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What Factors Motivate EFL Learners to Communicate With Native Speakers?: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study With Korean Students

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This study investigates the multifaceted growth of Korean English as a foreign language (EFL) learners who engaged in conversations with native speakers, examining their development across cognitive, emotional, and cultural dimensions. Using a qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach, the research involved semi-structured interviews with five university students who had extensive interaction with native speakers during their high school years. The findings indicate that learners were motivated by a complex interplay of extrinsic factors (i.e., academic pressures and the sociocultural importance of English), alongside intrinsic motivations (i.e., a deep interest in the language and a desire for proficiency). Regular interactions with native speakers allowed learners to perceive English as a practical communication tool rather than merely an academic subject, contributing to their acquisition of natural language expressions and cultural understanding. These experiences also reduced anxiety, enhanced confidence, and promoted more active participation. Furthermore, learners experienced profound psychological changes, developed intercultural competence, and shifted their self-identity from “English learner” to “English user,” impacting their long-term academic and career aspirations. The study highlights the need for EFL education to systematically support interactions with native speakers, advocating for integrative educational approaches that foster holistic growth and prepare learners for global engagement.

[native speaker interaction/foreign language speaking anxiety/L2 motivation/intercultural competence/L2 self-identity shift]

I. INTRODUCTION

In second language acquisition, opportunities to communicate with native speakers are essential for enhancing language proficiency and fostering cultural understanding (Ellis, 1994; Jackson, 2019; Spada & Lightbown, 2019). Direct exposure to authentic language environments allows learners to develop essential communicative skills for real-world interactions, and it helps them gain a holistic understanding of the target language by grasping the cultural contexts in which it is used (Alptekin, 2002; Gass et al., 2020). However, despite the introduction of communicative language teaching (CLT) in the 1970s and the subsequent implementation of numerous CLT-based pedagogical approaches in English education (Spada, 2007; Thornbury, 2016), the majority of learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts remain silent during English classes, unable to communicate effectively with peers or instructors. This phenomenon can lead to negative outcomes such as silence or disconnection in actual communication situations with native speakers (Chaiyasat & Intakaew, 2022; Smith & King, 2018; Swain, 2005). In response to this issue, the field of foreign language education has focused on two primary factors: foreign language speaking anxiety and foreign language learning motivation (Ahmetovic et al., 2020; Gardner et al., 1992; Liu & Huang, 2011; Luo et al., 2020).

First, foreign language speaking anxiety is a significant challenge in second language learning. Learners experience tension, nervousness, and silence in speaking situations due to fears of making mistakes, anxiety about their abilities, and worries about appearing incompetent in front of others (Horwitz et al., 1986; Woodrow, 2006). This anxiety can be exacerbated in interactions with native speakers, as it is compounded by both linguistic and cultural differences (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Marzec-Stawiarska, 2015), causing learners to become reticent or passive in real communication scenarios, thereby missing opportunities for interaction and slowing their language proficiency development (Horwitz, 2001; Krashen, 1982; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). To address this issue, numerous previous studies have investigated the causes and potential solutions (Bensalem, 2018; Chou, 2018; Gkonou, 2011; Liu, 2018; Luo, 2014; Mak, 2011; Zarei & Rezadoust, 2020). However, while these studies have primarily focused on the causes of speaking anxiety and how to eliminate them, there is a lack of in-depth analysis of how such anxiety actually affects real communication situations with native speakers.

Foreign language learning motivation, another critical factor, encompasses the reasons and enthusiasm driving learners to acquire a new language (Dörnyei, 1990, 1998). Highly motivated learners are known to exert more effort and perseverance in the learning process and engage more actively in interactions with native speakers, contributing to successful language learning (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Therefore, previous research has explored various types of motivation, including intrinsic and extrinsic

motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020), ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2009), analyzing how these motivations encourage learners to participate in meaningful communication. However, most research has focused on improving language proficiency outcomes rather than identifying specific motivational factors that actively engage learners in real conversations with native speakers (Danesh & Shahnazari, 2020; Dunn & Iwaniec, 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Thus, in the field of second language education, there have been ongoing efforts to find ways to reduce learners' speaking anxiety and enhance their motivation to facilitate more active communication with native speakers. Despite the abundance of studies on foreign language speaking anxiety and motivation individually, there is a relative scarcity of comprehensive research investigating the combined impact of these two factors on communication with native speakers (Teimouri et al., 2019).

Furthermore, studies exploring how these factors evolve through learners' accumulated experiences over time have been limited (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). This stands in contrast to the abundance of short-term experimental studies focusing on specific variables of foreign language speaking anxiety or learning motivation, as well as research utilizing one-time questionnaires (Chen, 2023; Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2022). Considering that foreign language speaking anxiety and motivation are dynamic and subject to change across past, present, and future contexts (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2023), there is a significant research gap in understanding how these factors change over time. Therefore, this study aims to explore how Korean EFL learners become actively engaged in conversations with native speakers and how these experiences shape their linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural development over time. By focusing on learners' lived experiences and meaning-making processes, this study seeks to provide a more holistic understanding of native-speaker interaction in EFL contexts and to offer educational implications for supporting learners' communicative growth.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Factors Influencing EFL learners' Willingness to Communicate With Native Speakers

The factors that encourage EFL learners to engage in conversations with native speakers are diverse and complex (Dewaele, 2019; MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010). These factors can be broadly categorized into personal, linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors. Personal factors include learners' personality, age, and learning styles (Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021). According to MacIntyre et al. (1998), learners with extraverted and open personalities

tend to participate more actively in communication, and traits such as extraversion and risk-taking propensity can influence willingness to communicate (Dewaele, 2013; Dewaele & Pavelescu, 2021). Self-confidence in real communication situations also directly affects willingness to communicate (Clément et al., 2003; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2021). In EFL environments, where opportunities for conversation with native speakers are limited, these factors may have an even greater impact (Fatima et al., 2020; Yashima et al., 2004).

Linguistic factors include language proficiency, vocabulary, grammatical knowledge, and pronunciation skills (Liu & Jackson, 2008). Studies by Baker and MacIntyre (2000) and Zhou et al. (2023) have reported that higher language proficiency is associated with a greater willingness to communicate. However, Kitano (2001) pointed out that even learners with high language proficiency in EFL environments can experience anxiety when conversing with native speakers, suggesting that language proficiency alone does not fully explain the willingness to communicate. Sociocultural factors encompass cultural knowledge, intercultural competence, and social support (Jackson, 2019). Yashima (2002) introduced the concept of "international posture" to explain the relationship between cultural openness and willingness to communicate, arguing that a deeper understanding of the target language culture increases communication willingness. The availability of communication opportunities is also crucial; the more environments provided for contact with native speakers, the higher the willingness to communicate becomes (Artamonova, 2025; MacIntyre et al., 1998). Additionally, language policies (Mai, 2023), attitudes towards English (Alrabai, 2022), and the degree of internationalization in learner's society are also key factors (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Milligan, 2022).

2. Foreign Language Speaking Anxiety

Foreign language speaking anxiety can be defined as "the feeling of fear and anxiety experienced when speaking in a foreign language" (Horwitz et al., 1986, p. 129). The foreign language classroom anxiety model by Horwitz et al. (1986) comprises three components: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation. Similarly, the main causes of speaking anxiety include lack of confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Ozdemir & Papi, 2022), fear of making mistakes (Hutabarat & Simanjuntak, 2019), and worry about negative evaluation (Lipton et al., 2020; Okyar, 2023), with symptoms such as increased heart rate, sweating, and reduced concentration (Szyszka, 2017). In EFL contexts, this anxiety can be intensified.

A study by Jiang and Dewaele (2019) found that Chinese EFL learners, with fewer opportunities for direct contact with native speakers, tend to experience higher levels of speaking anxiety. Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014) reported that Asian EFL learners show higher levels of speaking anxiety compared to learners from Western cultural backgrounds,

which may be attributed to cultural differences and the influence of the educational system. This anxiety can impair the learners' language performance, leading to avoidance of communication situations and hindering overall language development (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994; Zhang, 2019). Recent studies emphasize speaking anxiety as a dynamic factor that changes depending on the situation (Gregersen, 2020). This suggests that speaking anxiety in EFL learners may change as they accumulate experiences communicating with native speakers. However, there is still a lack of research exploring how these dynamic changes develop through learners' ongoing experiences over time.

3. Foreign Language Learning Motivation

Foreign language learning motivation, defined as "the driving force that initiates and sustains language learning" (Dörnyei, 1998), was initially based on Gardner's socio-educational model, which introduced the concepts of integrative and instrumental motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Ryan and Deci (2000) distinguished between intrinsic motivation, which stems from the enjoyment of the learning process itself, and extrinsic motivation, which is influenced by external rewards or pressures, arguing that intrinsic motivation generally leads to more sustainable and effective learning outcomes. Recently, Dörnyei's (2009) L2 motivational self-system has gained prominence, comprising three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience, which explain how learners' future self-images and current learning experiences influence motivation formation.

Learning motivation affects learners' effort and persistence, ultimately contributing to language proficiency improvement (Al-Hoorie & Szabó, 2022; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Current research emphasizes the dynamic nature and context-dependency of motivation, focusing on motivational changes over time and their impacts (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Hiver & Larsen-Freeman, 2020; Papi & Hiver, 2020; You & Chan, 2014). These studies demonstrate that second language learning motivation is not a fixed trait but a dynamic factor that can change over time. To better understand this dynamic nature, more qualitative research examining learners' developmental experiences is needed.

4. Interaction Between Speaking Anxiety and Learning Motivation

Speaking anxiety and learning motivation are closely related and exhibit complex interactions (Horwitz, 2017; Khajavy et al., 2018; Liu & Huang, 2011). High levels of anxiety can reduce motivation, but strong motivation can help overcome anxiety (MacIntyre, 2017; Yan & Horwitz, 2008). Some studies suggest that moderate anxiety levels can stimulate motivation and improve performance (Luo et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2019). In EFL

environments, this interaction can be more complex. Liu and Huang's (2011) study on Chinese EFL learners found that highly motivated learners tend to experience higher anxiety. This implies that in EFL contexts, limited opportunities for native speaker communication can lead to anxiety due to pressure to maximize such opportunities.

However, existing research has not sufficiently explored the complex impact of the interaction between these two factors on EFL learners' communication with native speakers (MacIntyre, 2017). Moreover, previous studies have used cross-sectional approaches, capturing interactions at specific points in time, which fail to reflect dynamic changes. These factors are closely interrelated and possess dynamic characteristics that change over time (Dörnyei et al., 2015). Therefore, this study aims to investigate not only the interaction between speaking anxiety and learning motivation but also the various factors influencing EFL learners' participation in conversations with native speakers from a comprehensive and experiential perspective, capturing how these factors evolve through learners' accumulated experiences. Through this approach, this study seeks to explore concrete strategies to help learners actively engage in communication with native speakers. The research questions are as follows:

1. What backgrounds and motivations led Korean EFL learners to engage in conversations with native speakers during their high school years?
2. What factors influenced learners' participation in conversations with native speakers?
3. What changes did learners experience through interactions with native speakers, and how did these changes influence their subsequent English learning and personal development?

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research methodology to deeply explore the factors that led Korean EFL learners to engage in conversations with native speakers. A phenomenological approach, specifically interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith & Osborn, 2003), was adopted to understand the participants' lived experiences and individual interpretations. The study used a retrospective qualitative approach, examining participants' past experiences by tracing their journey from high school years to the present. Therefore, the study focused on students who had opportunities for oral interaction with native speakers during their language learning. Through in-depth interviews and experiential

analysis, the study aimed to uncover the factors, motivations, contexts, difficulties, and personal growth that led students to actively pursue conversational interactions with native speakers.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The collected data were systematically analyzed following IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2003). To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, member checking and researcher reflexivity were employed to ensure the accuracy of participants' accounts and minimize researcher bias. The research procedure followed the IPA framework developed by Smith et al. (2009).

2. Participants

The participants in this study were five university students who graduated from the high school where the researcher was employed. They had over two years of experience in an English newspaper club with native English teachers during their high school years, as well as experience participating in various programs involving native speakers. Their academic achievement in English during high school was in the top 10% nationally, corresponding to a C1 level on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Currently, they are pursuing various fields such as engineering, arts, and education in their university studies, but they remain involved in English-related activities. For instance, one participant, an engineering major, regularly attends chemistry seminars conducted in English, while another participant, majoring in arts, leads an English presentation study group in preparation for an international design competition. The participants majoring in education are leading study groups for English education related to teacher certification exams and participating in English reading discussion groups analyzing international education policies. Furthermore, some participants are preparing for international experiences, such as considering studying abroad in the United States, actively participating in English conversation clubs with students from diverse nationalities, and applying for exchange programs.

3. Research Procedure

The researcher explained the purpose of the study to graduates of the high school where the researcher is employed, specifically those who had experience interacting with native speakers during their high school years, and obtained their consent to participate. Participants were asked to provide their school records and materials from their classes with native speakers. These materials were used as references during the interviews and helped participants recall specific experiences and details more accurately. They also served as supplementary contextual data that supported the interpretation of participants' experiences

and provided additional insight into the academic and learning environments in which interactions with native speakers occurred.

Data collection involved two interviews. The first interview, lasting 60–90 minutes, was semi-structured with open-ended questions about experiences conversing with native speakers, speaking anxiety, motivational factors, and impacts on their language learning. The second interview, conducted within 2–3 weeks after and lasting about 60 minutes, explored and clarified the key points from the previous responses more deeply.

All collected interview data were transcribed and systematically analyzed following the IPA framework (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). In the initial phase, the researcher conducted iterative readings of the transcripts, identifying key statements that reflected participants' subjective experiences. The next step involved identifying emergent themes, where conceptual meanings were derived from participants' narratives. During this process, the researcher focused on recurring meaning patterns related to learners' motivations, emotional experiences, interaction processes, and perceived changes. The identified themes were then organized into superordinate themes based on conceptual similarities across participants' narratives while preserving the contextual uniqueness of individual experiences. Finally, an interpretative account was developed, integrating the themes and providing a deeper understanding of how participants' experiences shaped their engagement with native speakers. This systematic analysis process enabled an in-depth understanding of how Korean EFL learners made sense of their experiences communicating with native speakers, while also revealing common patterns in their meaning-making processes. Unlike previous studies focusing solely on language acquisition outcomes, this study emphasizes how learners' perceptions and motivations evolve over time within their unique sociocultural contexts.

4. Ethical Considerations

This study prioritized participants' rights and welfare. Participants were fully informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, and their participation was voluntary; written consent was obtained. They were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and their personal information was used only for research purposes. All data were securely stored, and identifiable information was thoroughly anonymized.

IV. FINDINGS

Korean EFL learners participated in communication with native speakers based on various intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and sociocultural backgrounds. In this process, they were

influenced by linguistic, psychological, and environmental factors, while teacher and peer support, along with topic-related factors, played mediating roles. Through the participation, learners experienced linguistic, cognitive, and emotional changes, which ultimately led to behavioral changes and long-term impacts. This overall process promoted holistic growth and transformation in EFL learners. The findings were systematically organized based on the concepts derived from coding, according to the three main research questions.

1. Background and Motivation for Students' Participation in Conversations With Native Speakers

1) Sociocultural Background

The educational environment in Korea, focused on university entrance and the social importance of fluent English, emerged as a significant background for students' participation in conversations with native speakers. In the context of South Korea, where admission to high-ranking universities is closely linked to social success, English learning has transitioned into a powerful extrinsic motivation. Moreover, in this competitive educational environment, learners actively sought opportunities to converse with native speakers to avoid falling behind, experiencing psychological pressure regarding their performance. However, this competition functioned as a healthy rivalry, serving as an important trigger that encouraged learners to engage in communication with native speakers. "Since everyone was actively participating, I felt that I needed to do the same, and I felt pressure not to fall behind" (P2, July 10, 2025).

Contrary to some studies (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014; Hutabarat & Simanjuntak, 2019) that primarily highlight the negative effects of learning pressure, this study suggests that such pressure can also function as a positive role in encouraging learners to speak up. This finding aligns with research indicating that appropriate levels of anxiety can enhance second language learning (Luo et al., 2020; Shao et al., 2019).

2) Extrinsic Motivation and Ought-to L2 Self

Participants cited the perception that the activity was exclusive to certain students as a major extrinsic motivation for participating in conversations with native speakers. The academic and social benefits from these interactions, and the sense of superiority from receiving a distinguished education were important reasons. "It was attractive that the activity was perceived as one that only certain students who were good at English" (P1, July 2, 2025).

By participating in such special activities, they felt a desire to be recognized by peers and

a sense of social superiority. Especially in regions where opportunities to converse with native speakers were extremely rare, these opportunities were considered more valuable.

Additionally, the fact that activities with native speakers were positively evaluated by teachers and included in school records, potentially offering great advantages for university admissions, served as a major external motivator. “I participated to gain recognition and good evaluations from teachers” (P1, July 2, 2025).

Therefore, students felt the need to demonstrate their fluency in these conversations to catch the teacher’s attention. Unlike previous studies suggesting that anxiety about teachers’ negative evaluation generally causes learners to close their mouths (Lipton et al., 2020; Okyar, 2023), this study confirmed that anxiety about teacher evaluation can motivate learners to attempt communication with native speakers more actively. This suggests that learners’ motivation to prove their abilities was strengthened to fulfill their ought-to L2 self.

3) Intrinsic Motivation and Ideal L2 Self

Most students expressed a desire to improve their English skills through activities with native speakers, as they aimed for careers related to English or career goals that required extensive use of English. “I’m aiming for a career related to English, and I’ll have many opportunities to converse or write in English later, so I wanted to improve my English skills” (P3, July 17, 2025).

This shows that the intrinsic motivation linked to their career goals was a driving force in their participation in conversations with native speakers and their desire to improve their English proficiency. Additionally, interest in the English language itself served as a significant intrinsic motivation for engaging in conversations with native speakers.

> *Participating in English-related activities with native speakers was exciting, and just the idea that I would have the opportunity to interact with them made me enjoy. Even if I didn’t receive direct linguistic help from the native speakers, simply being with them helped me become more familiar with native speakers and reduce any vague fears. (P5, July 3, 2025)*

These findings align with MacIntyre’s (2017) research, which suggests that engaging in truly enjoyable activities can help overcome psychologically difficult and pressured environments. Interest and passion for English provided students with strong intrinsic motivation, leading them to actively participate in conversations with native speakers. Ultimately, students’ intrinsic motivation was deeply connected to their ideal L2 self. The improvement in their English skills and the image of who they wanted to become through it continuously motivated the students to immerse themselves in learning English.

2. Factors Influencing Participation in Conversations With Native Speakers

1) Linguistic Factors

Contrary to initial expectations, students' listening comprehension was not a significant issue because native speakers used simple words and spoke slowly, considering the students were Korean. However, the most challenging aspect was when students knew what they wanted to say but did not come out of their mouths easily. Despite this challenge, as students continuously participated in conversations with native speakers and engaged in various related English activities—such as English newspaper club, team-teaching classes with native speakers, semesterly English immersion camps—they felt an increased familiarity with vocabulary, grammar, and English structures, ultimately improving their English proficiency. This process contributed to enhancing students' ability to express their thoughts in English without hesitation, i.e., improving the transition process and creating a positive cycle leading to increased confidence in conversations with native speakers.

2) Psychological Factors

Initially, students were afraid of conversing with native speakers. Through continuous interaction and engaging in various related English activities, they gradually gained confidence and felt a sense of achievement. "At first, I was scared of talking with native speakers due to differences in appearance and culture, but gradually as I got used to it, I gained confidence" (P2, July 10, 2025).

What initially caused anxiety became a catalyst for gaining confidence. Thus, the improvement of English skills through various activities with native speakers and continuous exposure to the target language not only alleviated students' anxiety but also contributed to expanding their confidence. These findings suggest a potential solution to the issue identified by Jiang and Dewaele (2019), who found that Chinese EFL learners with limited native speaker contact experience higher levels of speaking anxiety demonstrating that continuous interaction with native speakers can positively influence students' psychological factors.

3) Learning Environment and Collaborative Factors

Continuous exposure to native speakers through various activities and diverse platforms (such as face-to-face, video conferencing, telephone English, etc.) served as a crucial environmental factor. Additionally, a cooperative learning atmosphere, including peer interactions between senior and junior students, encouraged more active participation in conversations with native speakers and contributed to students becoming more immersed in

English learning. First, juniors emulated seniors who successfully conversed with native speakers. Observing seniors' successful interactions, juniors gained confidence and motivation. Moreover, seniors played a mentoring role. By sharing their experiences and providing valuable tips and strategies, seniors helped juniors reduce their fear and juniors could build confidence in conversations with native speakers.

4) Linguistic and Psychological Support From Teachers

The linguistic and psychological support from Korean English teachers and native English-speaking teachers served as an important support system. The presence of a reliable mentor in itself alleviated students' speaking anxiety. The fact that students could always receive scaffolding and feedback from their Korean English teacher provided them with great reassurance. Especially when communication breakdowns occurred, timely help from Korean English teachers served as a lubricant, allowing conversations to continue smoothly. Also, it was a great motivator when the Korean English teacher corrected them when they were lost or going in the wrong direction. "If the Korean English teacher hadn't guided us properly, our interest would have dropped sharply. The teacher's careful and consistent attention and support, in response to our enthusiasm, were a great help" (P1, July 12, 2025).

This result contrasts with previous studies suggesting that the presence of a teacher evaluating and judging students' speaking skills heightens students' speaking anxiety (Lipton et al., 2020; Okyar, 2023). Instead, it implies that the teacher's role needs to shift from that of a rater to a supporter. Moreover, encounters with native-speaking teachers who guided students with a kind and cooperative attitude played a crucial role. "At first, I felt burdened and scared, but thanks to the native teacher's friendly attitude, the burden was reduced" (P4, July 14, 2025).

5) Information Gap and Cultural Differences

Background knowledge on specific topics and cultural differences acted as significant factors. Students, who participated in the English newspaper club, had expert-level knowledge on topics related to their career interests, while the native English teacher, who was responsible for editing, sometimes found these topics unfamiliar. This information gap boosted students' confidence and provided negotiation opportunities in conversations. "When the native teacher corrected my manuscript, I felt confident explaining if their corrections did not match my intentions because I knew my article perfectly" (P5, July 13, 2025).

Additionally, cultural differences became important conversation starters. Students could participate more actively and express their opinions on this topic because they had more

knowledge about unique cultural information in Korea. In this way, these cultural differences and information gaps allowed students to take ownership of conversations and helped them express their opinions clearly. Consequently, students were able to participate more actively in conversations with native speakers. “When I planned an interactive news section, the native teacher mentioned that a certain crime is punished severely in their country, unlike in Korea. It was interesting to exchange opinions and discuss the situations of each country” (P2, July 4, 2025).

3. Changes in Students Through Conversation Participation Experience

1) Linguistic Changes

Participants reported significant improvements in overall English skills and communication abilities through conversations with native speakers. These interactions provided opportunities to learn new words and expressions, understand new meanings and usages of words they already knew, and receive valuable feedback. Native teachers’ explanations about “why it’s better to change it this way, or why this is wrong” were crucial for students to understand English nuances.

Moreover, because students could receive real-time feedback through conversations, they were able to immediately correct wrong expressions and prevent them from becoming fossilized. This made students more confident in their English expressions. “Receiving real-time feedback during conversations with native speakers was very helpful, because I could immediately correct incorrect or awkward English expressions” (P4, July 14, 2025).

As their English proficiency improved, students participated more actively, which in turn led to further improvement in English skills, creating a positive cycle that positively influenced their interest and motivation to learn English.

2) Cognitive Changes

Through continuous interactions with native speakers, learners’ perception of using English shifted from a special event to an everyday activity. This change helped students use English more comfortably in real-life situations. “The perception of talking with native speakers changed from being a special event to something natural that could happen anytime and anywhere” (P1, July 12, 2025).

Additionally, students gained a deeper understanding of cultural differences. By looking at and interpreting the same events or phenomena from different cultural perspectives, students were able to expand their background knowledge and improve their competence to understand different cultural contexts.

The positive effects of sharing common interests in communication with native speakers were also notable. By talking about common interests with native speakers, students could have deeper conversations and develop mutual understanding and a sense of connection. This became an important factor in helping students participate more actively and confidently in conversations. Consequently, these cognitive changes promoted students' broader perspectives and deeper understanding in learning English, significantly strengthening their learning motivation and confidence.

3) Emotional Changes

The improvement of English proficiency through various activities and continuous exposure to the target language alleviated students' anxiety about speaking with native speakers and boosted their confidence. The chance to converse with native speakers itself was highly meaningful. It helped learners overcome their fears and build confidence, even with limited English. Additionally, students emphasized the importance of a positive and flexible mindset in accepting native speakers' corrections. "I think it's very important to have a flexible mindset to accept native speakers' corrections. I could learn better expressions by not shrinking back and accepting feedback" (P3, July 17, 2025).

Most importantly, this entire process brought great joy and a sense of achievement to students. Initially, they participated in conversations with native speakers driven by the desire for recognition, extrinsic motivations, or an ought-to L2 self, but gradually, they found that learning English itself became enjoyable and fun. This reflects a positive emotional change towards learning English and allowed students to continuously feel a sense of accomplishment in their learning journey. Consequently, the experience of participating in conversations with native speakers facilitated positive emotional changes in students, reduced fear, increased confidence in using English, strengthened intrinsic motivation, and had a positive impact on their ongoing English learning.

4) Behavioral Changes

Students demonstrated a range of behavioral changes as a result of their engagement in conversations with native speakers. Firstly, there was a notable increase in voluntary participation in English-related activities such as conversation and debate clubs with native speakers, listening to English pop songs, watching movies and dramas in English, looking up unfamiliar words including slang and abbreviations, watching English-related YouTube videos, and exploring English-speaking cultures. Moreover, there was a marked increase in active attempts to interact with native speakers. Although they felt some pressure when discussing new or difficult topics in English, this positively influenced their participation in

various English classes and activities in university, and they showed an active attitude in interactions with native-speaking professors.

The solidification of English-related career paths and future plans was also very noticeable. For example, participant 1 continues to engage in English newspaper activities at university and regularly attends chemistry seminars conducted in English for postgraduate studies. Participant 2 leads an English presentation study group in preparation for an international design competition, while yet other participants (P3, P5) lead an English education-related study group and conducts practice teaching sessions in English to prepare for the teacher certification exam. As a result, the experience of engaging in conversations with native speakers significantly encouraged students' voluntary participation in English activities, promoting active interaction and solidifying English-related career plans. These behavioral changes positively influenced their English competence and learning motivation.

5) Long-term Impacts

Students experienced various long-term impacts from their participation in conversations with native speakers. Their participation in university courses taught in English improved, and interest in international opportunities greatly increased. Additionally, they showed heightened interest in exchange programs and overseas employment opportunities, resulting from their developing international perspective. Lastly, a sustained willingness to continue learning English was developed. As their English communicative competence improved, students received continuous motivation for English learning. This played an important role in setting and implementing long-term English learning plans. Specifically, participant 4 is participating in English reading discussion groups for international education policy analysis at university and considering studying abroad in the United States. Participant 5 is actively participating in English conversation clubs with students of various nationalities and preparing for exchange student programs to the United States. Consequently, the experience of participating in conversations with native speakers provided students with long-term learning motivation and goals, leading to the continuity of English learning and interest in international opportunities. These impacts are expected to serve as an important foundation for better outcomes in a global environment.

V. DISCUSSION

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological framework to explore in depth how Korean EFL learners developed communicative competence and experienced internal changes through interactions with native English speakers during their high school years.

While previous studies have focused on individual variables such as speaking anxiety or learning motivation, or have been limited to short-term experiments, this study comprehensively explores the holistic meaning of actual interactions—from the initial motivations and backgrounds that led learners to engage with native speakers, through the factors that shaped these interactions, to the transformative changes that emerged through learners' accumulated experiences—providing a multidimensional illumination of their transformation processes.

The changes observed in learners extended beyond simple language proficiency improvement to encompass identity transformation. Particularly noteworthy is that learners came to perceive themselves not as "English learners" but as "English users." This identity shift is closely related to Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, specifically the formation of the ideal L2 self. While external factors (ought-to L2 self) such as university entrance exams and teacher evaluations strongly influenced learners initially, achievement experiences gained through actual interactions with native speakers gradually strengthened their intrinsic motivation, leading to the concretization of an ideal self connected to career goals and self-actualization. This process of internal motivational transformation supports previous research by Hiver and Larsen-Freeman (2020) and Liu et al. (2023), which emphasized the dynamic nature of foreign language learning motivation—that is, motivation changes over time and is reconstructed through learners' experiences and interactions.

Furthermore, the factors influencing interactions with native speakers identified in this study support or expand various claims in existing literature. Clément et al.'s (2003) assertion that confidence in actual communication situations directly affects willingness to communicate was confirmed in this study. However, contrary to Lipton et al. (2020) and Okyar's (2023) claims that teacher evaluation increases students' speaking anxiety, this study found that when teachers acted as supporters rather than evaluators, learner participation was actually enhanced. Additionally, the finding that peer support, such as mentoring between senior and junior students, functioned as a positive mechanism providing practical strategies and confidence to learners reaffirms the importance of socially interactive learning in EFL environments. These findings deepen theoretical discussions about constructing support systems to facilitate interactions with native speakers in EFL contexts.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study investigated the factors motivating Korean EFL learners to engage in conversations with native speakers and their subsequent development through these interactions. The findings provide important insights into three key aspects of learners' experiences.

Regarding the first research question about backgrounds and motivations, the findings revealed a complex interplay between extrinsic and intrinsic motivations. While Korea's educational context created strong extrinsic pressures through university admission and academic achievement requirements, learners also developed intrinsic motivation through their growing interest in authentic communication. Notably, what began as external pressure often transformed into internal drive as learners experienced success in real communication situations.

In terms of influencing factors, the study identified several key elements that affected learners' engagement with native speakers. The continuous availability of interaction opportunities, combined with supportive learning environments, played crucial roles. Particularly significant was the finding that teacher support and peer collaboration served as mediating factors, helping learners overcome initial anxiety and build confidence. This suggests that successful native speaker interaction programs require not just exposure to native speakers, but also carefully structured support systems.

The study's findings about learners' changes were particularly significant, revealing a transformative journey that went beyond simple linguistic improvement. Beginning with psychological changes in anxiety reduction and confidence building, learners experienced deeper transformations in their identity as English users and their global perspectives. This progression from language improvement to identity transformation highlights the profound impact that sustained native speaker interactions can have on EFL learners' development.

These findings offer important implications for EFL education. First, it is necessary to systematically provide and support opportunities for EFL learners to engage with native speakers. This means not just hiring native-speaking teachers but providing opportunities for learners to interact with native speakers in various contexts. Secondly, not only linguistic factors but also psychological and intercultural factors should be sufficiently considered. Building a support system that can reduce learners' anxiety and build their confidence is necessary, and the development of programs that can enhance cultural understanding is also essential. Thirdly, developing educational methods that support learners' holistic growth is necessary. This involves an integrative approach that encompasses not only linguistic proficiency improvement but also the formation of learners' identity, enhancement of intercultural competence, and development of an international perspective.

Nevertheless, as this study was conducted with a small number of participants ($N = 5$) from a specific Korean high school, caution should be taken when generalizing findings to other EFL contexts. Additionally, since most data were based on learners' self-reports, the lack of objective measurements of language proficiency improvement could be pointed out as a limitation. Future research should include comparative studies in various EFL environments, long-term tracking studies, and quantitative research on the impact of conversations with native speakers on actual language proficiency improvement. Moreover,

further in-depth research on how the experience of interacting with native speakers affects learners' cognitive and emotional development is needed.

In conclusion, engaging in conversations with native speakers provides crucial experiences that bring not only linguistic growth but also comprehensive growth in cognitive, emotional, and cultural aspects for EFL learners. These experiences contribute to learners' growth by equipping them with the language skills and cultural competence necessary for the global era. Therefore, it is crucial to systematically provide and support these opportunities in EFL educational settings, thereby promoting learners' holistic growth and strengthening global competence. This will significantly contribute not only to the effectiveness of English education but also to nurturing individuals with diverse competences needed in a globalized society.

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Examples in: English
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Applicable Levels: Secondary

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