

# Motivating Korean Elementary Students

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What are the key factors to motivate someone to learn a foreign language? To what extent can we, as teachers or language advisors improve motivation levels in our students?

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## **1. Introduction**

Motivating students has long been a topic of great interest and importance to teachers and researchers alike. Surprisingly, little research has been done to discover exactly what motivates Korean students and how teachers and researchers can increase motivation in their Korean students. “[We as] teachers need to try and understand what motivates [our] class and learners, as well as to identify the problems that learners face” (Hedge, 2001: 393).

I interpret motivation as the driving force behind all human action and student attitudes towards English are great indicators as to how much how they will be willing to devote to study. Some research suggests that success in language learning itself leads to motivation (Ushioda, 1993). I will argue that success is both the catalyst *for* and result *of* motivation.

I will first introduce the most prevalent theories behind motivation, three different motivation orientations, and briefly discuss intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Second, the concepts of praise and rewards in motivation will be addressed. Third, I will explain a survey I conducted to help investigate motivation in my Korean elementary school fourth graders aged ten and eleven years old and use this survey to determine which factors (success, attitudes, desires, or intensity) are the most pertinent to Korean motivation. Finally I will suggest ways in which we can improve motivation by addressing the needs established by previous research and those identified from the survey results.

## **2. Motivation**

To better understand motivation, a look at the main theories and orientations of motivation is necessary. Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will further highlight these aspects of motivation.

### **2.1 Theories of Motivation**

Historically, three schools of thought have emerged with different theories regarding motivation (Brown, 2007). All three share the view that motivation is derived from human needs and the strength of each individual need dictates how far and how hard someone is willing to work to achieve it. The behavioral view addresses reward anticipation, the cognitive view focuses on curiosity and the constructivist view deals with environmental and social circumstances that affect motivation.

### **2.1.1 The Behavioral View**

The behavioral view relates to a learner's anticipation of rewards (many characteristics symbolic of extrinsic motivation). Questions such as "What will I get if I study English?" or "Will the teacher praise me?" exemplify the behavioral view. This view is often more typical of younger learners unable to realize the long-term advantages. In this case motivation is usually driven by external forces i.e. rewards or praise. Pavlov and Skinner provided the initial cases for behaviorism with their respective work on animal and human behavior.

### **2.1.2 The Cognitive View**

The cognitive view involves choices a learner makes to achieve personal language goals or to avoid 'uncomfortable' or undesirable experiences (Keller, 1983, cited in Brown, 2007). Ausubel (1968: 368-379, cited in Brown, 2007: 169) identified important factors behind student motivation. He stressed the importance of discovery, environmental manipulation, staying busy, curiosity of our environment, interest in people from different backgrounds, the desire for knowledge, exploration and acceptance and acknowledgement by other people.

### **2.1.3 Constructivist View**

The constructivist view goes beyond the first two perspectives in that the individual's social surroundings are as important as the need itself. Maslow (1970) provided the initial basic needs formula through his hierarchy. His 'pyramid of needs' begins with basic survival at the base (e.g. oxygen, food, sleep) gradually continuing to more complex needs like protection and security, then to love, belonging, self-esteem and finally to 'self-actualization' where the individual reaches his or her full potential.

Motivation is viewed not only as derived from one's own 'self-determination' but also as the way in which individuals interact within various social circumstances. A student may or may not be particularly motivated to engage in an activity or task individually, but has the potential to become more motivated when required to participate for the sake of the group's success. "Learning English is different from learning subjects such as math or science and will involve social, historical, emotional, cultural, moral sense of self as a subject (Kramsch 2001: 12 cited in Lamb 2004: 4)."

## **2.2. Motivational Orientation**

Gardner and Lambert pointed out that positive attitudes and motivation are related to success in second language learning and that 'achievement in a second

language is dependent on essentially the same type of motivation that is necessary for the child to learn his own first language' (1959, cited in Spolsky, 2000). These studies focused heavily on the socio-educational model of learning whereby motivation was present in two forms: Integrative and Instrumental Orientations. The next section will focus on the integrative orientations and its' applicability in the EFL context. Then instrumental orientation will be briefly defined and its uses explained in the EFL context.

### **2.2.1 Integrative Orientation**

This form of motivation is used as a tool to connect with the culture of the target language. In this case, a person is trying to become a part of a particular language group or cultural community (Gardner & Lambert 1972:3). Although early studies suggest that integrative motivation is a strong factor in language learning success, Lamb's study (2004: 3) shows little to no applicability of integrative motivation outside the ESL context (Great Britain, Canada or the U.S.).

Warschauer (2000:512, cited in Lamb 2004) indicates that globalization has created a new society where there are no longer one or two dominant dialects of English. Rather, new English societies have evolved out of different language speaking groups using English to communicate for reasons other than a desire to connect with the target culture.

For two speakers in India or South Africa where shared language may be English as opposed to a local language, their reasons for using English may be borne out of necessity and no longer reflect the dominance of their former colonizers. There may be other factors affecting their motivation: business, communication, or simple communication.

In countries like South Korea where English is not spoken by a majority of the people and students' only access to English is through school curriculum or foreign mass media, integrative motivation does not have the same influence over their desire to pursue the study of English. The desire to integrate is irrelevant in EFL contexts where there is no place outside the classroom to practice English. Integrative motivation is more applicable in countries where English is spoken by a larger percentage of the people and where there are ample opportunities to employ it.

### **2.2.2 Instrumental Orientation**

"An orientation is instrumental if the purpose of language study is utilitarian such as getting ahead in one's occupation (Gardner & Lambert 1972:)." Dornyei (1990, cited in Lamb, 2004) suggests that it may be more helpful using instrumental orientation

in promoting successful learning in the EFL context by ways of jobs, financial rewards or better test scores.

It appears that in some contexts, there is no noticeable difference between these two orientations, so there must be additional factors that affect student motivation. Dornyei (2001, cited in Brown, 2007) emphasizes that there are many reasons for people to learn languages that do not neatly fit the instrumental and integrative split. He stresses that additional components of language learning must be recognized as having influence on learner motivations to learn a language. Oxford agrees with Dornyei in that motivation derives from the need for self-confidence and self-efficacy. (1994: 514)

### **2.2.3 Process-oriented motivation**

Dornyei developed a theory to address the changes that occur in everyday motivation, present in three stages. The first phase of language learning in Dornyei's process-oriented approach (2001 cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006) is called 'choice' motivation whereby a student decides to start studying English and set goals for her/himself. A good example of this would be a student learning of an opportunity to travel to the Philippines or the United States. The student might then be motivated to ask the teacher about the English language and cultural aspects of the Philippines or the US.

The second, 'executive' phase (Dornyei, *ibid*), occurs when and if the student continues to hold an interest in and maintain his or her motivation to study English despite minor setbacks such as a long wait time before their trip begins. A student might also decide at this point *not* to continue to study or lose interest in English altogether. The student may not have the patience or the willingness to continue especially if the class curriculum is uninteresting or too difficult.

The third and final phase, motivation retrospection (Dornyei, *ibid*), involves the student's continued interest in English after returning from travel. It is at this stage that the student makes judgments about his or her performance and/or ability and if he or she decides to continue English language study.

Teachers and language advisors must be aware of these stages of motivation, keeping students motivated at each stage of the process and adapting to the highs and lows that can occur in each level of motivation. In the EFL setting, awareness of other factors like attitude, cultural beliefs about the language and most importantly, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation will influence how students approach language learning and if they are receptive to teacher input. In the next section I will discuss intrinsic and

extrinsic motivation.

### **2.3 Intrinsic & Extrinsic Motivation**

Of great importance when addressing motivation is identifying the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. If motivation is intrinsically driven, students will be interested in learning English for the sake of enjoyment and not for any material reward. A student might be interested in English because he or she likes English films, music or books with no regard for the rewards found in reading or films other than the pure joy found in them. An elementary school student may not see the enduring benefits i.e. future career advancements, ease of travel, possibilities or uses of other extrinsic factors of motivation. It is therefore helpful for teachers and researchers alike to identify ways to make the classes enjoyable in order to maintain or even create positive attitudes towards learning English.

### **3. Praise and Rewards**

The view held by many educators and parents alike is that praise can influence positive behavior and can help children's intrinsic motivation (Henderson & Lepper, 2002). In my classroom, praise is often a necessary tool to encourage student participation and initiate volunteering. Bluemenfield et al (1982) found that praise is connected with a positive self-image and promotes good moods. Most teachers know the feeling when a student gains confidence because of a simple, "good job" or "right".

Paul (2003:115) however argues that the idea of rewards, praise and punishment being 'natural' is a myth and that when teaching Asian elementary school children, the promise of stickers and candy may be harmful in maintaining motivation. He continues by saying that in the long run, praise, punishment and rewards may in fact harm overall student intrinsic motivation. However, I find this statement counter-intuitive and in my personal experience I have found that the initial use of sweets, stickers (rewards) and positive feedback towards students have actually helped my students by increasing their willingness to participate in future classroom discussions and activities.

Henderlong and Lepper researching the effect of praise on children have also found some indications of praise that are "ineffective and sometimes dysfunctional (2002: 774)." Some studies indicate that the problem with praise is that it is inherently a value judgment and that some students will behave poorly simply to prove the teacher wrong (Faber & Mazlish, 1995). Most teachers have encountered troublesome students having a bad day or students who are difficult to reach.

While there is much debate as to whether or not praise, punishment and rewards positively affect motivation, the practical teacher in me believes that praise is helpful if not necessary in the less than one hour per week in most Korean elementary EFL teaching situations. Seeing the students only three times per month on average due in part to class cancellations, student sporting events or examinations, extrinsic motivational tools such as praise and rewards are sometimes the only way to reach my students. In my personal experience, praise is not ineffective and in fact enhances motivation. This conclusion is based on limited exposure to my students and is not indicative of all teaching situations.

#### **4. The Korean Context and My Survey**

To better investigate motivation and the concepts discussed above, I must first explain the English teaching situation in Korea as well as my teaching context. Then an explanation of the survey I created, administered, and later evaluated will be provided.

##### **4.1 English in Korea**

South Korea is inundated with English after school language institutes where students study several additional hours of English per week. Most students with whom I have informally interviewed have shown resentment towards these after school programs. They claim they would rather be spending their free time on other, non-academic, activities. Most often, motivation to attend these schools is extrinsic, not by choice of the student, but rather their parents. However, children who attend these “cram” school programs generally have higher examination scores and perform better in school. As such, attendance has risen over the years in an effort to maintain an image of higher status among Korean families.

In societies with a high degree of homogeneity and reliance upon family for both social and financial needs, input from family and friends is indicative of how the young learner will approach learning the target language. In urban South Korea, English is the purported gateway to financial success and positive familial and friends’ attitudes towards English may positively affect a student’s desire to study English. Conversely, negative attitudes towards English may adversely affect student attitudes and the overall desire to study.

##### **4.1.1 My Teaching Situation**

In my EFL classroom, I teach English for only one or two hours per week and English has no ‘status for daily communication’ (Tanaka, 2005). Therefore, I am



frequently the only access students have to English. My classes generally consist of activities intended to inspire the children to communicate. I have the freedom to choose the materials for the class and there is a heavy focus on natural communication. At the beginning of the school year, the students were reluctant to speak but feel more comfortable as they have become accustomed to my teaching style.

## **4.2 My Survey**

The next section will discuss the survey participants, the questionnaire, and the procedure.

### **4.2.1 Student Participants**

My study involved 68 Korean year-four elementary school students all of whom have had some previous exposure to English either through the elementary school curriculum or through these after-school language institutes. I had been teaching these learners for a full school year before administering the survey.

### **4.2.2 Questionnaire**

The first section of the questionnaire contained three demographic questions to determine age, gender, and amount of English exposure. Then, using a five point Likert scale for ease of student comprehension and result interpretation, I asked the students to identify how much they liked or disliked English. The respondents chose from a scale of “I really dislike learning English” represented by one on the charts to “I really enjoy learning English represented by five on the charts [See Appendix].

The second section asked the students to agree or disagree with six different statements reflecting strategies they might employ while studying. Each statement reflected a particular learning strategy utilized by successful learners outlined by Brown (2007:147). The Likert scale was once again used with one representing strongly agree, two somewhat agree, three no preference, four disagree somewhat, and five strongly disagree.

The first statement, “I don’t get embarrassed when I speak English even when other students laugh at me” gauged how comfortable my students felt in my classroom. The second statement, “I like to try using new words even when I am unsure of their meaning” although more closely associated with another affective factor, ambiguity tolerance (Hofstede, 1986), was indicative of self-confidence and a willingness to participate. The third statement, “I feel good about my ability to learn English” referred again to self-confidence. The fourth statement, “I want to learn English

because of what I can personally gain from it” was meant to assess intrinsic motivation. The fifth statement, “I try to learn from my mistakes” again addressed ambiguity tolerance and the willingness of the student to take chances. The final statement, “I find ways to learn English outside the classroom” indicated a level of student motivation influence of school, parents or self.

#### **4.3.3 Procedure**

A paper copy of the survey, translated to into Korean by three native-Korean speakers, was available for all the students. Students were then asked to voluntarily complete the survey using as much time as was necessary and cooperated in the research. I asked my co-teacher to administer the questionnaire alone to avoid affecting student responses. After collection of the data, the results were then inputted into and downloaded from Survey Monkey. The mean was calculated using SPSS to measure correlations and general central tendencies and then made visual using survey monkey and SPSS chart graphics.

### **5. Results and Discussion**

The results from my survey help highlight some interesting findings about motivation in my Korean learners. The responses to the first statement regarding embarrassment when speaking English indicate a major reluctance to “lose face” amongst not only classmates but also the teacher. In Korea, appearing intelligent is very important and many students as well as teachers believe that it is better not to say anything than to say something incorrectly. Finch found in his research that Korean learners tend to ‘focus on accuracy’ and ‘play it safe’ (2001).

Lightbown and Spada (2006: 185) put it succinctly when they said that we as teachers have no control over a student’s intrinsic motivation. That statement however did not suggest that teachers are unable to foster positive attitudes towards learning English. This perception of success is very important in keeping the student motivated. If a student sees him or herself as being successful, he or she may wish to continue studying a foreign language.

Statement three, “I feel good about my ability to learn English,” received the highest mean score (55.9% responded with an “agree” or “strongly agree”) and I felt it would be the best question to be paired with how much the students like English (where 50% of the students responded with an “enjoy” or “really enjoy” English). In designing this survey I was interested in the relationship between a learner’s perception of their learning ability (potential for success) and their enjoyment of English.

A statistically significant relationship was found using the Spearman's Rho with a Correlation Coefficient of .665,  $p < 0.01$ . The data is represented in the Appendix (Table 2) with a best-fit line. The Spearman's Rho (Rank Order Correlation) was used in this case to describe the relationship between the two variables without making any other assumptions about them. There was an indication of a positive relationship between students who feel good about their English ability and their motivation to study it. Although previous research doesn't necessarily prove that motivation causes success in learning, there is evidence to show that positive attitude is associated with a willingness to continue studying (Lightbown and Spada, 2006: 63).

Statement four 'I want to learn English because of what I can personally gain from it' was a difficult question to decipher. The answer to this statement may have resulted from an intrinsic or extrinsic desire to learn. It was unclear what may have motivated students and only in further clarification will I find what lies behind student motivation.

Statement five, "I try to learn from my mistakes" showed a willingness to accept error feedback. Exactly 50% said that they "agreed" or "strongly agreed" and finally, statement six, "I find ways to learn English outside the classroom" identified the strategy of setting personal goals (Brown, 2007: 145). This last statement revealed that only 47% of the students were willing to set personal goals. This could be an indication that student intrinsic motivation is not enough and that they need help or other forms of motivation.

## **6. Suggestions**

Lightbown and Spada (2001: 34) point teachers in the direction of Crookes & Schmidt's research (1991) on how to make classes more interesting and further motivation. First, a syllabus is crucial for the students to know what is expected in class and what is expected of them. It allows students to feel more prepared and less surprised. After creating a syllabus, it is important to establish a routine but not to the extent that the class becomes stale. By, using a warm-up, review, presentation of new material and finishing with an activity, task or game, the students can follow the format and know which step to expect but not necessarily what activity or task awaits them.

To help eliminate boredom, the occasional element of surprise has its benefits. By varying the content and presenting interesting yet comprehensible material, students don't daydream or become disinterested. Maintaining student interest is imperative and there are other tools teachers and researchers can use to help students feel better about themselves and learning English.

## **7. Further Research**

The problem with some of the statements in my survey revolved around not addressing who or what motivated students to pursue extra-curricular English study. The students may have many reasons for studying English and identifying some of the possible motivations would allow me to make better assumptions about the responses. For future inquiry, I would like to offer more concrete answers i.e. “in front of the teacher, other students, or my partner” in order to identify how comfortable the students are when responding to questions, taking risks, guessing or volunteering information. I would also like to provide examples like praise, points in class games, having fun and/or better test scores when asking students about how they can personally gain from studying English. It is difficult to determine extrinsic or intrinsic motivations without further clarification. The results from some of the responses in the survey however indicate that my students are motivated and that the curriculum seems to be keeping the students motivated.

## **8. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have investigated some key factors of motivation, such as motivation orientation, praise and rewards, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Theories of motivation have also been discussed. To better understand how teachers can influence motivation in the classroom, I created a survey that I gave to my students. Through an understanding of the Korean English-language culture and my teaching context, I was able to gather insight with the use of this survey and conclusions can be drawn.

In an attempt to better understand motivation amongst my Korean learners, I conducted a survey with six statements related to motivation. Looking at these results, I was able to determine that success and self-confidence were the most important factors and that they were linked. The survey showed that students who felt good about their abilities also had a tendency to like learning English. Ultimately, it was clear to me that while a relationship exists, the direction between liking English and confidence in ability is difficult to determine. Despite the difficulty in establishing direction, I have found that recognizing success in the classroom no matter how slight can influence student enjoyment and willingness to participate in future activities. Classrooms should be a supportive, stimulating, engaging, age and culturally appropriate place that fosters a feeling of success (Lightbown and Spada, 2006).

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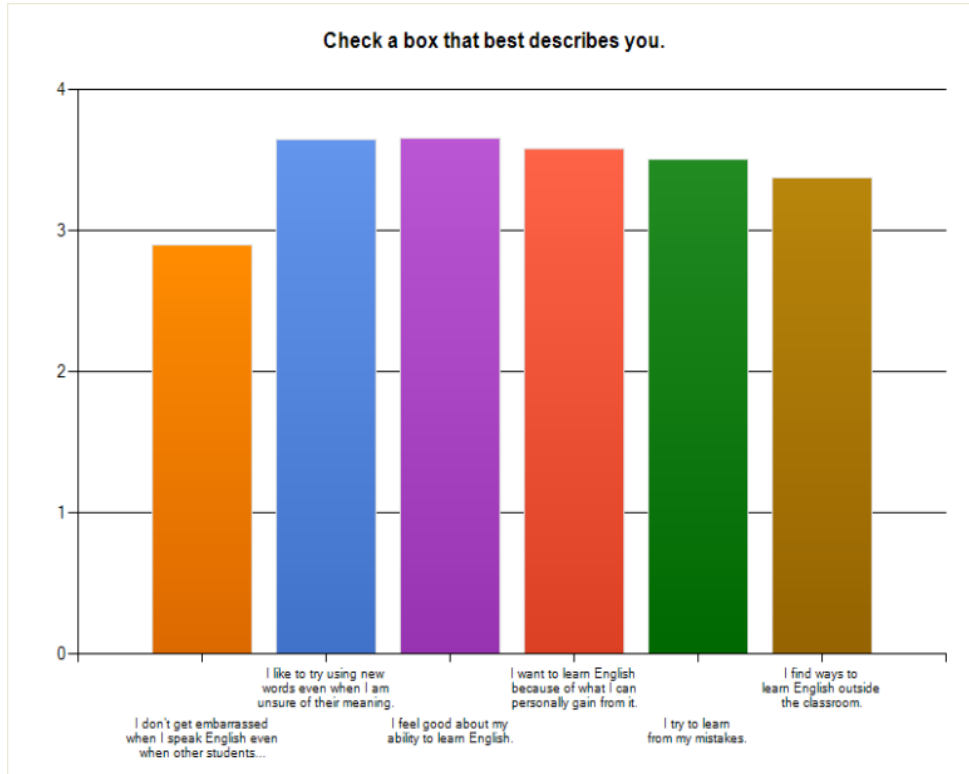
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# Appendix


TABLE I




: I don't get embarrassed when I speak English even when other students laugh at me.

: I like to try using new words even when I am unsure of their meaning.

: I feel good about my ability to learn English.

: I want to learn English because of what I can personally gain from it.

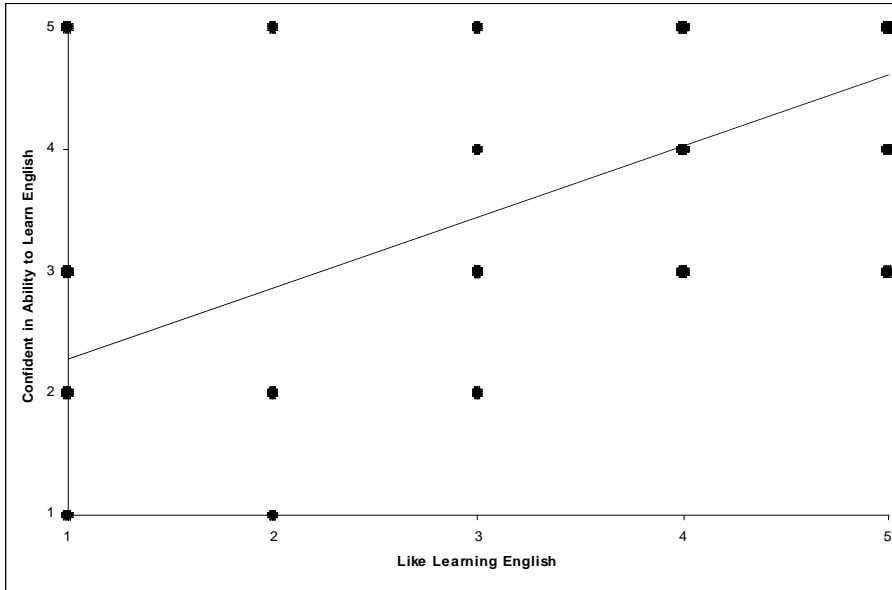
: I try to learn from my mistakes.

: I find ways to learn English outside the classroom.

The y axis is represented by numbers 1 = strongly agree, 2 = somewhat agree 3 = no preference 4 = disagree somewhat 5 = strongly disagree. The mean scores were calculated to show central tendencies.



TABLE 2



**Correlations**

			I Like English	Ability to Learn
Spearman's rho	LikeEnglish	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.665(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	62	62
	AbilitytoLearn	Correlation Coefficient	.665(**)	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	62	68

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).