

Driven to Learn: A Phenomenological Study of Learning Motivation Among Adult ESL Students in a South Korean Language School

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Abstract

This phenomenological inquiry examined how ten non-traditional Korean women sustained their motivation while studying English at a community-based Women's Resources Development Center in South Korea. Framed by Constructivist Learning Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the study considered the personal, classroom, social, and institutional conditions that helped or hindered persistence. Data were gathered through a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide that was reviewed by experts, translated for participant understanding, and supported by member checking. Thematic analysis of verbatim transcripts revealed that motivation was strengthened by enjoyment in lifelong learning, friendships formed in class, the participants' emerging identity as capable "global grandmothers," and the teacher's supportive rapport. At the same time, language anxiety, difficult lessons, limited parking, aging classroom technology, and unstable connectivity reduced comfort and interrupted learning. In response, the study proposes a zero-budget learning motivation plan focused on humane teacher practices, peer sharing, future-self activities related to travel and family communication, reflective learning routines, and regular institutional feedback. The findings suggest that mature adult ESL learners value functional, identity-related communication more than native-like performance and that language learning can support social integration, family connection, confidence, and continued personal growth.

Keywords: *Adult ESL motivation, qualitative phenomenology, global grandmothers, institutional friction, South Korea*

Bio-profile

Princess E. Patrocinio is an educator with more than 15 years of teaching experience in South Korea, working with learners from elementary, university, and corporate settings. Her current graduate work focuses on language learning motivation, qualitative phenomenology, and humanistic approaches to adult pedagogy. Her research interests include adult ESL motivation, learner-centered instruction, teacher rapport, language anxiety reduction, and the ways English learning supports identity, social participation, and lifelong education.



Introduction

Adult education is no longer viewed only as a route to employment or economic advancement. For many learners, it also provides a space for personal growth, social participation, and mental engagement. In South Korea, English learning carries this wider meaning because it is often associated with travel, cultural participation, family communication, and the ability to remain socially connected in a globalized environment. These concerns are especially visible among mature women who return to the classroom later in life and whose motivations may differ from those of younger, test-oriented students.

This study examined how adult ESL learners maintain motivation, and what causes that motivation to weaken, within a South Korean language school. Although previous research has addressed learner goals, classroom strategies, achievement, and dropout, less attention has been given to how mature female learners connect English learning with identity, family roles, peer belonging, and everyday life. Practical institutional concerns, including parking, classroom comfort, Wi-Fi, and equipment quality, are also seldom treated as meaningful motivational conditions.

The contribution of the study lies in its close attention to the lived experiences of adult female ESL learners in a community-based Korean setting. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the research describes what encouraged the participants to continue, what discouraged them, and how their experiences shaped their desire to keep learning. The findings may help adult ESL learners, teachers, administrators, and future researchers design support that is realistic, learner-centered, and responsive to the actual conditions of adult classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

The study was grounded in Constructivist Learning Theory, associated with Lev Vygotsky and Jean Piaget, and in Self-Determination Theory, developed by Edward L. Deci and Richard M. Ryan. A constructivist lens was suitable because the participants did not enter the classroom as blank slates. They brought family responsibilities, memories of earlier schooling, social goals, and personal hopes into the learning process. Their understanding of English was shaped through classroom participation, peer interaction, teacher guidance, and the connection of lessons to real-life situations.

Self-Determination Theory further explained the motivational side of these experiences. Autonomy appeared in the participants' decision to continue studying English in adulthood. Competence was reflected in their wish to understand, speak, and use English with greater confidence. Relatedness appeared in the importance they gave to teacher encouragement, peer support, and family-centered communication. Together, the two theories helped explain both how learning took place and why participants continued despite difficulty.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework traced the study from context to proposed output. Its inputs were the mature Korean female ESL learners, the community-based language school, and the motivational assumptions of Self-Determination Theory. At the center of the framework were the learners' lived experiences: how they described English learning, what supported their motivation, what challenged it, and what kept them returning to class.

These experiences were expected to influence engagement, participation, confidence, self-efficacy, and the development of English for real-life communication. The final output



was a proposed learning motivation plan that responded directly to the participants' experiences and to the practical needs that emerged from their accounts.

Research Questions

1. How do the participants describe their experiences of learning English in a South Korean language school?
2. What factors influence the learning motivation of the participants in a South Korean language school?
3. What challenges do the participants encounter that affect their motivation to learn English?
4. How do the experiences of the participants shape their motivation to continue learning English?
5. Based on the findings, what learning motivation plan may be proposed?

Literature Review

In Korean language schools, ESL learning should be understood as more than the study of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. It is also connected with social participation, intercultural communication, and the learner's ability to remain active in changing social environments. The concept of English as a lingua franca highlights successful communication rather than native-like speech (Jenkins, 2007), while the sociolinguistic reality of English use shows that learners use English in varied ways across cultural and social contexts (Kachru, 1985). These perspectives are useful for adult learners who often value practical communication over perfect accuracy.

Adult ESL motivation is influenced by personal, social, emotional, and contextual factors. Deci and Ryan (1985) explain that motivation becomes stronger when autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported. Research on older adult language learners likewise suggests that English learning can become a source of confidence, social participation, active aging, and personal growth, particularly when learners see it as useful for travel, family contact, and communication beyond their immediate community (Geng & Jin, 2023; Kim, 2022; Li & Li, 2025).

At the same time, the literature shows that adult motivation can be fragile. Anxiety, fear of mistakes, limited progress, weak peer interaction, technological problems, and institutional barriers may discourage participation and may contribute to demotivation or dropout when they are left unaddressed (Evans & Tragant, 2020; Meşe & Sevilen, 2021; Nabila et al., 2021; Welesilassie & Nikolov, 2022). Teacher rapport and emotional support are therefore important because they can lower anxiety, increase enjoyment, and make adult learners more willing to speak and participate (Derakhshan et al., 2025; Liu & Zhou, 2024; Pourgharib & Shakki, 2024; Zarei et al., 2024).

Method

Design

The study used a qualitative research approach and a phenomenological design. This design was appropriate because the purpose was to understand participants' experiences, meanings, feelings, and perceptions rather than to measure statistical relationships. Through phenomenology, the study examined how participants described their English learning, what influenced their motivation, what challenged them, and how these experiences shaped their desire to continue.



Sample

The participants were ten mature Korean female ESL learners enrolled in a community-based women's learning institution in South Korea. They were selected through purposive sampling because they had direct experience with the phenomenon under study. All participants were taking ESL classes during data collection and were willing to share their personal experiences.

Instrument

The main instrument was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide. The guide included open-ended questions aligned with the research questions and was translated into Korean to help participants respond with clarity and confidence. Audio recordings were used to preserve the interviews accurately for verbatim transcription, coding, and thematic analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical procedures included institutional permission, informed consent, a clear explanation of the purpose of the study, protection of participant confidentiality, and voluntary participation. Member checking was used so that participants could confirm whether the transcripts reflected their intended meanings.

Statistical Treatment

No statistical treatment was applied because the study was qualitative. Instead, the verbatim transcripts were examined through thematic analysis. The researcher read the transcripts carefully, identified significant statements, coded recurring ideas, grouped related codes into themes, and interpreted the meanings in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework.

Results and Discussion

Participants described English learning as enjoyable, socially meaningful, and closely tied to identity. Four major experiential themes emerged: cultivating joy through lifelong learning, fostering connection and social belonging, navigating identity as global grandmothers, and empowering learning through teacher rapport and pedagogical support. Statements such as "I love studying," "I felt happy when I could speak English with my classmate," and "I want to be an old lady who can understand and speak in English" showed that English learning was connected not only with language ability but also with confidence, communication, and the kind of future self the participants hoped to become.

Motivation was strengthened by intrinsic interest in learning, a warm classroom atmosphere, peer interaction, shared learning, and future-oriented family and travel goals. Participants became more motivated when they could exchange ideas with classmates, receive encouragement from the teacher, imagine traveling with grandchildren, and use English to maintain relationships with family and friends. These findings show that adult ESL motivation is not only academic. It is also personal, social, emotional, and connected to imagined future experiences.

The challenges that weakened motivation came from both inside and outside the learner. Participants mentioned parking difficulty, limited student benefits, old projectors, Wi-Fi concerns, language anxiety, fear of mistakes, and the need for more support. These concerns show that motivation may decline not only because English itself is difficult, but also because institutional and technological friction can interrupt comfort, attention, and participation.



The strongest reasons for continuing were meaningful communication, family-centered future goals, personal growth, and supportive teacher-student relationships. Participants continued because English helped them share ideas, imagine future travel, communicate across generations, and feel encouraged by a teacher who made the classroom emotionally safe. In this sense, persistence was sustained less by grades or formal achievement and more by belonging, purpose, and practical communication.

Proposed Learning Motivation Plan

Teacher Rapport and Emotional Safety: Begin each week with a brief emotional check-in, use encouraging feedback, and correct speaking errors in a supportive manner. The expected output is greater learner confidence and comfort when speaking English.

Peer Connection and Social Belonging: Strengthen classroom belonging through Tea and Talk sessions, pair-sharing, and group discussions based on familiar life topics. The expected output is more active peer participation and stronger social belonging.

Family-Centered and Future-Oriented Learning: Connect lessons with family, travel, and everyday communication through future-self activities, travel role-play, and family message writing. The expected output is the completion of simple English tasks related to family, travel, or future goals.

Lifelong Learning and Personal Growth: Sustain enjoyment through daily wins journals, monthly sharing of learning progress, and positive self-talk exercises. The expected output is continued interest and a clearer sense of meaningful progress.

Institutional Support and Student Comfort: Give learners regular channels to raise practical concerns through suggestion box reviews, short feedback meetings, classroom resource monitoring, and parking or facility concern reporting. The expected output is that learners feel heard and that practical concerns are documented for school action.

The proposed plan was designed as a zero-budget intervention because many forms of motivational support are humanistic and procedural rather than expensive. Teacher encouragement, peer connection, future-oriented tasks, reflection activities, and clear feedback channels can be introduced immediately, while also giving administrators a practical way to document larger institutional concerns.

Conclusions

The study concluded that the learning motivation of adult ESL students in a South Korean language school was shaped by a combination of personal, social, emotional, and institutional experiences. Participants viewed English learning as lifelong learning, a source of enjoyment, a way to connect with classmates, and a means of maintaining family and global relationships. Intrinsic interest, classroom atmosphere, peer interaction, teacher encouragement, and future goals strengthened motivation. However, language anxiety, learning difficulty, technological concerns, and institutional barriers also affected participation. Overall, mature adult ESL learners were more likely to continue when the classroom supported emotional safety, social belonging, practical communication, personal growth, and learner-centered support.

Recommendations

Adult ESL teachers are encouraged to use learner-centered strategies that build emotional safety, peer interaction, and practical communication. Supportive correction, simple speaking tasks, group sharing activities, and lessons connected with family, travel, and daily communication are recommended. Language school administrators should also consider



the proposed motivation plan as a practical guide for improving student support, classroom resources, feedback systems, and basic facilities that affect adult learners' comfort and participation. Future researchers may extend the study to other adult learner groups, other regions, or mixed-method designs that examine both lived experiences and measurable motivational outcomes.

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