Do you like learning English?
 - Do you enjoy or dislike studying English at school or a private academy?
- 2) The ideal L2 self:
 - What is your dream? (or what is your future image?)
 - Is your dream related to using English? If so, how is it related?
- 3) The ought-to L2 self:
 - Who do you study English for? For yourself? For your mother/father? Or for anyone else?
- 4) Demotivation:
 - Have you ever felt that you don't want to study English because you are getting tired of studying it? If so, can you tell me about your personal experience?