Motivational Trajectories of DMC and Non-DMC Male EFL Learners: A Sociocultural Theory Perspective

Namhee Yu & Tae-Young Kim†
Chung-Ang University

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the motivational disparities between male EFL learners in Korea experiencing Directed Motivational Currents (DMC; Dörnyei et al., 2016) and those who do not (non-DMCs), using sociocultural theory (SCT) as a theoretical framework. SCT posits that motivation is not a static trait but a socially and emotionally mediated process shaped by learners' interactions with their environments. Drawing on the constructs of perezhivanie (Vygotsky, 1935/1994), affordance, mediation, and internalization, this study explored how learners' engagement with learning contexts contributes to the continuity or fragility of their motivation. The participants were 35 12th-grade male students, and subsets were classified into DMC and non-DMC groups based on their mean motivation scores and standard deviations across school years. A qualitative content analysis was performed on retrospective motivation narratives to identify stage-specific motivators and demotivators across the elementary, middle, and high school levels. The findings indicate that DMC learners maintained motivation by internalizing emotionally significant learning experiences and consistently engaging in goal-directed behaviors supported by peer interaction and teacher mediation. By contrast, non-DMC learners displayed fragmented and externally driven motivation, often disrupted by emotional setbacks or a lack of meaningful engagement. These results underscore the significance of designing emotionally resonant and socially mediated learning environments that foster the sustained development of learner motivation in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Directed Motivational Currents, L2 motivation, *perezhivanie*, affordance, mediation

1. Introduction

Motivational engagement in second language (L2) learning has long been recognized as a key determinant of learner achievement and persistence (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Gardner, 2010). However, traditional classifications of motivation into intrinsic and extrinsic types often fall short of capturing the dynamic, individualized,

† Corresponding author: tykim@cau.ac.kr

and socially situated nature of learner motivation. In response, a growing body of research has shifted attention to the concept of Directed Motivational Currents (DMCs)—a form of intense, long-term motivational flow that integrates vision, emotion, and structured behavioral engagement (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Dörnyei et al., 2016; Henry et al., 2015; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). These integrated elements distinguish DMCs from general conceptualizations of L2 learning motivation, which tend to be more transient and context-dependent (Al-Hoorie, 2017). DMCs are marked by sustained effort toward a salient goal, typically grounded in deeply personal and emotionally resonant experiences, thereby providing a more holistic account of how long-term motivation is activated and maintained.

This study focuses on male EFL learners in Korea and examines the contrasting motivational profiles between students who experience DMC and those who do not. Understanding these differences is not only theoretically relevant but also pedagogically critical in contexts like South Korea, where standardized assessments and achievement-driven school cultures can either suppress or support sustained motivation (Haggerty & Fox, 2015). The importance of university entrance examinations and school grades in Korean society was found to be an essential external factor that triggered DMC in learners (Kim, 2020).

To make sense of these motivational divergences, this study adopts Sociocultural theory (SCT) as a conceptual lens. SCT, grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978), views motivation not as a static individual trait but as a socially and emotionally mediated process shaped through learners' interactions with their environments. In particular, this study draws on four interrelated constructs: *perezhivanie*, affordance, mediation, and internalization. *Perezhivanie*, originally introduced by Vygotsky (1935/1994), refers to the dynamic interplay of emotion and cognition that shapes how learners interpret and respond to their experiences. Affordance captures the perceived opportunities for action in a given context (van Lier, 2024), while mediation and internalization describe how social tools and interactions are transformed into internal psychological resources (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Together, these constructs provide an integrated framework for understanding how motivational currents are triggered, sustained, or disrupted.

While previous research has emphasized the role of DMC in sustaining long-term motivation (Henry et al., 2015), relatively little attention has been paid to how such motivation is emotionally constructed and interpreted by learners within educational and cultural contexts—particularly in environments where highly competitive

academic pressures shape students' experiences of schooling. To address this gap, the present study therefore poses two core questions: (1) What differences exist in motivators and demotivators between male EFL learners identified as belonging to DMC and non-DMC groups across different school levels? And (2) In what ways do the SCT constructs explain the differences in motivational trajectories between male EFL learners in the DMC and non-DMC groups? Through an analysis of student reflections on their English learning experiences, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying long-term motivational engagement in Korean EFL contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Directed motivational current (DMC)

Unlike momentary spikes of motivation, DMCs are characterized by a unique temporal structure—a sustained motivational surge that propels learners toward a personally valued goal with a strong sense of momentum (Dörnyei et al., 2016). This motivational drive is often experienced through a series of tasks, where learners report feeling immersed in purposeful action over an extended period. In contrast, learners who are not in a DMC state may pursue similar goals but without the same level of consistency, emotional engagement, or goal-oriented momentum.

Recent research has increasingly illuminated the conditions under which DMCs are initiated and sustained in L2 learning contexts. One such study by Karimi and Parsamajd (2025) examined learner narratives and reflective journals to investigate how long-term motivational engagement unfolds through the interaction of individual vision and socially mediated experiences. They identified vividly envisioned future selves, emotionally charged goal pursuits, and consistent behavioral routines as core mechanisms that sustained DMC. Importantly, learners in their study frequently reference dialogic interactions with peers and instructors, as well as timely feedback, as critical supports that maintained their motivation over time. These findings underscore the relational and affective scaffolding that underpins long-term engagement—an aspect that closely aligns with the present study's interest in how goal-oriented learning contexts, supported by clear routines, progressive milestones, and consistent guidance (i.e., the type of facilitative structure emphasized in DMC theory), contribute to motivational persistence in EFL contexts.

Muir and Dörnyei (2013) conducted a case study that documented the trajectory of a university student's DMC over several months. Their findings shed light on the triggering factors, sustained behavioral routines, and emotional momentum that defined the learner's motivational flow. Notably, their study highlighted how a clear long-term vision, structured learning routines, and ongoing self-reflection served as crucial supports for maintaining engagement. This study remains a foundational empirical account illustrating how DMCs can be intentionally initiated and supported within real-life language learning contexts.

Building on this process-oriented view, Henry, Dörnyei, and Davydenko (2015) offered a process-oriented account of how DMCs unfold over time. Their study traced the trajectory of motivational flow from initial triggering events to emotionally reinforced behavioral routines. They emphasized the importance of emotional amplification—where positive feelings generated through meaningful progress fuel continued engagement. This dynamic layering of affect and action suggests that DMCs are shaped not only by personal drive but also by emotionally meaningful progress and supportive social interactions within the learning environment.

Extending this perspective, Oh and Kim (2024) qualitatively investigated Korean EFL learners' DMC experiences, highlighting how emotionally salient episodes—often rooted in personal vision—acted as catalysts that transformed language learning into a deeply meaningful endeavor. Learners experiencing DMC engaged in structured routines and reflected on pivotal experiences that maintained their long-term engagement. Their study underscores how DMCs are co-constructed through personal and social factors, but it is important to note that Dörnyei's theoretical framing of DMC remains grounded in a primarily cognitive orientation.

This cognitive grounding makes DMC less fully aligned with sociocultural perspectives. While DMC accounts acknowledge the role of social interaction and affective support, the framework itself was not originally designed to capture how motivation is socially mediated and emotionally lived through. To address this limitation, the present study seeks to reinterpret DMC from a sociocultural perspective, suggesting that sustained motivational currents can be understood as socially and affectively mediated experiences embedded in learners' interactions with their environments. Such an approach does not replace the cognitive insights of DMC research but rather extends them by situating motivational engagement within the broader ecology of learners' lived experiences.

2.2. Sociocultural theory as a lens for interpreting L2 motivation

Sociocultural theory (SCT) views learning and development as culturally mediated processes that unfold through social interaction before becoming internal psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1978). This theoretical orientation provides a valuable lens for understanding motivational dynamics in L2 learning, especially when interpreting the longitudinal nature of DMC. Rather than viewing motivation solely as a trait or an individual drive, the sociocultural perspective emphasizes the role of learners' emotional engagement, environmental perception, and meaning-making processes in shaping sustained motivation. Within this framework, these interrelated constructs—*perezhivanie*, affordance, and the processes of mediation and internalization—help explain why some learners develop sustained motivational pathways while others do not (Kim, 2021; Lantolf & Poehner, 2014).

Among these constructs, the concept of *perezhivanie*, a Russian term capturing the intricate integration of emotion and cognition, offers a foundational insight into how learners interpret their lived experiences in the learning context. In educational settings, *perezhivanie* refers to learners' emotionally and cognitively unified experiences that mediate how they perceive and respond to their learning environment. It serves as a pivotal unit of analysis for understanding why certain episodes become motivationally significant. Veresov and Mok (2018) conceptualize *perezhivanie* as a metaexperience—a personally meaningful integration of affect and cognition—which can serve as a pedagogical entry point to foster learner engagement. In this view, motivation does not arise from external conditions alone, but from how learners emotionally and cognitively process those conditions through lived experience. Cross (2012), for example, describes *perezhivanie* as a tension between learners' affective past and present learning demands, highlighting how emotionally charged moments—whether frustrating or inspiring—can become catalysts for deeper commitment. When learners reflect on such experiences, especially in relation to their self-concept or long-term vision, these episodes can become embedded within a sustained motivational trajectory.

To understand how such emotionally meaningful moments emerge in the first place, the concept of affordance becomes crucial. Affordance, as developed by van Lier (2004), refers to the opportunities for action and meaning-making that the environment offers to language learners. These affordances are not inherent properties of the environment, but are relational and emergent, depending on the learner's attentional focus, prior experiences, emotional states, and learning goals.

In this sense, affordances only become functional when they are perceived, taken up, and acted upon. A teacher's question, a peer's comment, or a group task may serve as affordances for one learner but not for another, depending on their personal engagement. This underscores the fact that motivational affordances are not fixed but are dynamically realized through the learner's participation in meaningful activity. For learners experiencing DMC, affordances tend to align with their long-term goals and are emotionally resonant, allowing even mundane tasks to be experienced as personally significant. In contrast, when learners are disconnected from the social and emotional meaning of the activity, the same environment may offer no perceived affordances at all. Recognizing and designing emotionally engaging and goal-relevant affordances is therefore critical to sustaining L2 learning motivation (Kim & Kim, 2013). Thus, affordance helps to bridge the external environment and the learner's internal interpretation, complementing the concept of *perezhivanie* by highlighting how opportunities in the environment become emotionally and cognitively meaningful. This perspective underscores that what matters is not just the presence of objective stimuli, but the learner's interpretive and affective uptake and appropriation of them.

To further explain how such affordances become internal motivational resources, the concepts of mediation and internalization are central. Mediation refers to the use of cultural and social artifacts—such as language, teacher guidance, and institutional discourse—to regulate thinking and behavior (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In Vygotskian theory, all higher mental functions are mediated, meaning that individuals do not interact with the world directly but through symbolic tools and social relationships (Lantolf, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978). These tools may include not only linguistic scaffolding and classroom discourse but also emotionally significant interactions, such as peer collaboration and teacher feedback.

As Lantolf (2000) explains, mediation enables learners to shape their learning by engaging with both symbolic and physical resources, with language serving as the primary means through which meaning is developed. Rather than reacting passively to external conditions, learners can reinterpret challenges in constructive ways—for instance, viewing a disappointing test score as a growth opportunity after receiving encouragement from a teacher or peers. In this study, DMC learners displayed such mediated transformation through adaptive behaviors like goal-(re)setting and persistence, often crediting teacher support and emotionally responsive peer interactions as key to maintaining motivation. This supports Lantolf and Thorne's (2006) assertion that mediation allows learners to appropriate socially available tools

to direct their own psychological development.

Internalization, as understood in sociocultural theory, refers not merely to copying or imitating external activity, but to a developmental process in which socially mediated actions are transformed into self-regulated psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1978). Through this process, learners gradually appropriate cultural tools —especially language—and begin to use them independently to manage their learning. Internalization thus involves a qualitative restructuring of mental functioning, enabling learners to engage in increasingly autonomous and intentional activity (Lantolf & Thorn, 2006). As Ushioda (2011a) suggests, motivation that endures over time is often linked to the internalization of personal goals, enabling learners to act agentively within shifting educational context. For example, a teacher's guidance or a peer's encouragement may initially serve as external motivators, but through internalization, learners begin to adopt these values as their own. Once personal goals are psychologically integrated, they not only regulate behavior but also cultivate a sense of personal direction and emotional connection to learning—key component for sustaining long-term motivation.

Taken together, *perezhivanie*, affordance, mediation, and internalization provide an integrated sociocultural framework for interpreting motivational differences observed in this study. These concepts help reframe DMC not as a product of individual willpower, but as an emergent property shaped by learners' emotionally resonant experiences, their interpretations of opportunity, and their active participation in socially mediated learning contexts. Despite their explanatory potentials, however, few studies have examined how these constructs interact to shape long-term motivation across different stages of schooling. This is particularly important in EFL contexts like Korea, where learners' motivational experiences may shift significantly as they transition from elementary to secondary education. By applying this integrated SCT lens across school levels, the present study aims to capture how learners experience, maintain, or lose motivational currents over time within the evolving demands of their educational environments.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

This study involved thirty-five 12th-grade male students from a public high school

located in a suburban city near Seoul, South Korea. The participants were drawn from three classes taught by the first author, allowing for sustained and authentic engagement in reflective data collection, since data could be collected repeatedly within the regular curriculum schedule, and the familiar classroom context enabled learners to contribute in ways consistent with their ordinary learning practices. Participants demonstrated a wide range of English proficiency level, from low-intermediate to advanced, reflecting the diversity commonly found in public high school classrooms. Male students were selected not only to control for gender-based variability in motivational patterns—which have been noted in previous studies (e.g., Busse, 2013; Lamb, 2012)—but also to address the relative scarcity of research on male learners' motivation experiences in EFL contexts. Thus, by focusing on male high school students, this study aims to explore how their motivational trajectories are socially constructed and to contribute to a more balanced understanding of DMC development across diverse learner populations. Furthermore, it is important to note that these participants began middle school in 2020, during the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to prolonged social distancing measures, many students were unable to attend *hagwons* throughout their first and second years of middle school. In addition, public schools transitioned to online instruction for extended periods, limiting students' access to classroom-based interaction, peer collaboration, and regular teacher feedback. This dual disruption—both in formal and supplementary, private education—likely shaped the motivational experiences of these learners, and may explain relatively infrequent references to institutional learning contexts in their narratives.

3.2. Data collection

To trace learners' motivational trajectories over time, participants first created motigraphs by rating their motivation for each school year from elementary through high school on a scale from 0 (very low) to 10 (very high). Based on these ratings, they then wrote reflective essays explaining their reasons for each score and describing their motivational experiences across schooling. Each motigraph provided a year-by-year record of self-reported motivation intensity, from which a mean score (representing overall motivational intensity across years) and a standard deviation (indicating the degree of fluctuation over time) were calculated for each participant. These quantitative indices were used later, together with the qualitative essays, to classify learners into DMC and non-DMC groups based on both the consistency

(as indicated by the standard deviation) and intensity of their motivational trajectories (as indicated by the mean score). This task was conducted in a regular classroom setting during the first semester of their final year. During the sessions, students who did not participate in the study were given alternative self-directed learning tasks (e.g., vocabulary review and silent reading) prepared in advance by the teacher, ensuring that their instructional time was not compromised. Conducting the data collection during regular class hours was deemed appropriate because it minimized disruption to the students' schedules, allowed equal access to participation under similar conditions, and ensured that all learners had sufficient time, with data collection distributed across two sessions (approximately 100 minutes in total). The essays were written in Korean, the participants' first language, to ensure clarity and depth of expression without interference from limited L2 proficiency.

Retrospective reflective writing was chosen as a method because it allows learners to reconstruct and interpret their past experiences, making it possible to access affective and cognitive aspects of language learning that may not be evident through standardized measures. While relying on written explanations to reconstruct nearly a decade of motivation may raise concerns about the accuracy of recall or the influence of socially desirable responses, retrospective narratives have increasingly been recognized as valuable tools in language learning research, particularly for their ability to reveal how learners interpret and give coherence to past experiences (Pavlenko, 2003). The openness of the prompts allowed students to approach their histories with individualized perspectives, drawing attention to the emotional and contextual aspects that shaped their engagement. As learners reconstruct their past through narrative, they actively engage in the process of identity construction, linking past events to present understandings and future goals (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Although such narratives may be filtered through memory and personal bias, they provide meaningful insights into learners' evolving motivational pathways. To address these potential limitations, specific measures were implemented to enhance the reliability of the data. Specifically, students were encouraged to engage in sincere reflection and given sufficient time during class to avoid superficial responses. In addition, before writing the narratives, they created motigraphs that served as a concrete visual basis for reconstructing their motivational history and potential DMC experiences. To further enhance credibility, the motigraphs were cross-compared with the written essays as a form of methodological triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which enabled the researchers to verify the consistency between students'

quantitative ratings and qualitative accounts. All participants were informed of the study's purpose, and consent was obtained. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained by assigning participants numerical identification codes in place of names, removing any personally identifiable information from transcripts, and storing all digital files on password-protected devices accessible only to the researchers. Data were used solely for research purposes in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines.

Students were classified into DMC and non-DMC groups based on their self-reported motivation ratings across school years. To be eligible for either group, students needed a mean motivation score of 7 or higher, as this score was treated as the lower boundary of the "high motivation" range on the 0-10 scale (with 0-3 representing low, 4-6 moderate, and 7-10 high motivation). Among those, students whose standard deviation fell within the lower 50% of the distribution—indicating consistently high motivation—were categorized as the DMC group. Conversely, students with both a mean score of 7 or higher and a standard deviation in the upper 50%—indicating fluctuating motivational levels—were classified as the non-DMC group. This classification approach was informed by the study's focus on motivational development over time, rather than static intensity alone. While all participants in both groups reported high levels of motivation on average, the grouping took into account differences in consistency—an important characteristic of sustained motivational engagement. Learners whose ratings remained consistently high across years were considered to reflect a stable motivational trajectory, while those with greater variability were interpreted as showing more fragmented patters. This distinction allowed the study to explore how motivational experiences unfold differently even among similarly motivated learners, offering insights into the temporal dynamics of goal-directed engagement.

3.3. Data analysis

Using a qualitative content analysis approach, motivators and demotivators were closely examined and categorized for each group (DMC and non-DMC) across three educational periods—elementary, middle, and high school—rather than as a single aggregated dataset. This decision reflects previous findings that students' motivation is shaped by stage-specific environmental and developmental factors (Pintrich, 2003). Accordingly, motivators and demotivators were analyzed separately at each school level to better capture context-sensitive motivational patterns.

The analysis followed the structured content analysis framework proposed by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), which emphasizes a systematic coding and categorization process. In the preparation phase, all student narratives were read iteratively to develop a holistic understanding of the data. The primary qualitative source comprised students' written reflections in their retrospective motivation essays. During the organizing phase, meaning units were extracted and assigned initial codes, which were then grouped into broader categories reflecting emotional, social, and instructional factors. In the abstraction phase, the categories were refined into overarching themes and interpreted through the lens of sociocultural theory (SCT), particularly the constructs of *perezhivanie*, affordance, mediation, and internalization, to examine how learners emotionally and cognitively constructed meaning from their experiences.

While themes were primarily derived from patterns that appeared across multiple responses, some salient ones were included even when mentioned by only one or two students, if they offered conceptually rich insights into distinct motivational pathways—that is, when their comments, though rare, provided theoretically valuable explanations or illustrative examples of how motivation can be formed, sustained, or disrupted. This reflects qualitative aim of capturing not only common trends but also meaningful individual variation, unique experiences or perspectives that provide valuable understanding of how motivation can be shaped in diverse and sometimes unexpected ways. For example, Respondent 28 noted that a lack of instructional variety due to having the same teacher and persistent lecture-based methods reduced their engagement—highlighting how pedagogical monotony, though not frequently reported, can undermine motivation by limiting opportunities for interaction.

Based on the consistency (standard deviation) and intensity (mean score) of students' self-reported motivation ratings presented in their motigraphs, participants were classified into DMC or non-DMC groups for each school level (elementary, middle, and high school). Group membership was determined independently at each stage to capture changes in learners' motivational patterns over time. To illustrate these classifications, Table 1 below presents the distribution of respondents across groups for each school level, indicating the identification numbers of participants assigned to each category.

Table 1. Participant group classification based on motivation scores and standard deviation

	DMC groups	Non-DMC groups
Elementary school	7, 13, 15, 19, 28, 30, 34	1, 4, 32, 35
Middle school	1, 5, 14, 21, 26, 31, 34	11, 15, 18, 24
High school	3, 5, 20, 25, 26, 27, 29, 33	4, 12, 15, 19, 21, 24, 35

It is noteworthy that Respondent 1, who was categorized as non-DMC in elementary school and shifted to the DMC group in middle school, was not assigned to either group at the high school level. This indicates that his mean motivation score fell below the eligibility threshold of 7, suggesting a marked decline in motivation. In this case, the learner appears to have lost sustained engagement with English learning during high school, reflecting the inherently dynamic nature of motivation, which can undergo significant changes across different educational stages. Such cases highlight that motivational trajectories are not always linear and may involve significant downturns that prevent learners from being classified into either group.

4. Findings

This section presents a qualitative content analysis of the motivators and demotivators experienced by DMC and non-DMC male EFL learners in Korea across three school stages. The data was carefully reclassified based on accurate group membership, and this analysis is interpreted through the lens of Sociocultural theory (SCT), focusing on the concepts of *perezhivanie*, affordance, mediation and internalization.

4.1. Elementary school years

4.1.1. DMC group

To explore the underlying sources of sustained motivation among elementary DMC learners, their responses were organized into themes through content analysis.

The table below summarizes the key motivators identified in the elementary DMC group.

Table 2. Motivators identified in the elementary DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Emotional and social internalization	Motivation derived from emotionally engaging, activity-based classes and peer interactions	7, 19, 30, 34
Enhanced self-efficacy	Motivation reinforced by success experiences, such as performing well in class or overcoming perceived weaknesses	13, 15
Curiosity and novelty toward a new language	Motivation triggered by initial exposure to English as a new and unfamiliar subject	28

Following the themes presented in Table 2, learners in the DMC group during elementary school demonstrate rich emotional engagement and socially meaningful interactions that left a lasting impression on their English learning experiences. Rather than formal classroom instruction, these learners frequently emphasized immersive activities—such as group projects, cultural content, and music-based learning—that made English enjoyable and memorable. The following excerpts further illustrate how such experiences functioned as motivational anchors for these learners during the early stages of their language development.

Excerpt 1. Although I don't remember much from elementary school, what stays in my memory is not the regular classroom but the special English sessions where we listened to pop songs or did group activities with friends. These experiences left me with positive impressions of English classes. (Respondent 7)

These social and playful activities created a favorable memory frame, which the learner internalized. The fact that such activities were vividly remembered, while routine classroom instruction was not, indicates that they were affectively internalized, leaving durable impressions that shaped the learner's motivational orientation.

Excerpt 2. Thanks to my experience of using *Tunten* English and reading English storybooks between grade 3 and 6, my English skills were better than those of my peers. At an Elementary school, I was taught by a native speaker, and I did

well on tests and had plenty of opportunities to communicate in English. I fully demonstrated my ability during this time, especially while studying advanced grammar structures like 5 basic sentence patters, infinitives, and gerunds using EBS middle school materials. (Respondent 13)

Excerpt 2 illustrates how positive learning outcomes—such as successful test performance and active communication with a native teacher—reinforced the learner's self-efficacy and confidence.

However, as shown in Table 2, demotivators were also identified among some learners in the DMC group. Although these students generally maintained strong motivation, specific contextual or emotional factors occasionally led to reduced engagement or confidence.

Table 3. Demotivators identified in the elementary DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Long-term exposure to the same teacher and lecture-style instruction	A lack of variety due to having the same teacher and persistent lecture-based methods reduced engagement.	28
Perceived failure and threats to self-efficacy	Poor test performance led to a sense of inadequacy, undermining confidence.	15
Decreased interest due to academic orientation in english learning	A shift from playful to academic instruction weakened emotional connection.	30

Table 2 summarizes the demotivating experiences reported by a small subset of learners within the elementary DMC group. These demotivators, though not widespread, emerged in unique and individualized ways. No single demotivator was shared across multiple respondents, and the themes identified reflect diverse, context-specific reactions rather than generalized trends.

Excerpt 3. For four years, the class format and content hardly changed, and even the same teacher remained. Although I initially found English enjoyable, the lack of novelty made it feel like a mechanical task. (Respondent 28)

This excerpt underscores how static affordances and a failure to refresh classroom interactions can disrupt even an initially strong emotional engagement.

4.1.2. Non-DMC group

In contrast to the DMC group, learners in the non-DMC group revealed a different set of motivational patterns. Like their DMC peers, they also reported externally triggered motivators. However, the key distinction lay in how these triggers were processed. For DMC learners, external affordances such as playful activities or teacher interaction tended to be internalized into lasting affective anchors and strengthened self-efficacy. By contrast, non-DMC learners described motivational surges that were more conditional and short-lived, as they depended heavily on continued external validation or instructional novelty rather than being transformed into sustained internal engagement.

Table 4. Motivators identified in the elementary non-DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Socially mediated confidence and engagement	Enjoyable experiences, recognition in competitions, and support from teachers sparked interest and confidence in English learning.	1, 32
Self-Discovery and mastery through instruction	Gaining understanding through structured instruction (e.g., phonics), leading to confidence and motivation.	4
Gradual academic maturity and responsibility	Motivation increased progressively as academic responsibility and perceived necessity grew.	35

Excerpt 4 illustrates this reliance on external recognition. The learner remained disengaged until a native teacher at a *hagwon* explicitly praised their talent, which reignited motivation and encouraged contest participation. This motivational shift was powerful but also conditional on the teacher's recognition, highlighting its dependence on external validation.

Excerpt 4. In grades 3 and 4, I had no interest in any subject, including English. But in grade 5, a native teacher told the head-teacher of *hagwon* that I had talent, and I started participating in speaking contests. The teacher's encouragement made English enjoyable, and I even joined the top-level class within months. (Respondent 32)

Similarly, Excerpt 5 shows how motivation was ignited through game-based

classroom instruction. While this format sparked interest and encouraged greater effort in later grades, the learner's engagement was tied to the presence of playful teaching methods, suggesting a situational rather than deeply internalized source of motivation.

Excerpt 5. In third grade, I preferred playing outside over studying, so I had low motivation for learning English. In fourth grade, English was taught through games, which sparked my interest. Later, I worked harder to do well and prepare for middle school. (Respondent 35)

Taken together, Excerpts 4 and 5 indicate that the non-DMC group's motivation was not less affected by external triggers but less likely to convert those triggers into durable internal resources. This distinction explains why their motivation appeared more situational and fluctuating compared to the DMC group.

Table 5. Demotivators identified in the elementary non-DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Initial lack of foundational knowledge	Struggling with phonics and pronunciation in early grades caused frustration and disengagement.	4
Low academic interest in early years	General disinterest in studying during lower elementary grades resulted in low motivation for English learning.	32, 35

Table 5 presents the demotivators identified in the elementary non-DMC group. While these learners eventually developed interest in English, some experienced early-stage barriers that hindered initial engagement. Notably, phonics and pronunciation difficulties and a general disinterest in studying during lower elementary years were common sources of demotivation. These demotivators were not permanent but appeared as temporary obstacles that lasted only until sufficient scaffolding, such as phonics instruction, was provided, thereby delaying the development of sustained motivational engagement.

Excerpt 6. In the third grade, I couldn't understand anything in English class because I didn't know phonics. I couldn't even pronounce the word 'the'. I just used Korean typology to indicate English pronunciation. But after attending a *hagwon* and learning phonics, I realized I could understand and participate, and

that changed everything. (Respondent 4)

In Excerpt 6, early negative *perezhivanie* (e.g., not understanding lessons, lack of prior preparation) created learning gaps. This student's early demotivation due to unfamiliarity with phonics underscores Olson's (1994) claim that awareness of linguistic categories like "words" is not innate but mediated through literacy practices—a process some learners may not access without sufficient early scaffolding.

4.2. Middle school years

4.2.1. DMC group

Compared to the elementary group, a greater number of respondents recalled motivationally significant experiences during their middle school years. This increase may be attributed to the relative recency of middle school experiences, which makes them easier to recall, and salience, as the period is often marked by stronger academic and social influences. Such conditions may have provided more numerous and memorable affordances that contributed to sustained motivation. The table below summarizes the key motivators identified among middle school learners in the DMC group.

Table 6. Motivators identified in the middle school DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Social interaction	Peer interaction, competition, and collaborative learning enhanced motivation.	1, 14, 34
Meaningful progress	Rapid skill improvement, good test results, and teacher praise fostered motivation.	1, 14, 21, 26, 31
Academic pressure	External academic pressure (e.g., exams, future aspirations) triggered consistent effort.	1, 5, 21, 26
Positive teache mediation	Constructive feedback, structured instruction, and emotional support from teacher encouraged learning.	14, 21, 34
Autonomy	Engagement in self-directed learning strategies enhanced motivation.	1, 5, 21, 26

As shown in Table 6, motivators in the middle school DMC Group include social interaction, meaningful progress, academic pressure, positive teacher mediation, and autonomous learning strategies. These factors often contributed to a sense of personal growth, increased self-efficacy, and enjoyment through academic challenges. For instance, as shown in the excerpt below, one learner developed independent routines and peer-supported tactics to stay engaged even during repetitive test preparation.

Excerpt 7. In grade 1, due to COVID-19, I stayed home and studied every single day. It was probably the most academically productive time of my life. I didn't know the joy of spending time with friends yet, so studying itself was enjoyable. That foundational period helped shape my current English skills. In grade 2, I started studying for English exams. Though repetitive reading was boring, I made studying fun by talking with my friends about the passages, laughing at fun parts, and quizzing each other. Studying with a friend made it enjoyable. (Respondent 1)

In Excerpt 7, isolation during the pandemic paradoxically created a focused space for cognitive engagement, allowing internalization of learning goals despite external constraints. The learner's positive *perezhivanie*, driven by self-structuring and peer collaboration, sustained long-term motivation through both independent effort and social affordances, as he consistently maintained high levels of engagement throughout his three years of middle school.

Excerpt 8. Since I had already learned middle school English in elementary school, I had no difficulty understanding class content. My peers even came to me for help. However, I was aware that my knowledge about English words was not enough, so I focused heavily on memorizing words. In grade 2, I got 100 on my first written exam, which boosted my confidence. In grade 3, I switched *hagwons*, but still consistently scored 100s and entered high school without worry. (Respondent 21)

Excerpt 9. Although I started studying middle school English as early as grade 5 in elementary school, I stopped studying English altogether in grade 7 due to COVID-19 and the non-test semester. In grade 8, I began preparing for vocabulary and exams. After failing the first semester final, I was motivated to study and managed to get all A's and master high school English. By grade 9, I focused

heavily on reading and memorizing high-level vocabulary and grammar. I mastered them all and didn't have to study grammar again in high school. (Respondent 26)

DMC group learners, as seen in Excerpts 8 and 9, demonstrate a pattern of regaining and amplifying motivation through structured, exam-driven learning. Both excerpts reveal how academic performance and self-awareness of weakness—such as limited vocabulary—became turning points that led to intensified effort and mastery. Their success in structured settings (exams, vocabulary books, grammar drills) served not only as validation but also as fuel for sustained effort. Importantly, both excerpts reflect how learners transformed their setbacks into emotionally meaningful accomplishments.

Table 7. Demotivators identified in the middle school DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Pandemic-induced disruption	Online learning and social isolation during COVID-19 reduced learning motivation.	14, 26, 31
Institutional instability	Loss of trusted teachers or changes in learning environments disrupted learning momentum.	5, 14
Cognitive overload or physical fatigue	Excessive workload or health issues led to burnout or temporary disengagement.	5, 31

Despite their overall motivational stability, demotivators were not absent in DMC learners, as shown in the Table 7. For instance, Respondent 26 reported a slight decline in motivation during grade 7 due to pandemic disruptions and lack of formal testing. However, what distinguished the DMC trajectory was the learner's ability to overcome this lapse by reconnecting to structured academic goals. This resilience in the face of disruption illustrates the dynamic interplay between external constraints and internalized vision.

4.2.2. Non-DMC group

Despite being at the same developmental stage as their DMC counterparts, middle school learners in the non-DMC group reported different motivational patterns. The following table outlines the key motivators identified among middle school

non-DMC learners, highlighting the more fluctuating and situational nature of their engagement.

Table 8. Motivators identified in the middle school non-DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Unrealistic goal engagement	Unrealistic vision served as motivators.	11
Peer comparison and competitive drive	Desire to catch up with or outperform peers sparked motivation.	15
Breakthrough and reframed understanding	New instructional approaches enabled previously struggling learners to gain confidence.	18, 24

As shown in Table 8, students in the non-DMC group exhibited a range of motivators, though often marked by temporal intensity or external triggers rather than sustained, self-regulated engagement. Excerpt 10, for instance, illustrates how a vision of living abroad sparked the respondent's early commitment to English learning. This type of unrealistic goal engagement, while powerful, tended to be fragile when later confronted with practical limitations. The lack of sustainable affordances led to a breakdown of motivation.

Excerpt 10. In grade 1, I watched an American drama and became fascinated with New York. I had a dream of living there and started studying English diligently, attending school and academy classes, and reading easy English comics. But by grade 3, I realized that for a non-wealthy Korean to settle in the U.S. was nearly impossible, and I lost interest in English. (Respondent 11)

Table 9. Demotivators identified in the middle school non-DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Disillusionment	Loss of belief in achieving personal goals led to decreased motivation.	11
Academic disappointment	Failing to meet academic expectations or high-stakes outcomes led to disengagement.	15, 24
Early confusion and self-doubt	Initial difficulty in English learning caused low self-confidence and aversion to the subject.	18

As illustrated in the Table 9, demotivators reported by non-DMC learners often

reflected emotional or situational setbacks that disrupted their engagement with English learning. Unlike their DMC counterparts, these students' motivation tended to fluctuate in response to external events, such as academic failures or loss of academic identity. The demotivating factors were not only more abrupt but also appeared to affect the learners' broader academic confidence and long-term orientation. Excerpt 11 below demonstrates how a major academic disappointment —failing to gain admission to a desired high school—undermined the respondent's prior enthusiasm and led to disengagement from English and other subjects.

> Excerpt 11. By grade 9, I was ranked first in my class and was considered one of the top students in entire school, which made me very enthusiastic about studying. [···] So, I studied harder than ever and consistently scored above 90 on school exams. However, after being rejected by the high school I had applied to, I lost all motivation to study. I began neglecting not only English but most of my other subjects as well. (Respondent 15)

These findings indicate that middle school is a pivotal phase where learners' perceptions of success, identity, and future trajectories become increasingly shaped by both academic performance and socio-emotional contexts. For DMC learners, affordances such as emotionally engaging peers, competent instructors, and meaningful challenges acted as mediators to sustain momentum. Non-DMC learners, however, often demonstrated fragmented motivation—triggered by temporary recognition, crises, or external validation—with limited internalization of long-term goals.

4.3. High school years

4.3.1. DMC group

In high school, DMC learners often sustained motivation by reframing challenges and aligning their goals with personally meaningful values. The table below summarizes the main motivators identified at this stage, reflecting a shift toward self-regulation and future-oriented engagement.

Table 10. Motivators identified in the high school DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Growth mindset	The belief that enduring hardship leads to growth sustained high motivation.	3, 5, 20, 26, 27
Self-regulation	Making independent decisions and adjusting strategies through reflection sustained motivation.	5, 20, 27
Social recognition and identity	Desire for social approval and academic pride promoted sustained motivation.	3, 25
Support from teacher	Emotional and instructional support from trusted teachers increased learning satisfaction.	3, 33
Personal academic milestones	Incremental success experiences increased self-confidence and future effort.	20, 26, 29

As shown in the Table 10, high school learners in the DMC group often sustained their motivation through a combination of growth mindset and self-regulation. Despite experiencing repeated challenges—such as test-related stress or inefficient study methods—these students maintained their commitment by reframing difficulties as part of their learning journey. In particular, they often balanced performance expectations with intrinsic interest, shifting from a focus solely on grades to finding personal meaning in learning English. This pattern is clearly illustrated in the following excerpt.

Excerpt 12. Although I was a bit shocked to get a 3rd grade on the March exam in grade 10, I was able to focus on my school exams. [⋯] Later, by setting goals beyond grades—like traveling abroad and making foreign friends—I was able to study English with a lighter pressure, and since grade 12, I have studied with genuine enjoyment. (Respondent 29)

Table 11. Demotivators identified in the high school DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Grade-driven pressure	Persistent low or stagnant scores despite effort undermined motivation	3, 5, 26, 27
Emotional burnout	Accumulated stress from academic failure or excessive focus led to emotional exhaustion	3, 20, 29
Instructional mismatch	Discrepancy between student needs and instructional methods	5, 26, 27
Comparison with peers	Constant comparison with high-performing peers diminished confidence	25, 29

While DMC learners in high school generally maintained sustained engagement, their narratives also revealed moments of motivational decline. These demotivators often emerged when external expectations—particularly related to academic grades—clashed with students' intrinsic interest or perceived progress. The most prominent source of demotivation was grade-driven pressure, as many students felt discouraged when their test scores failed to reflect improvement despite their continuous effort. In addition, emotional exhaustion, stemming from long-term academic strain or repeated setbacks, also undermined their motivation. Importantly, however, these demotivational moments did not always lead to complete disengagement but often prompted learners belonging to DMC group to reassess their strategies or redefine the meaning of learning itself.

> Excerpt 13. When I took my first high school English midterm, I studied desperately and really wanted to do well. […] I ended up getting a grade 4, which was my worst result across all subjects. Even though I improved my grades in other subjects, I couldn't push English beyond a grade 2. […] I eventually quit the cram school and studied on my own. […] After that, I got 93 points and achieved a grade 2 for the first time in my life. (Respondent 27)

4.3.2. Non-DMC group

The table below presents the main motivators reported by non-DMC high school learners, typically reflecting short-term academic concerns such as test performance and peer comparison, rather than personal engagement.

Table 12. Motivators identified in the high school non-DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Realization of academic urgency	External triggers such as low scores or peer comparison spurred motivation	12, 15, 19, 35
Strategic shift in learning methods	Moving away from rote memorization toward comprehension-based learning enhanced engagement	4, 21
Emotional validation through success	Occasional academic success provided short-lived boosts	4, 24, 35

As shown in the Table 12 above, a prominent motivational pattern involved a realization of academic urgency—often triggered by low test scores, peer comparison, or approaching college entrance exams. These realizations prompted students to engage in intensive short-term efforts to improve their English proficiency. However, unlike DMC learners, their motivation tended to lack long-term sustainability, frequently declining when the academic results did not meet their expectations or when the emotional burden became too heavy.

> Excerpt 14. In grade 11, I felt I needed to change, so during the vacation, I studied English from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day. As a result, my motivation for English learning naturally increased compared to grade 10. [⋯] But the scores didn't improve much, which left me feeling disappointed. I felt that the results didn't match the amount of effort I put in. I even considered focusing only on the college entrance exam rather than school grades, but I heard that few people succeed that way, so I decided to keep working on my GPA. (Respondent 12)

This excerpt illustrates how a sharp motivational rise occurred when the student recognized the need to improve their academic standing. However, the learner's reflection that their effort did not yield proportional outcomes reveals early signs of disillusionment. The fact that he considered abandoning the GPA but decided to keep working on it in favor of social norms further underscores the learner's drive was externally pressured and emotionally volatile.

Table 13. Demotivators identified in the high school non-DMC group

Theme	Description	Respondents
Effort-outcome discrepancy	Learners lost motivation when their significant effort did not lead to proportional academic success	4, 15, 19, 21, 24
Comparison with peers	Students felt demotivated when comparing themselves to high-performing peers of racing social expectations	12, 21, 24, 35

Among high school students in the non-DMC group, demotivation frequently stemmed from a perceived misalignment between effort and outcomes as well as from comparison with peers. Several students described moments of intense investment in English study that were met with disappointing results, leading them to question the effectiveness of their strategies or their own abilities. This sense of effort-outcome discrepancy not only weakened motivation but also caused frustration, as students felt their hard work was not rewarded. In parallel, others reported external comparison and pressure as a major demotivator. These two patterns often intersected, suggesting that motivation in the non-DMC group was vulnerable to both personal disillusionment and social evaluation.

> Excerpt 15. Although I spent a lot of time studying English, my test scores showed no improvement. I felt frustrated that even a slight increase in difficulty would cause my scores to drop. I also started losing confidence because I couldn't meet other's expectations, and my grades kept declining. (Respondent 21)

To visually consolidate the findings, Table 14 presents a comparative summary of the key motivators and demotivators identified in DMC and non-DMC groups across the three educational stages. Notably, across all school levels, the DMC groups consistently exhibited a wider range of motivational and demotivational categories and included a greater number of respondents per category. This discrepancy can be attributed to the inherent nature of DMC, which is characterized by emotionally salient and goal-directed engagement with learning experiences. Learners in the DMC group were more likely to perceive, reflect on, and internalize various affordances and challenges in their environment. From a sociocultural perspective, this reflects a more developed capacity for mediated self-regulation and meaning-making, enabling these learners to extract motivational significance from a broader array of learning episodes. In contrast, non-DMC learners, whose

motivation tended to be inconsistent and externally driven, often lacked the reflective tools or emotional integration necessary to articulate such a wide variety of motivational influences. The observed asymmetry between DMC and non-DMC learners serves as the foundation for the following discussion, where the interplay of these themes is examined in relation to learners' dynamic motivational change.

Table 14. Motivators and demotivators in DMC and non-DMC groups across educational stages

School Level	Group	Motivators	Demotivators
Elementary	DMC	- Emotional and social internalization - Enhanced self-efficacy - Curiosity and novelty toward a new language	- Long-term exposure to the same teacher and lecture-style instruction - Perceived failure and threats to self-efficacy - Decreased interest due to academic orientation in English learning
	Non-DMC	- Socially mediated confidence and engagement - Self-discovery and mastery through instruction - Gradual academic maturity and responsibility	- Initial lack of foundational knowledge - Low academic interest in early years
Middle	DMC	- Social interaction - Meaningful progress - Academic pressure - Positive teacher mediation - Autonomy	- Pandemic induced disruption - Institutional instability - Cognitive overload or physical fatigue
	Non-DMC	- Unrealistic goal engagement - Peer comparison and competitive drive - Breakthrough and reframed understanding	- Disillusionment - Academic disappointment - Early confusion and self-doubt
High	DMC	- Growth mindset - Self-regulation - Social recognition and identity - Support from teacher - Personal academic milestones	- Grade-driven pressure - Emotional burnout - Instructional mismatch - Comparison with peers
	Non-DMC	- Realization of academic urgency - Strategic shift in learning methods - Emotional validation through success	- Effort-outcome discrepancy - Comparison with peers

5. Discussion

5.1. School-level patterns in motivational development

This study examined the motivational experiences of male EFL learners in Korea across three school levels, distinguishing between those who demonstrated sustained motivational trajectories (DMC groups) and those whose motivation was more fluctuating (non-DMC groups). While both groups were exposed to similar learning contexts, the patterns of engagement differed significantly depending on school level and group classification.

At the elementary level, DMC learners often recalled emotionally rich and socially meaningful experiences—such as music-based activities, group projects, and teacher encouragement—that served as early motivational anchors. These experiences were interpreted not merely as enjoyable but as formative, allowing learners to build a positive emotional orientation toward English learning. In SCT terms, these experiences can be understood as instances of *perezhivanie*, where cognition and emotion merge to shape lasting impressions. These early encounters formed the emotional and interpretive foundation upon which DMC learners built sustained motivation. This resonates with Mercer's (2011) discussion of how emotionally meaningful experiences shape learner's self-concept, highlighting the role of such experiences not only in forming identity, but also in sustaining long-term motivation through a stable and agentive sense of self.

In contrast, non-DMC learners at the same level often reported similarly enjoyable events; however, these experiences were less frequently integrated into their self-concept or future vision. The key difference lay not in the absence of affordances, but in the learners' limited perception or internalization of them. As van Lier (2004) notes, affordances must be recognized and acted upon in order to become meaningful. In the case of non-DMC learners, many affordances appeared to remain passive or unnoticed. This lack of recognition and internalization of meaningful learning opportunities hindered their ability to sustain a high level of motivation in L2 learning.

These contrasts became even more pronounced in middle and high school. While both groups encountered academic pressures, instructional misalignments, and disruptions (e.g., COVID-19), DMC learners often reframed these challenges through goal-setting, self-regulation, and social interaction. They demonstrated what Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 79) describe as a "mediated mind"—actively

employing cultural and social tools (e.g., peer collaboration, teacher feedback) to transform setbacks into renewed effort. In contrast, non-DMC learners tended to respond more passively to similar obstacles, often falling into demotivation in the face of external disappointments such as poor test results or unmet goals. This divergence became particularly evident in high school, where DMC learners increasingly aligned their goals with personal values and exercised greater self-regulation, whereas non-DMC learners struggled with emotional fatigue and the pressure of performance-based comparisons.

5.2. Similarities and differences between DMC and non-DMC groups

Despite the differences described above, there were also important similarities between the two groups. Both DMC and non-DMC learners reported engaging in enjoyable or encouraging learning activities during elementary school, such as games, songs, or praise from teachers. In both groups, such events often served as early motivational triggers. Additionally, both groups described encountering demotivating challenges—academic failure, peer comparison, or pandemic-related disruption—particularly during middle and high school years. These common experiences suggest that learners in both groups were exposed to comparable emotional and environmental conditions.

However, it was not the presence or absence of such experiences but rather the learners' subjective interpretive frameworks that accounted for the stark differences between the two groups. DMC learners, while not immune to burnout or failure, were able to make sense of adverse experiences in ways that supported sustained motivation. These setbacks were often reframed as positive turning points through self-reflection, teacher support, or alignment with broader goals. This finding supports Ushioda's (2011b) view of learners as interpretive agents who actively mediate their motivational experiences through personal meaning-making and contextual engagement. In contrast, non-DMC learners appeared to lack the interpretive tools or mediated support necessary to transform such moments into opportunities for growth. As a result, their motivational trajectories tended to be more sporadic and emotionally fragile.

The difference in response to affordances further illustrates this divide. For example, Respondent 1 described how studying English became more enjoyable and motivating when shared with peers. He recalled making exam preparation more engaging by discussing passages with friends, laughing at fun parts, and quizzing

one another. This shift from solitary study to socially mediated engagement illustrates how peer interaction functioned as an affectively meaningful affordance. In SCT terms, this represents both *perezhivanie*—where experience is cognitively and emotionally unified—and mediation, as peer interaction served as a cultural artifact for regulating motivation. In contrast, learners in the non-DMC groups often described similar instances—such as praise, games, or instructional support—but these did not evolve into affordances or sustained sources of motivation. As shown in Excerpt 10, one student initially became highly motivated after watching an American drama and envisioning a future life in New York. However, when that dream was later perceived as unrealistic, the motivation quickly faded. In this case, the learner's vision functioned as a temporary motivational spike rather than as a mediated, internalized resource. With appropriate peer collaboration and other mediational artifacts, this episodic memory could have been transformed into an affordance that supported more sustained engagement.

In sum, the divergence between DMC and non-DMC learners highlights the central role of emotionally anchored, socially mediated, and personally meaningful learning in the formation of long-term motivation. While external triggers may initiate engagement, it is the learner's interpretive, emotional, and social integration of these experiences that regulate their motivational resilience.

6. Summary and Implications

This study examined the motivators and demotivators among Korean male EFL learners in the DMC groups and non-DMC groups through the lens of SCT. DMC learners showed sustained motivation supported by emotionally engaging experiences, clear goals, and consistent social support. Activities like group projects or English songs served as positive *perezhivanie*, helping learners internalize English learning as personally meaningful. Peer collaboration and teacher mediation played a key role in helping DMC learners reframe setbacks as opportunities for growth. These forms of support contributed to sustained engagement by allowing learners to connect their efforts with emotionally meaningful goals. In contrast, non-DMC learners exhibited inconsistent motivation. They often depended on external factors such as competition or future ambitions, but their drive weakened when expectations were not met or emotional stress increased. The absence of emotionally meaningful learning opportunities—often due to repetitive academic instruction—discouraged

their participation.

While previous research has highlighted the importance of emotionally meaningful experiences and social support in sustaining L2 motivation (Kim, 2021; Oh & Kim, 2024), the present study attempts to build on these insights by applying sociocultural theory to interpret how motivation is dynamically constructed over time (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; van Lier, 2004). In addition, rather than viewing motivation as a static trait or examining it as an aggregated construct, this study explores how motivational experiences vary across three developmental stages, with the aim of capturing context-sensitive changes in individual learners' motivational patterns.

The comparative analysis suggests three key implications. First, motivational sustainability is not maintained by external stimuli alone; it requires emotionally significant experiences that are socially mediated and internalized over time. The findings revealed that learners in the DMC groups were more likely to transform affectively rich experiences—such as group projects, music-based tasks, or collaborative study during exam preparation—into long-term motivation, especially when these experiences were interpreted through meaningful social interactions. Second, affordances must be actively perceived, not merely offered. For example, the same learning environment—such as the shift to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic—was interpreted differently depending on learners. While some students found the isolation conducive to focus and developed self-regulated routines, others experienced a lack of support, which disrupted their motivation. Third, effective interventions should emphasize mediation and internalization by supporting learners' self-reflection and strategy development. As shown in several non-DMC learner narratives, motivation often fluctuated depending on external outcomes such as grades or peer comparisons. To support more stable engagement, it is important to provide emotionally meaningful, socially mediated learning experiences that promote internalization and self-regulation over time.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations that warrant acknowledgment. The reliance on retrospective self-reported narratives may have introduced memory-related distortions or post-hoc rationalizations, although guiding participants to reflect on distinct educational stages was intended to mitigate such effects. Future research could enhance validity through more robust data triangulation—such as incorporating classroom observations or motivational logs—to complement learners' reflective accounts. Although this study compared DMC and non-DMC learners, it did not track motivational development over time. In this regard, a longitudinal approach could provide a more dynamic understanding of how

DMC emerges and evolves in real-life learning contexts. Finally, future research could extend this work by examining sociocultural variables beyond gender and school level to gain a richer understanding of how motivation is shaped within diverse educational ecologies.

References

Al-Horrie, A. H. (2017). Sixty years of language motivation research: Looking back and looking forward. *SAGE Open, 7*(1), 1-11.

Busse, V. (2013). An exploration of motivation and self-beliefs of first year students of German. *System, 41*(2), 379-398.

Cross, R. (2012). Creative in finding creativity in the curriculum: The CLIL second language classroom. *The Australian Educational Researcher, 39*(4), 431-445.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). *Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior.* Plenum.

Dörnyei, Z., & Kubanyiova, M. (2014). *Motivating learners, motivating teachers*. Cambridge University Press.

Dörnyei, Z., & Ushioda, E. (2021). *Teaching and researching motivation* (3rd ed.). Routledge.

Dörnyei, Z., Henry, A., & Muir, C. (2016). *Motivational currents in language learning: Frameworks for focused interventions*. Routledge.

Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 62*(1), 107-115.

Gardner, R. C. (2010). *Motivation and second language acquisition: The socio-educational model.* Peter Lang.

Haggerty, J. F., & Fox, J. (2015). Raising the bar: Language testing experience and second language motivation among South Korean young adolescents. *Language Testing in Asia, 5*(11), 1-16.

Henry, A., Dörnyei, Z., & Davydenko, S. (2015). The anatomy of directed motivational currents: Exploring intense and enduring periods of L2 motivation. *The Modern Language Journal, 99*(2), 329-345.

Karimi, M. N., & Parsamajd, Z. (2025). Factors maintaining EFL learners' directed motivational currents in learning English: An activity-theory-informed multiple case study. *English Teaching & Learning, 49*(3), 361-387.

Kim, M., & Kim, T.-Y. (2013). Same environment, different affordances: Ecological

analysis of four different learners in a university context. *English Language & Literature Teaching, 19*(1), 133-155.

Kim, T.-Y. (2020). *New horizons in English learning motivation research*. Hankukmunhwasa.

Kim, T.-Y. (2021). *Perezhivaniya* in L2 learning and motivation from a sociocultural perspective: A qualitative analysis of retrospective L2 learning essays. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction, 30*(Part A), 100521.

Lamb, M. (2012). A self system perspective on young adolescents' motivation to learn English in urban and rural settings. *Language Learning, 62*(4), 997-1023.

Lantolf, J. P. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford University Press.

Lantolf, J. P., & Poehner, M. E. (2014). *Sociocultural theory and the pedagogical imperative in L2 education: Vygotskian praxis and the research/practice divide*. Routledge.

Lantolf, J. P., & Thorne, S. L. (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford University Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.

Mercer, S. (2011). *Towards an understanding of language learner self-concept*. Springer.

Muir, C., & Dörnyei, Z. (2013). Directed motivational currents: Using vision to create effective motivational pathways. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching, 3*(3), 357-375.

Norton, B., & Toohey, K. (2011). Identity, language learning, and social change. *Language Teaching, 44*(4), 412-446.

Oh, S., & Kim, T.-Y. (2024). A qualitative approach to Korean EFL students' L2 motivation and directed motivational currents. *Language Research, 60*(2), 151-176.

Olson, D. R. (1994). *The world on paper: The conceptual and cognitive implications of writing and reading*. Cambridge University Press.

Pavlenko, A. (2003). "I never knew I was a bilingual": Reimagining teacher identities in TESOL. *Journal of Language, Identity & Education, 2*(4), 251-268.

Pintrich, P. R. (2003). A motivational science perspective on the role of student motivation in learning and teaching contexts. *Jornal of Educational Psychology, 95*(4), 667-686.

Ushioda, E. (2011a). Motivating learners to speak as themselves. In G. Murray, X. Gao & T. Lamb (Eds.), *Identity, motivation and autonomy in language learning* (pp. 11-24). Channel View.

Ushioda, E. (2011b). Why autonomy? Insights from motivation theory and research.

Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching, 5(2), 221-232.
Ushioda, E. (2012). Motivation: L2 learning as a special case? In S. Mercer, S. Ryan & M. Williams (Eds.), *Psychology for language learning* (pp. 58-73). Palgrave Macmillan.
Van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning: A sociocultural perspective*. Springer.
Veresov, N., & Mok, N. (2018). Understanding development through the *perezhivanie* of learning. In J. P. Lantolf, M. E. Poehner & M. Swain (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of sociocultural theory and second language development* (pp. 89-101). Routledge.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1935/1994). The problem of the environment. In R. Van der Veer & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *The Vygotsky reader* (pp. 338-354). Blackwell.
Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.

Namhee Yu
Graduate Student
Department of English Education
Chung-Ang University
84 Heukseok-ro, Dongjak-gu, Seoul 06974, Korea
E-mail: kinye1016@gmail.com

Tae-Young Kim
Professor
Department of English Education
Chung-Ang University
84 Heukseok-ro, Dongjak-gu, Seoul, 06974, Korea
E-mail: tykim@cau.ac.kr

Received: July 6, 2025
Revised version received: August 8, 2025
Accepted: August 23, 2025

Appendix

<A retrospective on my English learning experience>

1. Quantify your English learning motivation over the four-year from 3rd grade to 6th grade of elementary school (use 0 to represent no motivation to learn English at all and accurately indicate the relative strength of your motivation for each year on a scale from 0 to 10).

Grade	3rd grade of elementary school	4th grade of elementary school	5th grade of elementary school	6th grade of elementary school
Level of English learning motivation	9	8	7	10

2. Describe the characteristics of the change of the numbers above (e.g., how and why you maintained a high level of motivation, what caused your low motivation to suddenly increase, and vice versa).

When I was in elementary school, English classes weren't difficult, and most of the time we played English games, so I enjoyed learning. I even participated in school English drama competitions and off-campus English speech contests, winning several awards. I could study English as much as I wanted never lose motivation. In sixth grade, I attended a language institute for the first time and after scoring high on the level test, I gained a great deal of confidence in my English ability. Studying English with new friends was truly a memorable experience.

3. Quantify your English learning motivation over the three-year period from 1st grade to 3rd grade of middle school (use 0 to represent no motivation to learn English at all and accurately indicate the relative strength of your motivation for each year on a scale from 0 to 10).

Grade	1st grade of middle school	2nd grade of middle school	3rd grade of middle school
Level of English learning motivation	10	7	7

4. Describe the characteristics of the change of the numbers above (e.g., how and why you maintained a high level of motivation, what caused your low motivation to suddenly increase, and vice versa).

In my first year of middle school, due to COVID-19, I was stuck at home and spent almost all 365 days just studying. Since I hadn't yet experienced the fun of hanging out with middle school friends, studying actually felt like the most enjoyable part of my life at the time. I think the English I studied during that period became the foundation of my current skills. In second grade, I started preparing for school English exams, and for the first time, I began to feel that studying English was tiring. Still, even in the repetitive and dull routine of solving the same passages every day, I managed to find small joys that helped me keep going. I studied with a friend from the same school and academy—we would talk about the passages, find funny parts, and memorize the content in a humorous way. We also quizzed each other and competed, which helped make studying English something we could truly enjoy and succeed at together.

5. Quantify your English learning motivation over the three-year period from 1st grade to 3rd grade of high school (use 0 to represent no motivation to learn English at all and accurately indicate the relative strength of your motivation for each year on a scale from 0 to 10).

Grade	1st grade of high school	2nd grade of high school	3rd grade of high school
Level of English learning motivation	5	4	9

6. Describe the characteristics of the change of the numbers above (e.g., how and why you maintained a high level of motivation, what caused your low motivation to suddenly increase, and vice versa).

After entering high school, I found myself memorizing dozens of reading passages and studying English simply because I felt I had to, not because I was motivated. At that time, I really disliked studying English and often questioned whether it was even meaningful to learn the language in such an academic way. I wondered, "Will this ever be useful in the future?" However, as I became involved in various activities related to my future career, my perspective began to change. I came to realize that English is truly essential for pursuing my dream. I aim to become a scholar recognized on a global scale, and to do that, fluent English is not just helpful—it's fundamental. English is also indispensable throughout the learning and research process. These days, I continue my English studies with a clear vision of my future self in mind.