

Relatedness and Autonomy Support in Korean L2 Classrooms: Effects on Learners' Goals, Persistence, and Stress

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ABSTRACT

Learning a new language can be both stimulating and challenging, particularly in intensive programs. This study examines the relationship between needs-supportive teaching and Korean L2 learners' motivations and learning attitudes. University students completed surveys that assessed their perceptions of autonomy- and relatedness-supportive teaching, as well as intrinsic and extrinsic goals, and learning outcomes, including stress and persistence. The results highlighted the central role of relatedness support; learners who perceived stronger relational behaviors such as warmth, attentiveness, and encouragement reported higher intrinsic goal endorsement, greater persistence, and lower learning-related stress. Intrinsic goals were also positively linked to the learners' willingness to continue studying Korean. Autonomy support did not emerge as a unique predictor when modeled alongside relatedness support, likely reflecting their interrelated contributions to adaptive motivation. These findings underscore the importance of fostering relationally supportive teacher–student interactions to promote self-determined, resilient, and engaged learners. Practical implications of L2 instruction include enhancing relational support, reducing stress, and sustaining long-term engagement.

Keywords: Korean L2 education, goal contents, need-supportive teaching

1. Introduction

In recent years, interest in learning Korean as a second language (L2) has grown rapidly. Although comprehensive statistics on enrollment in university-based Korean language programs are limited, broader trends indicate substantial international growth. According to OECD data, Korea ranks tenth among member countries in international student growth (Lee, 2025), reflecting both the increasing global

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influence of Korean culture and the rising academic and professional value of Korean language proficiency. Given that many Korean universities require high levels of linguistic competence for degree admission, enrollment in university-affiliated Korean language programs has likely increased in parallel.

This expansion presents both challenges and opportunities for pedagogy. As programs accommodate increasingly diverse learner populations, sustaining motivation, fostering meaningful engagement, and promoting persistence have become central concerns (Dörnyei, 2009; Noels et al., 2000). Long-term success in L2 learning depends not only on linguistic competence but also on motivational quality—specifically, the extent to which learners pursue personally meaningful goals and perceive their learning environment as supportive of their basic psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Noels, 2001; Ushioda, 2011). Identifying instructional strategies that promote adaptive motivation is therefore critical, both for enhancing individual learning outcomes and for improving student retention and program quality.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a well-established framework for understanding these processes (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). SDT posits that satisfaction of three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—supports optimal motivation, engagement, and well-being. In educational contexts, need-supportive teaching—defined as teaching that facilitates autonomy through meaningful choice, nurtures competence through scaffolding, and fosters relatedness through care and connection—has consistently been associated with higher intrinsic motivation, persistence, and engagement (Jang et al., 2016; Reeve, 2012).

Despite extensive evidence in general education, relatively few studies have examined these processes among adult Korean L2 learners. In particular, the association between different forms of need support and learners' goal contents—the intrinsic or extrinsic reasons driving their language learning—remains underexplored. This gap is important because prior SDT-based research indicates that pursuing intrinsic goals (e.g., personal growth, cultural interest, meaningful relationships) supports self-determined motivation, whereas extrinsic goals (e.g., financial reward, social recognition) are linked to controlled motivation and lower persistence (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Among these dimensions, autonomy and relatedness support may be particularly crucial for adult L2 learners who navigate culturally and linguistically unfamiliar settings. Autonomy-supportive teaching promotes learners' internal motivational

resources by encouraging self-endorsed engagement, offering meaningful rationales, and acknowledging learners' perspectives (Jang et al., 2016; Reeve & Cheon, 2021). Such support fosters intrinsic motivation and resilience when facing linguistic or cultural challenges (Noels, 2001; Noels et al., 2000). Relatedness support, in turn, nurtures a sense of belonging and emotional security, buffering stress and sustaining engagement through social connection (Bao & Lam, 2008; Ushioda, 2011). Given that many Korean language learners experience both high aspirations and socioemotional strain in adapting to new academic and cultural demands, focusing on autonomy and relatedness support offers a meaningful lens for understanding motivational quality in this context.

Furthermore, this study focuses on stress and persistence as key learning attitudes reflecting emotional and behavioral adaptation. Need-supportive teaching can reduce stress by enhancing volition and connection, while promoting persistence through internalized motivation (Jang et al., 2016; Vansteenkiste et al., 2010). Examining these outcomes together provides an integrated view of how motivational quality translates into both adjustment and sustained engagement in Korean L2 learning. The present study sought to address this gap by examining how perceived need-supportive teaching—particularly autonomy and relatedness support—is associated with Korean L2 learners' endorsement of intrinsic and extrinsic goals, as well as related learning attitudes, including stress and persistence. By focusing on these relationships, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of motivational dynamics in Korean language education and practical insights for designing learning environments that foster sustained engagement, goal internalization, and learner well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical frameworks in Korean L2 research

Until recently, research on motivation among learners of Korean as a second language (L2) has been largely grounded in Gardner's socio-educational model, with limited integration of contemporary theoretical perspectives (Tong, 2018). In contrast, broader L2 motivation research has undergone a substantial paradigm shift over the past two decades, moving beyond the socio-educational framework toward more dynamic models, including Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System

(L2MSS) and SDT (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This shift reflects the recognition that L2 learning motivation cannot be fully captured by static constructs such as integrativeness and attitudes alone; rather, motivation is a dynamic, self-regulated, and contextually embedded process (Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2021). While the socio-educational model and L2MSS were developed specifically for language learning contexts, SDT offers a broader framework for understanding the “why” and “what” of human behavior across domains.

2.2. SDT in L2 learning

SDT (SDT) provides a framework for understanding why learners engage in certain activities and what drives the quality of their motivation. Motivation exists along a continuum, from extrinsic regulation—where behavior is driven by external rewards, social approval, or other pressures—to intrinsic regulation, where engagement is fueled by genuine interest and enjoyment. Central to SDT is the satisfaction of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy reflects learners’ sense of volition and choice in their actions, competence captures their sense of effectiveness and skill, and relatedness involves feeling connected and supported within a social context. When these needs are met, learners are more likely to pursue intrinsic goals; when needs are frustrated, motivation can become controlled or even disengaged (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In language learning contexts, teachers play a pivotal role in supporting these needs. Autonomy-supportive behaviors—such as offering meaningful choices or encouraging self-regulated learning—scaffold learners’ sense of agency. Relatedness-supportive behaviors, including attentiveness, care, and interpersonal warmth, strengthen learners’ sense of belonging and connection (Jang et al., 2016; Reeve, 2012). Evidence from L2 research shows that need-supportive instruction enhances autonomous motivation, persistence, engagement, and achievement, whereas controlling teaching practices can undermine these outcomes (Al-Hoorie et al., 2022).

Despite these general findings, research focusing on Korean L2 learners remains sparse. Most prior studies have characterized learners’ motivational profiles or examined broad links to outcomes (e.g., Koh & Kim, 2011; Li, 2015), leaving questions about how specific forms of need support—autonomy and relatedness—shape learners’ intrinsic and extrinsic goal endorsement largely unanswered (Tong, 2018). Early evidence suggests that patterns observed in other L2 settings may also

apply to Korean learning. For example, Choi (2015) found that autonomy-supportive teaching enhanced autonomous motivation among Chinese learners of Korean. Yet, systematic investigation connecting teachers' support behaviors to learners' goal contents and learning attitudes is still needed.

2.3. Need-supportive teaching, goal contents, and learning outcomes in L2 contexts

Within the framework of SDT (SDT), need-supportive teaching refers to instructional behaviors that promote students' satisfaction of the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Teachers who enact these behaviors cultivate classroom environments that enhance voluntary engagement, high-quality motivation, and adaptive learning outcomes (Reeve, 2012; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Autonomy-supportive teaching involves acknowledging students' perspectives, providing meaningful choices, offering rationales for tasks, and minimizing controlling language (Reeve & Jang, 2006). These practices foster a sense of volition and ownership, which in turn enhance intrinsic motivation and persistence. Competence support entails offering clear guidance, optimally challenging tasks, and constructive feedback that promote students' sense of mastery (Jang et al., 2010). Relatedness support encompasses expressing care, respect, and genuine interest in students' well-being, thereby fostering belonging and emotional connection to the classroom (Furrer & Skinner, 2003).

A substantial body of research demonstrates that need-supportive teaching enhances engagement, learning strategies, and well-being across educational settings (Jang et al., 2016; Niemiec & Ryan, 2009). In L2 contexts, autonomy support predicts intrinsic motivation, persistence, and willingness to communicate (Dincer et al., 2019; Noels et al., 2019), while relatedness support strengthens emotional engagement, resilience, and self-efficacy (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Sparks et al., 2015, 2016). However, the relative effects of autonomy and relatedness support may vary across cultural and instructional contexts. For instance, in highly structured programs with limited learner choice, relatedness support may become a particularly salient source of motivational energy (O'Reilly, 2014; Dincer et al., 2017).

Beyond the type of motivation, SDT also distinguishes goal contents—the specific aims learners pursue—as a critical determinant of motivational quality. Goals can be broadly categorized as intrinsic (e.g., personal growth, meaningful relationships,

community contribution) or extrinsic (e.g., wealth, fame, external approval) (Kasser & Ryan, 1996; Ryan & Deci, 2017). Intrinsic goals are generally aligned with autonomous motivation and well-being, whereas extrinsic goals correspond with controlled motivation and poorer adjustment (Vansteenkiste et al., 2006). In L2 learning, intrinsic goals such as genuine interest in the target language or intercultural understanding predict sustained engagement and achievement, while extrinsic goals such as fulfilling institutional requirements or gaining social recognition tend to relate to surface-level learning and stress (Noels et al., 2003; Kim & Kim, 2020).

Integrating these perspectives, need-supportive teaching is theorized to facilitate adaptive goal endorsement through the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (Adie et al., 2012; Deci et al., 2001; Ferber et al., 2024; Milyavskaya & Koestner, 2011; Zhang et al., 2021). When students experience autonomy and relatedness support, they are more likely to internalize intrinsic goals and approach learning with sustained engagement and lower stress (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Sparks et al., 2015, 2016). Conversely, controlling or unsupportive environments may foster extrinsic goal pursuits driven by pressure or external approval, which can undermine persistence and well-being (Vansteenkiste et al., 2004a, 2004b).

Despite these insights, relatively few studies have examined the joint contribution of need-supportive teaching and goal contents in L2 contexts, particularly among learners of Korean. Prior work has often emphasized autonomy support and intrinsic motivation (Choi, 2015), leaving open questions about how relatedness support shapes learners' intrinsic and extrinsic goals and, in turn, their learning attitudes such as stress and persistence. Addressing this gap may illuminate how supportive teaching behaviors promote meaningful and sustainable motivation in structured L2 programs.

2.4. The purpose of the present study

Grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000, 2017), the present study examined how autonomy-supportive and relatedness-supportive teaching relate to Korean L2 learners' intrinsic and extrinsic learning goals and, in turn, to two attitudinal outcomes—stress and persistence in Korean study. Although SDT highlights three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness—the present study focused on autonomy and relatedness support for both theoretical and contextual reasons.

Theoretically, autonomy and relatedness represent interpersonal qualities of teaching that are most observable in classroom interactions and directly shape students' motivational orientations (Jang et al., 2016; Reeve, 2016). Contextually, Korean L2 programs are often structured around standardized curricula and fixed schedules (Davis, 2022; Oga-Baldwin & Ryan, 2025), which constrain opportunities for autonomy but make teachers' interpersonal behaviors especially salient for supporting students' sense of volition and connection. In contrast, competence support—such as providing structure or optimal challenge—is typically institutionalized through curriculum design and assessment practices rather than varying widely across instructors in this context. Furthermore, stress and persistence were selected as attitudinal outcomes because they represent affective and behavioral indicators of learners' adaptation in sustained language learning. Together, these variables allow for an integrated test of how need-supportive teaching relates to learners' motivation and well-being. Accordingly, the present study addressed two questions:

1. How are autonomy- and relatedness-supportive teaching behaviors associated with learners' intrinsic and extrinsic learning goals?
2. How do these motivational goals, in turn, relate to learners' stress and persistence in Korean language study?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and procedure

Participants were 92 Korean L2 learners enrolled in full-time Korean language programs at university-affiliated Korean Language Institutes across South Korea. Full-time enrollment was defined as attending 4–5 hours of classroom instruction per day, five days per week, over an 8–10-week academic term. This intensive schedule facilitated frequent learner–instructor interaction, making the assessment of need-supportive teaching particularly relevant.

Although participants were recruited from multiple institutions, university-based Korean language programs in South Korea generally follow the standardized six-level TOPIK (Test of Proficiency in Korean) framework, minimizing variability across sites. Of 107 initial responses, 15 were excluded due to missing data, response errors, or duplication, resulting in a final sample of 92 participants from 25 programs nationwide. Most participants attended institutions in Seoul, with the largest

representation from a single program being 17 students.

Participants' first languages spanned 26 languages, with the most common being English (n=23), Spanish (n=12), French (n=9), and Chinese (n=6). On average, participants had studied Korean in a university-based program for approximately six months. Participants were recruited via social media, personal networks, and campus flyers. After providing informed consent, they completed an online questionnaire assessing perceptions of need-supportive teaching, learning goals, and learning attitudes. To encourage participation, respondents were entered into a raffle for small gift card prizes.

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Learning goal contents

Students' endorsement of intrinsic and extrinsic goals was measured using a 12-item scale adapted from the Aspirations Index (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996). The scale comprised six categories, evenly divided between intrinsic and extrinsic goals. Intrinsic goals included: (a) close relationships (e.g., maintaining meaningful connections with others), (b) personal growth and interest (e.g., developing oneself and acquiring new knowledge), and (c) community integration and contribution (e.g., integrating into Korean society and contributing to the community). Extrinsic goals included: (a) wealth and career advancement (e.g., obtaining a higher-paying job), (b) fame and social recognition (e.g., achieving public acknowledgment or professional prestige), and (c) institutional requirements (e.g., fulfilling visa or university enrollment obligations).

Participants rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). The scale demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.67 for intrinsic goals and 0.76 for extrinsic goals. Although the reliability for intrinsic goals was slightly below conventional thresholds, it was considered acceptable for use in cross-sectional analyses.

3.2.2. Need-supportive teaching

Participants' perceptions of need-supportive teaching were assessed through autonomy support and relatedness support. Autonomy support was measured using a modified version of the Daily Teacher Autonomy Practices – Student Report

(DTAP–SR; Patall et al., 2017), which captures the extent to which teachers provide meaningful choice and encourage self-directed learning (e.g., “My teacher(s) allow me to choose how to do my work in the classroom”).

Relatedness support was assessed by combining three items from the Teacher Support subscale of the Students’ Perceptions of Their Classroom Social Environment (Ryan & Patrick, 2001) with nine items from the Teacher Support Scale (TSS; Metheny et al., 2008). Following Sparks et al. (2015, 2016), two additional items were added to further capture teacher–student relational quality (e.g., “My teacher(s) enjoy having me in their classes”; “My teacher(s) care about what happens to me”).

Both scales included 15 items, rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree). Internal consistency was excellent, with Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of 0.93 for autonomy support and 0.95 for relatedness support, indicating reliable measurement of perceived need-supportive teaching in this sample.

3.3. Informed Consent

Participants provided informed consent prior to participation, with assurances of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and anonymous data handling. All measures were originally in English and were administered in back-translated Korean and Chinese versions, following established procedures (Jang et al., 2010). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

4. Results

4.1. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations among the study variables. Relatedness support was positively correlated with intrinsic goal endorsement ($r=0.41$) and positive persistence ($r=0.47$), and negatively correlated with stress ($r=-0.21$). Autonomy support was moderately correlated with intrinsic goals ($r=0.28$) and positive persistence ($r=0.37$), but showed weaker associations with stress ($r=-0.09$) and extrinsic goals ($r=0.13$). Intrinsic goals were positively correlated with positive persistence ($r=0.42$), whereas extrinsic goals demonstrated minimal associations with other variables. Relatedness support and autonomy support were

strongly intercorrelated ($r=0.83$), reflecting that these dimensions of need support often co-occur in instructional contexts. The strong correlation between autonomy and relatedness support suggests potential overlap in variance, which should be considered in subsequent regression analyses, as it may attenuate the unique predictive effect of each predictor.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and zero-order correlations for study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Extrinsic goals	—					
2. Intrinsic goals	0.42	—				
3. Autonomy support	0.13	0.28	—			
4. Relatedness support	0.14	0.41	0.83	—		
5. Stress	0.13	-.04	-.09	-.21	—	
6. Positive persistence	0.05	0.42	0.37	0.47	-.33	—
<i>Descriptive statistics</i>						
Mean	2.77	3.58	3.7	3.94	3.45	4.14
Standard Deviation	0.93	0.74	0.83	0.85	1.29	1.05

Note. M=mean; SD=standard deviation. Correlations above 0.30 are considered moderate; correlations above 0.50 are considered strong (Cohen, 1988). The strong correlation between autonomy and relatedness support ($r=0.83$) suggests potential overlap in variance, which may attenuate unique effects in regression analyses.

4.2. Impact of need support on goal contents

The first phase of multiple linear regressions measured the predictive power of perceived need support on goals contents. Visual inspection of normality, linearity, and homoskedasticity suggests test assumptions were well met.

Table 2. Need support and extrinsic goals

	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	<i>SEE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Full model	0.14	0.02	0	0.93	0.95	2	0.391
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	
Constant	2.13		0.47	4.5	<.001	[1.19, 3.08]	
Autonomy support	0.07	0.06	0.21	0.31	0.759	[-0.36, 0.49]	
Relatedness support	0.1	0.09	0.21	0.49	0.623	[-0.31, 0.51]	

Note. *B*=unstandardized regression coefficient. *CI*=confidence interval.

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to examine whether autonomy support and relatedness support predicted agreement with extrinsic goals (Table 2). The overall model was not statistically significant, $F(2, 89)=0.95$, $p=.391$, and accounted for only 2% of the variance in extrinsic goal agreement, $R^2=.02$, adjusted $R^2 \approx .00$. This suggests that the combination of autonomy support and relatedness support does not meaningfully predict extrinsic goal orientation in this sample. Neither autonomy support ($\beta=0.06$, $t=0.31$, $p=.759$) nor relatedness support ($\beta=0.09$, $t=0.49$, $p=.623$) had a statistically significant impact on agreement with extrinsic goals.

Table 3. Need support and intrinsic goals

	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	<i>SEE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Full model	0.43	0.18	0.16	0.68	9.92	2	<.001
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	
Constant	2.26		0.34	6.57	<.001	[1.58, 2.94]	
Autonomy support	-0.17	-0.19	0.15	-1.12	0.267	[-0.48, 0.13]	
Relatedness support	0.5	0.57	0.15	3.33	0.001***	[0.2, 0.79]	

Note. *B*=unstandardized regression coefficient. *CI*=confidence interval. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$.

The second multiple regression to examine the predictive impact of both need support measures on intrinsic goal agreement (Table 3) was statistically significant, $F(2, 89)=9.92$, $p<.001$, and predicted 18% of variance in intrinsic goal agreement, $R^2=0.18$, adjusted R^2 0.16. Relatedness support ($\beta=0.57$, $t=3.33$, $p<.001$) was an individually significant predictor of intrinsic goal agreement, but autonomy support ($\beta=-0.19$, $t=-1.12$, $p=.267$) was not.

4.3. Impact of need support and goal contents on learning attitude

The second phase of multiple linear regressions examined the predictive power of perceived need support and agreement with goal contents on two attitude outcomes: stress related to learning Korean and positive feelings towards continuing to learn Korean. Assumptions of normality and homoskedasticity were well met. Inspection of scatterplots showed some unclear linearity for some predictors, likely due to stress and positive feelings towards continuing to learn Korean being measured by one survey item each.

In the first multiple regression examining the impact of need support and goal contents on stress towards learning Korean (Table 4), the model was not statistically significant, $F(4, 89)=2.17, p=.079$. The model only moderately predicted 9% of variance, $R^2=.09$, adjusted R^2 0.05. Extrinsic goals ($\beta=.15, t=1.31, p=.194$), intrinsic goals ($\beta=.02, t=-0.12, p=.904$), and autonomy support ($\beta=0.27, t=1.43, p=.156$) did not have a statistically significant impact on stress. Although the overall regression model did not reach statistical significance, relatedness support showed a significant negative association with stress ($\beta=-0.46, t=-2.34, p=.021$), suggesting that students who perceived stronger relational support from teachers tended to report lower stress levels.

Table 4. Goal contents and need support on stress

	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	<i>SEE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Full model	0.3	0.09	0.05	1.26	2.17	4	0.079
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	
Constant	3.97		0.79	5.04	<.001	[2.41, 5.54]	
Extrinsic goals	0.2	0.15	0.16	1.31	0.194	[-0.11, 0.52]	
Intrinsic goals	0.03	0.02	0.22	0.12	0.904	[-0.4, 0.46]	
Autonomy support	0.41	0.27	0.29	1.43	0.156	[-0.16, 0.99]	
Relatedness support	-0.69	-0.46	0.29	-2.34	0.021*	[-1.27, -0.1]	

Note. *B*=unstandardized regression coefficient. *CI*=confidence interval. * $p<.05$, ** $p<.01$.

In the second multiple regression examining the influence of need support and goal contents (extrinsic and intrinsic goals) on positive persistence attitude toward continuing Korean study (Table 5), the overall model was significant, $F(4, 89)=9.16$,

$p < .001$, explaining 30% of the variance ($R^2 = 0.30$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.26$). Individually, extrinsic goals ($\beta = -0.14$, $t = -1.36$, $p = .177$) and autonomy support ($\beta = 0.01$, $t = 0.08$, $p = .937$) were nonsignificant. Autonomy and relatedness support were strongly correlated ($r = 0.83$), reflecting that teachers who provide one form of need support often also provide the other. This high correlation may reduce the apparent unique effect of autonomy, even though both constructs remain conceptually distinct and autonomy remains theoretically important within SDT.

Table 5. Goal contents and need support on persistence attitude

	<i>R</i>	<i>R</i> ²	Adj. <i>R</i> ²	<i>SEE</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Full model	0.54	0.3	0.26	0.9	9.16	4	<.001***
	<i>B</i>	β	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	95% <i>CI</i>	
Constant	1.16		0.57	2.05	0.044	[0.03, 2.29]	
Extrinsic goals	-0.15	-0.14	0.11	-1.36	0.177	[-0.38, 0.07]	
Intrinsic goals	0.47	0.33	0.16	3	0.004**	[0.16, 0.78]	
Autonomy support	0.02	0.01	0.21	0.08	0.937	[-0.4, 0.43]	
Relatedness support	0.43	0.34	0.21	2	0.048*	[0, 0.85]	

Note. *B*=unstandardized regression coefficient. *CI*=confidence interval. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

In contrast, intrinsic goals significantly and positively predicted persistence attitude ($\beta = 0.33$, $t = 3.00$, $p = .004$), suggesting that students who endorse intrinsic learning goals—such as personal growth, enjoyment, or meaningful engagement—are more likely to maintain motivation to continue studying Korean L2. Relatedness support also positively predicted persistence attitude, though the effect was marginal ($\beta = 0.34$, $t = 2.00$, $p = .048$).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Understanding what drives motivation in structured language programs is essential for fostering both engagement and well-being. The present study examined how perceived need-supportive teaching—specifically autonomy and relatedness support—relates to Korean L2 learners’ goal contents and learning attitudes, including stress and persistence. By exploring these dynamics, the study illuminates how classroom

interactions can cultivate sustained motivation, support goal internalization, and promote positive learning experiences.

5.1. Need-supportive teaching and motivation in Korean L2 classrooms

Consistent with SDT, learners who perceived stronger relational support—manifested through warmth, attentiveness, and encouragement—were more likely to endorse intrinsic learning goals, persist in their Korean study, and experience lower learning-related stress. These findings suggest that relational behaviors constitute the most visible and influential pathway for promoting motivation in structured L2 classrooms (Cox et al., 1997; Froiland & Worrell, 2016; Lekes et al., 2009). Prior research similarly underscores the importance of relatedness support in structured learning contexts, providing the psychological foundation necessary for internalizing goals, sustaining engagement, and fostering resilience (Ferber et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2021; Dincer et al., 2019; Reeve & Jang, 2006).

Autonomy support, although central in SDT, did not emerge as a unique predictor in the regression analyses. This pattern likely reflects both its high correlation with relatedness support ($r=.83$) and the structural constraints inherent in intensive university-based L2 programs, such as fixed curricula and standardized assessments (Oga-Baldwin & Ryan, 2025; Reeve, 2006; Yang et al., 2025). Nonetheless, integrating autonomy-supportive strategies with relational support can enhance learners' sense of agency and ownership. For instance, instructors may provide meaningful choices in assignments, clarify task relevance, or encourage students to set personal learning goals, thereby fostering autonomy within structured programs.

Practically, fostering relatedness can involve personalized feedback that recognizes effort and progress, collaborative activities that encourage peer support, and informal discussions that demonstrate genuine interest in learners' experiences. Even modest relational gestures—such as checking in on progress, discussing culturally relevant topics, or celebrating incremental achievements—can strengthen students' sense of belonging and facilitate the internalization of intrinsic goals. When relational and autonomy-supportive strategies are combined thoughtfully, they create a coherent motivational environment that promotes persistence, engagement, and resilience.

5.2. Goal contents and learning outcomes

Learners' goal contents also played a crucial role in shaping their learning

attitudes. Contrary to expectations, intrinsic goal endorsement was not significantly associated with reduced learning-related stress. This suggests that, in intensive Korean programs, stress may be driven more by situational pressures—such as linguistic difficulty, program workload, or post-graduation uncertainty—than by motivational orientation alone (Auerbach et al., 2011; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Ling et al., 2016; Vansteenkiste et al., 2007; Mercer & Ryan, 2010). Even highly intrinsically motivated learners may therefore experience elevated stress under such structural demands.

By contrast, intrinsic goal endorsement was positively linked to learners' willingness to continue studying Korean. This pattern aligns with Vallerand's (1997, 2000) hierarchical model of motivation, which conceptualizes intrinsic goals as self-determined forms of regulation that promote sustained engagement and well-being across contexts. Within this framework, intrinsic goal orientations may help learners persist even under demanding conditions. These findings also corroborate SDT-based research showing that intrinsic goals foster self-determined motivation and long-term commitment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2004a, 2004b, 2006). Consistent with this, previous L2 studies report that learners driven by enjoyment, cultural understanding, or personal growth demonstrate stronger perseverance in language study (Nam, 2012; Noels et al., 2019; Ushioda, 2011). Although this study assessed attitudinal persistence rather than actual behavioral continuation, students' expressed willingness likely reflects underlying motivational processes.

From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest that supporting intrinsic goals can sustain long-term engagement even under high-pressure conditions. Educators may embed culturally meaningful and personally relevant tasks, encourage reflective goal-setting, and provide opportunities for choice within structured programs. Aligning goal-oriented instruction with relational and autonomy-supportive practices fosters a coherent motivational framework that nurtures both short-term engagement and long-term commitment.

5.3. Implications, limitations, and future directions

The present findings carry both theoretical and practical implications for L2 motivation and pedagogy. Theoretically, they extend Self-Determination Theory by showing how autonomy- and relatedness-supportive teaching jointly shape learners' motivational quality, goal internalization, and learning attitudes—including stress

and persistence—emphasizing the combined effect of these supports. Practically, even within highly structured programs with fixed curricula, Korean L2 teachers can foster motivation, sustain persistence, and reduce learning-related stress through autonomy-supportive behaviors—such as promoting intrinsic motivation, providing meaningful choices, acknowledging learners’ perspectives, and clarifying task relevance—and relatedness-supportive behaviors—such as demonstrating warmth, offering encouragement, providing personalized feedback, and fostering a sense of belonging. Together, these strategies highlight how everyday classroom interactions can meaningfully enhance learners’ engagement, emotional adjustment, and long-term commitment to language study.

The findings also highlight the central role of relatedness-supportive teaching in cultivating intrinsic goal alignment, positive learning orientations, and persistence within Korean L2 classrooms. Teacher–student relationships characterized by attentiveness, mutual respect, and emotional attunement may particularly support engagement in structured programs. While autonomy support remains a core principle of SDT, its practical influence may be moderated by structural constraints, such as fixed curricula and standardized assessments. Incorporating autonomy-supportive practices—like providing meaningful choices, clarifying task relevance, and fostering self-endorsed goals—within a relationally supportive environment can help sustain learners’ sense of agency and motivation over time.

Several limitations should be noted. The sample was modest and relied on self-report measures, which constrains generalizability and precludes causal inference. Stress and persistence were measured using single-item indicators, which may offer less precision than multi-item scales. Participant demographics were uneven, with a higher proportion of native English speakers, potentially limiting representativeness. Finally, the quantitative design restricts insight into the nuanced ways need-supportive teaching is enacted; future research could incorporate qualitative or mixed-method approaches for richer understanding.

Despite these limitations, the findings provide a theoretically grounded and practically relevant foundation for understanding the interplay between relational and autonomy-supportive teaching, goal contents, and learning outcomes. Future research could explore these dynamics with larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and multi-method assessments to clarify how need-supportive teaching supports sustained motivation, engagement, and goal internalization across diverse L2 learning contexts.

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Appendix

The purpose of this survey was to investigate students of Korean language programs' agreement or disagreement with statements about their personal learning goals, as well as their perceptions of teachers' behaviour. All items were measured on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is strongly disagree and 5 is strongly agree.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
1	2	3	4	5

Goal contents agreement

1. I am learning Korean to get a higher paying job.
2. I am learning Korean to deepen the commitment and intimacy I have with important Korean people in my life (romantic partners, friends, family).
3. I am learning Korean because it is required to enter a desired University program.
4. I am learning Korean to grow as a person and learn something new.
5. I am learning Korean to be admired by others.
6. I am learning Korean to integrate as a member of society in Korea.
7. I am learning Korean to be more financially successful in the future.
8. I am learning Korean to create new and lasting relationships with Korean people (romantic partner, friends etc.).
9. I am learning Korean because it is required to maintain or change my visa status.
10. I am learning Korean to further my interest in Korean language and culture.
11. I am learning Korean to be in entertainment / media and become famous.
12. I am learning Korean to improve the lives of others in my community, either in Korea or my home country.

Autonomy support

13. My teacher(s) allow me to choose how to do my work in the classroom.
14. My teacher(s) allow me to choose how to use my time for studying and classwork.
15. My teacher(s) encourage me to study in my own way.

16. My teacher(s) structure class activities around my interests.
17. My teacher(s) take my preferences into consideration.
18. My teacher(s) work my interests into his/her lesson(s).
19. My teacher(s) explain how what we were learning is important and useful.
20. My teacher(s) talk about the connection between what we are studying in class and real life.
21. My teacher(s) provide opportunities for me to ask questions.
22. My teacher(s) acknowledge and responds to my questions in class.
23. My teacher(s) are open to hearing criticism or complaints about activities.
24. My teacher(s) are was accepting of any negative feelings about course material.
25. My teacher(s) provide encouragement when I struggle with the course material.
26. My teacher(s) give suggestions when I struggle with course work.
27. My teacher(s) tell me when I make progress in learning course material.

Relatedness support

28. My teacher(s) make me feel comfortable to ask my questions.
29. My teacher(s) are interested in my future.
30. My teacher(s) take the time to help me get better grades.
31. My teacher(s) enjoy having me in their classes.
32. My teacher(s) care about what happens to me.
33. My teacher(s) think I should continue my Korean language education.
34. My teacher(s) support my goals for the future.
35. My teacher(s) are easy to talk to about class things.
36. My teacher(s) are easy to talk to about things besides class.
37. My teacher(s) respect my opinion.
38. My teacher(s) really understand how I feel.
39. My teacher(s) would try to help if I was sad or upset.
40. My teacher(s) know when to make jokes with students.
41. My teacher(s) are friendly and approachable.
42. My teacher(s) schedule time to talk to me one-on-one.

Attitudes

43. I feel stressed about learning Korean.
44. I feel positively about continuing to learn Korean.