

A Qualitative Approach to Korean EFL Students' L2 Motivation and Directed Motivational Currents

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study investigated second language (L2) learning motivation and directed motivational current (DMC) among South Korean English as a foreign language (EFL) students using a qualitative research method. A modified DMC presurvey and semi-structured interviews were conducted. Of the 34 survey respondents, five students who had studied English for over 13 years and who showed high DMC intensity were selected. This study examined the common and distinctive DMC factors in three stages: initial, middle, and end. At the initial stage, self-directed goals and positive L2 learning experiences initiated the DMC. At the middle stage, a sense of responsibility and positive emotionality sustained the DMC. Throughout the DMC process, students experienced positive emotions such as satisfaction and confidence, which reinforced their motivated behaviors and increased their energy to immerse themselves in accomplishing their goals. At the end stage, the DMC concluded or diminished with goal achievement. The analytical findings enhanced our understanding of Korean EFL learners' DMC, and this paper offers related insights for future research and educational practice.

Keywords: L2 learning motivation, directed motivational current, Korean EFL students, qualitative research

1. Introduction

Second language (L2) motivation has been extensively studied as a pivotal factor contributing the achievement of successful language learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Ushioda, 2012). Initiated with Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, L2 learning motivation has progressed through various phases, including the cognitive-situated period, the process-oriented period, the L2 self system period, and the socio-dynamic stage (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). At the core of this expanded and refined theories of English language learning motivation lies its temporal and dynamic nature (Kim, 2020; MacIntyre & Serroul, 2015).

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L2 learning motivation is “never static but is constantly increasing or decreasing depending on the various social influences surrounding action” (Dörnyei, 2002, p. 156). This temporal and dynamic nature of L2 motivation allows the possibility that students with low levels of motivation can become motivated by the guidance of teachers, peer relationships as well as supportive educational and home environments. However, it is equally possible that students with high levels of L2 motivation will not necessarily remain high for a long period of time, and that their high level of motivational state may change (or decrease) contingent upon various influencing factors such as surrounding environments or people.

In this regard, Dörnyei and his research teams introduced a Directed Motivational Current (DMC). Unlike former L2 learning motivation, which is not static but constantly changing, DMC is defined as a phase of exceptionally intense and sustained motivation towards a deeply desired personal objective (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Henry et al., 2015; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). Based on the studies of Dörnyei et al. (2016) and Muir (2020), the most prominent characteristics of DMC are the following four: 1) vivid vision to launch DMC, 2) clear start and end of a DMC, 3) salient structure (or routines) to maintain, and 4) positive emotion as motivated behaviors.

However, as Kim (2020, p. 186) suggested, L2 learning motivation based on Western, Anglo-American theories fundamentally differ when applied to English as a foreign language learning. For instance, in Western, Anglo-American ESL contexts, L2 learning motivation often serves as a means of acquiring additional personal cultural capital (cf. Bourdieu, 1991), as English is already their native language and the international lingua franca. They pursue second language learning for intellectual play. In contrast, in South Korea (hereafter Korea), L2 learning is driven by necessity, specifically for achieving successful college admission or employment. Thus, excessive competition among students for college admission tests has intensified unnecessarily high instrumental motivation, which was termed competitive motivation (Kim, 2006, 2010).

In this regard, it is crucial to prioritize investigating the practical applicability of DMC theory to Korean students and in Korean contexts. However, there has been limited research on dimensions of DMC in English language education within Korea (H. S. Kim, 2018). Thus, this exploratory study seeks to analyze DMC cases among Korean students and establish a groundwork for its implementation within the Korean educational context. In particular, to understand and analyze the characteristics of DMC in the Korean context and the detailed process how it starts

and ends, DMC is divided into multi stages such as the initial stage to trigger DMC, the middle stage to maintain DMC, and the end stage of termination or decline DMC. The research questions are as follows:

- RQ1. What are the common and distinctive triggers found in the initial stage of DMC among Korean EFL students?
- RQ2. What are the common and distinctive maintaining factors found in the middle stage of DMC among Korean EFL students?
- RQ3. What are the common and distinctive factors found in the end stage of DMC among Korean EFL students?

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Directed motivational current (DMC) and its factors

Second language (L2) motivation has been extensively studied as a pivotal factor contributing the achievement of successful language. However, L2 motivation has been characterized by split-second shifts (or second-by-second timescale) (Dörnyei et al., 2015) and changed by situational temporal context, according to the learner's psychological state or learning process (Kim, 2020; Waninge et al., 2014). The characteristics of temporary and situational learners' motivations can be perceived as challenges or difficulties in maintaining enduring motivation for English learning over an extended period. Directed Motivational Current (DMC), however, is a new concept in L2 motivation, focusing on intensive motivational surges, "which is capable of stimulating and supporting long-term behavior such as the learning of an L2" (Dörnyei et al., 2016, p. 18).

This DMC theory has a theoretical background on Flow theory suggested by Csikszentmihalyi (1988). Flow theory posits that individuals can experience a state of complete absorption and heightened focus during short-term activities, accompanied by elevated levels of enjoyment and satisfaction. Dörnyei et al. (2016) recognized that there are similarities between the flow theory and DMC. However, there are clear differences between DMC, which involves active engagement in multiple stages of tasks over weeks or even years to achieve a self-directed goal, and Flow theory, which involves full engagement in a short period of time such as several hours (Dörnyei et al., 2016; Kim, 2020). For this reason, Ibrahim (2020)

stated DMC as ‘Sustained Flow’. Ibrahim and Al-Hoorie (2019) defined the concept of flow as “a special experience of total absorption in one task”, while sustained flow or DMC as “the occurrence of flow in a series of tasks aimed at achieving a certain outcome (e.g., improving proficiency in a second language)” (p. 51).

Dörnyei et al. (2016) provided a comprehensive understanding of DMC, suggesting key factors of DMC. The first factor is goal-orientedness. A clear and well-defined goal is essential for a successful launch of DMC, as it cannot proceed without one. Additionally, the launch of DMC relies on the learner’s sense of ownership of their goals (Dörnyei et al., 2014; Kuftić & Martinović, 2023). Henry et al. (2015) found that a well-defined and clear goal also maintains and energizes long-term motivation.

Another key factor of DMC is the self-renewing property, which keeps the current flowing. The unique structure of DMC includes automatized behavioral routines, sub-goals and progress checks, and the role of affirmative feedback (Jahedizadeh & Al-Hoorie, 2021; Muir, 2020; Zarrinabadi & Khodarahmi, 2023). The structure of DMC is characterized by “the existence of motivated behavioural routines, and this becomes a smooth and self-evident part of the DMC process” (Dörnyei et al., 2014, p. 14). Examples include behaviors such as consistently imaging conversations in an L2, like Hanna in Henry et al. (2015), carrying L2 vocabulary flashcards everywhere (Ibrahim, 2016), or rising early and staying up late to study (Zarrinabadi & Tavakoli, 2017), which are entrenched patterns of behavior found in DMC.

The last factor is the positive emotionality and this exists in all DMC experiences. Khan et al. (2024) stated that the individuals “engaged in DMC experience feel a distinct feeling of satisfaction, contentment, and a profound sense of connection between their activities and their sense of self” (p. 242). The DMC cases are characterized by empowering positive emotions and the activities that are typically perceived as boring are seen as enjoyable for the achievement of goals (Henry et al., 2015).

2.2. Studies on DMC in other ESL/EFL contexts

After Dörnyei and his colleagues (e.g., Dörnyei et al., 2014, 2015, 2016; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013) presented the theory of DMC, researchers in the field of L2 motivation have previously struggled to grasp the clear concepts of DMC due to the small amount of research findings (Dörnyei et al., 2016). Khan et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative study to reveal DMC cases in Pakistani ESL learners. A

total of 1,300 participants responded to a questionnaire regarding their experiences of DMC. According to the responses, 60% of the participants reported experiencing DMC intense levels of English learning motivation. This group was classified as the DMC group, and the respondents' responses about motivational intensity levels of the group were very close to each other, while the other group showed a high variation. In Pietluch's (2018) study, the link between self-efficacy and DMCs were examined using a questionnaire. Pietluch (2018) conducted a study involving 212 undergraduate English majors in Poland and revealed a robust connection between self-efficacy and DMCs, with participants' responses indicating that self-efficacy tends to rise during a DMC.

The majority of DMC research conducted interview studies to analyze specific DMC-related experiences from the research participants, thus the majority of qualitative studies were conducted on a small scale due to the nature of the studies (Jahedizadeh, & Al-Hoorie, 2021). For example, Başöz and Gümüş (2022) employed a qualitative research design with interviewing 41 university students in Turkey. Henry et al. (2015) employed interview-based methods to examine the DMC phenomenon from 21 students from all corners of the globe such as Australia, Iran, Ireland, or Pakistan. Başöz and Gümüş (2022) and Henry et al. (2015) investigated various aspects of DMCs including its triggering factors, major components or conditions of DMCs. In common, the triggering factors of DMC were concrete goals such as “to gain the highest grade on an assignment, to complete a course within a self-imposed timeframe, and to secure admission to the next-level course” (Henry et al., 2015, p. 337). The clear goals were set when their DMC experiences began, and the given goals were triggering intense long-term motivation (Başöz & Gümüş, 2022). An emergent opportunity such as a chance to study abroad, moments of realization (e.g., one realized that one has a language learning ability or aptitude), competition (or positive connotation) could find as triggering factors of DMC.

For the major factors or conditions of DMCs, regular check on their progresses such as sub-goals, affirmative feedback, and positive emotionality were found. Başöz and Gümüş (2022) noticed that students with DMC participated in certain routines with no specific volitional control such as “looking up any unknown words and singing along English pop songs without looking at the lyrics” (p. 9). In addition, regular progress checks of their sub-goals for themselves and having affirmative feedback from teachers were found to be crucial elements found during DMC. Jahedizadeh and Al-Hoorie (2021) emphasized the pivotal influence of positive emotions, including excitement stemming from a perception of advancement,

progress, development, and identity transformation. The positive emotionality emerged as the dominant form of affect experienced within a DMC (Ibrahim, 2020).

In this regard, this study examines whether the DMC factors identified in previous research across various language learning contexts are also present in the Korean context, and seeks to identify the characteristics of DMC experienced by Korean EFL learners. In addition, we break down DMC episodes into initial, middle, and end stages to better understand the specific factors of DMCs and under what circumstances DMCs are triggered, maintained, stagnated, or terminated.

3. Methods

3.1. Data collection

To identify the key factors and sub-constructs of DMC cases in a Korean context, this study employed a qualitative research method, based on a pre-survey and semi-structured interviews conducted during the fall and spring semester of 2023-2024 academic year. To recruit learners with DMC experiences in a Korean context, this study prioritized English-related majors (e.g., Department of English Education or English Linguistics and Literature), as they are expected to have experienced a higher level of motivation and interest in learning L2.

A total of 34 participants were fully informed of the concept of DMC prior to answering the questionnaire. The survey¹⁾ was administered in advance to select students who had a DMC experience to be interviewed, and included three different sections (see Appendix): 1) Levels of English motivation from elementary to high school (recent 10 years of L2 motivation levels), 2) DMC experiences (questionnaire), and 3) Short essays on DMC experiences. In this study, in addition to using Muir's (2016) existing questionnaire, the pre-survey included two additional sections to explore the DMC of Korean learners. The first section, which focused on levels of English motivation, was added to cross-check the difference between learners' usual L2 learning motivation levels and their motivation levels during the DMC experience. In the third section, participants were asked to write short essays (their episodes) related to their DMC experiences. This was intended to assess their

1) The questionnaire of the survey was based on Muir's (2016) DMC Disposition Questionnaire (DDQ). The DDQ (originally in English) was translated into Korean for the participants.

understanding of the concept of DMC and to preliminarily analyze the differences between their experiences and the concepts found in previous studies on L2 learning motivation. These short essays were then thematized and used to formulate interview questions (see Appendix).

For the first section of the survey, participants get to number their levels of English learning motivation from 0 to 10 for each grade on the given table (e.g., elementary to secondary schools, and present). Participants were also asked to answer the 15 questionnaires with 6-point Likert scale (1: Strongly disagree to 6: Strongly agree), which is a revision of Muir's (2016) questionnaire, including three parts: 1) DMC experiences, 2) experiencing demotivation or end of DMC, and 3) experiencing other people's DMC (See Appendix). On the first part of the questionnaires (Q. 1-15) ask respondents whether they have experienced DMC such as "I have personally experienced this type of intense motivation specifically while learning a language (Q. 1)", "How long did this experience last? (Q. 6)". The second part of the questionnaires is the experience of demotivation or end of DMC (Q. 9, 13) such as "While experiencing this intense motivation, I felt a real struggle to keep going (Q. 9)", and "As my goal was achieved or end, I experienced my learning motivation decreased again (Q. 13)". Lastly, the questionnaire also included a question to ask whether they have witnessed DMC around them, "I have seen this type of intense motivation in people around me such as friends, family, or students (Q. 14)".

3.2. Participants

Among the 34 respondents who participated in the pre-survey, there were 16 males and 18 females, of whom six students were selected. However, one student who only had a one-shot interview was excluded, resulting in a total of five students being included. Table 1 describes the overall research procedures.

The selection criteria included those who demonstrated consistently high levels of English learning motivation from elementary to high school and achieved the highest scores on questionnaire items concerning DMC experiences (Table 2). The narrative responses to the short essays of the five respondents were utilized for subsequent semi-structured interview inquiries.

Table 1. Research procedures

Research procedures	Periods
- Introduction to DMC concepts and the study - Recruitment of 34 students studying English-related majors	2023.11 ~ 2023.12
- Analysis on L2 learning motivation levels, DMC survey scores, and short essays - Selection of top 5 participants	2023.12 ~ 2024.01
- Pre-interview: Review individual survey question answers and preview questions for the main interview - Semi-structured interview (60-85 minutes each) - Transcription and analysis of data	2024.01 ~ 2024. 02
- Follow-up interviews and member checking from the first interview (40-60 minutes for each) - Transcription, analysis of data and final member checking from the follow-up interviews	2024.03 ~ 2024. 04 2024.03 ~ 2024. 05

Table 2. Participant information

Name	Yebin	Jay	Seojin	Dabin	Bora	M
Age (Male, Female)	21 (F)	21 (M)	21 (F)	21 (F)	22 (F)	21.2
Years of studying English	13	15	15	13	16	14.8
English motivation level (0 to 10)	5.8	6.3	7.5	9.1	5.7	6.9
DMC experiences (Mean of Q 1-15)	5.9	5.7	5.3	5.1	5.0	5.4
Experiencing demotivation or end of DMC (Mean of Q 9, 13)	3.5	1.5	6.0	3.0	3.0	3.3
Witnessing experiences of others' DMC (Q 14)	4	3	6	6	2	4.2

Table 2 included the participants' survey results. During the selection process for participants outlined above, the respondents' average motivation levels were used as a reference, with greater emphasis placed on their completion of the questionnaire regarding DMC experiences and their short essays. According to the above selection criteria, only one male student and four female students were selected out of 34 respondents²⁾. Their average age of five participants was 21 and all five students had same background of English major. All five students had spent

their secondary school years in Korea and had over 14 years of experience learning English. Their levels of English learning motivation (overall mean of all respondents: 5.67 out of 10, five participants' mean: 6.9 out of 10) and the average scores on the DMC questionnaire items (Q 1-15) were higher than the other respondents (overall mean of all respondents: 4.18 out of 6, five participants' mean: 5.4 out of 6). The mean of experiencing demotivation or end of DMC was found to be similar with the all respondents (3.33) and the five participants (3.3). Five participants' overall mean on 'witnessing experiences of others' DMC (Q 14) was 4.2, while all 34 respondents' overall mean was 3.54.

3.3. Semi-structured interviews and data analysis

The five selected participants were interviewed two times between January and March in 2024 (Table 1). The interviews were conducted by the first author, who is a Ph.D. candidate majoring in English education and second language acquisition. The interviewer has extensive experience in conducting interviews on English learning motivation, which ensures her competence in effectively administering and analyzing the entire interview process. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and via ZOOM, both of which were recorded with their informed consent. To help them recall their DMC experiences, the participants were asked to review their previously completed questionnaires right before the interview began, and were encouraged to recall events and feelings from their first experience with English. The semi-structured interviews revisited previously answered survey questions to elicit specific responses about why they answered the way they did. After the interviews, all recorded interviews were transcribed by the interviewer using Clova and re-listening, and the transcripts were repeatedly listened to and coded for common themes for each time period as initial, middle, and end stage in the students' DMC episodes. The member checking process was followed after the analysis of the interviews as well (see Table 1).

Table 3 presents the questions commonly employed in the semi-structured interviews conducted for the study. Because there is little prior research on the dimensions of DMC found among Korean students, this study aimed to capture as much detail as possible about the characteristics of DMC among Korean learners. To this end, the interview questions included their general L2 learning experiences

2) Since the primary aim of this study is not to examine gender differences, it is determined that the gender imbalance in this study will not pose a significant issue.

as well as DMC episodes (see Table 2). To analyze the semi-structured interviews, we utilized Mayring's (2000) qualitative content analysis. As this study analyzes participants' DMC episodes derived with prior formulated aspects of DMC, we followed deductive category application. We coded each episode or example from the interviews based on the DMC factors suggested in prior studies (i.e., goal-orientedness, behavioral routines, sub-goals, progress checks, affirmative feedback, and positive emotionality). However, if an example unique to Korean learners was found, such as a sense of competition, it was newly coded. If a concept needed modification for clearer meaning, we adjusted the coding agenda (e.g., changing "goal-orientedness" to "self-directed goals").

Table 3. Semi-structured interview questions

Interview questions
Initial L2 learning experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you first start studying English? • What was your most memorable English learning experience at the time?
DMC-related episodes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For survey questions 1-15, please provide specific examples from your past experience as to why you answered the way you did. • [Goal orientedness/Clear starting point] How did your DMC experience primarily begin? • [End point] Did you find DMC difficult to sustain or did your motivation to decrease after your DMC experience? • [DMC structure] Did people around you recognize anything different about your English learning during your DMC experience? • [DMC structure] What behaviors helped you maintain your DMC or why you were able to maintain it? • [DMC structure] What makes you do the routines, did those behaviors increase your motivation, or were you able to do them because you had a clear goal for learning or because you were highly motivated? • [Positive emotionality] How did you feel during your DMC experience?
Etc.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you study English while experiencing DMC? • Can you tell the difference between your normal motivation to learn and your DMC? • What was the biggest driver for you to experience DMC (e.g., environment, learning goals, people around you, etc.)?

4. Findings and Discussion

In this study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with Korean EFL

students who have reported comparable experiences to DMC in the pre-survey. Subsequently, based on these interviews, the common and distinctive elements found among Korean students' DMC experiences were delineated into the following stages: Initial, middle, and end stages.

4.1. Initial stage: Self-directed goals as a triggering factor of DMC

As Henry et al. (2015) suggested, students who experienced DMC commonly had a well-defined and clear goal. The clear goals (or triggering factors of intense motivation) were prerequisites to initiate and maintain the intense long-term motivation (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013). Likewise, Korean EFL students also reported that they had specific reasons and clear goals to initiate DMC experience. All five participants commonly answered that while experiencing DMC, the intense and long-term L2 motivation or the sustained flow, they had self-directed goals such as improving English skills to become a diplomat, communicating with foreigners fluently in English. Excerpt 1 shows how Jay became motivated to learn English after setting a clear goal to work at an international organization, which triggered his DMC experience.

Excerpt 1. I took a career aptitude test in 6th grade, which indicated I had an aptitude for working in diplomacy. As a child, I was inspired by figures like UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, which fueled my aspiration to work within an international organization. ... I prioritized English, so I spent a lot of time learning English, not just because I had to, but because I wanted to... I wanted to do it and I was motivated to do it, so I focused on it and studied more. (Jay)

When asked to recall a time when the DMC experiences (or an intense level of motivation to learn English) began, and what the reason for their high level of motivation was, the participants commonly mentioned their own learning goals. Jay noted a significant surge in his motivation to learn English upon realizing his ambition to work for an international organization (Excerpt 1). It is noteworthy that Jay continuously emphasizes himself as the driving force behind all these efforts. For example, Jay set a goal to become a diplomat and he, himself, was motivated by this goal to study English. Throughout the series of steps involved to accomplish his goal, Jay's self-directed L2 motivation led him to focus more on studying English (Excerpt 1). This self-directed goal was also affected by interpersonal factors (e.g., parents) (Excerpt 2).

Excerpt 2. My dad is not a very good English speaker, but it seemed so cool to see him talking to foreigners in restaurants and hotels and solving problems for his family when he was traveling, so at first I just thought, I want to be like him when I grow up, and I want to be able to travel abroad and talk in English ... I was so interested in English that when I was in fifth grade, my mom told me about an international school where I could take all my classes in English, and from then on, it became my biggest goal to get into an international school. ... So I wanted to get a grade A unconditionally. (Bora)

From a young age, Bora grew up going on annual family trips to Phuket, Thailand, and she was motivated to learn English from a young age by hearing her father speak to foreigners in English. She also mentioned that DMC started when she had a goal for an international school where all courses are taught in English language that she loved so much (Excerpt 2).

In Excerpt 3, we could find out that DMC was triggered by positive attitudes towards L2 learning as well as the self-directed goals affected by interpersonal factors such as teachers. Seojin emphasized her own goal in the course of her DMC initiation. She gained confidence in learning English through various experiences with English and was further motivated to learn English by her teachers when college entrance exams became her most important goal.

Excerpt 3. Since I was a child, my parents took me to Gwanghee English Elementary School, so after school, I participated in many other English programs, so I think I had a lot of experience with English on my own. They also made me do a lot of science and math, but I didn't do well, so I thought I was good at language like Korean and English. ... When I was doing career counseling or college counseling at school, I always heard, "Seojin, are you going to major in English education or any other English related major?" and I thought that was the exact trigger to have my own goal. (Seojin)

In the initial stage of DMC, for example, self-directed goals and positive experiences of English from young ages were found to be triggering factors of DMC. For example, the participants' common triggers to initiate DMC were their self-directed goals influenced by various factors, such as positive experiences with English in childhood and positive attitudes towards L2 learning influenced by positive feedback, compliments, and encouragement from parents and teachers. It is important to note that despite the intervention and influence of parents and teachers, the learning goals that triggered DMC were primarily self-set.

In Jay's case (Excerpt 1), after receiving career counseling, he mentioned working for an international organization as a specific starting point for his DMC, which was followed by spontaneous actions to learn about the work of diplomats and relevant people (e.g., former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon). In Dabin's case (Excerpt 4), despite her limited English skills, she made a promise to herself to go to an international middle school, and as a result of this responsibility, she immersed herself in learning English by reviewing all the lessons in English after class and memorizing English words from time to time. In the initial stage of DMC, self-directed goals and positive experiences of English from young ages were found to be triggering factors of DMC.

4.2. Middle stage

4.2.1. Self-directed goals and the sense of responsibility as maintaining factors of DMC

The aforementioned self-directed goal setting was found to not only cause DMC, but also to help it persist over time. As found in Excerpt 4, despite the difficulty in understanding the lessons due to her low English level, Dabin was determined to go to an international middle school, where teachers teach all courses in English. She did not give up and tried to find her own way to learn and improve her skills despite the difficulties. The reason she worked hard and did her best, despite the difficult situation caused by her lack of English skills, was closely linked to her sense of responsibility toward her self-directed goals. She chose to enter the school and the situation, which made her decide to handle it herself (Excerpt 4).

Excerpt 4. I went to an international middle school, and teachers taught every subject in English. I entered the school in the first year of middle school and my English proficiency was very low, so it was very hard and difficult for me to keep up with the classes. ... So I spent twice as much time doing it. I think I did it a little bit with the idea that I should somehow improve my English skills. ... [It was because] I wanted to attend this school. If I had entered the school because my parents told me to, I might have blamed them and quit, asking why they sent me there. But since I said I wanted to go, I felt responsible and made it work somehow. (Dabin)

In the case of Excerpt 5, we see that students' self-directed goal serves as a maintaining factor of DMC and help Jay continue putting significant effort into studying English. In addition, he mentioned that his persistent nature and unwillingness to give up easily helped him continue studying English to achieve his goal.

Excerpt 5. I had a specific goal [of working for an international organization], so I had to do this [learning English] in order to achieve this goal [of getting better at English], and I'm not the type of personality that gives up quickly at all, so I think it's the goal and my persistence that has kept me going [sustaining high levels of motivation]. (Jay)

In the middle stage of DMC, self-set goals were found to drive students' efforts in studying L2 with a sense of responsibility (Excerpts 4 and 5). According to Peng and Phakiti (2022), DMC experiences allow learners to "give more independent attempts to access in-class and extracurricular learning opportunities and strengthen their positive attitudes towards language learning" (p. 16). Indeed, students in the middle stage of DMC invested the majority of their time in studying L2 and became more engaged in the academic process. This included checking their progress, studying more, and creating their own study routines, rather than being forced to do so (Zarrinabadi et al., 2019). It does not mean that their learning progress was always easy or difficult, but they did not give up because of the self-directed goals in learning L2 with other factors such as a sense of competition with peers and a sense of responsibility toward their own goals (Excerpts 6 to 8).

In the case of Dabin in Excerpt 6, she compared herself to her peers, she felt guilty that she had received low grades in all subjects simply because of her poor English, and the sense of responsibility that she had chosen to attend this school on her own, not because of her parents (Excerpts 4 and 6), made her strive to improve her English, even if it meant creating her own routines.

Excerpt 6. I was getting a lot worse grades than the other kids because I was taking classes in English with lack of English proficiency, so I got a little bit resentful of that. ... Honestly, I didn't want to do it, but I think I was trying to give myself some habits while I was learning English, so I would always review the words that I didn't know after class and memorize them and reread the parts that I missed in class and translate them back into Korean, and that became my English learning pattern [routines]. (Dabin)

In Excerpts 7 and 8, Jay and Yebin also showed that they created their own routines such as writing down their goals to remind themselves, or watching TV shows in L2.

Excerpt 7. In order to fulfill my dreams, I thought that my biggest challenge in high school was going to college and to do this I had to set specific goals. I thought that if I didn't set goals, I wouldn't be able to get there, so I kept setting goals. ... Up until high school, I used to use a study planner a lot for studying. I'd just write down my goals and then a little Bible verse or something that inspired me at the top of my study planner, and I think that's how I kept myself motivated for those goals. (Jay)

Excerpt 8. Until I had a clear dream, I simply enjoyed learning English, but after I thought that I should be a Korean teacher abroad, I developed a sense of mission and felt compelled to improve my English skills. So, I watch a lot of shows in English, engaging in extensive shadowing exercises and following YouTube channels focused on English conversation. (Yebin)

As suggested by Dörnyei et al. (2016) and Henry et al. (2015), triggering stimuli caused students to set their goals, resulting in a facilitative structure that generated sub-goals and established ongoing processes or routines. As mentioned on Excerpts 6 to 8, while experiencing DMC, students were able to keep motivated by doing the routines such as reviewing unknown words after classes or writing down study planner with the goals written. Students' self-directed goals instilled a sense of responsibility, driving them to immerse themselves in studying English with significant effort despite difficulties such as lack of English proficiency or lower grades compared to their peers. Guided by this sense of responsibility and their self-directed goals, students established their own routines or engaged in motivated behaviors to reach their objectives. As they progressed toward their goals, positive outcomes such as improved grades on English tests or feelings of accomplishment reinforced their motivated behaviors as well.

4.2.2. The positive emotionality as a maintaining factor of DMC

During the DMC experience, learners were also found to experience significantly positive feelings of emotion such as accomplishment, satisfaction, and confidence, which keep the DMC for longer periods. It is noteworthy that academic performance

such as grades and DMC have reciprocal relationship. In case the students' hard work paid off, the experience of achievement kept them motivated and continued studying English (Excerpts 9 and 10).

Excerpt 9. In the case of English, I studied well and studied a lot according to my plan, but in other subjects, for example, math is a subject that I really hate, so in my case, even if I set a goal, I sometimes gave up. In the case of English, when I studied, the achievement was good, but in math, even if I studied, it was hard and not enjoyable, and I think I lost a little more motivation for it because my grades did not get better after studying. (Jay)

Excerpt 10. Actually, I like to see results right away, and I think when I didn't have results, my motivation became really low, and I think it goes same in my life, too. ... However, I was preparing for the College Scholastic Ability Test, with a deadline getting shorter and shorter. So, my motivation became high, and I studied more, and then I started to see results get better again, and so on. (Seojin)

As Dörnyei et al. (2014) proposed, positive emotional loading in a DMC is associated with the feeling that individuals perceive their actions as purposeful and meaningful, contributing to the pursuit of their goals. In this regard, the importance of university entrance examinations and school grades in Korean society (Kim, 2020) was found to be an essential external factor that triggered DMC in learners and ensured its continued repetition (Excerpts 7 and 10).

In addition, complements or positive future expectations from others also motivated students to maintain their DMC (Excerpts 3 and 11). The accumulation of positive experiences with English, influenced by parents' or teachers' affirmative feedback, led to the development of confidence in English and enhanced DMC experience. As Dabin stated, teacher's positive expectations on her English learning and future career influenced her studying English (Excerpt 11).

Excerpt 11. I think my teacher was very fond of me and guided me so I tried to do my best in English and I tried to do my best in studying to fulfill her expectations. I think my teacher's influence was a lot in learning English. (Dabin)

Occasionally, even witnessing a non-close acquaintance' DMC (e.g., celebrities and entertainers) could also influence students to stay motivated by serving as role models for learning English (Excerpt 12).

Excerpt 12. I just endure a little while thinking about international students or Korean people who are really successful in foreign countries. They also have a completely different mother tongue and English, but they studied really hard and are standing there, and there must be a hard process so far, but if I endure it now, I can be like them, so I think I saw role models in the distance instead of around me. (Bora)

Based on Table 2, except for Seojin and Dabin (i.e., witnessing experiences of others' DMC: 6 out of 6 points), the others rarely witnessed other people around them experiencing DMC (between 2 and 4 points, below average). This implies that L2 learners' DMC can be influenced by observing someone else's high level of motivation. Additionally, their DMC could be affected by encounters with individuals outside of their immediate circle as well, such as celebrities who have successfully learned English. However, advice or positive expectations from teachers or parents who are near them may help students experience DMC more directly (Excerpts 11 and 12).

4.3. End stage: The end or decrease of DMC intensity for the accomplishment of the goal

DMCs have clearly recognizable start and endpoints, which is always directional and has a clear end (Dörnyei et al., 2014; Muir, 2020; Zarrinabadi & Khodarahmi, 2023). This study analyzed interviews in which participants recalled their past English learning experiences and reflected on their DMC experiences. It is assumed that Korean EFL students' DMCs also began with clear goals and ended or faded. Indeed, four participants out of five reported that they had experienced a decline in motivation as their goals were met. The other one insisted that his motivation had not declined and that DMC had not ended yet, as his goal of becoming an English teacher had not been achieved.

At first, as observed in Excerpt 13, Seojin is reporting that she lost her interest in studying English, and it was because her major goal of getting into university was accomplished when she was admitted. In Seojin's case, she had always scored higher in English than in other subjects in high school, and she described English as a subject that reassured her while studying for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). However, now that she has achieved her goal of getting into the university, majoring in English education, and her DMC experience has come to an end.

Excerpt 13. After experiencing intense motivation, I think that after coming to university, I've lost the motivation or goal of learning English [for admission] and lost interest in studying [English]. (Seojin)

It is worth noting, however, that unlike Seojin, other participants who mentioned experiencing decreases in L2 motivation described similar situation of the end of DMC as a “decrease” or a brief “pause” of DMC rather than an “end” of DMC (Excerpts 14 and 15). This difference is likely due to learners’ triggers for DMC. For example, when DMC was triggered by college entrance exams or high school grades, the DMC seemed to end once those goals were achieved at this current time of past DMC being discussed. However, when the participants’ DMC was triggered by non-immediate goals or not-yet accomplished goals such as future employment (e.g., becoming a Korean teacher in foreign countries or English teacher, and working for international organizations), DMC seemed to continue (Excerpts 14 and 15).

Excerpt 14. I think [my DMC] dropped a little bit like studying English grammar for school exams, but I was still pretty much on track with my conversation study. ... I'm still not a Korean teacher [who teaches Korean to English speakers] yet, so I think it [DMC] is still ongoing. (Yebin)

Excerpt 15. I think [DMC retention periods] are short, like a month or two, or like three or four months, and then I would take a break, and then I would start again. I think it's not so much a decrease, it's more like I'm just burned out and I'm kind of letting go of everything a little bit and just doing nothing every day. (Bora)

In the case of Yebin (Excerpt 14), her self-directed goal was becoming a Korean teacher abroad, and this is not yet accomplished. Since, she had a long-term L2 learning goals, she did not think that her DMC for learning English stopped, even though the L2 motivation for short-term goals may have decreased. This is also found in Bora’s interview (Excerpt 15). The DMC experience was described as starting and stopping every few months, and was referred to as a “break” rather than a termination.

However, Jay showed a different reaction to the end of DMC compared to the other interview participants. He had a much stronger stance on motivation decline rather than the end of DMC (Excerpt 16).

Excerpt 16. I don't think I ever thought that just because my goal was achieved, my motivation to learn English ended. Even though I got into a university where I wished to become an English teacher, I never thought, "Oh, now I'm done with English." (Jay)

Jay insisted that he has never experienced an end of L2 motivation. Since his goal is to become an English teacher, he believes that his motivation to learn English should not decrease or stop just because he got to the university and became a teacher a few years later. Along with the 'not-yet accomplished goals' mentioned earlier (Excerpts 14 and 15), Jay's strong belief contributes to the continuation of DMC rather than its decline or an end. In reality, there may be changes in the degree of motivation for learning English or the extent of motivated behavior. However, at least in this interview, his strong belief that his DMC is continuing and should continue to be a better teacher appeared to sustain his high levels of motivation.

In this regard, we found out that depending on their types of goals, participants either experienced the end of DMC or reported that their motivation to learn English had decreased rather than ended.

5. Conclusion

This exploratory study aimed to analyze Korean students' DMC experiences to understand the theory of DMC and its dimensions in the field of L2 motivation, which has been mainly studied in Western countries, within Korean contexts. Through the pre-survey and semi-structured interviews, the key factors of the DMC such as clear goal-orientedness, positive emotions, and DMC structure (Dörnyei et al., 2015, 2016; Henry et al., 2015; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013), were also found among Korean EFL students.

The DMC experiences found among the participating Korean EFL students could be divided into three main stages: Initial, middle, and end stage. In the initial stage, self-directed goal setting was commonly found in all participants. Strong motivation was initiated by the goals they set for themselves with the help of teachers and parents. Once individuals establish their personal goals, these become powerful motivators to sustain DMC, making every action that contributes to goal achievement enjoyable (Dörnyei et al., 2014). In the middle stage, self-directed goals and a sense of responsibility immersed students in learning L2 through their own

methods, like posting on social media in English, reviewing all classes by translating English to Korean, or writing planners with goals. This process generated positive emotionality such as satisfaction and accomplishment, fostering a positive self-ego and further energizing the continuation of DMC (Zarrinabadi & Tavakoli, 2017). In the end stage, it was found that perceptions on the end of DMC vary depending on the types of triggering factors of DMC. For goals achievable within a single semester or a specific period, such as academic performance (i.e., CSAT), participants regarded the DMC ended as the test ended. However, for mastery goals like ultimate improvement in English proficiency, it is argued that DMC persists and has not ended, as individuals still feel unsatisfied with their English skills. Indeed, the timing of DMC termination can be interpersonal or intrapersonal depending on the type of goals.

The findings of this study indicate that specific self-directed goal setting is essential for the initiation of DMC. However, the goal-setting process can be influenced by positive advice, encouragement, and expectations from teachers or parents. In other words, to help learners set goals that could initiate DMC, positive experiences with English and external encouragement are crucial. For example, the participants reported experiencing DMC for at least a month or years, but this does not mean that learning English was always enjoyable or that results were consistently positive. Despite reporting months or years of DMC, the study found that students often had days when they did not make strong efforts, and periods of DMC did not always lead directly to subsequent DMC experiences. Nevertheless, during periods of DMC, students could experience positive emotions related to learning L2, such as feeling less fatigued by difficult tasks and feeling satisfied with the academic process itself. These positive feelings were also influenced by teachers and parents. Praise, encouragement, affirmative feedback, and expectations from teachers or parents were key to re-motivating students or helping them overcome negative outcomes, fostering a mindset of 'try again then I can do this' (Başöz & Gümüş, 2022; Henry et al., 2015).

In this regard, it is crucial to provide students with opportunities to self-assess their specific goals and monitor their progress, while also offering timely feedback and encouragement from teachers and parents (Henry et al., 2015). In addition, achieving even smaller or short-term goals and accumulating successful language learning experiences is paramount. This will empower students to gain confidence in setting their own goals and immerse themselves, putting significant effort into learning L2 with positive emotions. English teachers should also help students see

the target language as a way to express themselves and grow personally. This means including students' identities and interests in lessons and connecting what they learn in class to who they are and what they like to do outside of school (Ushioda, 2011).

This study confirmed that the concept of DMC, previously explored in other ESL/EFL contexts, is applicable to the Korean context. However, further research with a more diverse sample of learners is needed to validate these findings. While this study is significant in analyzing DMC factors in the Korean context and dividing DMC experiences into three stages, it is limited by its focus on English education majors. Additionally, most participants recalled past DMC experiences, which restricts the exploration of their current, ongoing DMC. Further empirical research is necessary to analyze DMC across various learning experiences, including students from fields such as international studies, political science, and international relations, in addition to English education. Moreover, in addition to qualitative studies with small sample sizes, quantitative research analyzing the factors of DMC in Korea should also be conducted.

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Appendix

Questionnaires and interview questions for the study (revised version of Muir’s [2016] study)

- Levels of L2 learning motivation by grade

Please describe your level of motivation to learn English from the time you first learned English (e.g., kindergarten, third grade in elementary school, etc.) to the present, using a scale of 0-10 (Set 0 for no motivation to learn English at all and indicate the relative strength of your English motivation on a scale of 0-10).

Grade	Kinder- garten	Elementary school						Middle school			High school			Present
		1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	1	2	3	
Level of L2 moti- vation														

- DMC disposition questionnaire

Questions	Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 6						N/A (not applicable)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1 I have personally experienced this type of intense motivation specifically while learning a language.							
2 How often do you think you have experienced this kind of intense motivation? (None=N/A, once=1, ... more than six times=6)							
3 I once felt intense motivation to learn English because of something special happened while I was learning English.							

Questions	Strongly disagree 1 – Strongly agree 6						N/A (not applicable)
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
4	During this time, I was able to work more productively than I usually can because of my goal.						
5	People around me could see that I was experiencing something special or intense motivation.						
6	How long did this experience last? (None=N/A, more than a week=1, more than a month=2, more than 3 months=3, more than 6 months=4, more than a year=5, more than 2 years=6)						
7	While I was experiencing intense motivation to learn English, I was able to study a much higher amount than before.						
8	While I was experiencing intense motivation to learn English, I felt much more fulfilled than before.						
9	While experiencing this intense motivation, I felt a real struggle to keep going.						
10	I surprised myself with how much I was able to do.						
11	While I was experiencing intense motivation to learn English, I put in a lot of work or effort without realizing how hard it was.						
12	While experiencing this intense motivation, I remember thinking about my goal all the time.						
13	As my goal was achieved or end, I experienced my learning motivation decreased again.						
14	I have seen this type of intense motivation in people around me such as friends, family, or students.						
15	I would like to experience this type of intense motivation again.						

- Short-essays on DMC-related episodes
 1. If you've ever been fully immersed in learning English over a period of weeks or months, tell us more about your memorable experience.
 2. Describe further how you felt during the above experiences, the changes you noticed in yourself during the English language learning process, the reactions of those around you, and the changes you noticed after the immersion experience (or after the end of the immersion).
- Participant information
 - Name
 - Age
 - Name of university and your major
 - Years of English study
 - English proficiency level (CSAT grade or any other tests [TOEIC, TOEFL] scores)