



# Secondary Students' Motivational Beliefs in Second Language Learning under High-Stakes Assessment

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English as a foreign language (EFL) is considered one of the most important subjects in Korean secondary schools making achievement tests in this subject high-stakes by nature. Although English is viewed as a high-stakes subject, there are few studies that show students' qualitative evidence of secondary students' motivational beliefs in a second language context. The purpose of the present study is to qualitatively explore Korean secondary school students' subjective task values of English as a content area, task value of assessment, students' achievement goal orientations toward English assessments, and attributions in second language learning. Implications from the findings and future research are discussed.

**Keywords:** Motivational beliefs; Subjective task value; Goal orientation; Attribution; Second language assessment

English as a foreign language (EFL) is viewed as one of the most essential subjects in Korean secondary schools (Kim, 2010). The English achievement tests are considered by students to be high-stakes exams as these tests decide university selection and application (Cho, 2004; Kim, 2010). After the implementation of the Seventh National Curriculum in 1998, English became a mandatory school subject from Grades 3 through 12 (KICE, 2018). The College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT) is the most high-stakes assessment in Korea. Students with high scores on English exams have more opportunities to be admitted to a prestigious university than low performing students. As a result, private tutoring for English has become prevalent in secondary education (Dawson, 2010). Since admission to such universities has been related to job employment and future success in career, competition for the universities among high school students becomes intense (Jang, 2004). For these reasons, students spend a significant amount of time and energy on learning English very competitively for 10 years (Magno, 2010). Although English is considered to be a high-stakes subject in an EFL context, there are few studies that show students' qualitative opinions about their motivational beliefs regarding high-stakes second language assessment.

## Key Motivational Beliefs in Second Language Learning and Assessment

To better understand students' motivational beliefs under high-stakes English assessment, factors that impact students' efforts, regulations, goals, and interpretations of academic results need to be studied in assessment contexts. For example, the value an individual holds for a specific task

and goals they have can be used to explain an individual's effort and persistence (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Furthermore, students' interpretation of academic success or failure influences their resulting behaviors (Weiner, 1985; Williams & Burden, 2001). Thus, understanding students' task value, goal orientation, and attributions can provide insight to students' efforts, persistence, and willingness in learning, and in turn, they help better understand how students respond to assessment in academic environments. The purpose of the present study is to provide the overview of secondary students' motivational beliefs and provide qualitative evidence of secondary students' subjective task values of English as a content area, task value of assessment, students' goal orientation regarding the value of English assessment, and attributions within a second language context.

### **Task Value**

An individual's value for a specific task can be used to explain effort and persistence toward the task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). If students recognize a high value for a task, they are more likely to choose to participate in the task, persist in that task longer, and put forth more effort than those who have a lower value for the same task (Hong & Peng, 2008; Wigfield & Eccle, 2000). Subjective task value is conceptualized as having four components: attainment value, intrinsic or interest value, utility value of the task for future goals, and cost of engaging in the task (Cole, Bergin, & Whittaker, 2008; Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Attainment value refers to the importance of doing well with a task and whether success with the task would support qualities that are central to an individual's sense of identity and that are valued by others in the individual's social group (Cole et al., 2008; Eccles, 1983). The statement "it is important for me to learn the course material in English class" exemplifies attainment value. Thus, the qualities of the task regulate its attainment value by interaction with individuals' needs and self-perceptions such as social and personal identities (Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Intrinsic or interest value refers to how much individuals enjoy performing the task. When students do a task based on its intrinsic value, they engage more fully in the task (Eccles, 1983). For example, "I am very interested in the content area of English course." Utility value is defined as individuals' perceptions of the task's usefulness for carrying out their future goals (Cole et al., 2008). Utility value can be viewed as extrinsic motivation because students perceive the task as a tool to an aim rather than an aim in itself (Eccles, 2005). One of the examples is "I think I will be able to use what I learn from this course in another course." Finally, cost value is considered unfavorable factors of engaging in the task, which are fear of failure, lost opportunities as a result of choosing one task, and the anticipated effort that students need to make in order to finish the task (Eccles, 2005; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). Since students have limited time and energy, they need to make decisions based upon their hierarchy of importance assigned to each of these factors (Eccles, 2005). For example, if students choose to study English rather than studying other subjects or watching TV, the cost value of learning English increases.

Extant research shows that subjective task value impacts the ways students approach their learning and performance. A significant amount of research has been conducted concerning the relationship between task value on specific subjects such as English, math, and science, and learning strategies (Bong, 2001; Pintrich, 1999; Wolters & Pintrich, 1998; Wolters, Yu, & Pintrich, 1996). Task value has been related to the use of cognitive and self-regulated learning strategies (Pintrich, 1999; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Veen & Peetsma, 2009; Wolters & Pintrich, 1998). In particular, it has been considered an important predictor of self-regulated learning in that it has been positively associated with cognitive strategy use (Pintrich, 1999). Students who value and were interested in the content of the subject were more likely to participate in the task by using more self-regulated learning strategies (Pintrich, 1999; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990; Veen & Peetsma, 2009).

In addition, several studies have examined task value as it pertains to assessment. Cole, Bergin, and Whittaker (2008) found that students' perceived utility value for a low-stakes test functioned as an important predictor of test-taking effort, which leads to better learning outcomes. When students perceived the importance or utility of an assessment, they reported trying harder on

tests and their scores were higher than other groups of students who reported that assessment was not useful for them (Cole et al., 2008). In a study on the effect of Chinese students' perceived task value on test performance, Chinese students who showed a stronger utility value of the test reported putting forth more effort and being more persistent while preparing for tests than those who perceived a weaker utility task value of the test (Hong & Peng, 2008). Therefore, it reasons that students' subjective task value of English as a content area and task value of assessment impact how they perceive second language assessment.

### **Goal Orientations**

Another theory of motivation that may help understand students' beliefs and behaviors toward assessment is goal orientation theory. Researchers have described two major types of goal orientation: mastery goal orientation (sometimes referred to as learning or task-involved goals), where students are concerned with mastery and learning of the material; and performance goal orientation (sometimes referred to as ego-involved goals), where students focus on demonstrating their ability and performance compared to other students (Wolters, Yu, & Pintrich, 1996). A further distinction is made between performance-approach and performance-avoidance goals in performance goal orientation (Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). Performance-approach goals refer to an individual's focus on proving competence through high performance; whereas performance-avoidance goals indicate avoidance of tasks in order not to look unintelligent.

Research has shown that perceived goals are related to how students approach learning. Wolters, Yu, and Pintrich (1996) found that students' mastery goal orientation was positively associated with adaptive motivational beliefs, such as task value, self-efficacy, and self-regulated learning whereas performance goal orientation was negatively linked to those constructs. However, other studies found that performance-approach goals were positively associated with academic achievement (Elliot, 1999; Hulleman, Schrager, Bodmann, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Midgley, Kaplan, & Middleton, 2001). Thus, it appears that the simultaneous adoption of performance-approach and mastery goals may each provide benefits such as learning and achievement (Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2011). Goals can demonstrate why students make efforts and engage in the learning task and give a clue to understanding students' learning behaviors in assessment contexts. Therefore, it reasons that students' goal orientations would be related to assessment-related learning behaviors.

### **Attribution Theory**

Extant research has shown that students interpret their academic success and failure in different ways and that this interpretation affects future motivation for learning (Weiner, 1985, 2000). Attribution theory explains how students' view of academic success and failure affects future motivation. Attributions can be defined as an individual's interpretations of outcomes (Weiner, 1985). Weiner (2000) proposed that individuals tend to perceive their success or failure in terms of three common aspects: locus, stability, and controllability. Locus is concerned with whether the cause comes within the person (internal) or the environments around the person (external). Stability refers to whether the cause of an outcome is perpetual (stable) or inconstant over a period of time (unstable). Finally, controllability means whether the person is responsible for the reason that induces the outcomes (controllable) or whether the reason is beyond the person's control (uncontrollable).

Research concerning attributions and achievement in learning a foreign language has revealed that English language learners who attributed test grades to internal, controllable factors were more than successful than those who attributed performance to external and uncontrollable factors (Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Williams, Burden, Poulet, & Maun, 2004). Hsieh and Kang (2010) examined attributions made regarding the learning of EFL in Korea. Their study was consistent with previous studies that found that successful English language learners were more likely to attribute their success in second language learning to internal factors such as ability and effort than

unsuccessful learners. Since attributional beliefs can explain future motivation and the investment of time and effort for successive learning (Weiner, 2000), it reasons that when students believe that assessment is fair or unfair, or accurate or inaccurate, their attributional beliefs based upon previous experiences would influence the development of such perceptions. How they interpret these learning experiences influence how students view assessment (Segers & Dochy, 2001). Thus, students' attributional beliefs can provide clues to explain how they approach assessment in second language learning.

### **The Present Study**

The purpose of the present study was to examine secondary students' motivational constructs (subjective task value of English as a content area, goal orientations valuing of English language assessments, and attributions) through in-depth interviews with Korean students attending university in the U.S. A retrospective research approach was used in which participants recalled their second language learning experiences regarding assessments in Korean high schools. In the study, assessments refer to classroom achievement tests (summative midterm and final exams) in high schools. The following research questions guided the study: (a) What motivational variables (task value, goal orientations, and attributional beliefs) are important in Korean secondary students' learning of English?; (b) What motivational variables are important in high-stakes English testing experiences?

### **Methods**

Qualitative research was used to establish in-depth information by listening to students' voices and their stories related to second language learning and test-taking experiences in second language learning. The present study utilized a phenomenological approach.

### **Participants**

In total, 20 participants were Korean college students who graduated from high schools in Korea. Ten were seniors, two juniors, four sophomores, and four freshmen. Thirteen confided that they had taken intensive courses at private language institutions (cram schools called *hakwons*) or private tutoring to learn English.

### **Data Collection**

The study was conducted as a retrospective research approach to recall learning English experiences in Korean high schools. Open-ended questions were intended to explore their motivation in second language learning and assessment during high school. The interview protocol consisted of the following sections: task value of English as a content area, task value of English assessment, goal orientations for learning English and English assessment, and attribution for English assessment. Interviews were audio-recorded for transcription. To protect the privacy of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned.

### **Data Management and Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed for data analysis in Korean. Transcripts were analyzed in Korean as well and then coded by two native speakers of Korean. They first examined the transcribed narratives and compared them to the original recordings for accuracy.

### **Results**

Motivational constructs fell into the following subcategories: task value of learning English and English assessment, goal orientations, and attributions.

## Motivation

**Task value of learning English.** Themes for task value were divided into the following four categories: (a) attainment value, (b) intrinsic value, (c) utility value, and (d) cost value. Attainment value is typified by Kim (Participant 2). He commented that it was important for him to do well in learning English because it was related to his pride and self-fulfillment. As he said, "I prided myself on my ability to speak English. So, when I didn't get good grades in English tests, I used to care about how other classmates perceived me and got stressed out" (Participant 2).

For intrinsic value, seven participants said they enjoyed learning English. The enjoyment participants reported stemmed from various aspect associated with the experience including those valued for their utility such as being able to communicate with people from other countries, accessing new materials or content from other countries faster, and simply being able to read passages written in English more quickly. These findings indicate that assess and ability-development are valued by some English learners for both their utility as well as the intrinsic enjoyment garnered from such attainment. This can be seen in the following example.

I enjoyed learning English. I stayed in Singapore for almost one month when I was a sophomore in high school. I took some classes in a private language institution there. Although my English was not good enough for daily conversation, I was able to talk to friends in my class. Then I realized I needed to develop my English for better communication. Since then, I enjoyed learning it. (Participant 2)

Sixteen participants indicated commonly utility values during the interviews. They commented that learning English was useful for the benefits at university in general, the chosen program of study, preparing for the job market, and strengthening university applications.

These days, many people try to use English-written textbooks and speak in English in the universities. If they want to get better jobs, English would be a basic skill. If society keeps requiring English skills, it's better to follow. (Participant 8)

For cost value of learning English, many participants mentioned that they had given up getting sufficient sleep, studying for other school subjects not covered by the CSAT, which is the most high-stakes national college entrance exam, spending time with friends, engaging with their hobbies, among other sacrifices, indicating high cost value.

When I was in high school, Korean literature, English, and mathematics were main school subjects. Relatively, social studies or other subjects were not that important, so I didn't spend a lot of time studying those subjects. Instead, I focused on studying English. (Participant 5)

Most of the participants showed strong utility and cost value in learning English compared to the intrinsic value.

**Task value of English assessment.** Although interviews focused on school achievement tests (mid-terms or final exams), most of the participants voluntarily shared their opinions about the CSAT. In this subtheme, utility value and cost were more frequently found. For the question about whether English assessment was useful or not, nine participants reported that they believed that it was. Several participants mentioned that assessments had helped them check their proficiency and misconceptions or to develop different learning strategies, as seen in the following examples.

I think it was useful for doing self-checking. We have to take a high-stakes English test at the end. So, before the tests, I wanted to check where I needed to improve in order to get higher scores on the CSAT. My ultimate goal of learning English was to enter a prestigious university. So, I needed to get good scores on the CSAT, which is necessary for university applications. (Participant 1)

I think it was useful because it provided a short-term learning goal. For example, if there is a test coming up, I can make study plans according to the test schedule. So, it can be useful as an instrument of learning. Looking back on my school days, I never studied voluntarily. However, I made plans and studied according to tests schedules. So, it motivated me to take the initiative in studying. It was difficult to make study plans voluntarily, but tests enabled me to do it. (Participant 20)

For the cost value of English assessment, seventeen participants indicated that they gave up something such as sufficient sleep, breaks, hobbies, and spending time with friends in order to prepare for the tests.

I gave up my break times. Well, I tried to decrease my leisure time to study, too. (Participant 5)

I wanted to be a singer someday and liked to play a guitar for fun, but I gave them up all while studying for the CSAT. (Participant 6)

**Goal orientations.** Participant responses were coded into the two different categories in this theme: Mastery goal for learning English and performance approach goal for learning English. None indicated performance-avoidance goals. Some participants revealed multiple perspectives about their goals. Thirteen participants adopting mastery goals reported that they had wanted to be good at English in order to develop better language skills.

I liked it (learning English) and I knew that I was able to communicate with people from other countries in that language. So, I guess I wanted to be good at English since my childhood. I believed that someday I would use it for any purposes and back then we had to study English anyway. I guess I had this passion for improving my language ability rather than just getting a good grade. I didn't need to take the CSAT exam (he decided to apply to universities in the U.S.A) so I didn't care about the grade that much back then. (Participant 2)

On the other hand, seventeen participants adopting performance-approach goal frequently noted that they had wanted to be good at English and English assessment because they wanted to have good grades to compete with others during the university application process.

I wanted to be good at English whether learning English or English exams because I knew if I got good grades in exams, I would be able to apply for the university through nonscheduled admission. English was so important to me because eventually, I needed good grades for the university application. (Participant 15)

Additionally, eleven participants mentioned that they wanted to be good at learning English because of other people's expectations, such as from parents, teachers, or out of competition with friends.

**Attributions.** Eighteen of twenty participants described their English study as a successful experience and provided their explanations about why they perceived it as such. In this theme, responses from those who attributed learning English as a successful experience were analyzed. Their explanations were divided into three categories: locus of causality, stability, and controllability. Some of the participants provided multiple explanations and reasons for their academic success in English. Fourteen participants who viewed language as a successful experience attributed this success to internal sources, such as constant effort, driving force (initiative), and self-confidence.

I think it was because of my efforts and personality. I'm a perfectionist in everything. So, I usually need more time to be perfect and it takes lots of time to master something. However, I always believed that my efforts pay off. I enjoyed learning English and I made lots of effort to master it. So maybe that's why I was good at English. (Participant 2)

On the other hand, twelve participants attributed their successful experiences in English assessments to external sources, such as parental support, having lived abroad during their childhood, private cram language schools, and luck on the test days.

I think it's because of my parents. They had sent me to good language institutions since my childhood. They didn't put me in just one of the cram schools to learn some test-taking skills. They carefully searched for an English-speaking institution and TOEFL prep academy. So, I was able to be exposed to more authentic English due to my parents' support. (Participant 3)

Six participants attributed their successful experiences to stable factors such as ability.

I don't know. I was good at subjects that require lots of memorization. It didn't take me long to memorize English vocabulary too. I remember that I was able to memorize 500 words a day. When my friends gave up some of the subjects that needed tons of memorization, I never gave up and kept studying. I knew that I was good at those subjects that needed lots of memorization, including English. So, I can say that it (a successful experience for learning English) was because of my ability to memorize. (Participant 11)

For controllability, fourteen participants attributed their successful experiences to controllable factors, such as effort.

In language learning, I thought that how much you know about vocabulary matters. So, I tried to memorize as much I could, and I guess it finally paid off. Other than that... after the exams, I analyzed test items to check why I got wrong answers and tried to develop my own learning strategies that were working for me. I made notes and comments on the test items whenever I got wrong answers. This strategy helped me a lot. (Participant 17)

On the contrary, twelve responses indicated uncontrollable factors such as luck or poor instruction.

Thinking of good grades I received in English tests, it was not because I did well in tests. It was just, I believed because other classmates didn't do well in tests. I thought it was just good luck rather than my effort. (Participant 9)

It is common that students showed multiple attributions, but most students attributed their success to internal and controllable factors.

### The Relationship between Motivation and Adaptive Beliefs about Assessment

Two groups of participants were divided according to the extent to which participants believed that English assessment was helpful for their second language learning: adaptive beliefs group (e.g., assessment is for improving my language skills) and maladaptive beliefs group (e.g., assessment is not helpful to enhance my language ability or assessment frustrates me). Are students' task value, goal orientations, and attributional beliefs related to their beliefs about assessment?

Table 1 shows the four different task values of both groups. Strong intrinsic task value and utility value of learning English were the most frequent types of value found with participants who viewed assessment as adaptive for learning while utility value and cost were the most frequent types of value in those believing assessment to be incongruent with their learning goals. For instance, Bang (Participant 19) commented that he was doubtful about the general purpose of English assessment since he did not find any benefits from language assessments for the purpose of second language acquisition. Nevertheless, he prepared for the CSAT exam to apply to his university (utility) and realized that he spent too much on the tests that he lost some opportunities to explore his future career options (cost).

In addition, half of all the participants mentioned the cost value of learning English and English assessment. Even participants from the maladaptive group showed strong cost value for learning English and assessment, suggesting that they still sacrificed something in order to learn English and to prepare for English assessment. The nature of a high-stakes assessment may explain this phenomenon.

Table 1

#### *Task value of learning English*

|                                      | Attainment | Intrinsic | Utility | Cost |
|--------------------------------------|------------|-----------|---------|------|
| Adaptive assessment beliefs Group    |            |           |         |      |
| Learning English                     | 0          | 6         | 9       | 3    |
| English Assessment                   | 1          | 0         | 8       | 4    |
| Maladaptive assessment beliefs Group |            |           |         |      |
| Learning English                     | 0          | 3         | 6       | 5    |
| English Assessment                   | 0          | 0         | 6       | 5    |

Table 2 shows the goal orientations of both groups. All participants showed the performance-approach, such as demonstrating good grades for university application and meeting other's expectations. In the high-stakes assessment context, the performance-approach goal may play a significant role in students' learning behaviors whether they hold adaptive beliefs or maladaptive beliefs about assessment.

Table 2

#### *Goal orientations*

|                                      | Mastery | Performance-approach | Performance-avoidance |
|--------------------------------------|---------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Adaptive assessment beliefs Group    | 5       | 11                   | 0                     |
| Maladaptive assessment beliefs Group | 4       | 10                   | 0                     |



For attributions, internal, unstable, and controllable factors such as effort or persistence were found more often in the adaptive beliefs group than in the maladaptive beliefs group. In addition, external, unstable, and uncontrollable factor such as living abroad experiences and private language school experiences were found commonly in both groups as well.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

English as a foreign language (EFL) is considered one of the most important subjects in Asian countries, making second language tests high-stakes. Students have different motivations for second language learning and its assessment. This study explored motivational factors that impact students' efforts, regulations, goals, and interpretations of academic results in second language learning. Students' task value, goal orientation, and attributions may explain students' effort, persistence, and willingness in second language learning under the high-stake assessment. The purpose of the present study was to provide the overview of secondary students' motivational beliefs and provide qualitative evidence of secondary students' subjective task values of English as a content area, task value of assessment, students' goal orientation regarding the value of English assessment, and attributions within a second language context. Findings suggest that secondary students in EFL had strong utility values and performance-approach goals in learning English and taking English assessments compared to other types of motivational beliefs. Language educators should be aware of students' motivational beliefs in their second language learning and be aware of how high-stakes second language assessments impact their motivational beliefs.

It can be argued that students' motivation for good grades at the university is a performance-approach goal from the traditional achievement goal perspective since performance-approach goals are related to the demonstration of competence. This reveals an issue of defining terms concerning the crucial element of performance goals (Senko et al., 2011). Some believed that performance-approach goals' nature is to reveal competence whereas other believed it is to outperform peers, suggesting that the two types of performance goals can be differentiated and have different effects (Senko et al., 2011). Elliot, Murayama, and Pekrun (2011) also proposed new a new approach to types of goals, suggesting three different types of goals: task-based, self-based, and other-based goals. Therefore, other new approaches for goal theory may provide better explanations for, especially, secondary students' desires to outperform peers for the competitive university application.

In addition, students' various types of motivation would be a key clue to further investigate students' beliefs about assessment. This study, with a limited number of participants, did not provide solid evidence for the relationship between secondary students' motivational beliefs and their beliefs about assessment. However, students who demonstrated strong intrinsic task value and utility value on the subject and assessment reported adaptive beliefs about assessment. Therefore, further study on the relationship between motivation and beliefs about assessments provides a new context to understand students' learning behaviors under high-stakes assessment context. Furthermore, how the motivational variables and beliefs about assessment influence each other and whether the relationship is one-way or reciprocal are needed to be studied in the future with large quantitative data.

However, it should be noted that participants were not representative of general high school students. Twelve participants were Korean international undergraduate students and eight participants were exchange college students. They had different goals for university applications. Five out of twenty participants shared that they had decided to apply to universities in the U.S.A when in high school in Korea. Their early decision made them hold a comparatively strong task value of English.

In sum, the findings in this study suggest that secondary students show different types of motivational constructs in second language learning and high-stakes assessment contexts. To investigate the relationship between students' motivation and their engagement-associated behaviors in assessment, quantitative studies with a large population are needed in the future. This

future study would provide a new context where educators should consider in second language learning.

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