Demotivation and L2 Motivational Self of Korean College Students

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Recent L2 motivation research has paid attention to the dynamic nature of motivation and to the process of motivational changes in L2 learning. While studies have mostly focused on the factors positively influencing L2 motivation, relatively little research has been conducted on the factors that influence learner demotivation. In this light, the study examined the factors affecting Korean college students’ demotivation and their reaction to demotivation by drawing on the notions of ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self in Dörnyei (2005, 2009). Based on interviews with twenty-nine Korean college students, three factors were identified as demotivating factors: lack of meaningful purpose, lack of improvement and success experiences, and lack of self-determination. It was noted that the conflict between the students’ desire to use English for communication and the immediate need to gain good scores on standardized tests was the main source of learner demotivation. However, the students with a strong ideal L2 self were more successful in setting personalized goals and participating in personally meaningful activities when demotivating factors were present. The findings indicate the importance of learners’ ability to visualize their ideal L2 self in overcoming demotivation and remotivating themselves.

Key Words: demotivation, ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, interviews

1. INTRODUCTION

Learner motivation has been an important topic of second language research since Gardner and Lambert’s (1972) socio-educational theory of motivation. Many empirical studies have been conducted to support or refute the notions of integrative and instrumental orientation of motivation. One of the main criticisms of the socio-educational model is its
little relevance to contexts where English is not used or studied for communication. Hence, subsequent research has focused on various motivational orientations in different learning contexts and their influence on learners’ motivational behaviors. Recent motivation research has considered the psychological concept of self or identity directly related to learning motivation and examined its relationship with motivational behaviors (Cizér & Magid, 2014). Among those, Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System theory provides a useful theoretical tool to investigate the relationship between the learners’ self-concept and their L2 motivation. The basic idea of the L2 Motivational Self System is that learners’ drive to reduce the perceived discrepancy between their ought-to L2 self and their ideal L2 self provides the necessary motivation for language learning.

While investigating the factors that influence learner motivation is crucial in understanding contextual differences in second language learning, it is equally important to uncover what factors influence learner demotivation especially in the context where high-stakes exams have a great washback effect on the school curricula and classroom content. Previous studies on demotivation focused on discovering demotivating factors and their impact on different proficiency groups (Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Falout & Maruyama, 2004). Accordingly, these studies were mostly carried out within quantitative approaches using a questionnaire (Falout et al., 2009; Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009), with the exception of few studies (Kim & Lee, 2012; Lee & Kim 2013; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). It is not surprising that teacher-related factors were reported as one of the strongest demotivators in these studies as they included elementary (Kim, 2011; Kim & Seo, 2012) or secondary school students (Hasegawa, 2004; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009) in EFL contexts which were often characterized by exam-oriented and grammar-focused instruction. While recognizing the importance of the teacher-related factors in learner demotivation, the present study pays attention to college level English learners who may have more options to choose the content or method of learning English and thus may be under less direct influence of teacher-related factors. It was also noted that the question of how students cope with demotivating factors has not been properly addressed in previous research. In this regard, the study focuses on describing the factors contributing to college students’ demotivation and their reaction to demotivation by referring to the L2 Motivational Self System as a theoretical framework. For the purpose of the study, the following questions will be addressed.

1. What are the factors that affect Korean college students’ demotivation in English?
2. How are the students’ reactions to demotivation related to their ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self?
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. L2 Motivational Self System

Drawing on Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory in psychology, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) proposed the concept of possible selves and that the discrepancy between possible selves generates learner motivation. Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System consists of three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to self, and L2 learning experience. The ideal L2 self refers to one’s ideal image of self and it reflects the learner’s aspirations, hopes and wishes of what he or she would like to become when the necessary language competence in the L2 is acquired. The ought-to L2 self, on the other hand, concerns one’s obligations, responsibilities, and expectations, in order to avoid possible negative outcomes, is hence driven by preventative motivation in Higgins’ terms. L2 learning experience refers to the situation-specific motivational component which affects one’s ideal self and ought-to self. That is, the ideal L2 self is related to the hoped-for self in the future while the ought-to self is related to the here-and-now self.

The core idea of the L2 Motivational Self System is that learners’ drive to reduce the perceived discrepancy between their current self and their hoped-for self provides the necessary motivation for language learning. When learners perceive their ideal L2 self achievable, and that the discrepancy between their current self and hoped-for self can be reduced, they are more likely to participate in motivational behaviors. Studies have shown that the ideal L2 self is a strong determinant factor in motivated behaviors (e.g., Cizér & Lukács, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2014; Papi & Teimuri, 2014; Ryan 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009) but the ought-to self has significantly less impact on learners’ motivated behaviors than the ideal self (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2014; Taguchi et al., 2009). Accordingly, it can be postulated that demotivation occurs when learners do not have a clear ideal L2 self and cannot relate it to their current L2 learning.

2.2. Studies on Learner Demotivation

Earlier studies on demotivation were conducted in the field of instructional communication. Gorham and Christophel (1992) cataloged what learners perceived as causes of their demotivation in a variety of academic subjects in university classrooms. They identified teacher-related factors as the most salient demotivator. In a subsequent study, Christophel and Gorham (1995) identified antecedent conditions that learners bring into the classroom as demotivating factors. They claimed that learners’ self-concept and attitude toward the subject and learning environment can negatively influence motivation. In the second language field, Dörnyei (1998) suggested nine factors that may contribute to
learner demotivation based on his study with fifty secondary school students in Hungary who were studying English or German as a foreign language.

- Teachers’ personalities, commitments, competence, teaching methods
- Inadequate school facilities (large class sizes, unsuitable level of classes or frequent change of teachers)
- Reduced self-confidence due to their experience of failure or lack of success
- Negative attitude toward the foreign language studied
- Compulsory nature of the foreign language study
- Interference of another foreign language that pupils are studying
- Negative attitude toward the community of the foreign language spoken
- Negative attitudes of group members
- Course books used in class

Research on learner demotivation used these categories to investigate demotivating factors in different contexts. Many studies have been carried out with Japanese secondary school students in which high-stakes testing may exacerbate motivational problems. Hasegawa (2004) studied Japanese English language learners’ experiences with English learning and demotivation with 125 junior high school students and 98 senior high school students. He found that inappropriate teacher behaviors may exert a strong impact on student demotivation. Teachers’ personalities, commitments, competence, and teaching methods were frequently observed as demotivating factors highlighting the importance of teacher role in the EFL context. A similar result was found by Trang and Baldauf (2007), who conducted a study with 100 Vietnamese college students. Based on students’ essays on demotivation experiences in learning English, they concluded that teacher-related factors, especially teaching methods, were the main source of demotivation accounting for 38% of the total number of external demotivators. They also claimed that internal factors such as an awareness of the importance of English, personal reasons, self-improvement, and self-determination more significantly contributed to students’ overcoming demotivation than external factors such as positive changes in teacher behavior, teaching method, learning conditions, and external encouragement.

Studies also examined the relationship between learner demotivation and proficiency levels. In their study with 656 Japanese high school students, Sakai and Kikuchi (2009) extracted five factors that were relevant to learner demotivation: learning contents and materials, teachers’ competence and teaching styles, inadequate school facilities, lack of motivation, and test scores. They found a significant difference between high and low motivation groups in terms of learning contents and materials, lack of intrinsic motivation, and test scores. Falout et al. (2009) conducted a study with 900 college students in Tokyo
and found that the grammar translation-based English class was the main demotivation factor. They also observed that self-denigration associated with learners’ past failure experiences and the resulting lack of confidence was a strong demotivating factor. It was also noted that learners with different proficiency levels showed different reactions to demotivation. The higher the proficiency, the better the learners were able to find things that they enjoy doing with the L2, while the lower proficiency group learners tended to seek help from others. The different demotivating factors for different proficiency groups were also observed in Falout and Maruyama’s study (2004). They found that higher proficiency learners were more apt to attribute demotivation to external factors, especially teachers, while lower proficiency learners were more apt to attribute their demotivation to internal factors, particularly disappointment in their performance.

Studies conducted in the Korean context have generally agreed that teacher-related factors were a strong demotivator (Kim, 2009; Kim & Seo, 2012) due to the nature of exam-focused study in the EFL context. It was also observed that students’ motivation tended to decrease in the school years from elementary to high school. Kim (2011) reported that elementary school students tended to lose their motivation as they moved up through the school years. While these studies were conducted with elementary and secondary school students, fewer studies have been carried out with college level students. By analyzing students’ essays on learning experience, Kim and Lee (2013) found that scores, testing, and competitive motivation functioned as both motivating and demotivating factors. While Kim and Lee included relatively advanced level learners who were majoring in English, Lee and Kim (2014) studied low level students. They reported that teacher-related factors (e.g., teachers’ praise and encouragement, teaching methods) consistently played a key role in students’ motivation and demotivation. Their negative attitude toward English that they formed over the school years was another factor that had a strong impact on learner demotivation.

As described above, studies on learner demotivation have sought to identify factors attributing to learner demotivation across different learning contexts, and the teacher-related factor was reported as a strong demotivating factor. As the participants in previous research were mostly elementary or secondary school learners, teacher-related factors were found to be the primary source of demotivation. As the studies with college students also asked about their past English learning experience, their demotivation factors were mostly related to classroom learning experience in primary or secondary school. It was also noted that most studies used a questionnaire and focused on quantifying the results except for few studies (Kim & Lee, 2013; Lee & Kim, 2014; Trang & Baldauf, 2007). Considering this gap in previous research, this study attempts to describe the process of how and why Korean college students become demotivated, and how this process is related to their self by adopting a qualitative approach.
3. METHOD

3.1. The Research Context

The study was conducted at a university in a metropolitan city in Korea. With a considerable emphasis on English, an official score on the standardized Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC, hereafter) is one of the graduation requirements at most universities in Korea. As such, the test score is used in deciding students’ participation in university-supported programs (e.g., International Buddy program, Culture Abroad program, and Study Abroad program), and it is also a key factor for scholarship eligibility at the university where the study was conducted. Despite the necessity of the TOEIC score for university programs and for job applications, students struggle to gain the required score, especially those whose major is not directly related to English. In order to improve their test scores, some students choose to enroll in the intensive TOEIC Camp program offered by the university during the breaks. This program requires students to attend more than 90% of the total class hours and to stay at the dormitory for three weeks. Students also have to take a pre- and post-program test to evaluate their progress. While the university provides the program for the standard test, it also encourages students to participate in the programs for communicative competence. In addition to the mandatory conversation class required for all freshmen, the university has encouraged all the departments to offer English-medium classes. The programs in the English-only dormitory and at the International Lounge offer a chance for students to practice English in informal settings.

3.2. The Participants

The participants in the study were recruited from the intensive TOEIC Camp program held at the university in the summer of 2014. It was a three-week long intensive program which specifically focused on preparation for the TOEIC. Classes were divided by different target scores (from 500-900 on the TOEIC) and each class had about 25-30 students. The Camp program was chosen for recruiting participants because of the accessibility to a wide variety of students in terms of majors, ages, sex, English study experiences, and goals for studying English. If students are simply not interested in English, and have not had much learning experience in English, they cannot talk about their motivational changes. Thus, by recruiting the participants from this program, it was aimed to have learners with varying degrees of motivation and different experiences of motivational fluctuations in learning English.

With the permission of the program director, the researcher visited eight classrooms
toward the end of the Camp program and explained the purpose of the study to ask for volunteers to sign up for participation. The sign-up sheets were collected the following day and a total of twenty five students volunteered to participate. Four more students were recruited from a class that the researcher had taught in the previous semester. A total of twenty nine students (10 male, 19 female) participated in the study. Although they were not specifically identified as demotivated learners at the time of the study, they all said that they had the experience of losing interest in English and they were willing to talking about their demotivation experiences.

All the participants started learning English from elementary school as part of the regular school curriculum. Six of them participated in a study abroad program and the rest of them have never been abroad or only traveled to non-English-speaking countries for a short time. The participants’ most recent TOEIC scores ranged from 350-950 (mean score: 666) and their average age was 23.6 (see Appendix A for Participants’ Profiles). The participants’ majors varied but there were slightly more English-related majors. Regardless of the their majors, all the participants acknowledged that English is necessary to gain entry to their desired career but only few expressed the possibility of actually using English for their work.

3.3. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted for the period of four weeks in July and August 2014 after the Camp program was finished. Twenty-one interviews were conducted with individual students and four interviews with a pair of students who felt more comfortable coming with their friend. When two students were participating in the interview together, the same questions were addressed to both students allowing them to add or make comments on each other’s responses. All interviews were conducted in the researcher’s office. The average time taken for an interview was about an hour (ranging from 50 min to 90 min). It was a semi-constructed interview and a list of questions was prepared as a guideline. The participants were invited to freely talk about anything relevant to their English learning experience. The interview questions include the following.

- When did you start learning English? Did you enjoy learning it?
- How did you study English before you came to college?
- What have you tried to improve your English at college?
- What are the difficulties in studying English?
- Have you lost interest in English? When and why?
- What is your goal of learning English?
- What would be your ideal image of yourself in the future?
All interviews were conducted in Korean and they were recorded for analysis. The recordings were transcribed by a research assistant and checked for accuracy by the researcher.

3.4. Data Analysis

The data were analyzed following the procedure suggested in Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to find emerging patterns in the data. Following the recommendations of this theory, the researcher tried to read the data without a priori categories suggested in previous research. At the initial reading of the transcripts, the parts that were relevant to learner demotivation and L2 self-images were segmented for analysis. The segments were again divided into units that denoted the same meaning thread. The minimum coding unit was a sentence but it was extended to more than a sentence when multiple sentences conveyed the same meaning. In order to analyze the data in a consistent and systematic manner, the analysis was conducted with a qualitative data analysis software program Nvivo (version 10).

In accordance with the open coding procedure, the seemingly important concept was coded under nodes. At this stage, those important concepts were labeled close to the verbatim to avoid vagueness of abstract categories. Among the codes, “lack of self-determination” (46 references), “lack of improvement” (43 references), “difficulty in speaking English” (78 references), “studying for the test” (51 references) appeared most frequently in the data. After this open coding process, the nodes were grouped, renamed, or deleted to generate a smaller number of thematically related categories. For example, “unsatisfactory test scores”, and “difficulty with grammar” were grouped under a broader category of “lack of improvement”. Later this category was revised as “lack of improvement and success experience” to include categories such as “unsuccessful communication effort”, “denied opportunities”. At the next axial coding stage, the relationships among the subcategories were explored to find a main storyline based on core categories. According to Saldana (2009), categories found through axial coding can be integrated into a narrative centered on a core category. The present study found the conflicts between learners’ desire to improve speaking and their obligation to study for the test as a core category to weave the other categories together into a story. A story was constructed to illustrate why the students became demotivated in their L2 learning process by using this core category as an axis (for the story, see Appendix B).

After the preliminary data analysis, peer debriefing was conducted with a colleague whose area of interest includes L2 learning motivation to validate the interpretation of the data. He read four sample transcripts (Student 1, 5, 13, 21, 23) and checked if the codes and categories were matched with the data. Disputable codes and categories were marked
4. FINDINGS

4.1. Factors Attributing to Learner Demotivation

Through the content analysis of the students’ interview data, three general themes were found to contribute to learners’ demotivation. These factors concerned the lack of meaningful purpose, the lack of improvement and success experiences, and the lack of self-determination. While the first two factors are related to the external educational context, the last factor is more internal to learners’ perceptions of themselves. They do not exactly correspond to the factors listed in Dörnyei (1998), but tend to overlap with factors such as the compulsory nature of foreign language study and reduced confidence due to experiences of failure and lack of success. In the following section, each theme will be elaborated with sub-themes and excerpts from the data.

4.1.1. Lack of meaningful purpose

As shown in previous studies (Christophel & Gorham, 1995; Falout & Maruyama, 2004), the participants’ past experience of studying English exerted an influence on their attitude toward English. Many participants recalled that they simply memorized the grammar rules without understanding them and practiced test-taking skills for the test. The participants described their studying experience as “just memorizing the whole book without really understanding the meaning” (Student 15) or “just learning test-taking strategies but no improvement in speaking (Student 5). They found their English study before college solely focused on obtaining good scores on the college entrance examination and yet they found their outcome rather disappointing.

Despite the students’ disappointment with their performance in the test results, they were under continued pressure to study English for the test in their college years. The students had to study English again to gain an official score on the TOEIC. This required test score was described as “a stumbling block” (Student 22) because without it, the students could not participate in university-supported programs or have a chance to apply for a job.
Students 2 described her studying English as a way to earn a certificate, not to improve her “real English skills.”

Excerpt 1
There might be students who just don’t like learning a foreign language. I’ve never seen anyone who actually uses English once they got a job in the company. I think the TOEIC score is just one of the qualifications, just like other certificates that you have to get to get a job. I’ve never felt that my English has improved because of the TOEIC study and I don’t think it is effective in improving real English skills. (Student 2, Interview on August 11, 2014)

As shown in Excerpt 1, the participant found the compulsory nature of study meaningless because she did not feel she had improved her English. Traditionally, studying English to obtain a good score or a good job is considered an instrumental motivation, which is particularly important in the EFL context. However, Excerpt 1 shows that continued study for the instrumental purpose without a sense of improvement could only decrease students’ motivation in English. Student 4 mentioned that his feelings of “always studying for the test” decreased his motivation to keep engaging in learning activities. Moreover, he felt torn between studying for the TOEIC and studying “real English” that he wished to do. He expressed his conflicted feelings as follows.

Excerpt 2
I don’t think TOEIC has anything to do with English, a real English ability. I only need it to submit my application to companies. They want to see my score. My TOEIC score is like a yardstick of my college life. I don’t think companies even consider my TOEIC score as my real English ability. They just use it to see how hard I have worked at college. If my score is low, they might ask me ‘what did you do when everybody else worked hard?’ . . . I don’t think the score has anything to do with the real English ability. So I kind of want to do something different, a real English. (Student 4, Interview on July 30, 2014)

He emphasized that the TOEIC score had nothing to do with his real English ability, but he would need it as a “yardstick” of his college life. This feeling of engaging in a test-oriented study for a prolonged period of time, and the subsequent conflicts created between what they have to study and what they wish to study were the most salient features attributed to learner demotivation. Unlike the previous studies that reported the teacher-related factor was a main demotivating factor, it was observed that the test-related pressure and the students’ lack of meaningful purpose were strong demotivating factors in the
present study. These findings are comparable to what was found in previous research. For example, compulsory nature of study (Dörnyei, 2001), course content (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009), and scores and testing (Kim & Seo, 2012) were found to be important demotivating factors in the EFL context. The result suggests that the external pressure (e.g., test scores, English requirements) can initially function as a motivator to help students engage in learning activities, but it could decrease students’ motivation when they have to study English without feeling they are gaining real English abilities.

4.1.2. Lack of improvement and success experiences

The lack of meaningful purpose in their study seemed to be aggravated when the participants’ test scores did not demonstrate their effort and time invested in English had been useful. The lack of improvement in test scores and a lack of success experiences in communication was another significant factor contributing to decreased motivation. The following excerpts showed the participants’ dissatisfaction with their grammatical knowledge and with their performance on the tests.

Excerpt 3
I worked hard but I still had problem figuring out which is a subject, which is a verb. My vocabulary was weak and there were a lot of words that I didn’t know. I spent all day just studying English. But the score was not good at all for what I did. (Student 4, Interview on July 31, 2014)

Excerpt 4
I really did my best. I worked hard every day repeating the same books again and again. But my score didn’t improve at all on the test. I didn’t feel like studying it again for a while. (Student 10, Interview on July 27, 2014)

As mentioned in excerpts above, the participants in the study commonly said they “didn’t feel like studying” English when they did not make any progress on test scores. Falout et al. (2009) found that low proficiency students tended to seek more external help than high proficiency students. However, the students in the present study, regardless of their proficiency levels, did not actively seek for help but tended to temporarily withdraw from studying. When asked what they do when they do not understand or have difficulty in English, they would look things up on the online dictionary or the grammar Q & A section but rarely asked for help from experts. The other characteristic of the students’ learning style was found in their avoidance of group study. A majority of students stated that they would rather study alone than in a group because they found the group study is “a waste of
time” (Student 1), “not everybody is contributing” (Student 6). Such a solitary learning style may have developed over the course of studying English for test preparation, which may limit their strategy use and does not lead to improvement in English.

In addition to the students’ disappointment with their test scores, their lack of success experience in communication was another factor in reducing their motivation. Most students stated that they found speaking most challenging because they had to think a lot before they spoke and still could not freely express themselves. Student 11, for example, came to meet a French exchange student through the International Buddy program but her communication effort was not successful.

Excerpt 5
I always thought the Buddy program was cool. So I applied for the program and came to meet this student from France. He was a man, and I didn’t feel very comfortable talking to him. I should have helped him but didn’t try very hard. I should have been more responsible but I didn’t have confidence in my speaking. Whenever I didn’t understand him and asked him to repeat, I felt sorry. When I asked, he spoke slowly but I couldn’t keep asking him to repeat. So I kind of stopped speaking to him. (Student 11, Interview on July 27, 2014)

Despite her initial excitement, Student 11 became less confident in her communication ability and finally stopped trying to communicate with her buddy. She described this experience as a communication failure and became less motivated in using English. The participants attributed their lack of confidence in speaking to the lack of communication opportunities. For example, Student 28 described his lack of speaking experience as follows.

Excerpt 6
Interviewer: Do you have any foreign friends that you speak English to?
Student 28: No, I don’t have any friends.
Interviewer: Have you tried to practice speaking?
Student 28: I went to the International Lounge. I kind of waited there for someone to talk to me. But no one talked to me. It’s not like someone helping me find a conversation partner or anything. I have to go and talk to someone but I just couldn’t.
Interviewer: So you don’t really have chances to speak English at the university?
Student 28: A lot less than I expected. I thought I would have more chances to speak English at the university but it’s not like that.
Interviewer: Have you thought about taking a course taught in English?
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Student 28: Well, I don’t think I can understand the class. I’m afraid I might get a poor grade in that kind of class. (Interview on August 5, 2014)

As an attempt to practice speaking, Student 28 went to the English-only Zone but his initiation did not result in a successful communication experience because no one spoke to him. He was not willing to take courses taught in English because of his fear of receiving a poor grade. The excerpt shows the difficulty that students in the EFL setting may face even when they have desire to practice speaking skills. Most of the participants in the study did not have much communication experience except in English conversation classes. Such limited chances for successful communication experiences may potentially reduce the students’ motivation to continue to make efforts in English. In sum, the students’ dissatisfaction with insufficient improvement in test scores and with their lack of communication ability was found to have a significant impact on the students’ demotivation.

4.1.3. Lack of self-determination

Falout et al. (2009) indicated that less proficient students tended to attribute their demotivation to internal factors (self-related factors) while more proficient students to external factors (e.g., teacher, course content). Without making a reference to the students’ language proficiency, the participants in the study tended to attribute their lack of success to the internal factors. They blamed their lack of self-determination for their lack of success and motivation. They described themselves as lazy, lacking strong will, and not disciplined in studying. The following excerpts illustrate how students perceive themselves in relation to English study.

Excerpt 7
I need an optimal level of enforcement. I don’t show good progress in English because I don’t have determination. If I had been more determined, I could be in a different place now. If I had studied harder in my middle and high school days, I could have gone to a better university. Even now, I don’t seem to have a strong will to make things happen. It’s all because of my lack of determination. (Student 17, Interview on August 5, 2014)

Excerpt 8
Interviewer: Have you been interested in English at the university?
Student 24: I haven’t been interested in English but I had to study. I study English just because I have to.
Interviewer: No other reason to study English?
Student 24: No. Because I’m a Business major, I don’t feel that I would need English much. Last year, I started going to a private institute to study the TOEFL but I quit studying in three days. I couldn’t do it. I guess I’m just not good at studying. (Interview on July 30, 2014)

Student 17 and Student 24 both described themselves as lacking determination to study English, and they tended to make self-denigrating comments on their lack of determination and its resulting outcome. Feeling less confident in regulating plans and actions to study English, the participants mentioned they need to be forced. This feeling of a lack of determination was observed in students’ comments on time management. They frequently mentioned the difficulty in managing their time between their academic studies and English. It can be postulated that the students’ lack of time management combined with their sense of lack of determination negatively influence learner motivation.

In summary, the prolonged studying for the test and the feeling of meaninglessness was found to be a strong demotivator in the students’ learning experiences. In addition, little or no improvement on test scores and lack of successful communication experience was also attributed to their demotivation. The students’ unsuccessful experiences are associated with their lack of speaking abilities due to limited chances to use English for communication purposes. Additionally, the student’s perceived lack of self-determination was found to be another demotivating factor, reducing the students’ confidence in themselves. That is, the students found themselves in a cyclic pattern of unsatisfactory test scores, lack of successful communication experience, reduced confidence, and as a result, decreased motivation.

4.2. L2 Motivational Self and Reaction to Demotivation

In addition to elucidating the learners’ demotivating experience in the EFL setting, the study explored relationship between the students’ perception of selves and their reaction to motivation. While previous studies were concerned with identifying demotivating factors according to learner proficiency levels (Falout & Maruyama, 2004; Falout et al., 2009), little attention was paid to what learners do to cope with their demotivation. In this regards, the study examined the participants’ reaction to demotivation, and its relationship with ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self. The images expressed in sentences “I wish… in the future”, I’d like to... in the future” were coded as ideal L2 self. The phrases or sentences containing expressions of obligation relevant to the current situation (“I should…” or “I must…”) were coded as ought-to L2 self. Through this coding process, the participants were grouped into three types according to the explicitness of the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self.
• Group 1: Students who perceived themselves as test-takers, who studied English mainly for test purposes and did not indicate a clear idea of themselves using English in the future. They showed a strong sense of ought-to L2 self but did not clearly describe their ideal L2 self.

• Group 2: Students whose primary goal was to gain good test scores and yet they had a desire to use English for communication purposes. Though they had a desire to speak fluently and to travel abroad using English, their ideal L2 self was not very explicit and they found little use of English in the future.

• Group 3: Students whose primary goal was not focused on test scores. They explicitly described their ideal L2 self, and their goal of studying English was closely related to their ideal L2 self.

Each group displayed a different pattern in reaction to demotivation and the characteristics of each group will be described in the following section.

4.2.1. Making minimum efforts

The first group of participants had strong images of themselves as test-takers, who mainly studied English for test purposes, and they did not visualize themselves using English in their life. The participants in this group (Student 1, 10, 11, 15, 18, 23) lacked a self-established goal for studying English and were mostly driven to study English to avoid negative outcomes they might face (e.g., failure to meet requirements, being denied access to job opportunities). English was not required in their immediate context and there was little expectation of using English for their academic or professional work. Student 23 described her goals as follows.

Excerpt 9

Student 23: If I hadn’t participated in the English Camp program this summer, I would have done a statistics class organized in our department. I need to get a certificate in statistics to get a job and that class could have been very helpful. But I couldn’t do it because of this Camp program.

Interviewer: Why did you decide to participate in the Camp program then?

Student 23: Because I need to get a good score on the TOEIC. I just want to get it done so that I can concentrate on other studies.

Interviewer: Do you think you would need English in your job?

Student 23: No, I don’t think so. I just need the score to apply for a job. I don’t think I would need English in my job. (Interview on August 1, 2014)
Student 23 expressed her feeling of obligation to participate in the Camp program to fulfill the English requirement. As she felt the current study was needed only to apply for a job, she just wanted to “get it done” so that she could be free from the English obligation. It shows that studying for the TOEIC could function as an initial motivator but that it may not help sustain the students’ motivation for an extended period. As a result, the students tended to avoid English or temporarily withdrew from studying instead of trying an alternative activity or seeking external help. This reduced effort often led to unsatisfactory outcomes, which, in turn, to demotivation in learning English. Although the students did not completely give up studying English, they only maintained a minimum level of motivation to fulfill their ought-to L2 self.

4.2.2. Establishing vague goals

A majority of the participants appeared to belong to this group (Student 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29). The students in this group differed from the first group in their awareness of the importance of English and in their level of effort in English. They acknowledged the importance of English as a tool to achieve their goals (e.g., jobs, promotions, global needs). They were under the pressure to perform well on the test, but they also envisioned themselves as English users in the future. They mentioned “traveling around” and “speaking fluently” as their ideal future self-image. The following excerpts illustrate the student’s image of their ideal L2 self.

Excerpt 10
Interviewer: Is speaking English important to you?
Student 5: Not really. But I kind of want to be able to speak well.
Interviewer: Why do you want to speak well?
Student 5: It’s just my wish. I don’t need to speak English for my job but I kind of want to.
Interviewer: Why do you want to speak English well?
Student 5: It’s cool to speak English. If I speak English, other people might think of me more professional.
Interviewer: You mean English sounds more professional?
Student 5: Yes. If I use English words here and there, I may sound more professional and other people will see me differently.
Interviewer: Do you want to work or live in a foreign country?
Student 5: Not really.
Interviewer: How well do you want to speak English?
Student 5: Just enough to have a daily conversation with native speakers. (Interview on August 5, 2014)
Excerpt 11
I have a friend who’s participating in a working holiday program in Australia. I think it’s
great. I kind of want to be like her. I don’t have a clear goal but I wish I could speak
English freely with foreigners. English is mostly for travel. I’ve never thought about
doing any kind of work in English. I wish I could speak enough English to do a business
trip. I don’t want English to be an obstacle when I travel. (Student 18, Interview on July
29, 2014)

As shown in Excerpt 10, Student 5 expressed his interested in speaking well enough to
have daily conversation with native speakers but his wish was not directly related to what
he wanted to do for his career. He wanted to sound “cool” and “professional” by speaking
English and wished to be viewed “differently” by other people. However, such wish was
not realized in his current endeavors studying English. In this regard, his ideal L2 self was
rather vague, not strong enough to carry out tangible plans and actions. A similar image
was illustrated by Student 18. She envied her friend’s English ability and wished to be able
to speak fluently. Though the image of an international traveler was most frequently
mentioned as the participant’s ideal L2 self, this self-image was not necessarily related to
their desired career or translated into goal-directed behaviors. This rather vague ideal L2
self can be best captured in Student 20’s expression of “insurance”.

Excerpt 12
Interviewer: You’ve been taking a lot of English courses. Any particular reason to take
those courses?
Student 20: I don’t think much about my goal. I just believe that I could improve my
English if I keep doing something.
Interviewer: You’ve been participating in many programs.
Student 20: Yes, but I don’t have a particular goal. I don’t know what to do with English.
  I think of it as “insurance.” English might give me an opportunity in the future.
Interviewer: What would be an ideal opportunity for you?
Student 20: Well, right now, it’s an exchange program. I’d like to participate in the
exchange program before I graduate.
Interviewer: Do you think English will give you more opportunities when you graduate?
Student 20: Well, I might be able to choose from more options. But I’m not sure. There
are too many people who are good at English. I’m not sure how good I should be or
if it’s even possible to be good at English. (Interview on August 6, 2014)

Student 20 likened studying English to having insurance implying that she was not sure
if she would ever need it but it would be nice to have it to feel secure. She had been
working hard to improve her English, but she did not have a particular vision but just hoped that she would have more options. This shows that students’ active participation in learning activities are not always goal-directed. This future self of the students can be termed as ‘idyllic’ rather than ideal in the sense that the they have an almost utopian view of themselves as English users without a well-defined need for learning English (Lyons, 2014). This tendency may be related to ‘a widespread utilitarian belief among Korea L2 learners that English is important for career development’ (Yang & Kim, 2011, p. 147). Although the desire to travel overseas and speak English for communication have usually been identified as ideal L2 self-related items in studies on L2 motivational self, these findings indicate the such hopes or desires can be only wishful thinking, not necessarily resulting in a specific ideal L2 self or goal-directed behaviors.

4.2.3. Seeking opportunities

A small number of students were grouped together as they expressed a clear ideal self-image and the relatedness of their current study with the future self. Their ideal L2 self was described as “a diplomat” (Student 3), “a travel agent” (Student 8), and “a sport manager” (Student 21) who will have to use English to perform their daily tasks. Unlike the other groups of students, they showed more goal-directed behaviors in learning English. Student 3 described her L2 ideal self as follows.

Excerpt 13

Student 3: I would imagine myself at the final interview to complete the program at the Foreign Diplomacy Academy. I would be able to answer the questions like what I think of current international issues, or what I think of Korea’s foreign relations policy on certain issues. I think I’ll be able to answer these big questions confidently.

Interviewer: What would your ideal image of yourself be in the future?

Student 3: I think I would travel a lot in a business suit with important documents in my briefcase. I think I would look serious in a business suit. (Interview on August 8, 2014)

As shown above, Student 3, 8, and 21 depicted a vivid image of themselves as successful L2 learners. They commonly mentioned that they were less motivated to study English when their test scores were not satisfactory. However, they did not find the test score to be a determining factor for their success but found it to be an activity they could enjoy. While acknowledging the fact that they had to study for the test to meet the English requirement, they compensated for this feeling of obligation by creating opportunities to
enjoy English. Student 8, for example, chose to live in an English-only dormitory when she was not satisfied with her TOEIC score.

Excerpt 14
I enjoyed living in the English-only dormitory. I didn’t feel that my English improved a lot but I liked the fact that I could talk with native speakers and get used to speaking English. There are people who get a better score on the test but a lot of them cannot speak. But I can speak English. (Student 8, Interview on July 31, 2014)

Her seeking opportunities to speak English prompted her interests and sustained her motivation in English. She mentioned that she enjoyed the moments when other students overheard her conversation with foreign friends, which helped her seek more opportunities to make foreign friends outside the classroom. Such an effort to seek and create opportunities to speak English was observed in Student 21.

Excerpt 15
These days, I do part-time work at a karaoke bar on weekends. You know, it’s near the Industrial Zone and we have a lot of foreign workers on weekends at the bar. They tried to talk to me in Korean but their Korean was not good. So I started to speak English, and then they talked to me in English. I like talking with them in English. (Student 21, Interview on August 6, 2014)

Just as Student 21 initiated conversations with foreigners, Student 3 volunteered to work at the International Lounge as a language assistant. These students tended to engage in using English outside the classroom. Though they became equally influenced by demotivating factors, they pursued opportunities to use English to communicate to remotivate themselves. They could relate their current study with the future self-image by establishing a personal goal beyond the institutional requirement and participating in activities meaningful to them.

The findings of this study showed that the students with a strong ought-to L2 self group regarded themselves mainly as test-takers and were more susceptible to test scores when they did not have a personalized image of the ideal self. The students with a strong ought-to L2 self and weak ideal L2 self considered their current self as test-takers and they only had a vague image of their future self. Though they were seemingly active in participating in learning activities, their ideal L2 self did not necessarily materialize into practical goals. The weak ought-to L2 self and strong ideal L2 self groups of students visualized their ideal L2 self as those who would use English for their professional career. They were resilient in their response to demotivating factors such as the compulsory study for test scores and a
lack of speaking opportunities, and could manage their demotivation better by seeking opportunities to use English for communication.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The study attempted to examine the demotivating factors specific to Korean college students’ learning experiences and to observe learners’ reactions to demotivation. The analysis of twenty-nine interviews showed that the lack of meaningful purpose of their studies, a lack of improvement in test scores and a lack of success in communication experiences had a significant influence on the students’ demotivation. It is noticeable that these factors are specific to the Korean context in which college students are under pressure of studying English for test-related purposes. As the standardized English score plays an important role in the job application process in Korea, a great number of universities have conformed to such societal demand by making standardized scores a mandatory requirement. Despite the intention of encouraging students to become more competent in English and better qualified for jobs, the participants in the study found such requirement to be an obstacle to their study of English. The students’ feelings that their studying was not meaningful reflect their beliefs about successful language learning. As they believed speaking is a crucial indicator of success in English, they did not find their test-oriented study meaningful. They felt they were at conflict with themselves over the need to study for the test and their desire to use English for communication purposes. The conflict was also observed between their ideal self and current self. They want to travel around communicating freely in English, but in their actual life, they have very limited opportunities to use English. This conflict of their desires and actual efforts appeared to be a primary source of demotivation.

However, the participants exhibited different reactions to demotivating factors with regard to their L2 self-image. The participants with a strong image of ideal L2 self were less susceptible to demotivation and they were more skillful in utilizing their resources and participating in goal-directed activities by establishing a personalized goal and applying self-regulatory strategies. On the other hand, the students with a strong ought-to L2 self without a personalized goal for learning English were found to be more vulnerable to demotivating factors. By adapting the model of ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self proposed in Kim (2009, p. 148), this relationship between learner demotivation and L2 motivational self can be illustrated as follows:

As suggested in Figure 1, learners’ adherence to extrinsic motivation and the ought-to L2 self may lead to learner demotivation. This is often observed in EFL contexts in which learners have to study English under continued external pressure. However, it should be
noted their extrinsically driven motivation can lead to more intrinsic motivation by internalizing motives or by discovering intrinsic aspects of a task (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Kim (2013a, b) showed that learners’ concept of the ideal L2 self can play a critical role in the process of internalizing extrinsic motivation into personally meaningful intrinsic motivation. It was noticed that Korean college students’ persistent ought-to self as test-takers functioned as a stimulus initially but it was not effective in maintaining long-term motivation. On the contrary, the students who identified their ideal L2 self as professional career-persons in English-speaking communities and perceived that English is a critical tool to gain access to their imagined communities were actively engaged in goal-directed, personally meaningful learning activities despite the constraints of the EFL contexts. It is thus important for learners to be able to visualize their ideal L2 self to maintain their motivation in L2 learning. However, learners’ ideal L2 self should be anchored in concrete plans and actions to be useful in second language learning; otherwise, it only serves as a fantasy. Kanno and Norton (2003) stressed that hopeful wish should be distinguished from a simple fantasy or desire, in that the former has to accompanied by concrete actions. This suggests that learners’ ideal L2 self should be realized as feasible goals to function as motivators. These findings highlight the need to help learners visualize a plausible ideal L2 self-image and make it relevant to their current studies. When students can see the possibility of reducing the gap between their current and future selves, they are less likely to be demotivated.

The findings of the study indicate that despite the effectiveness of using standardized test scores to evaluate learners’ progress, it should not be used to label students as failures or to demotivate students by devaluing their efforts made in the learning process. Despite the emphasis on English from the university and institutional programs, the participants did not find the university setting conducive to improving their English, but instead, found it to be an obstacle to their desired study. The result resonates with what Ushioda (1998) stated
about the negative aspects of the institutionalized learning context. Regardless of the students’ wishes to improve their speaking ability, the institutional and societal expectation pressures them to study for the test, and the students’ dissatisfaction with the contents of the studies continually decreases students’ motivation. Good performance on test and good communication skills should be recognized as compatible goals without conflicting with each other. In order to balance the two, learners need to be guided in setting practical goals and using proper strategies in a given context. Dörnyei (2005) noted that being strategic can be equated with being motivated. As such, learners need to be assisted in overcoming demotivation and to remotivate themselves by adopting appropriate strategies.

The study also found that learners’ negative self-evaluation of themselves was another factor affecting learner demotivation. It was found that the students’ motivation was reduced when the students blamed their lack of self-determination for not making progress in English. This lack of confidence led the students to doubt their success in learning English, as expressed in “I’m not sure how good I should be or if it’s even possible to be good at English” (Student 20). The students with an unclear image of ideal L2 self were more likely to be caught in a cyclical pattern of reduced self-confidence, self-blame, and poor performance because they are unable to control their affective states, as discussed in Ushioda (1998). They need to be guided to break the vicious circle and to remotivate themselves by placing blame on external factors without internalizing their failure to themselves. Hence, it is crucial for learners to have opportunities to experience success so that they can gain confidence in themselves. Experiencing a sense of success can help learners visualize their ideal L2 self. Once students feel some success as a result of their effort and engage in the actual use of English, they can be better at visualizing themselves successful English users.

Ushioda (2011) stated that “Individual difference research focuses not on differences between individuals, but on average and aggregates that lump together people who share certain characteristics” (p. 12). Reflecting her dissatisfaction with the predominantly quantitative approach, the study attempted to examine learner demotivation from a qualitative lens. Despite the insights gained on learner demotivation, limitations of the study need to be considered in future research. Grounded Theory recommends that a researcher be constantly engaged in data collection and data analysis procedures to reach a saturation point (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data saturation requires more data collection in tandem with the data analysis process. According to the guideline of Grounded Theory, approximately thirty participants are needed to reach a saturation point. Although the study had twenty-nine participants to reach the saturation point, the analysis procedure should have been more rigorously validated by calculating inter-coder reliability. It should be also noted that selection of the participants from the English Camp program might have affected the findings the study. Although the participants in the study experienced
demotivation at some point during their study, they could be more motivated learners than average university students. Hence their stories of demotivation may not necessarily represent the characteristics of demotivated learners.

The other weakness of the study lies in its reliance on self-reported interview data. Though the data were collected from a relatively large number of interviewees, the interviews were conducted only once with individual learners and the data may lack the richness and depth that longitudinal data can provide. It is desirable to include other types of data to triangulate the data sources and to validate the interview content. For example, learner journals or self-reflection can be included in future studies. Considering the drawbacks of the self-reported questionnaire, essay or interview data on learner demotivation, longitudinal studies need to be carried out to observe motivational changes and learners’ coping strategies in specific situations. Despite the aforementioned limitations, the study may provide a possible direction for looking at learner motivational change and its relationship with learners’ self-concept, which has been gaining more importance in researching individual differences in second language acquisition.

REFERENCES


Multilingual Matters.


## APPENDIX A

### Participants’ Profile

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APPENDIX B
A Story Based on the Core Category

Core Category: Conflicts between learners’ desire to speak English and the need to gain a good score on the test (boldfaced parts indicate categories found at the axial coding stage)

Korean college students in the study were under pressure of proving their English ability through standardized test scores (e.g., TOEIC), which forced them to continue to engage in test-oriented, learning activities similar to what they had in high school. Though the students acknowledged the need of standardized English test scores to gain entry to their desired job, they found it lacking meaningful purpose since studying for the test did not help them speak better. Together with this lack of meaningful purpose in studying English, a lack of improvement in test scores and a lack of successful communication experiences significantly influenced the students’ demotivation. The students tended to attribute their lack of improvement to their lack of self-determination. Feeling trapped between their disappointment with their communication competence and fulfilling the English requirements, they blamed themselves for not having done enough. The students illustrated their ideal self as those who travel abroad and speak English fluently, and yet they also showed their conflicting feelings between their ideal future self and current self, which often resulted in decreased motivation.

Applicable levels: Tertiary

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Received in December 1, 2014
Reviewed in January 15, 2015
Revised version received in February 15, 2015