

# An Analysis of Korean EFL Learners' Changes in Interest Level

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## [Abstract]

Between individual and situational interest, the former has been characterized as a relatively long-term preference, while the latter is recognized as a short-term state that is influenced by environments and situations and can change over time. Therefore, most of the previous researches have focused on exploring and promoting situational interest in order to increase learners' interest level. However, little research has been conducted in language learning related to interest, and the participants in the previous researches were either children or young adolescents, thus having limited relevance for explaining adult learners' changes in interest level and influential factors that contributed to the changes in situational interest. Therefore, the current study explored characteristics of each interest and tried to find the most influential factors to the process of changes in interest level. Ten interviewees answered the questionnaire and semi-structured interview questions regarding their interest in English learning. Transcribed interviews were analyzed, and recurrent themes were categorized and grouped. The analysis results indicated that the participants' levels of anxiety and self-confidence were related to individual interest, and they were extrinsically motivated to keep studying regardless of their situation and interest level. Teaching implications were suggested in order to

decrease the level of anxiety and to increase that of self-confidence.

**Key Words: individual interest, situational interest, interest, extrinsic motivation, intrinsic motivation**

## I. Introduction

Herbart (1965) alleges that interest is “one of the primary goals of education,” and it is closely related to learning. According to Schiefele (1991), interest further provides learners with motivation for learning and promotes long-term storage of knowledge. Schiefele defines interest as “a content-specific motivational characteristic composed of intrinsic feeling-related and value-related valences” (299). Among many definitions, previous researchers (Hidi 1990; Hidi & Baird 1986, 1988; Renninger, Hidi & Krapp 1992; Schiefele 1991) have come to agree that interest is divided into two dimensions: situational interest and individual interest.

Between these two interests, studies have focused on situational interest as researchers and teachers believed that situational interest could be changed by environments and situations, and changes in situational interest could lead to changes in individual interest. Therefore, researchers (Huh 2009; Lim & Chung 2005; Ra 2008; Ryu 2005; Yi 2004) measured learners' interest level, created activities that could promote their interest, or explored the most influential factors that contributed to changes in situational interest. However, little research has been conducted in language learning related to interest, and learners' voices were absent in the research. Moreover, the participants in previous research were elementary school students or young adolescents who gradually lost interest as time went by, but the studies did

not examine adult learners' changes in interest level after entering university, in regards to whether their interest level at university remained low or whether there were changes in interest level. In the current study, learners had a chance to explain their changes in interest level over time from elementary school to university. The research questions are as follows:

1. How did adult learners' level of interest change after they entered university?
2. What were the influential factors to adult learners' level of interest change?

## II. Literature Review

### 2.1 Interest

Dewey (1913) explained that individuals and environments interacted with each other in the development of interest (cited in Hidi 1990). On the basis of Dewey's claim, research about interest (Hidi 1990; Hidi & Baird 1986, 1988; Krapp 1999; Renninger, Hidi & Krapp 1992; Schiefele 1991; Thorndike 1935) has presumed that learning is an interactive process influenced by personal interest as well as the interestingness of tasks and objects.

Personal interest is identified as individual interest, and the interestingness of tasks and objects is often related to situational interest (Hidi 1990; Hidi & Baird 1986, 1988; Renninger, Hidi & Krapp 1992; Schiefele 1991). Individual interest usually refers to subjective long-term interest on specific topics, subjects, activities, or an

area of knowledge. It is a more stabilized state compared to situational interest (Schiefele 1991). On the other hand, situational interest is related to short-term interest about specific topics. Schiefele (1991) defined situational interest as “an emotional state brought about by situational stimuli” (302). Research about situational interest has mainly focused on investigating the characteristics that provoke interest and increase “the effects of interestingness of text materials on comprehension” (302).

Situational interest is known to be associated with specific contexts or features and is different from simple curiosity (Hidi & Anderson 1992; Krapp 1999). After situational interest is increased or activated in the first step, the enhanced situational interest can be connected to the development of individual interest (Hidi 1990; Hidi & Baird 1986; Hidi & Berndorff 1998). Once an interaction between a person and an environment occurs, both types of interests can influence the development of the other (Hidi 1990).

Interest research has recently been at the center of attention as interest has been shown to contribute to language learners’ proficiency improvement (Lee & Oh 2011). In Lee and Oh’s study, the regression analysis results indicated that participants’ interest was solely regressed to their proficiency improvement. For the short-essay questions in the questionnaire, the participants stated that communication-focused activities were the most interesting, while activities in preparation for the TOEIC test were the least interesting. However, they believed that activities for TOEIC preparation helped them improve their TOEIC scores and were an indispensable part of English learning.

## 2.2 Factors Influential on Changes in Interest Level

Providing appropriate learning environments is important in language education (Kim & Chon 2016; Lee 2014). When academic environments are successfully congruent with students' interest, learners' level of satisfaction and success can be increased (Holland 1997). Allen and Robbins (2010) examined the effects of the congruence level between learners' interest and their learning environments. They explored the relationships among motivation, academic performance, and the level of congruence between interest and participants' majors. The results indicated that the level of congruence and motivation influenced their timely degree completion.

Kim, Yoon, and So (2008) claimed that interest was a vital factor influencing the effectiveness of learning. Their study, which investigated Korean students' academic interest, showed that environmental factors could lower the participants' level of interest. The participants' academic interest decreased with their age and grade in school. They lost interest due to an excessively controlled learning environment, stress, anxiety, and loss of competence as a result of extreme competition and normative evaluation in Korea. The participants' interest was negatively correlated to their academic achievement; participants with a high level of achievement had a low level of interest. However, they gradually lost interest due to academic environments that severely emphasized outcomes and achievement. Therefore, Kim, Yoon, and So concluded that, in order to enhance the level of situational interest, teachers need to provide students with autonomy, to develop integrated courses, to operate special purpose courses, and so on.

In Kim and Yoon's (2004) study, the learning environment also influenced learners' level of interest. Kim and Yoon suggested diverse ways to design a learning environment in order to enhance learners' interest and intrinsic motivation. Teachers

often use games or other humorous contexts to increase learners' level of interest, but Kim and Yoon warned against adding irrelevant activities because they can result in hindering learning of the targeted content. They claimed that teachers needed to primarily focus on making learners interested in learning the content. Kim, Yoon, So, Kweon, Kim, and Lee (2004) examined the effects of task types, contexts of tasks, and task goals on learners' interest and motivation. Their results indicated that learners' interest was increased when task types were familiar and interestingly constructed, and when contexts of tasks and task goals were clearly explained.

With regard to the effects of self-efficacy and group work on task interest and learning outcomes, So and Kim (2006) found that learners with high self-efficacy had a higher level of interest compared to those with lower self-efficacy. Regardless of their level of self-efficacy, their interest level was higher for individual work rather than for small group work. Cho's (2015) findings also indicated the positive relationship between the level of self-efficacy and academic achievement. Kim and Jung (2011) explored the relationships among teaching factors, students' interest, excitement, and intrinsic motivation. Teachers' enthusiasm and attitudes influenced students' level of interest, excitement, and intrinsic motivation, and they were connected to learners' level of satisfaction with courses and use of learning strategies.

The previous research explained above explored interest in the field of educational psychology. Even though the significance of interest has long been recognized, only a handful of research studies related to the topic have been conducted in language learning. Lee and Lee (2008) explored the relationship between vocabulary acquisition and interest among Korean high school students and found that the higher their level of interest, the higher their vocabulary test scores. Additionally, Lee and Oh's study (2011) indicated that the level of interest influenced the level of proficiency improvement, and Lim and Chung (2005) described how to use drama in

the language classroom in order to increase young learners' interest level.

Similar to Lim and Chung's study (2005), most of the interest research in language education (Huh 2009; Ra 2008; Ryu 2005; Yi 2004) has mainly investigated young learners' interest. Therefore, research on adult language learners' interest is needed. The current study explored adult learners' changes in interest level after entering university. During the interview, the participants had a chance to explain their changes in interest level over time from elementary school to university. In order to gather opinions about changes in interest from a wide variety of learners, participants enrolled in different courses and with varying proficiency levels were recruited for this study.

### III. Methods

#### 3.1. Participants

Multiple different cases were analyzed in this qualitative study in order to gain understanding of the participants' most and least preferred classroom activities. Seven freshmen, two sophomores, and one third-year university student whose first language was Korean participated. Before entering university, they received English education that observed a unified national curriculum. All of them received ten years of English education: four years in elementary school, three years in junior high school, and another three years in high school.

The participants' university, a women's university, is located in Seoul, South Korea and required them to take two English mandatory courses: one in the first semester and the other in the second semester. They were also permitted to take

elective English courses concurrently or after the mandatory English courses. They were interviewed after finishing the first semester. At the time of the interviews, seven of the freshmen had finished taking the first mandatory course, and one of them had taken an elective English course along with the mandatory course. Two sophomores took an elective English course after taking both mandatory courses, and one third-year student took the same elective course.

The participants' proficiency levels and their majors were varied. Their university required freshmen to take the TOEIC test three times: the first one as a placement test when they entered the university, the second at the end of the first semester, and the third at the end of the second semester. Their two TOEIC scores were collected: one at the beginning of the first semester and the other at the end of the semester.

Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information

Participants	Majors	Courses	1 <sup>st</sup> TOEIC	2 <sup>nd</sup> TOEIC
1 <sup>st</sup>	Chemistry	Mandatory: Intermediate	455	710
2 <sup>nd</sup>	Multi-Media	Mandatory: Intermediate	610	610
3 <sup>rd</sup>	Public Administration	Mandatory: Intermediate	585	620
4 <sup>th</sup>	Library & Information Science	Mandatory: Highest	745	905
5 <sup>th</sup>	Undeclared	Mandatory: Intermediate	490	710
6 <sup>th</sup>	Horticultural Science & Landscape Architecture	Mandatory: Intermediate Elective: TOEIC	710	810
7 <sup>th</sup> (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	Food & Nutrition	Elective: TOEIC	600	725
8 <sup>th</sup>	Information Security	Mandatory: Highest	660	720
9 <sup>th</sup> (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	Biotechnology & Environmental Engineering	Elective: TOEIC	620	770
10 <sup>th</sup> (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	Biotechnology & Environmental Engineering	Elective: TOEIC	580	690

Table 1 illustrates more detailed information of the participants' majors, courses they took, and their TOEIC scores. Their average score for the first TOEIC was 605.5 and that for the second TOEIC was 727. Their second scores showed some improvement compared to the first ones even though each participant's degree of improvement was different. The fourth participant had the highest TOEIC scores and the second participant had the lowest second TOEIC score. Moreover, the second participant did not show any signs of improvement between the TOEIC tests.

Instead of using pseudonyms, the order of the interviews was used to identify the participants because there were ten of them, which was a relatively large number for a qualitative study, and because of the difficulty in matching up pseudonyms with the data. The participants were recruited through snowball sampling; the researcher contacted their professors and explained the purposes of the study and interview questions. In order to gather opinions from a diverse group of learners about their interest in language learning, participants with varying proficiency levels who were enrolled in different courses were recruited.

### **3.2. Course Description**

The mandatory courses were divided into three levels depending on the results of the placement test at the beginning of the first semester: the lowest, intermediate, and the highest. Seven participants took mandatory courses; two of them took the highest level course and five of them took the intermediate level course. Both of the courses were composed of two classes per week: one focusing on English speaking and the other focusing on preparing for the TOEIC test. In the first class, there was a textbook that primarily focused on practicing English conversation, but instructors provided students with handouts for the second class.

The elective course that the participants registered for was aimed at helping students score 750 points or higher on the TOEIC test. At the beginning and end of the semester, they were required to submit their TOEIC scores in order to calculate their improvement, and the results were counted as a part of the final grade. The elective course was also composed of two classes per week, and professors developed course curriculum and activities for TOEIC listening, reading, and speaking. During interviews, the participants were asked to choose their most and least preferred activities in their course and to explain reasons for their choices.

### **3.3. Data Collection and Analysis**

The researcher contacted the participants' professors who asked each participant whether they were available for an interview after the first semester ended. Before the recruiting process started, their final grades were all submitted. Therefore, their participation in this study was completely voluntary. When they agreed to be interviewed, the researcher contacted them to arrange a meeting, and they were interviewed individually. Before the formal interview, they answered short-essay questions about their demographic information. The researcher met with each participant in her office, and each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed. Each interview lasted about 90 to 120 minutes, and the interview questions were semi-structured. At the beginning of each interview, explanations about the research purposes and interview procedures were provided to the participants. Gift cards were provided as a token of gratitude.

The participants were asked to bring their textbooks for the courses and to explain their most and least preferred activities during the interview. The transcribed interview data were scrutinized in the first stage of data analysis, and the most

salient themes and preliminary hypotheses were developed and categorized. The themes that emerged were applied in the second stage in order to code the data (Merriam 1998). In order to increase the validity of data analysis, the researcher had discussions with the students' professors in regard to the participants' characteristics and their participation during the courses before and after the formal interviews. Relevant resources such as syllabuses of the courses, handouts, and their test results were also collected.

## IV. Results and Discussions

### 4.1. Individual Interest

The participants' individual interest was related to their learning styles. Some participants preferred communication-focused practice, while some preferred grammar instruction. However, their preferences were not related to their level of interest. It was not certain that their extrinsic motivation such as their desire for getting a good job or a future plan to study abroad changed their level of individual interest, but it made them keep studying English. Table 2 summarizes their most and least preferred language tasks.

Table 2. Participants' Most & Least Preferred Tasks

Participants	The Most Preferred Tasks	The Least Preferred Tasks
1 <sup>st</sup>	speaking, presentation	grammar, writing
2 <sup>nd</sup>	speaking, listening	grammar, writing
3 <sup>rd</sup>	grammar, vocabulary	speaking

4 <sup>th</sup>	test preparation	speaking, pattern drills
5 <sup>th</sup>	speaking, listening	test preparation
6 <sup>th</sup>	reading, grammar	speaking
7 <sup>th</sup> (3 <sup>rd</sup> )	reading, grammar, writing	speaking
8 <sup>th</sup>	speaking, grammar	listening
9 <sup>th</sup> (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	speaking	test preparation
10 <sup>th</sup> (2 <sup>nd</sup> )	speaking	grammar

As seen in Table 2, each participant had different preferences for classroom activities and English language tasks. The most preferred language skill to focus on was speaking. Six of the participants answered that they liked to be engaged in speaking activities in which they could participate and have a chance to practice with their peers or teachers. They preferred to participate in practical hands-on activities such as interviewing their classmates for surveys or making dialogues that required interaction with other classmates. On the other hand, the participants who preferred studying speaking did not like learning grammar, memorizing vocabulary, writing, or listening.

However, the third, fourth, sixth, and seventh participants did not like participating in speaking activities such as interviewing their classmates or filling in blanks to make a dialogue. The third participant preferred learning grammar and memorizing vocabulary, while the sixth participant liked reading. Unlike the first and second participants who preferred the textbook-based class that included diverse speaking activities, the third participant preferred the TOEIC preparation class in which instructors mostly explained test-taking strategies and methodologies for preparing for the test.

Time played a critical role in the process of changes in interest level. The participants' level of interest changed as time went by. They had liked English when

they were young, usually when they were elementary school students, but they gradually lost their interest in English in junior high or high school. Major reasons for their loss of interest in English were connected to their high level of anxiety and low self-confidence. In Korea, studying English outside of the public school system is prevalent even among elementary school students; participants answered that they had studied English at a private language institute or at home before starting to study English in the third grade at school. Due to taking lessons in advance at private language institutes, they could maintain a high level of self-confidence and a low level of anxiety about English in elementary school, so they enjoyed participating in interactive communication-based English activities at school and even enjoyed extra work such as reading at home or memorizing vocabulary. Even for learners who do not study in advance at a private language school, English in elementary school does not increase learners' anxiety because the teaching is composed of easy-going activities such as singing songs or playing games.

However, some participants lost their interest in junior high or high school. They were scared due to their low self-confidence in regards to their English ability. One of the reasons for this was from comparisons with peers who had studied abroad. Those students' pronunciation was like native speakers' and some participants thought that they were not good at English compared to their native-like peers. Additionally, their test scores were not good enough for them to be placed in an English class for excellent students. The sixth participant lost her interest at university because she compared herself with her peers who had studied abroad.

Researcher: You used to like speaking English in junior high school. Why don't you like it any more?

Sixth participant: I did not hate speaking English in high school. However, at university, I realized that my classmates were really

good at speaking English. Because of them, I started to be afraid of speaking English.

The other participants were usually influenced by the level of their self-confidence and anxiety when they were adolescents, but they overcame their fear at university. However, the sixth participant did not like speaking due to her low self-confidence at university. The participants experienced severe competition with their peers their entire academic lives in Korea, and their self-confidence was often lowered because of it. The lowered self-confidence increased their anxiety and made them be silent in the classroom.

The seventh participant also had a high level of anxiety, and she did not speak in front of teachers or classmates because she believed that her classmates would laugh at her because her pronunciation was bad. She did not even talk with her partner during pair work because of her anxiety about pronunciation and her low self-esteem. As a result, she liked reading, grammar, and writing tasks, which required relatively little speaking.

Seventh participant: I hate speaking English and sometimes I do not want to make a sound.

Researcher: Are you worried that your partner will not understand you because of your pronunciation?

Seventh participant: I guess so.

Researcher: Are you also afraid of making errors?

Seventh participant: When I speak English, I am afraid that my partner's English proficiency is better than mine. If I had studied abroad, I could have spoken English fluently. I think I would not hate speaking English if I were a fluent speaker.

The seventh participant was afraid of losing face in front of her classmates and believed that studying abroad could have made her be a fluent speaker. She described herself as outgoing and active. It has been acknowledged that shy students usually hate speaking and they tend to like less interactive skills such as reading or writing. However, the seventh participant's experience indicates that researchers need to explore the possibility that anxiety and self-confidence are more critical factors than learners' personalities.

The seventh participant explained that her anxiety was lowered in the ninth grade. At that time, her teacher made the whole class sing a song at the beginning of each class, and she liked the activity a lot. Because her active participation in the activity lowered her level of anxiety, she did not hate English as much as she did in other years. In the ninth grade, she also liked the classroom arrangement. The English teacher made four students form one group and sit down together facing each other. The purpose of the grouping was not to do group work but to help each other. In the group, two students usually had better grades than the other two students, and they played the role of helper or keeper in the group. Students with bad grades could ask for help from the students with better grades.

Korean schools often divide English and mathematics courses into two or three levels depending on students' proficiency levels. Students who belong to a lower level class either lose their interest in the subject area and decrease their level of self-confidence, or work hard to get back into a higher level class even when they are not interested in English itself.

In addition to self-confidence, teachers' positive feedback also played a vital role in enhancing the participants' level of interest in English. When they first studied English in elementary school, the participants' level of interest was high and teachers' positive feedback helped them maintain their level of interest. However, the influence

of teachers' positive feedback did not last for a long period in junior high or high school. The English curriculum in junior high and high school was mainly reading-based and grammar-focused. The participants had Korean and native English speaking teachers; Korean teachers usually taught reading, listening, and grammar while native speaking teachers taught communication skills.

The eighth participant did not like English, but she studied hard and actively answered teachers' questions because she wanted her teachers to recognize her as a good student. The third participant's test results greatly influenced her performance. When her test results were good in junior high school, she actively participated in speaking activities and studied English diligently. However, her interest faded away when her English scores fell in high school and her self-confidence in English was lowered due to her test results. She did not want to participate in speaking activities in the native English speaking teacher's class. Even when she was interested in some speaking activities, she did not participate because her performance in the class was not counted toward her English grade.

Some participants chose speaking as the most preferred English skill while some chose speaking as the least preferred skill. This contradiction was linked to participants' level of self-confidence and anxiety when they spoke English or participated in an activity. The fourth participant showed the influence of anxiety and self-confidence in his level of interest. When her English proficiency and test scores were improved or when her teacher gave her positive feedback, her self-confidence was enhanced, and her level of anxiety was decreased. As a result, her interest and affection for the subject area were deepened. Similarly, participants who had a higher level of self-confidence and a lower level of anxiety compared to their peers tended to have a higher level of interest.

## 4.2. Situational Interest

Some previous research (Hidi 1990; Hidi & Berndorff 1998) claimed that situational interest might contribute to changes of individual interest. In this research study, individual interest almost always influenced the level of situational interest, but situational interest did not always influence the participants' level of individual interest. The sixth participant answered that her instructor's very traditional teacher-centered instructional style did not change her interest in the subject area.

Researcher: What was your favorite subject area?

Sixth participant: I liked English the most in junior high school.

Researcher: Why did you like the subject?

Sixth participant: I liked it because I had a good grade in English.

Researcher: Didn't you say that your teacher explained grammar or vocabulary without asking any confirmation questions to students and her explanations were bad?

Sixth participant: Yes, she did not care about students and her explanations were not clear.

Researcher: Why did you like the subject?

Sixth participant: I liked it because I could feel fulfilled in reading and translating English stories. The teacher's teaching style did change my mind.

The sixth participant did not like listening or speaking activities as she had a low level of self-confidence and a high level of anxiety, but she liked to read English stories and translate them. Her teacher's unilateral explanation did not change her level of interest. On the other hand, the ninth participant became interested in English at university. She did not like English at all in junior high and high school because

she did not like her English teachers and hated grammar. However, she maintained high grades on her tests because she thought that she needed to study English to enter a good university. Plus, she felt good when her test results were good. Due to her good test scores, she was first assigned to the intermediate course at university. In the first semester, she came to like speaking English and participating in activities because she liked the topics and pragmatic hands-on activities. She felt that she was proficient at English and could improve when she studied harder.

All participants had strong extrinsic motivation at university. They all wished to travel abroad and/or indicated that they would like to apply for a job that required English speaking or living in other countries. Some of them planned to study abroad in English speaking countries. Some of their parents emphasized the importance of English, and the participants were all aware of it. They all answered that they would keep studying English and would never give up even though some of them were not interested in the subject area and their scores were not good.

Additionally, the participants answered that learning TOEIC in the course was 'interesting.' Some said it was 'interesting,' and some said it was 'useful.' They answered that preparing for TOEIC was interesting or useful even though there were no games or other fun activities. After instructors explained grammar, they answered students' questions for most of the class time. Even students who liked speaking and valued interaction or communication in English learning answered that the TOEIC classes were 'interesting' and/or 'useful.' The following excerpt described the seventh participant's enjoyment of learning.

Seventh participant: I liked the native English speaking teacher's class in high school because his lecture was interactive, and I could learn with my peers. I could also play a lot of games.

Researcher: Didn't you say that you felt interested when you learned reading strategies?

Seventh participant: That was "fun" too.

Researcher: What is your definition of "fun"? Playing games and spending time with friends can be fun, but learning strategies in a lecture-based class does not sound "fun."

Seventh participant: I think it was fun because the learning strategies were useful. The teacher's lecture about reading skills and strategies was very useful, and I think learning them was fun. I think it was more like enjoyable learning.

All the participants had strong extrinsic motivation, and they were aware of the importance of good TOEIC scores for getting a job in Korea. However, some were not interested in studying TOEIC. They did not like or want to study TOEIC, but they reluctantly studied to prepare for the test because they had to. Another interesting fact about the seventh participant was that her final grade was A+ even though she did not like speaking and she answered that she was not interested in English at all. In her case, her high achievement was a result of her high level of extrinsic motivation.

### **4.3. Factors Influencing the Level of Situational Interest**

Many factors influenced the level of situational interest. During the interview, in order to explain their reasons for losing interest in English, the participants compared English courses in elementary school with those in junior high or high school, or English courses at private language institutes with those at school. They discussed the following factors: teachers' teaching styles, teachers' relationship with learners, context of the target language, difficulty level of teaching materials, the combined activities

between problem-based learning and practical application activities afterward, group identity, and quantity of extra work.

First of all, in terms of teachers' teaching styles, in elementary school, teachers did not usually explain grammar or rules, so the participants could enjoy a stress-free learning environment. At that time, they were not afraid of making errors. All the participants had negative feelings toward teachers' unilateral explanations in junior high or high school. In those situations, teachers often failed to establish a close rapport with students. The students did not participate and teachers did not expect or ask for their participation during the lecture.

In contrast, teachers' explanations on the contexts of targeted rules helped the participants to better understand. Most of the participants liked teachers with a cheerful and lively personality, especially in speaking classes. When they liked their teachers or they had a close rapport with teachers, their level of situational interest increased. The targeted proficiency level of a course was also important. If the targeted level was too low or too high, the participants did not study hard and lost interest. When the proficiency level was appropriate and their anxiety was not intensified, they willingly participated in the activities.

Some participants liked to participate in speaking activities such as filling in blanks to complete a conversation or asking questions for a survey while some did not like them. This contradictory result was caused by the level of anxiety and self-confidence. The participants who liked asking questions for a survey had a lower level of anxiety, while some did not like the activity because of their higher level of anxiety. They were afraid of making errors when speaking English and losing face.

Teachers can lower students' level of anxiety by providing them with a model conversation or model answers at the beginning of activities. The sixth participant did not like the survey activity because she did not know what to say. However, she felt

much better after practicing some examples of each activity. Also, putting too many warm-up questions at the beginning of class can increase learners' anxiety.

However, conversation examples need to be provided with caution. Some participants did not like filling in blanks for a conversation if the answers for the blanks were too predictable and they thought that the activity was too boring and cliché. Conversation topics for adult learners also need to be selected with discretion. The sixth participant answered that she did not like participating in speaking activities as the answers were too childish or did not need an answer at all. For example, she did not want to answer questions about whether she had a good relationship with her sisters or brothers, or whether she liked her friends or not.

Fifth participant: I enjoyed studying English the most in elementary school. I liked doing a puppet play and group work because performing my part in the activities and working together with my classmates were interesting. My classmates' participation in the activities was the best as well.

Researcher: Can you explain the reasons?

Fifth participant: I guess I participated in the class because I liked it; not because I had to, but because I wanted to. I liked to interact with my classmates, and participating in activities gave me a sense of achievement.

Some participants did not like activities which required simply repeating a model answer or asking some predictable questions. For them, a project-based learning environment can compensate for the disinteresting conversation activities. The participants preferred classes that had a small number of students because they did not have a chance to present or participate due to the large number of students in one class in junior high or high school. However, this did not mean that they did not

like group work. The participants liked to play games in elementary school because they liked games because they could play them with their peers. The fifth participant in the excerpt above stated that she enjoyed studying English the most in elementary school because she liked group work.

The most influential factor for situational interest changed over time. When participants were elementary school students, interaction with peers and/or teachers' feedback were the most influential factors, while the level of anxiety and self-confidence played the critical role in junior high and high school. The level of anxiety and self-confidence was also important for university students, but individual learning styles influenced their interest, and extrinsic motivation drove them to continue studying.

## V. Conclusions

The importance of interest has long been recognized in education, but not many studies related to interest have been conducted in the context of language learning. Moreover, the participants in previous research were children or young adolescents, and the results concluded that the participants lost their interest as time went by. However, the loss of interest in junior high or high school could possibly be renewed when they grew up, so this study investigated Korean language learners' changes in interest level over time.

The participants described their language learning from the very beginning to the most recent years. They all said that they used to like English when they were young. As children, they started to learn English either in elementary school or at a private institution. At first, they learned English through chants, songs, or

communicative activities. They enjoyed participating in classes, and their level of anxiety was low and their self-confidence was high. Teachers' positive feedback intensified their self-confidence.

However, they gradually lost their interest when they were forced to memorize vocabulary or grammar rules in junior high or high school. They were under pressure, and they were often compared with their peers who studied or lived abroad. As a result, their self-confidence was lowered and their fear of losing face was increased. Even in junior high or high school, some participants actively participated in English class activities in which a native speaking teacher taught while some did not because they did not like speaking activities in high school.

At university, some of the participants' level of interest increased even after taking the mandatory English courses. After fulfilling the graduation requirement of taking mandatory English courses, some decided to take elective courses because of the importance of English for getting a job or for their future plan of studying abroad. Even though they did not like English and their interest level was low, they decided to keep studying because they were extrinsically motivated.

Similar to the participants in Kim, Yoon, and So's study (2008), the current participants' level of interest was gradually decreased, and the drop was intensified especially when they were high school students preparing for the college entrance examination. Previous research concluded that young adolescents lost their interest in high school, but the results of the current study indicate that learners can gain their interest back. The participants' level of interest was increased at university because communication was the focus in the mandatory courses. Even though some participants who took elective courses that focused on preparing for the TOEIC test answered that their situational interest was higher compared to when they were in high school, they said it was not because the TOEIC preparation was fun but that it

was useful.<sup>1)</sup>

When they were in junior high and high school, the learning environment, learning stress, anxiety, and self-confidence influenced their level of interest. However, at university, they gradually overcame the influence of anxiety and low self-confidence and continued to study English even when they were not interested in the topics or activities. The main reason for this endurance was their extrinsic motivation.

Kim and Yoon (2004) warned teachers about the use of irrelevant content through games or other humorous activities to increase the level of interest because the dissociation between the targeted content and interesting materials can result in decreasing the learning effects. The current study also indicated that learners felt interestingness when they realized the usefulness of activities, so teachers do not need to force them to create fun or interesting activities that are irrelevant to targeted themes.

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#### **Notes**

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## 국문초록

### 언어 학습자들의 흥미도 변화 분석

이 은 희 (경희사이버대학교)

기존 연구에서 개인적 흥미는 상대적으로 변화가 적고 오래 지속되는 성향으로 정의된 반면 상황적 흥미는 환경이나 상황 혹은 시간에 따라 변화될 수 있다고 인식되어 왔다. 따라서 학습자들의 흥미도 향상을 위하여 변화가 용이한 상황적 흥미를 연구하고 증진시키는 방법들에 대한 논의가 활발하게 진행되어 왔다. 하지만 이와 같은 흥미도 연구가 영어 교육 분야에서는 부족하였고 지금까지의 연구가 초등학생이나 중, 고등학생들을 대상으로 하여 성인 학습자들의 흥미도 상태와 변화를 파악하는데 어려움이 있었다. 이에 본 연구는 성인 학습자들의 흥미도를 분석하여 변화의 유무를 조사하고 만약 변화가 있다면 이에 영향을 미치는 요인들에 관하여 분석하는 것을 목적으로 한다. 서울 소재 대학에서 교양 필수나 선택 과목을 수강한 열 명의 학생들이 설문과 인터뷰에 참여하였고 전사된 인터뷰 자료는 분석을 통하여 반복적으로 나타나는 주제들로 분류되었다. 연구의 결과 참가자들의 불안과 자신감의 정도가 개인적인 흥미도와 관계가 있었고 외적 동기는 참가자들의 흥미도나 상황에 상관없이 영어를 계속해서 학습하도록 해주는 원동력으로 파악이 되었다.

**주제어 :** 개인적 흥미, 상황적 흥미, 흥미도, 외적 동기, 내적 동기

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