

## Motivational Factors in the ESL Classroom

Kevin Baublitz

Associate Professor

Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, English Department

89 Wangsan-ri, Mohyeon-myeon, Cheoin-gu, Yongin-si, Gyeonggi-do

Tel: 31-330-4131

Email: [keiblitz@yahoo.com](mailto:keiblitz@yahoo.com)

## **I. Introduction**

It has always been a major goal in education to encourage motivation and try to make learning interesting for students. The term motivation is derived from the Latin “movere”, meaning “to move”, and is commonly defined as a cluster of factors that energizes behavior and gives it direction. Given the extraordinarily multi-dimensional nature of motivation, it is difficult to study, but perhaps it can best be analyzed by focusing on what causes people to perform a task. Words like “choice”, “persistence” and “effort” can be associated with motivation and it is connected to why people decide to do something or for how long and hard they will pursue a task. The factors that influence motivation and achievement within the context of a ESL learning environment is what this study analyzed, without any particular hypothesis or motivational theory in mind. The focus was on what a group of Korean university ESL students had to say about what does or does not positively affect their motivation to study English. The broader perspective of this study was to analyze student responses to a motivational survey and to suggest ways teachers can better foster a classroom environment that encourages the development of intrinsic motivation in an English as a second language classroom.

## **II. Motivational Types**

There are basically two motivational types that motivational theorists describe when trying to explain how students learn and what can provide the best classroom environment. One motivational type can be described as external or extrinsic motivation. The roots of extrinsic motivational theory come from the behaviorist B.F. Skinner’s research on behavior modification and the systematic use of rewards. The other motivational type is intrinsic motivation, which is characterized by autonomous or self-directed learning, where the student is in control of their own learning.

## **III. Extrinsic Motivation**

Those who believe that motivation to learn is prompted by external rewards believe that people are basically passive. Behaviorist philosopher Barry Schwartz notes that students will usually respond only when the

environment tempts them with the opportunity to get rewards or avoid punishments. When a learner receives an incentive or tangible reward to participate or to complete an activity, this is referred to as extrinsic motivation. When someone is extrinsically motivated, the individual spends time to complete an activity as a means to an end or to receive a reward of some type. However, Bowman has conducted research which appears to show decreased motivation among college students who were offered only extrinsic rewards. Bowman claims that rewards are too controlling, do not lead to learner autonomy and serve to undermine self-determination. He argues that extrinsically motivated students eventually become “de-motivated” which is a state characterized by the belief on the part of the student that their efforts are inconsequential to accomplish a specific task and that they lack the ability to do so.

In the field of second language learning and motivation, Park and Kim claim that Korean students are more motivated by social tradition, an extrinsic or an external source of motivation in learning English. Park and Kim suggest that while memorization of grammar and English vocabulary among Korean ESL students is above average, the students’ long term ability to stay motivated to master English over a life-time will be inhibited if they are only motivated by social tradition. Cluck points out that language learning will be inhibited if it relies solely on external controls such as parental approval. This seems to confirm what other studies have shown regarding the use of extrinsic rewards as the main motivational strategy in learning a language. Cluck suggests that since students need to be self-motivated in learning English as a second language, the teacher who de-emphasizes extrinsic rewards such as grades and verbal praise may foster a better language learning environment.

#### **IV. Intrinsic Motivation**

Intrinsic motivation is characterized as more of a self-determined event where learners take responsibility for their own learning and have more of a sense of control. Enhanced motivation is reliant on innate (intrinsic) factors that cause people to challenge themselves, just as young children do when exploring or encountering a new object for the first time. In the second language acquisition field, intrinsic motivation can be stimulated

when teachers become more a manager or facilitator of language learning and relinquish their traditional center-stage authoritarian position.

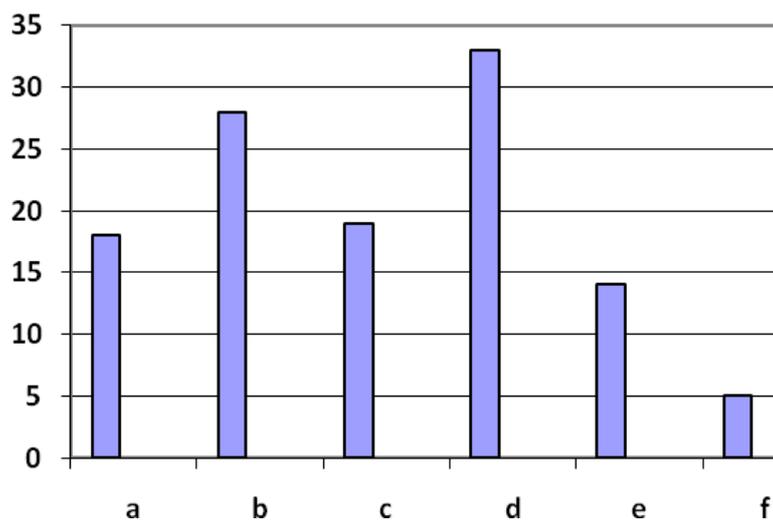
According to Dickinson, intrinsically motivated students become more inclined to set their own goals and monitor their own progress which benefits not only themselves, but the other language learners in the class with whom they interact in small group and paired work. Intrinsically motivated students therefore tend to be more creative and resourceful in using a second language because they are less reliant on the teacher and rather personalize their own learning because the learning involves their natural interest.

## **V. Questionnaire and Participants**

From a subject pool of 140 age eighteen to twenty four year old students of the English department from two major four year private Korean university campuses, survey questionnaires were distributed to students in ESL classes over a period of two weeks. Twenty three of the questionnaires could not be used for this study due to written responses which were not answered with enough specificity or were left blank. It should be noted that since the study was not cross sectional it would be unrealistic to suggest the results of the questionnaire were conclusive.

The survey questionnaire included these two questions:

- (1) In your experience, please explain what single reason or event there is for you to have been motivated to learn English. What encouraged you to stay positive about learning English? Please give the details.
  
- (2) In your experience please explain what single reason or event has discouraged you from being motivated to learn English? Please give the details of something that did not help you learn English.



**Table 1**

Positive Motivational Factors
(a) An English teacher I liked or an interesting class.
(b) Communication with native English speakers.
(c) Better understand English movies, music, and TV shows.
(d) The belief that English ability is necessary to get a job.
(e) Encouraged by parents and friends to learn English.
(f) English is the global or international language.

## VI. Discussion of Questions in Table 1.

(a) An English teacher I liked or interesting English class.

It seems clear that teachers can influence student motivation and achievement, but the frequent question often asked by teachers is why do some students put forth more effort and persist on academic tasks for one teacher, but not for another? Thayer-Bacon asserts that students who see professors who care and develop interactive relationships with students based on trust and respect take more responsibility for their own learning and demonstrate higher levels of intrinsically motivated behavior. Dweck suggests that teachers should create

learning environments in which students feel safe to take risks, with an emphasis on helping students to develop learning goals as opposed to performance goals (i.e. grades on tests). Once this kind of learning climate has been established, a caring teacher is then in a better position to maintain student interest in language learning and help the students remain engaged in learning. Students can then receive assistance from the teacher when the learning task becomes difficult, but still retain the sense that they are in control of their own learning. A student who was influenced positively by a teacher to stay motivated to learn English in this study included this comment on the survey:

*“When I was 12, I met an English teacher in an English institute who was very kind and taught English to our class enthusiastically. It was a great experience and motivated me to learn English.”*

Some might suspect that a teacher who uses praise frequently in class will probably be more liked by students and that fact will increase the chance that students will develop intrinsic motivation. The trouble with this concept is that overly praising the students' achievements can become a form of external reward and can move students toward over-reliance on the teacher. This can have results which are counterproductive to successful language learning. Students who become overly concerned with gaining favorable judgments of their competence from the teacher, may shy away from taking the necessary risks and challenges to avoid any chance of failure and losing the teacher's praise and approval. This may be especially true among Korean university students where “saving face” is more important than in the west. Sikkula-Leino's motivational study of Finnish ESL university students suggests that a good alternative when praising the students is for the instructor to praise the effort of the students as opposed to praising outward performance measurements. Teachers can help assure students that setbacks and failure are a natural stage in the second language learning process and put an emphasis, not on immediate demonstrations of intellectual prowess, but rather on perseverance and acquisition of language skills over time. This can help foster a learning environment where students are more likely to become intrinsically motivated to continue learning. While totally eliminating praise may not be a good choice either, to neither overdo praise nor use it in a controlling or manipulative way will help students to stay intrinsically motivated while learning another language.

(b) Communication with native English speakers.

Many universities throughout Asia have instituted a policy of hiring native-speaking English teachers to help students who have never traveled overseas to better understand the culture behind the English language. Native English-speaking teachers possess life experiences, new ideas, and teaching methods that can help arouse interest among students who have had little chance to communicate with native English speakers and perhaps better motivate students to learn English. However, many students surveyed responded that they had a non-native-speaking English teacher who inspired them to learn, which perhaps points to the strength of Korean English teacher's ability to more quickly identify their students' frustrations about grammar and pronunciation because of having gone through the same process to master English. One student wrote of her high school Korean teacher of English whose guidance sparked her interest in building her own speaking skills:

*"In high school, I joined an English Conversation Class as a leader. That class motivated me to learn English because I was interested to talk with native speaker. Of course, she was nice and encouraged my speaking."*

(c) Better understand English movies, music, and TV shows.

Teachers who can capitalize on the interests students already have in aspects of English-speaking countries' cultural exports such as music, television shows, and movies can perhaps help channel students' intrinsic interest to learn English. Numerous questions regarding these topics can be presented to students to discuss in pairs or groups in a student-centered language learning environment. This way, the teacher can harness the natural interest of students in a non-threatening classroom environment where the teacher plays more the role of guide in moving students from questioning to discussing their answers to the class as a whole. Much of the media that students enjoy, such as popular movies, can be used in the classroom. Showing short, two-to-four-minute clips with a variety of cultural contexts, videos from popular movies, and television shows may serve to foster intrinsic interest in English speaking and can help motivate students in an ESL/EFL class. Using short clips with

a specific linguistic focus is entirely different from the “just push play” approach, which does not give the students a chance to describe what they saw or have an opportunity to personalize their learning.

(d) The belief that English ability is necessary to get a job.

In an era of globalization, it appears that many students feel that being proficient using English is an important factor in landing a good-paying job. However, since the promise of a good job is really a form extrinsic motivation, perhaps this kind of counterproductive carrot-and-stick approach to encourage people to learn English can turn into an external crutch and can handicap their own intrinsic motivation. Kohn points out that both carrots and sticks can be effective at getting only one thing: temporary compliance. If learning English just for a job which pays good money becomes the focus, then this gets students focused on only the outcome rather than the uplifting and enriching experience of being intrinsically motivated to learn a language. Consider the following response from a student who appears to be motivated to get a job so that he can enjoy interacting with other people from other countries but did who does not mention anything about high pay or money.

*“I’ve lived in Dubai for four years when I was young so speaking English was part of my life then. Since my dream is to work in a trading company and interact with foreigners, it is my dream that kept me positive about English.”*

(e) Encouraged by parents and friends to learn English.

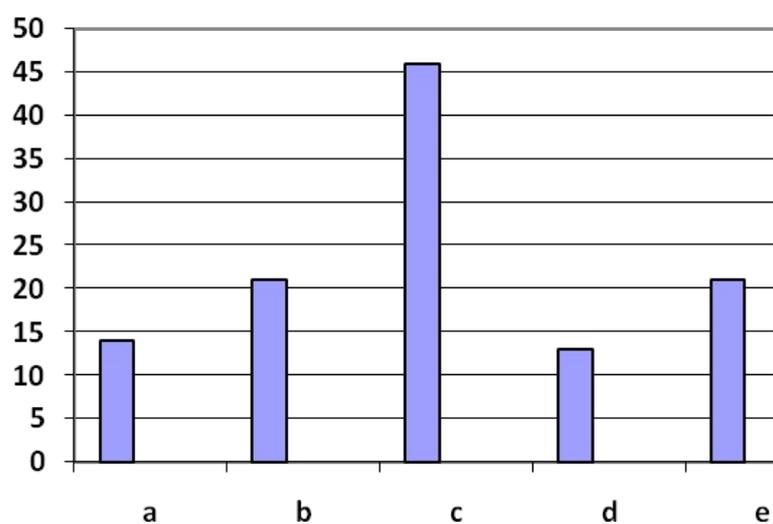
Fulk notes that outside pressure to succeed puts the language learner in the position of mastering English to please the parents (an extrinsic motivational source) more than from a desire to learn the language for their own sense of personal achievement. Dweck’s research with high school students suggests that teachers and parents should not overly praise easy successes because we may be teaching students that low-effort products are what they should be most proud of. She argues that friends and parents tend to exaggerate positives and candy-coat negatives, making them not the most objective people in aiding real academic development. Dweck suggests

that teachers can privately praise their students' efforts and that parents and friends can continue to provide a supportive role from the sidelines, but without being "heavy handed" either with praise or criticism to help facilitate students' autonomy.

(f) English is the global or international language.

Currently, Korean universities are doing more to help students have more opportunities to study abroad by organizing university to university student exchange programs. These opportunities can play a crucial role in helping students have authentic communication experiences with native speakers and better prepare students for the rapidly unfolding globalization in which English plays an important role. For students who don't study abroad, some useful ideas may include using classroom teaching materials which connect comparative cultural points to help students better master the language. The following student response reflects the belief that English is an important tool in today's globalized world:

*"One reason that made me study English is the fact that everything you do nowadays you do need to know English. To use the Internet, to see a movie, to do business, etc... So I thought that was essential to me to learn English."*



**Table 2**

Negative Motivational Factors
(a) Don't like the Korean testing system.
(b) Discouraged by comparisons to other students and ultra-competitiveness.
(c) Find English grammar difficult.
(d) English class was not interesting.
(e) Frustrating or embarrassing experience with native speaker.

## VII. Discussion of Questions in Table 2.

### (a) Don't like the Korean testing system

Since students in East Asian countries learn by repetition and memorization to pass the universities' entrance examinations, there are often few chances to practice using English in a real-world setting. English test-taking in many East Asian countries appears to serve the purpose of sorting students rather than becoming a tool that aids students' communicative language development. Perhaps some Korean students who participated in taking this survey resent a system in which they have had to study English for a test and still find themselves unable to communicate well in English. Perhaps by not elevating the importance of test grades, language teachers can turn the students' focus toward the importance of achieving their long-range goals incrementally and positively affect students' intrinsic motivation in studying English. Some research seems to point to a more useful role for testing by reporting that students who were given quizzes to help students monitor their own progress had increased intrinsic motivation as opposed to students who took quizzes that were evaluated by the teacher. This kind of testing shows more sensitivity toward letting students have more control over their own learning and could also have a positive impact on developing intrinsic motivation toward language learning.

### (b) Discouraged by comparisons to other students and ultra-competitiveness.

As Table 2 shows, the second most common response to the question regarding negative motivational factors is discouragement from comparisons to other students or the pressure brought on by competition for grades. Extrinsic rewards in an ESL classroom, such as grades and teacher praise, can make some students feel like winners, while other students who are superb performers can be made to feel like losers as a result of strict grading policies. Perhaps a better view toward the role of competition in an ESL class could be to provide opportunities for students to test their English abilities in cooperative learning activities. Collaborative learning and pair-work discussion activities are excellent ways to get students working together and to give them a chance to use English in oral and written form in ways in which the pressure to “be the winner” is removed. When teachers give students more chances to freely interact with others in class, learning, not getting the good grade, becomes the goal. Instead of creating an overly competitive atmosphere in the classroom, teachers can enhance a sense of community and cooperation by capitalizing on the student’s own knowledge and interests to make learning more interesting and fun. Here is what one student wrote regarding this issue:

*“There are many students who lived abroad for years. When I see them in a class, I feel demotivated because even though they don’t try hard to improve English, they are already good speakers of English. So I feel depressed.”*

(c) Find English grammar difficult.

Why students find English grammar difficult can be left for another study, but the issue of why students report a feeling of having less motivation is perhaps due to the widespread use of the grammar-translation teaching method used by many Korean English teachers. Behind the popularity of the grammar translation method lies the teacher’s belief that the use of L1 is helpful for learning English. Unfortunately, this usually means that oral/aural skills are neglected, and language learning becomes restricted to a very narrow, non-communicative range that does not prepare students to use the language in everyday life. Teaching with the grammar-translation method means that the control of the learning is usually teacher-centered, which limits

student autonomy in using the language. This not only inhibits the development of intrinsic motivation which is stimulated best in students in an autonomous learning environment, but also makes free flowing and spontaneous use of English difficult. The worst-case scenario involves teachers with less oral competency who use the grammar-translation method because of their own insecurity in speaking English to students and who shy away from the “face-threatening” task of fully participating in or teaching oral communication activities in classrooms. This is not to say that teachers should throw out the baby of grammatical competence with the bathwater of the overuse of the grammar-translation method. While there can be cases where using the grammar-translation method can help to explain certain grammatical rules, the results of this survey suggest that dependence on the method has a negative impact on student motivation. Here is what one student wrote about having been taught English primarily with the grammar-translation method:

*“I have studied English for almost 13 years but I am not good at English speaking, the most important part of English, I think. When I feel that I don’t speak English very well even though I’ve studied for a long time, I am discouraged.”*

(d) English class was not interesting.

Littlewood believes that there is a direct correlation between interesting content and teaching methods which engage the language learner’s participation. Many students in the survey said that their motivation to study English decreased as a result of their English classes being uninteresting. For example consider the following response:

*“Korean teachers at high school and middle school need to get their career advanced by providing practical education, not dead knowledge.”*

In order to help students progress, ESL classrooms need to provide students with the chance for purposeful communication. This can help promote intrinsic motivation and get the students more focused on issues to which they can relate and concentrate on getting their meaning across. Theme-based or content-area ESL

curricula can be a way to give students more incentive to speak in class while still adhering to the institutional needs for offering a language course. Cross-cultural comparisons, topics facing Korean university students, and other social issues can all serve to liven up the classroom and heighten student interest.

(e) Frustrating or embarrassing experience with native speaker.

McCarty wrote in a book entitled *Motivating Your Students*, “Motivation is not something that you do to people; it is something you do with people”. The large majority of those who listed negative experience with native speakers cited their own lack of ability to pronounce English properly, which resulted in the native speaker not comprehending the exchange. Many ESL teachers have try mirroring communicative skills in the native language which are similar to those used in conversational English.

*“I like English but usually I couldn’t open my heart to communicate with foreigners. So I still can’t express myself very well in English. I think I need to experience to make more and more foreign friends or go abroad to improve my English speaking skill.”*

## **VIII. Discussion**

According to Gross-Davis, the teacher’s enthusiasm for the subject and for teaching is key to helping stimulate motivation in the classroom stating: “Whatever level of motivation your students bring to the classroom will be transformed, for better or worse, by what happens in the classroom”. Dornyei notes that the teacher’s level of enthusiasm and commitment is one of the most important factors that affect the learner’s motivation to learn. In other words, teachers who are motivated to teach and have not “lost the spark” for teaching can expect better results. Prabhu reports that a teacher's belief in the curriculum and methodology behind a lesson he or she is teaching is very positively correlated to the ultimate success of the lesson.

It seems clear from the results of this survey that many problems with students not being motivated to learn English can be remedied by English teachers who constantly make changes to their own curriculum to keep it

more interesting. Teachers should construct curricula that have a variety of fresh and relevant activities to inspire student interest and make more of an effort to not simply follow the textbook, but to be more creative and innovative in preparing for their classes. When teaching students who are bringing independent learning skills, perhaps prescribing for students what their assignments and choices are is less effective, as these kinds of students may already have skills in working with other students as members of an independent language learning group.

When students complain that their work in class is not meaningful and monotonous, one answer to this problem is to foster a more interesting classroom environment for students by providing more opportunities for group work. As previously stated, giving students more autonomy and allowing them to take the initiative in their own communicative activities increase intrinsic motivation and help reduce anxiety. For example, in a culture where saving face is important, as it is in Korea, students speaking in a group realize that they will not be the only one to shoulder the blame if they make a mistake. By using small groups in ESL classrooms, students will have a tendency to try to use more of the target language and produce a much larger variety of speech acts. Students learning English cooperatively can be in a better position in this kind of non-threatening atmosphere to more freely use the English they already know. The well known sociolinguist Halliday points out that language is acquired and internalized through interpersonal interaction, and his work provides a good theoretical justification for giving students more opportunities to argue, discuss, and suggest their opinions in group activities.

In the end, helping students to become motivated to achieve a higher level of English and pursue learning without constant external or extrinsic praise should be the paramount goal and only skillful teaching can accomplish that. When learners become independent, they take on self-selected activities with more minimal teacher supervision and self-propel themselves to become more competent in the target language with minimal teaching supervision and assistance. The advantages that these kind of independent language learners have is that they will tend to meet new learning circumstances with more confidence rather than retreat from the new language learning task. He or she can develop new learning strategies independently to strengthen and improve

both learning skills and overall language proficiency. The student is then no longer completely dependent on the teacher's availability and can progress without direct supervision. The teacher then can enjoy the satisfaction that the students have not merely become self-directed with language learning, but have developed skills useful for other areas of their lives.

In teaching situations where the students are less independent, prescribing to students what their choices are, where they are located, and how many students may participate in each activity may be necessary. Gradually, as students gain proficiency in working independently and develop the necessary skills for making new choice, the teacher will drop the more "top-down" approach to instruction. The teacher will be able to work with several groups, as opposed to each student individually, in each language learning task, working to help the students continue to build their skills of independent learning and to move from one assignment to the next, encouraging them to make their own choices in learning. For those students who still need special teacher assistance, the teacher can set up "non-independent" groups to refocus and restart in an effort to continue to help students who find the process of sustaining their own learning more challenging.

## **IX. Conclusion**

The ongoing question about where motivation comes from and how to best promote it in the ESL classroom will take more time and study to resolve. What is clear, however, is that motivation is a key factor to success in second language acquisition and that material that is more meaningful can spark students' curiosity about learning English. In an age when there is more pressure on students to master English, teachers would serve their students well by being willing to adopt a more non-authoritarian approach to teaching English as a second language and respecting the students' interests and learning style preferences. While it is important to better understand motivation to enable students to become self-starters, it is well recognized that there is no grand theory of motivation or single magical formula that will ensure success in motivating all ESL students. Hopefully teachers will invest the time and effort in adopting new teaching methods that can help students learn English in an optimal learning setting where all become winners.

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## **Motivation in the ESL Classroom**

Kevin Baublitz (HUFS)

Motivation is clearly a critical factor for second language learning because it affects students' willingness to approach learning and using English. Teachers who hope to provide meaningful instruction need to consider how to increase the motivational levels of their students in order to ensure student success in learning. This paper examines what Korean university students studying English as a second language (ESL) have to say about what does or does not positively affect their motivation to study English. The ways in which intrinsic and extrinsic motivation affect ESL learners are explained by examining student surveys and current research. How self-directed or autonomous learning stimulates intrinsic motivation is a major part of the paper, as is how teacher-centered classrooms tend to make ESL students more extrinsically motivated.

**Key Words: Motivation, Extrinsic, Intrinsic, Education.**