Reconceptualizing L2 Learning Demotivation from a Vygotskian Activity Theory Perspective

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This theoretical position paper highlights how second language (L2) learning demotivation or decrease in motivation can be reconceptualized within the framework of Vygotskian Activity Theory (AT). Previous demotivation studies primarily focused on determining the demotivating factors. There has not been sufficient academic attention to the dynamic interaction between L2 learners and their potential factors for demotivation. In this paper, we attempted to apply AT in order to explain this intricate demotivation process, particularly focusing on L2 learners’ subjective perceptions of their learning environment. From the perspective of AT, L2 learners’ learning-related activities are seen as activities composed of subject, object, mediational tool, community, rule, and division of labor. Describing a learner’s L2 learning experience in Lantolf and Genung’s (2002) study, we argue that the tensions emerging between the elements in the activity system result in demotivation. Future directions and the issue of commensurability of AT with other theories are discussed.

Key words: Activity Theory, demotivation, learner perception, commensurability, tension

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1. INTRODUCTION

This theoretical position paper focuses on how second language (L2) demotivation can be reconceptualized within the framework of Vygotskian Activity Theory (AT).\(^1\) The concept of demotivation has recently drawn attention from researchers and practitioners in the field of L2 learning. As shown in many studies, particularly in the East Asian context (e.g., Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Jung, 2011; Kikuchi, 2009; Kim, 2012, 2013a), many L2 learners are required to learn English as a compulsory school subject. Those who cannot link their future aspiration with English learning at school fall prey to demotivation and express a grave level of learned helplessness. In order to remedy this undesirable situation, studies in L2 learning demotivation have a solid rationale.

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), demotivated learners are those who were once motivated but have lost their interest in L2 learning for specific reasons; hence, demotivation “concerns specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action” (p. 139). Based on this perspective on demotivation, discovering the external forces exerting influences detrimental to L2 learning motivation has come to occupy a central place for L2 motivation researchers. A majority of L2 demotivation studies have focused on determining the demotivating factors by using quantitative factor analysis (Falout et al., 2009; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009) or a qualitative or mixed methods analysis (Keblawi, 2005; Kikuchi, 2009; Kim & Seo, 2012; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). It was found that teacher-related factors, such as teaching styles and teacher personalities, and curriculum-related factors, such as learning contents and materials, are major external factors inducing demotivation. In addition, it was shown that demotivation also resulted from learners’ internal characteristics, such as lack of self-confidence and negative attitudes toward the target language (Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009).

However, the same factor can be either a motivating or demotivating factor among different learners and even for the same learner at different times (Kim & Lee, 2013a, 2013b; Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004). What requires more attention is how the internal or external factors of demotivation are perceived by individual learners during their learning processes, which in turn lead to demotivation. Therefore, this paper aims to describe the process of demotivation, focusing on learners’ perceptions by analyzing the demotivating factors revealed in a particular previous study. The possible demotivation process induced by those factors will be demonstrated from the perspective of AT. AT views an L2 learner as an active agent perceiving and creating his or her own learning context within a given sociocultural milieu (Kim, 2005; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

\(^1\) In this paper, we use L2 interchangeably for both second language and foreign language.
Reconceptualizing L2 learning demotivation from an AT framework would provide a robust theoretical foundation for better understanding the demotivational process by reflecting on learners' idiosyncratic experience and sociocultural contexts.

2. A CRITICAL REVIEW OF PREVIOUS DEMOTIVATION STUDIES

While fully acknowledging previous academic endeavors to diagnose the dominant demotivating factors found among L2 learners, we attempt to introduce a new theoretical framework useful for focusing on the dynamically changing processes in L2 learning demotivation through systematically analyzing the co-occurring factors in the demotivational process. In the previous literature, we have found a few notable studies on L2 learning motivation emphasizing L2 learners' motivational processes. Shoaib and Dörnyei (2004) and Kim and Lee (2013a, 2013b) adopted a qualitative verbal account analysis, which highlights the changes in motivation and reasons for such motivational perturbations. To date, most quantitative research has placed an emphasis on illustrating the demotivational factors, and this has resulted in a plethora of factors involved in L2 learner demotivation. It is understandable that different demotivational factors would be found, because such factors always reflect different educational contexts and populations. However, Shoaib and Dörnyei’s and Kim and Lee’s studies provide evidence that the demotivational factors collected from verbal or written accounts expressed by L2 learners are not simply confined within the limitations of context and population. The participants, who were adult learners of English, engaged in either interviews (Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004) or autobiographic essays (Kim & Lee, 2013a, 2013b). In many cases, the same factors are perceived as motivational for some participants, whereas exactly the same factors are seen as demotivational for other participants. For example, Kim and Lee (2013a) exemplified how the L2 teacher, peers, instructional methods and textbooks are perceived as both motivational and demotivational factors for Korean participants. Moreover, a recent study by Kim (under review) further illustrated how the same factors are perceived as either motivational or demotivational depending on the participants’ cognitive maturity, as represented by school grade. The same factors, such as parental guidance or social pressure, function as effective factors when learners are young; however, such factors soon lose their power to motivate L2 learners as learners become cognitively mature. This insight supports the claim that “motivation is not a stable state but a dynamic process that fluctuates over time” (Shoaib & Dörnyei, 2004, pp. 35-36).

As noted above, previous studies have focused on determining the demotivating factors; yet it would not be the case that a certain demotivating factor per se always has a direct influence on learners. Kim’s (2011a) work shows that it is not the demotivating factors, but
the learners' perception of these factors, that have a direct influence on L2 learning demotivation. He conducted a longitudinal study on two learners' motivation in an English as a second language (ESL) context. The findings revealed that learners' different perceptions of the ESL learning environment played a vital role in generating, maintaining, and terminating ESL learning motivation. Despite the fact that the two participants were living in a neighborhood in the target language community, the learner who perceived the context as beneficial to L2 learning did not experience demotivation, whereas the other learner who did not fully utilize the merit of living in an English-language context gradually became demotivated. In the latter case, the participant created a parochial belief in the effectiveness of native English speaker input, which resulted in a negating positive influence coming from the conversations with other non-native English speakers around him. Given this, demotivation is clearly influenced by learners' recognizing the contextual factors around their daily lives. Therefore, what seems to be the missing link in the previous studies is an understanding of how the internal or external factors of demotivation are perceived by individual learners during their learning process, which in turn lead to demotivation.

In a critical analysis of previous research on L2 learning demotivation, Kim and Kim (2013) stated that regardless of the research methods (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods), the researchers adopted the research approach which corresponded to their assumptions of what demotivation is. A majority of researchers conducted cross-sectional studies in order to identify what causes student demotivation (e.g., Alavinia & Sehat, 2012; Choi & Kim, 2013; Falout et al., 2009; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009; Tuan, 2011; Warrington & Jeffrey, 2005). While cross-sectional studies did not directly address demotivational changes, the researchers who carried out the quasi-longitudinal research included motivational constructs and investigated changes in L2 learning demotivation (e.g., Hamada, 2008; Kim, 2011b, 2012; Kim & Seo, 2012).

Cross-sectional research (e.g., Choi & Kim, 2013; Falout et al., 2009; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009) is based on the conjecture that L2 demotivation is a distinctive construct from motivation. They assumed that what makes L2 learners demotivated is distinctive from motivational factors. Accordingly, the research focus was not on how L2 motivation changes over time or for specific reasons, but on which unique factors are detrimental to L2 learning. On the other hand, with an underlying assumption that demotivation is a decreasing trend in motivation, quasi-longitudinal research has been more concerned with downward changes in motivational intensity (e.g., Jung, 2011; Kim, 2012; Kim & Seo, 2012). These studies identified demotivational tendencies over time among L2 learners.

Although the two approaches may seem distinct from each other, the focus of investigation in the demotivation research is not different. The demotivating trend identified in Kim's (2012) quasi-longitudinal research, for example, is descriptive in nature,
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in that this research investigates the different levels of motivational subcomponents in each school grade from grades 3 to 12 in South Korea. By comparing the different levels of student motivation, the downward trend in motivational strength is regarded as a clear sign of demotivation, and in this sense, Kim’s research is descriptive. In order to identify any specific reasons for demotivation, we need to collect L2 learners’ verbal data which directly denote the experience of how they became demotivated in the process of L2 learning. In this regard, verbal or written retrospective data analysis will be needed in L2 demotivation studies. By analyzing such data and extracting the salient themes from them, the unique features of demotivation can be correctly diagnosed. The quasi-longitudinal research, in this regard, can contribute to identifying unique characteristics of demotivation, wherein the research focus converges with that of cross-sectional approaches in demotivation.

We can find inconstancies in categorizing the identified demotivational factors. Among the internal factors in previous studies, there were lack of intrinsic motivation (e.g., Ghadirzadeh, Hashtroudi, & Shokri, 2012; Hamada & Kito, 2008; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009), lack of will to study English (e.g., Jung, 2011), and reduced motivation and interest (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2011). It would seem questionable whether reduced motivation can be seen as one of the demotivating factors. It appears to be the state of demotivation per se, rather than the reason leading to demotivation. Also, it is unclear whether a lack of self-confidence extracted as one of the demotivating factors (e.g., Falout et al., 2009; Trang & Baldauf, 2007; Tuan, 2011) is a cause or result of demotivation. It is possible that because learners are not confident in their L2 proficiency, they become demotivated. However, at the same time, demotivated learners possibly come to have a lower level of self-confidence. Given this, the relationship between self-confidence and demotivation seems to be circular rather than a cause-and-effect with only one direction.

We assume that these limitations may arise from the insufficient focus on learners’ perception itself. Even though the researchers’ decision on what serves as demotivating factors was rigorous, it may be tentative considering the perspective from learners per se. Even the same factor can work differently within individual learners’ L2 learning experiences (Kim, under review; Kim & Lee, 2013a, 2013b); thus, it can be regarded as a motivating or a demotivating factor among different learners or even by the same learner as a result of their distinctive interactions with learning environments. As a result, an investigation of demotivation requires a deeper understanding of the process by which individual learners perceive the possible demotivating factors. We found AT to be a useful framework for addressing the process of demotivation by focusing on learners’ perceptions. A fundamental reason is that AT allows recognizing learners as agents of perception toward their own learning process in a given sociocultural context (Kim, 2005; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).
3. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ACTIVITY THEORY AND PREVIOUS L2 LEARNING (DE)MOTIVATION RESEARCH

Having its origin in Vygotsky’s (1978) Sociocultural Theory (SCT), AT was developed by Leont’ev (1979) and further by Engeström (1999a, 2009). AT addresses the development of the human mind or consciousness in relation to socially and culturally meaningful activities (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2010). According to Davydov (1999), an activity is a purposive behavior which engenders notable changes through the behavior, and therefore, by looking into the dynamics of activities, we can understand the development or changes in the human mind.

3.1. Mediation and Mediational Tools in AT

Central to this theoretical framework is mediation, which connects L2 learners (subject or agent) with their aspired, ultimate state (object or focus). The fundamental concept in SCT is that “higher forms of human mental activity are mediated by culturally constructed auxiliary means” (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 59). That is, mediational tools, either material or symbolic, are required in order for a subject to maintain its attention toward an object. For example, if an L2 learner, as the subject in AT, has the objective (i.e., “object” in AT) of successful L2 learning, useful mediational tools in L2 learning can be textbooks, reference books, pencils, computers, learning strategies, teachers, parents, and friends. Note that these mediational tools include not only physical and mental artifacts, but also human resources, such as teachers or friends.

Among the mediational tools, drawing from Alanen (2005), Kim (2013b) demonstrates that learner belief can facilitate or hinder the L2 learning process and therefore functions as one of the mediational tools. According to Alanen, L2 learner beliefs can be considered “a specific type of cultural artifact that mediates human activity in a manner similar to tools, signs, symbols and myths.” This is because beliefs “have their origins on the social plane” and “are considered in social interactions” (p. 66). While presenting longitudinal data according to the AT framework, Kim contrasts two adult Korean immigrants to Canada; one had a strong belief in the effectiveness of native English speakers, whereas the other had a belief that all English speakers around her were beneficial to her English learning. In the former case, the belief was not in line with the context in Canada, where a variety of English speakers live together regardless of their ownership of English. In the latter case, the participant “did not have a limited belief in native speaker efficacy,” and her inclusive attitude “toward her L2 environment was attributable to her belief in the effectiveness of all types of English input” (p. 467).
3.2. Motives and Goals in Leont'ev’s AT Model

AT emphasizes activity as a type of mediated subject-object interaction (Kaptelinin, 2005). According to Leont’ev (1979), the analysis of activity can be undertaken at three different strata: activity, action, and operation. The criteria for defining the unique characteristics of each stratum are motive, goal, and condition (see Figure 1). Figure 1 shows a representation of Leont’ev’s activity theory model as succinctly visualized by Kim (2013a). Based on this model, we can come to understanding of each criterion (i.e., motive, goal, and conditions) characterizing each unit of analysis (i.e., activity, actions, and operations).

First, the motives are broad concepts compared to goals, and the conditions refine the specific contexts where motives and goals are generated, maintained, and/or modified. Motives refer to why something needs to be done in the first place (Block, 2003) and generate an activity; an activity does not exist without a motive. For example, if an L2 learner wishes to improve his or her English proficiency, this aspiration functions as the learner’s motive and English learning activity comes into existence. With the support of concrete goals regulated by the motive of the activity, different actions are carried out within an activity. In L2 learning contexts, the activity of successful L2 learning is executed by different actions; some students may rely on a school teacher’s instruction (action 1), whereas those who believe in the effectiveness of private tutoring can focus on the tutor’s lecture (action 2). In carrying out the learning actions, conditions affect achieving goals set in the previous strata. That is, among available conditions, operations are selected as the mode regarding how the actions can be done. For example, the action of taking English writing courses may be accomplished in an online setting or traditional
offline classroom setting, according to the conditions accessible to the learners’ environment.

In order to explain more specifically the relationship between an activity and an action, the same activity can be realized with different actions, and the motives are crystallized with relevant sub-goals. Further, the same action may represent different activities. For example, even within a class, although students may seem to be engaged in group work in the L2, some of them may think that this is part of seeking enjoyment with their friends and consolidating their friendships (activity 1), whereas others who are academically oriented may think that this group work is also a part of a conscious learning (activity 2). Therefore, it should be noted that the relationship between an activity and an action is not linear, but multifaceted.

The role of motives and goals also needs to be refined. According to Engestrom (1999b), motives and goals share similarities, in that both represent human aspiration in order to accomplish what is not yet conducted. Nonetheless, in terms of specificity and concreteness, there exists a qualitative difference between them. Even though we generate the initial motive to learn English, this mental disposition may not be put into action instantaneously. Instead, while we have this relatively vague aspiration, we may not make much effort to learn English. Therefore, the motive in activity stratum in Figure 1 needs to be complemented by specific, concrete learning goals. The motive of learning English is enacted through creating short-term goals, such as listening to English audio CDs or memorizing 20 new vocabulary items a day. In this regard, Engestrom (1999b) distinguished a motive from a goal by stating that “goals are attached to specific actions. Actions have clear points of beginning and termination and relatively short half-lives” (p. 381). It is worth noting that the relationship between a motive and a goal is similar to that between an activity and an action; the same motive can be realized by different (but related) goals, and even the same goal may serve for different motives. For instance, students’ goal of participating in an English conversation for 20 minutes a day can serve as the motive of learning English, but at the same time, this can serve as the motive of socializing with other English speakers within a community.

3.3. An Activity System Approach in Engeström’s AT Model

In 1990s, after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, AT was disseminated to the Western hemisphere. In this circumstance, a Finnish researcher Engeström (1999a, 1999b, 2009) and his associates began to appreciate the value of AT in understanding human purposeful activity and endeavored to refine the AT-related concepts initiated by Leont’ev (1978, 1979). Engeström’s elaboration of AT was considered necessary, given that Leont’ev’s version of AT had contributed to totalitarian ideology in the Soviet Union.
during the period of the Cold War (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999; Lektorsky, 1999). Even if we provided an example of English learning activity and possibly subsequent actions by an individual, Leont’ev’s notions of activity and actions were mainly used to describe the actions of different participants in a collective labor activity (e.g., division of labor in hunting activity in a primitive society). As Engeström and Miettinen (1999) noted in their critique, the collective activity cannot be reduced to the sums of the actions carried out by each individual involved in the activity. Given this, we need a more systematic epistemological tool in order to understand each individual’s unique actions without collapsing their uniqueness in a limited number of activity systems.

Another consideration in the expansion of AT was specifying the sociocultural environment that mediates an individual’s activity. Indeed, individuals do not participate in an activity without being engaged in interactions with other human beings and their contextual factors. Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman (2010) mentioned that AT “does not separate the social or the individual but always looks at the interactions of the two” (p. 94). Upon this backdrop, Engeström (1999a, 2009) developed a complex model of an activity system. In Figure 2, the essential elements in this model include not only the subject, object, and mediational tools, but also community, rules, and division of labor. In the first generation AT proposed by Leont’ev, the interaction between a subject and an environment was tacitly implied in the concept of condition (Swain, Kinnear, & Steinman, 2010). However, the inclusion of community, rules, and division of labor in the expanded triangle in Figure 2 allows us to observe in which communities the subject engages in an activity and what roles he or she takes based on the rules of the communities.

**FIGURE 2**

A Complex Model of an Activity System (Engeström, 1999a, p. 31)
Given the legitimate focus on individuals’ idiosyncratic experience and mediation of sociocultural contexts, Engeström’s (1999a, 2009) triangle model would be an epistemological advancement, in that this is useful for understanding L2 learning demotivation, emphasizing learners’ perceptions of their learning environments. Therefore, we adopt the second generation of the AT model for the conceptual framework of L2 learning demotivation. More details regarding the elements in the activity systems are elaborated in the next sections, with relevant examples in L2 learning.

Note that each element in Figure 2 does not have a separate meaning unless considered together with other elements. Furthermore, a factor categorized as an element of a particular activity system can concurrently belong to another activity system. This is what Cole (1996) calls a relational view. In an EFL classroom in Korea, for example, a competent English teacher may use English as the medium of instruction, in which case English is a mediational tool. At the same time, from the English learners’ perspective, English is the object to be mastered through classroom instruction. In this sense, each element of an activity system does not fulfill only one function, but dynamically shifts with close reference to other elements in the longitudinal process of L2 learning.

3.4. Previous L2 Learning (De)Motivation Research from the AT Perspective

To date, few studies have explored the process of demotivation from the framework of AT. However, there has been research examining L2 learning motivation within a sociocultural theory perspective (e.g., Kim, 2005, 2011a, 2013b; Ushioda, 2003). Among the studies, Kim’s (2011a) research employed L2 motivation activity systems adapted from Engeström’s (1999a, 2009) AT model in order to explain the fluctuations in English learning motivation in a coherent manner. Specifically, he investigated the trajectories of ESL learning motivation of two adult Korean immigrants. Through a longitudinal approach, the changes in their L2 learning motivation were visually represented with the components in the activity systems. His study revealed how learners’ different perceptions of the ESL learning environment played a pivotal role in generating, maintaining, and terminating ESL learning motivation. It was noteworthy that the perceived conflicts between mediational tool and community resulted in demotivation. Demotivation arises when the learners’ belief in L2 learning, functioning as a mediational tool, was not supported by the communities to which the learner belongs.

Kim (2013b) went further and demonstrated that, depending on learners’ different perceptions of the environment, L2 learning motivation can take a different form as either the ideal L2 self or the ought-to L2 self. The ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self are the components included in the L2 Motivational Self System proposed by Dörnyei (2005, 2009). Kim underscored how L2 learners’ ideal L2 self refers to their “internalized positive
self image following successful L2 learning” (p. 460). On the contrary, the ought-to L2 self is “a learner’s less-internalized self image or negative future image resulting from unsuccessful L2 learning” and is likely to be “less effective in promoting L2 motivation and in increasing L2 proficiency” (p. 460). Showing how Dörnyei’s L2 motivational self-system can be informed within the framework of AT, he revealed that learners’ initially high level of motivation cannot be gradually maintained if there exist tensions among the elements of AT. In this case, demotivation and the ought-to L2 self occur. On the contrary, if there is no tension among the AT elements, L2 learners’ motivation is maintained and the ideal L2 self is the consequent result.

4. APPLYING ACTIVITY SYSTEMS TO L2 LEARNING DEMOTIVATION PROCESS

In order to demonstrate a description of the process of L2 learning demotivation from the perspective of AT, we considered teacher-related factors as the most prominent one, and this is confirmed in the previous research (e.g., Alavinia & Sehat, 2012; Falout et al., 2009; Ghadirzadeh, Hashtroudi, & Shoktri, 2012; Hamada & Kito, 2008; Jung, 2011; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Trang & Baldauf, 2007; Warrington & Jeffre\textsuperscript{y}, 2005). L2 teachers play a crucial role in the process of L2 learning, particularly in the classroom setting. Within L2 learning activity systems, teachers take their part in the division of labor as legitimate members of the L2 learning classroom community. They can also be the mediational tool for the subject (L2 learners) to achieve the object (successful L2 learning). Among teacher-related factors, teaching methods, particularly teacher-centered instruction methods, have been identified as one of the major demotivating factors (e.g., Alavinia & Sehat, 2012; Hasegawa, 2004; Warrington & Jeffre\textsuperscript{y}, 2005). Thus, by using Engeström’s (1999a, 2009) AT, we can highlight how the teacher factor exerts a significant influence on the process of demotivation within L2 learning activity systems.

In this paper, for the purpose of exemplifying an AT-based analysis of L2 learning demotivation, we take a learner’s story from Lantolf and Genung’s (2002) research on a doctoral student’s experience of Chinese language learning. We considered how reanalyzing this case study would provide insights for Korean EFL learners’ putative demotivational processes. In the Korean context, Kim and Lee (2013a) suggested the possibility that students’ perception of English learning changes from communicatively-oriented activities in elementary school to a required school subject in junior high school, which may lead to demotivation to learn English among junior high school students. In this regard, it would be worthwhile to look more closely at how learners’ goals and perceptions of language learning go through changes by perceiving their learning environment, and
how the change reflects the demotivation process. To date, however, it is rare to find a longitudinal, sociocultural account of a learner’s changes in terms of perception and goals while engaging in EFL learning in the Korean context. We also considered the learner’s story in Lantolf and Genung as an exemplary case of in-depth, emic explanations from a learner’s point of view.

In Lantolf and Genung’s (2002) study, the learner, pseudonymously referred to as PG, took an intensive summer foreign language course for university graduation requirement. It seems that her perceived goal for Chinese learning changed over time. As will be explained later in this section, the fact that the foreign language course was mandatory for graduation pertains to the change in PG’s motivation over time. PG had reportedly failed to accomplish her original goal of learning Chinese as a foreign language in preparation for meaningful communication with native speakers of Chinese. Instead, she changed her goal to tacitly fulfill the requirement by obtaining a satisfactory course grade.

PG’s motives for enrolling in the Chinese language course were twofold at the beginning. One motive was the desire to successfully learn a foreign language, which reflects her personal history as a successful language learner. The other was to earn a Ph.D. by fulfilling one of the program requirements: obtaining a satisfactory course grade in a language course. The data revealed that the former was projected as the object of the activity of taking the Chinese course. According to Kaptelinin (2005), when the object of the activity is defined, the activity is given a direction. In PG’s case, successful L2 learning was identified as the object, as was indicated when “she began her study of Chinese as a highly motivated and effective learner (based on her history)” (Lantolf & Genung, 2002, p. 184). Thus, Figure 3 visualizes PG’s initial L2 learning motivation activity system.
As the class progressed, PG experienced several problems and difficulties, primarily arising from the perceived dissonance between her learning object in AT and her environment. As mentioned, the object of her activity was successful language learning. In pursuing this object, the subject found herself to be “almost instantly transformed into an ineffective learner by the instructors’ attitudes and methodology” (Lantolf & Genung, 2002, p.184). The instructors were three female native speakers of Chinese and one male non-native speaker of the language whose first language was English. The native instructors were in charge of language drill sessions and pronunciation exercises in which students were required to practice a limited number of syntactic patterns and read aloud a series of words. The instructors immediately corrected all the errors in students’ use of patterns and pronunciations. With the non-native instructor, the class was organized by practicing ten new full-form characters every day, and translation and transcription exercises were carried out. Those classroom tasks (division of labor) and the instructors’ teaching methods (mediational tool) were in sharp contrast with PG’s initial learning object.
FIGURE 4
Emerging Tensions in L2 Learning Motivation Activity System

Mediation tool
Four instructors, the textbook and tape program, classroom tasks, grammar translation method

OUTCOME
Decreased language learning motivation/ Demotivation

Object
Successfully learning Chinese as a foreign language

Rule
Chinese class rules

Communit
Chinese class community

Division of Labor
Responsibility as a student

Subject
PG

Also, the tasks and teaching methods were based on the philosophy of the program, which places a strong emphasis on formal accuracy in all aspects of the Chinese language, including writing. The rules of the classroom community required students to produce correct forms from the beginning, even at the expense of communication-oriented L2 learning. Given this, from the subject’s perspective, the learning environment (i.e., meditational tool, rule, and division of labor in motivation activity system) came to be in discord with pursuing communicative language learning. This dissonance can be understood as the tensions within object, meditational tool, rule, and division of labor, as illustrated in Figure 4, where the dotted lines denote tensions between the elements. We suggest that, as a result of the tensions, the outcome of the activity was PG’s demotivation to learn Chinese. She found her efforts to achieve L2 communication success as not being desirable upon considering her learning situations, and in turn abandoned the pursuit of communicative language learning.

At the beginning of this section, it was stated that PG’s motives were twofold, with successful L2 communication being more dominant at the beginning. However, the original object of the activity was gradually abandoned as the subject constantly perceived the inconsistencies between her object and the learning environment. As shown in Figure 5, the object of the activity changed to fulfilling the university’s requirement, which conformed to one of the motives for the activity. In the changed activity system, the tensions were resolved and the outcome was obtaining a passing grade in the Chinese course.
Despite the seemingly successful outcome in Figure 5, the question is whether the activity system above can be regarded as the subject's remotivation or creation of another activity system. As for remotivation, studies on L2 learning demotivation have addressed the issue, investigating how learners react when demotivated and how they overcome demotivation (Falout et al., 2009; Falout, 2012; Jung, 2011; Trang & Baldauf, 2007; Ushioda, 1998). For example, Trang and Baldauf (2007) demonstrated that the major contributing force for L2 learners’ overcoming demotivation was their lucid realization of the importance of English in order to achieve their future dreams. While keeping the importance of English in mind, L2 learners were able to reignite their interest in L2 learning and reinstate making efforts to learn the target language.

In PG’s instance, she could have withdrawn from the course or could have attended the class without a concrete object when demotivated; however, she decided to continue to take the course. Given this, it would be possible to view how she remotivated herself to continue the activity of studying Chinese by changing her object of the activity (i.e., source of remotivation). On the other hand, defining remotivation still needs further elaboration. The case of object-replacement from genuine L2 communication to meeting the degree requirement as seen in PG may be an example of another activity system of L2 learning motivation. As Miettinen (2005) stated, each activity is object-oriented, and if the object is abandoned and a new object is established, another activity system is initiated. Of course, from a broad perspective, we can still argue that the learner is remotivated because the act of learning is still continuous without any cessation. However, from an AT perspective, the
object-replacement strongly implies the termination of the previous activity system and the initiation of another activity system. In this regard, we can assume that the L2 learning motivation activity system represented in Figure 3 was transformed to another activity system in Figure 5, which can be designated as the graduation requirements activity system. This is because the object of the activity is what gives structure and direction to the activity (Hardman, 2007; Kaptelinin, 2005). In view of this, it is likely that PG’s intention to change the object engendered the transformation of the nature of activity itself.

5. SUMMARY AND REMAINING ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

With the story of PG’s L2 learning experience, we described how to understand the process of L2 learning demotivation from the perspective of AT. Previous demotivation studies endeavored to determine the demotivating factors, with teaching methods being the major factor. PG’s case of demotivation is also associated with a teacher-centered teaching method on the surface level. However, as illustrated above, it was not the case that the subject was affected by the teaching method only. Instead, demotivation resulted from the learner’s perception of inconsistency between the object and the other elements in Engeström’s (1999a, 2009) activity systems.

Given this, this position paper argues that L2 learning demotivation arises from tensions between the object established by each L2 learner and the learner’s perceptions of environments, including mediational tool, community, rules, and division of labor. We suggest that demotivation research should investigate L2 learners’ object and perceived environments in L2 learning and explain them in the activity system. For this purpose, it would be necessary to consider individual learners’ narratives regarding their L2 learning experiences by using interviews and autobiographic essays. Reconceptualizing L2 learning demotivation from an AT perspective would be a theoretical foundation for more closely addressing how L2 demotivation occurs based on learners’ idiosyncratic experience and sociocultural contexts.

For future research, making a more precise definition from an AT perspective would be required. As exemplified in PG’s Stage 3 (i.e., Figure 5), it is still unclear whether changing the object in order to adapt to an immediate learning environment is beneficial for overcoming demotivation and subsequently leading to remotivation. In PG’s case, her object change was not related to remotivation or regaining motivation in a narrow sense. Therefore, researchers should also look into effective ways to help learners resolve the tensions when demotivated.

A more serious theoretical issue would be the commensurability of AT with other related theories, such as Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System or Dynamic
Researchers practicing these different theories may express due concern of introducing another theory, having distinctive origins in terms of worldview and research methodology. For example, Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System, which has gained increasing academic prominence as it is now replacing Gardner’s (1985, 2010) traditional paradigm, follows the tradition of psychometric measurement. This is because the system is based on Higgin’s (1998) self-discrepancy theory and Markus and Nurius’s (1986) notion of possible selves, both of which assume that human motivation is objectively measurable within a limited time span and by using a group of closed-set Likert-scale items. On the contrary, AT and SCT owe their theoretical lineage to cultural historical psychology (Cole, 1996) or discursive psychology (Harre, 1991), and at times, they are associated with poststructuralistic narrative approaches (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000). Additionally, DST, having its origin in natural science such as physics or biology, has begun to take root in applied linguistics and explains the diverse fluctuations in L2 learning motivation using different terms. For example, attractors in DST are deemed to explain the demotivational trend among L2 learners, and each L2 learner’s changes in motivation is regarded as the trajectory of a complex, nonlinear L2 learning system (Dörnyei, in press; Kim, under review; Kimura, in press).

Proponents of either L2 Motivational Self System or DST may think that introducing AT to the field of L2 learning (de)motivation is making the already complicated overall picture more complex and fuzzy. However, Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba (2011) stated that:

The various paradigms are beginning to “interbreed” such that two theories previously thought to be in irreconcilable conflict may now appear, under a different theoretical rubric, to be informing one another’s arguments. (p. 97)

It is in this spirit that we need to adopt pluralistic views in applying the theory in L2-related phenomena. Using different theoretical lenses to the same phenomenon will provide kaleidoscopic views, where various explanations will be available. One theory might be particularly useful in explaining a specific language phenomenon, whereas another might be effective in a different phenomenon. For example, Kim (under review) demonstrated that both AT and DST can explain the motivation-related phenomena equally well with a different epistemological emphasis; AT is particularly useful in highlighting individual learner agency, whereas DST seems insightful in capturing the relationship between the individual and the external society.

Using AT in the area of demotivation is still in its infancy. This is mainly due to the fact that demotivation (and remotivation) is a new academic sub-discipline in the field of L2 learning and teaching motivation. Therefore, for some time to come, we need to promote
the steady growth of AT-based demotivation research and make a systematic effort to connect this line of research with others having different theoretical frameworks. Not until a considerable amount of demotivation research is accumulated can we discard one framework over another. It remains to be seen whether AT-based demotivation research is commensurable with other research traditions.

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Applicable levels: Primary, secondary, tertiary

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Reconceptualizing L2 Learning Demotivation from a Vygotskian Activity Theory Perspective

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