

# Association between English Learning Motivation and Language Proficiency by College Students in an EFL Context

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## Abstract

This study aimed to explore how Korean university students' English learning motivation is related to their English listening proficiency and study time. In addition, it attempted to interpret the English learning motivation linking the two different motivation theories: self-determination theory and L2 motivational self system. The interrelatedness among the assessment results on the L2 listening proficiency (pre and post test), listening study time, and motivation factors was measured by correlation coefficients. The results indicated that pre-test scores were significantly related to Identified Regulation and Identified Value Regulation toward English learning, and post-test results had significant correlation with Intrinsic Accomplishment and Identified Regulation. However, no motivation subtypes showed statistical association with the students' listening study time. The results were attempted to be interpreted both under L2 motivational self system and self-determination framework to better illuminate the motivation theory with more explanatory power.

## Keywords

L2 learning motivation /L2 listening /self-determination theory /L2 motivational system /ideal L2 self/integrative motivation

## Introduction

For several decades a great deal of research has been carried out to investigate the nature and role of language learning motivation in L2 teaching and learning areas. Gardner's (1985, 2001) L2 motivation framework has been a very powerful L2 motivation theory with its key concepts of integrativeness and instrumentality in the last five decades. Along with this model, Noels et al.'s (2000) self-determination approach to motivation with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation concepts has also received considerable attention. However, motivation theories are currently passing through some reconceptualising process, especially with

Gardner and his associates' (e.g., Gardner, 1985, 2001, Gardner & Lambert, 1959, 1972) socio-educational model. Dörnyei (2005, 2009) is at the forefront in reformulating the existing framework and developing it with intuitive and empirical evidences. He has proposed a new theoretical perspective, namely, L2 Motivational Self System, and it is now getting significant attention from second or foreign language educators. The newly emerging perspective toward L2 learning motivation involves the changing stature of English. In the rapidly globalized world, people around the world have become more aware that English plays a role of a global language not as a language of certain countries.

With this background, my concern about the effectiveness of the listening activity and its association with the students' L2 learning motivation was the starting point of this study. Even though motivation has been a popular research topic in the field of language education and has actively studied so far (e.g., Caizer & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei, 2005, 2009; Gardner, 1985, 1988, 2001; Kim, 2009; Noels, Pelletier, Clement & Vallerand, 2000), motivation toward English learning in an EFL context and its relationship with the improvement of English listening skill has not been explored that much.

On the basis of the literature review, the following three research questions were formulated and guided this study:

- 1) What are the subtypes of the motivational orientations toward English learning among Korean EFL college students?
- 2) Which motivational factors can predict the students' L2 listening proficiency, listening achievement, and listening study time? And how are they related?
- 3) How can English learning motivation be interpreted under the two different L2 motivation theories: The Motivational L2 Self System and Self-Determination Theory?

## 1 Method

### 1.1 Participants

One hundred and twenty two students from a university in Korea participated in this study in the fall semester of 2010. The students were non-English majors and mostly sophomores comprising 75% of females and 25% of males. They were randomly placed in three different classes and taught by one instructor. The participants took a 2-hour general English class per week for 15 weeks focusing mainly on reading, with other skill areas, such as speaking, listening, and writing. Their English proficiency levels ranged from high-beginner to intermediate. Eleven students out of 122 participants were excluded from the statistical analysis because they missed any one of the measures, such as questionnaire, pre-test, or post-test.

### 1.2 Instruments and Procedure

#### 1.2.1 Listening Assignment

The listening assignment was designed and implemented in order to complement the lack of practice time in the classroom and to raise the students' regular practice habits considering their perceived importance of oral-aural skills among 4 skills of English learning. The students were required to access a website (Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab) and study the 'General Listening Quizzes' part every week. They were asked to listen about 80 minutes a week, to write a listening log whenever they listen, and to submit the listening log sheet every week. The teacher gave instruction that when they submit the listening lot sheets, the basic same grade is given to everybody who listens more than 60 minutes a week. The items they had to record about their listening on the listening record sheet were the title, date, listening time (minutes), and their reaction to their learning practice and the contents of their listening study. The researcher recorded the students' average amount of accumulated practice time on an SPSS data sheet for analysis at the end of the semester.

#### 1.2.2 Questionnaire

A twenty one item questionnaire was constructed based on the *Language Learning Orientations* Scale previously validated by Noels et al. (2000) and had been used by many researchers including Vandergrift (2005). The questionnaire written in Korean was administered to the subjects on the first day of the semester in each class. The students responded to each item with 7-point scale answer choices from 1 to 7. The higher score indicated higher degree of agreement with the questionnaire

statement. The items were randomly ordered throughout the survey sheet.

#### 1.2.3 Pre and Post Test of Listening Proficiency

Listening proficiency was tested twice at the beginning and at the end of the semester. The listening part of the TOEIC diagnostic test was used to evaluate the subjects' listening proficiency. The number of test items was 50 which is the half quantity of the actual TOEIC listening test. The test measured the students' proficiency rather than achievement in English listening since the contents of the test was not directly related to their listening assignment.

#### 1.2.4 Data Analyses

The questionnaire scores and the results of the investigation on the listening time, and listening test results of the subjects were analyzed using SPSS 18.0. First, Cronbach's coefficient alpha was calculated to see the internal consistency estimate of reliability of the questionnaire for measuring students' motivation in English listening. The reliability estimate was .722, which was considered acceptable for this study. Second, a factor analysis was conducted to extract the major factors and determine the interrelationship among items in the questionnaire. Correlation coefficients and regression analyses were calculated to find out if the motivational types predict the students' listening proficiency and listening practice time. Interrelatedness among them was also calculated.

## 2 Results & Discussion

### 2.1 Research Question 1 and 2

Six motivational factors were extracted through the factor analysis of the 21 items of the questionnaire with the subjects of 111 students had almost the same constructs as found in Noels et al.'s (2000) research. Factor 6 (Identified Regulation) could be identified as Ideal L2 Self, and Factor 2 (Identified Value Regulation), Factor 4 (Introjected Regulation) and 5 (External Regulation) were classified into Ought-to L2 Self, and Factor 1 (Intrinsic Pleasure) and 3 (Intrinsic Accomplishment) were categorized into Learning Experience within Dörnyei's (2005) framework.

To assess the predictability of the listening proficiency before and after a semester-long listening practice, correlation and regression analyses were conducted using SPSS. The variables were listening practice time, six L2 motivational factors, and the pre and post-test results of the L2 listening tests. Students' study time during the semester did not show statistical correlation with the post-test. From this result and the students'

comment on listening record sheets, speculation was drawn that they achieved improved scores only when they had had quality practice time rather than the amount of the time they spent on studying for listening skills on the Internet. It was found that the students who recorded their satisfactory feeling of accomplishment on their listening record sheets tended to have better results on the post-test rather than those who just recorded their devoted time.

Through the examination of the correlations between motivational factors and test results, it was found that Factor 6 and 2 showed meaningful correlation with the pre-test results, whereas Factor 6 and 3 were significantly associated with the post-test results. Integrated Regulation (Factor 6) which was identified as ideal L2 self, was found to be the most important factor in the success of English proficiency. It was proved that strong psychological aspiration, which is the integrated motivation into the contemporary global community where English is the medium of communication, could be the crucial motivation to lead to the actual success in English. Identified Value Regulation (Factor 2) also predicted the students' language proficiency, but it was reasoned that it might be lost unless it is firmly internalized as it did not have a meaningful correlation with the post-test result. Another important finding is that the motivational orientation of Intrinsic Accomplishment (Factor 3), which is facilitated by constructive language learning experience, prompted the students' language gain. The subjects who exhibited the stronger tendency of intrinsic motivation of accomplishment achieved higher gain scores in the result of the post-test.

## 2.2 Research Question 3

Although IM (Factors 1, 3) and EM constructs (Factors 2, 4, 5, 6) in Noels et al.'s framework were similarly grouped in the present study, however, the self-determination continuum was not matched with the result of Noels et al.'s (2000). The intrinsic or extrinsic nature of the language learning orientation was not on the continuum in relation to the listening proficiency in this study, which is showing the congruent result to Vandergrift's (2005) study. It can be argued that the internalization of the motivation, whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic, better predict the proficiency. In this respect, the interpretation of the students' listening test results in relation to their motivation could be effectively conducted using Dörnyei's concepts of ideal L2 self (Factor 6), ought-to L2 self (Factor 2, 4, 5), and learning experience (Factor 1, 3), where ideal L2 self is the most internalized form of ought-to L2 self. The ideal L2 self can be identified with the

strong integrative intent in Gardner's conceptualization.

Regarding ought-to self, given the fact that only factor 2 among the three different types of ought-to L2 self affected listening proficiency, factor 2 seems to be a more internalized form of ought-to L2 self than the other two (factor 4 & 5), although no clear-cut boundary could be represented.

Bridging the theoretical frameworks of motivational L2 system and self-determination approach could lead to the finding that intrinsic motivation is closely matched to the concept of Dörnyei's learning experience. Noels et al. (2000, p. 61) argued that "intrinsic motivation generally refers to motivation to engage in an activity because that activity is enjoyable and satisfying to do." In this study the students who expressed their satisfying feeling in the process of accomplishing difficult problems tended to achieve higher gain scores, which is considered a kind of intrinsic motivation. However, they were not that much motivated by the intrinsic pleasure of listening to or reading English language itself, which was identified as another kind of intrinsic motivation. It might be related to the fact that the subjects of this study were still in a lower level of English proficiency. The kinds of motivational constructs which have the predictive power of L2 proficiency might be different for those who have already achieved higher proficiency in L2 or those who have acquired the ability to appreciate the beauty of texts in L2. This needs further investigation and might be an interesting topic for future study.

## 3 Conclusion & Implication

This paper presented the correlations between Korean college students' English learning motivation and English listening proficiency. This study is important in several aspects. First, it attempted to interpret the motivational constructs of Korean EFL students from the perspective developed by Noels et al.'s framework comparing them with the theoretical perspective of L2 motivational self system by Dörnyei. Making a bridge between the two frameworks and attempting to interpret motivational constructs within the L2 Motivational self system is expected to broaden the view of motivation to help students to effectively reach their language goals.

Second, it proved that Identified Regulation, which can be identified with ideal L2 self, is the most powerful motivation subtype in terms of achieving L2 proficiency. Other extrinsic orientations, which are equated to ought-to L2 self, are the kinds

of orientations not fully internalized (recognized as duties or responsibilities), and they can be on a continuum according to their degree of internalization. This finding also concurs with Kim Tae Young (2009, p. 148)'s argument that "the degree of internalizing the external reason for learning English at a personal level" leads to the success of L2 learning. Another important finding is that the motivational orientation of Intrinsic Accomplishment from constructive language learning experience was found to be a strong predictor of the students' success in language gain. Insights might be drawn from this to help students internalize and strengthen their volition.

Third, this paper could be of help to create a class model in reference with English listening proficiency development, and could play a role of facilitating further related studies. It would provide English educators and researchers with implication especially those who are in the EFL contexts where students are exposed to very limited aural input. In addition, how learning environment or culture affects the kinds of motivation will be another key subject in future motivation studies. Comparing motivation according to different learning contexts would disclose the universality or particularity of L2 learning motivation.

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