

The Influence of Content on Adult L2 Learners' Task Motivation: An Interest Theory Perspective

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Abstract

This study investigates the influence of content-related conditions on adult second language learners' task motivation during interactive tasks. It also aims to identify what is referred to as interestingness conditions within task content, that is, elements that are intrinsically interesting to most individuals. The investigation was conducted with 38 adult Korean English learners of intermediate proficiency in a conversation course as part of a TESOL certificate program. Using a mixed methods approach to research, results from a task motivation questionnaire, a topic preference questionnaire, and interviews show that content associated with immediate personal life themes such as personal growth, human relationships, and life challenges is perceived to be more intrinsically interesting than that associated with more remote and abstract topics such as those related to global issues and current affairs. Consequently, incorporating life themes into adult-based courses, especially through story-based texts, may act as an important springboard for active motivational engagement during task-based interaction.

Résumé

Cette étude examine l'influence des conditions, en fonction du contenu, de certaines tâches interactives sur la motivation d'adultes apprenant une langue seconde. L'étude cherche également à identifier ce qui est appelé des conditions favorisant l'intérêt en rapport au contenu des tâches, c'est-à-dire des éléments qui s'avèrent intrinsèquement intéressants pour la plupart des individus. Cette étude a été menée auprès de 38 apprenants d'anglais, soit des adultes coréens de niveau intermédiaire inscrits à un cours de conversation faisant partie d'un programme de certificat en enseignement de l'anglais langue seconde. L'étude a été entreprise selon une approche méthodologique mixte de recherche. Les résultats proviennent d'un questionnaire traitant de la motivation des participants à accomplir une tâche, de leurs préférences quant aux sujets liés à ces tâches, ainsi que d'entrevues avec eux. Ils démontrent que le choix de sujets liés à la vie de tout un chacun, tels que le développement personnel, les relations humaines et les défis que rencontrent l'être humain, sont perçus comme étant intrinsèquement plus intéressants que des sujets plus abstraits, comme ceux traitant d'actualité ou d'enjeux mondiaux. Par conséquent, l'intégration de tels sujets dans un cours de langue pour adultes, particulièrement par le biais de textes basés sur des histoires vécues, peut s'avérer un élément déclencheur important en ce qui a trait à l'engagement et la motivation d'étudiants adultes participant à des tâches d'apprentissage interactives.

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Introduction

Learners of a second or foreign language are increasingly asked to interact in communicative tasks with an emphasis on meaning as part of a methodological paradigm dominated by task-based language teaching (TBLT) and content-based instruction. While a substantial body of research into meaning-focused tasks has shown evidence of output-based acquisitional benefits (Samuda & Bygate, 2008), such research has operated mainly within a cognitive perspective to the neglect of more affective variables such as task motivation. Learner motivation assumes a level of importance as cognition is increasingly recognised as being inseparable from affect (Dörnyei, 2009b). As Dai and Sternberg (2004) stated, “intellectual functioning and development never occur as solely cognitive events but involve motivation and emotion” (p. 24). From a second language (L2) learning perspective, therefore, a highly engaged learner is more likely to be cognitively active on both a receptive and productive level, which in turn may enhance the conditions necessary for L2 acquisition to take place. Educators and researchers in the L2 field have thus begun to investigate the motivational properties that underlie language-learning tasks.

Task Motivation

Within mainstream education (Boekaerts, 1988) and language education (Julkunen, 1989; Tremblay, Goldberg, & Gardner, 1995), task motivation was first conceptualised as a combination of trait motivation, representing a more stable and enduring orientation, and state motivation, representing situation-specific motives. Such frameworks were influenced by cognitive notions of motivation embodied in intrinsic motivation or self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and expectancy-value theory (Wigfield, 1994) in which the following learner-internal variables were identified as having an influence on learners' task motivation: success expectation, task enjoyment, perceived task value, perceived task difficulty, degree of effort, and emotional state.

In reaction to the trait-state model, Dörnyei (2002) argued that such a conceptualisation was overly simple and failed to account for broader contextual and social factors such as other learners, the teacher, and the school culture. Indeed, in his investigation of the motivational characteristics of language learning tasks, Dörnyei (2002) was able to show how the high motivational level of one learner leads to a higher motivation and performance in his or her partner, thus demonstrating the social and “dynamic, negotiated nature of task motivation” (p. 152). This perspective also reflected a wider theoretical shift in the field of L2 motivation, one which viewed language learner motivation as a dynamic construct and part of a complex system involving the interaction of numerous interrelated variables (Dörnyei, 2009b). In consequence, Dörnyei (2009a) outlined his own task motivation model and argued that an individual learner's motivation would involve the dynamic interplay of the following elements:

- learner-specific factors (e.g., cognitive, motivational, and emotional factors; proficiency level; personality traits);

- learning situational factors (e.g., teacher, class size, composition of the learner group, school culture);
- task-related factors (e.g., task content, task structure, expected task outcomes, task participants); and
- other factors (e.g., time-related issues, distractions, disruptions).

The results of a research study conducted by Dörnyei and Tseng (2009) support this conception, showing how learners' motivational task processing varied depending on different stages of the task and the degree of success they experienced in assessing their moment-to-moment task engagement processes. Proficiency level emerged as a key variable in this study as the less proficient learners experienced more difficulty in appraising and monitoring their "ongoing task execution process" (Dörnyei & Tseng, 2009, p. 132). Also, a recent study by Poupore (2013), functioning with a complex and dynamic systems framework, adopted a process-oriented approach to analysing L2 learners' motivation in interactive tasks. Focusing on two tasks in which learners' task motivation exhibited a decreasing motivational pattern, the investigation revealed that each outcome was the result of different combinations of motivational and emotional variables interacting together in conjunction with group work dynamic (i.e., the social climate existing within the work groups). Another important influence interacting with these variables was the specific task characteristic of cognitive complexity (i.e., the cognitive demands imposed by the task).

In the analysis of task motivation, especially from a classroom perspective, it is important to understand the influence of task characteristics since instructors can more easily manipulate these characteristics. While a substantial body of TBLT research exists in relation to the influence of task characteristics on linguistic production and cognition (Ellis, 2003; Samuda & Bygate, 2008), relatively little exists in regard to their effect on motivation. This is particularly the case with respect to content-related features such as task topic and any text features associated with the task. This is somewhat surprising given that curriculum developers and teachers often begin with thematic content as their key starting point in course and lesson design. From a motivational perspective, one can again deduce that interesting content will positively influence affect and cognition within the learner. In point of fact, researchers from the field of interest theory have found learner interest in domain content to be positively related to increased attention, memory, motivation, and learning (Krapp, 2002). In relation to language learning, a study by Kang (2005) identified interest in the topic as a key variable in L2 learners' situational willingness to communicate. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011), moreover, identified the concept of interest as a powerful *motivational conglomerate* having important implications for L2 learning since it essentially represents a blending of motivational, cognitive, and affective (emotional) dimensions: "Besides its obvious motivational connotations, the notion of interest also involves a salient cognitive aspect—the curiosity in and engagement with a specific domain—as well as a prominent affective dimension concerning the joy associated with this engagement" (p. 93). Learner interest, therefore, through its tripartite structure of motivation, cognition, and emotion, acts as a key variable in relation to both task motivation and to providing enhanced conditions for more durable learning to take place.

Interest Theory and Interestingness of Content

In mainstream education, Dewey (1913) was the first to acknowledge the value of interest to student learning by arguing that it helped learners to use prior knowledge in pursuing new knowledge and functioned as a key motivator in influencing active engagement in learning tasks. Crookes and Schmidt (1991), meanwhile, were among the first to incorporate the concept of interest as part of a model of L2 motivation and defined it as “a positive response to stimuli...such that learners’ curiosity is aroused and sustained” (p. 481). In addition to having a positive relationship with attention, memory, and learning, interest also increases learners’ intrinsic motivation or natural enjoyment of learning and the number of learning strategies that they use (Pressley, El-Dinary, Marks, Brown, & Stein, 1992; Sweet, Guthrie, & Ng, 1997). Interest theorists also acknowledge that interest is distinct from other motivational variables in that it is always content specific and includes both affective and cognitive components that act as separate but interacting systems (Hidi & Renninger, 2006).

Interest researchers (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Krapp, Hidi, & Renninger, 1992) make a distinction between two different types of interest. The first, *personal interest*, is centred on individual differences and represents an individual’s enduring or state-like disposition to engage with particular domain content. The second, *situational interest*, is triggered in the moment by specific environmental stimuli. Situational interest researchers focus on identifying specific “conditions and/or concrete objects (e.g., texts, films) in the environment” (Krapp et al., 1992, p. 8) that will capture the interest of most individuals. Since one of the aims of the present study is to identify motivational properties within task content, situational interest is especially relevant because, unlike personal interest which is more narrowly focused and individually-based, it can be more commonly applied and thus easier for teachers to control in order to facilitate learning. In this way, it allows for the possibility to identify elements within task content that are more universally interesting than other elements and that are independent of individual learner preferences.

Most of the research on identifying conditions that elicit situational interest, or what Hidi and Baird (1986) refer to as *interestingness*, has focused on text characteristics. One of the first researchers to focus on the role of interestingness, Schank (1979), identified three informational conditions that generate interest:

- abnormality or non-normative qualities (unusual things that deviate from our expectations);
- relevant but missing information; and
- absolute interests (e.g., romance, sex, danger, power, death).

The first condition relates to surprise or unexpectedness of information and has also been referred to as novelty (Anderson, Shirey, Wilson, & Fielding, 1987). The second condition implies incompleteness of information and is also known as information complexity (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983). The third condition refers to universal concepts that human beings find interesting and are related to life themes. In reference to these universal concepts, moreover, Wade, Schraw, Buxton, and Hayes (1993) found that “topics related to injury, sex, and scandal are clearly of high interest...almost without exception” (p. 106).

In addition to life themes and novelty, Anderson et al. (1987), in a study investigating children's reading material, identified the following two interestingness characteristics: character identification (material involving characters with whom one can readily identify) and material involving intense action or feelings.

The use of tasks and/or texts that are personally relevant and connected to learners' lives, purposes, and goals has also been identified as an interestingness condition (Means, Jonassen, & Dwyer, 1997). Sadoski, Goetz, and Fritz (1993), moreover, have claimed that concreteness and imageability increase interestingness of texts through the provision of non-abstract and clear information and through rich imagery. Other studies also found text coherence (Hidi, 1990) and ease of comprehension (Schraw & Lehman, 2001) to be positively related to interestingness.

From an L2 education perspective, Tomlinson, a materials development specialist, has also provided some interesting insights into the issue of content and interestingness. In agreement with interest theorists, he has also argued that there are indeed absolute interests:

My experience has demonstrated that there are certain universal topics which are likely to stimulate engagement. These include birth, growing up, going to school, making friends, falling in love, starting a career, getting married and death. The obvious point is that these topics relate to most people's life experience. (B. Tomlinson, personal communication, September 6, 2006)

Particularly motivating, according to Tomlinson (1998), are life themes of the more controversial or scandalous type. As a case in point, Tomlinson refers to his experience in Africa. As part of a project to write a textbook for secondary learners of English in Namibia, a Ministry of Education questionnaire asked the target learners what they wanted to discuss and the topics requested included drugs, alcohol, smoking, teenage pregnancy, marital violence, and crime, that is, topics normally on publishers' lists of banned topics. Tomlinson has also argued that life themes can best be demonstrated through the use of literary and/or story-based texts that reflect such themes in an emotionally stimulating manner.

Several conditions, therefore, contribute to the interestingness of content. Although most of these interestingness conditions have been framed within a text perspective, they also relate and are applicable to a task-based framework. Within a communicative task, learners usually process and/or discuss content in one form or another, either related to a particular topic or theme and/or to some kind of associated texts they have read, listened to, and/or viewed prior to the task. In this study, therefore, task content conditions refer to both thematic elements as well as specific written and/or audiovisual text features related to the task such as concreteness of information, imagery, and other text organisation variables. Since the aim of the present inquiry is to identify motivational properties within task content, the list of interestingness conditions that have previously been identified in the literature provide a relevant and comparative framework in which to analyse and discuss the study's findings from an L2 learning perspective. More specifically, the investigation is framed around the following two research questions:

1. Which content-related conditions have a positive influence on learners' task motivation?

2. Which content-related conditions have a less positive or negative influence on learners' task motivation?

Research Setting and Participants

The participants consisted of 38 Korean English teacher trainees enrolled in a conversation course as part of a TESOL certificate program operated by a Korean university. Most of the learners had already graduated with an undergraduate degree with a few still pursuing their studies. While some were English or education majors, most held a degree in a different field. Career backgrounds were various and included public school teachers, English language institute teachers, homemakers, businesspersons, and students. With regard to gender, 71% were female and 29% male. The average age was 30.6 years and ranged from 23 to 48 years. Most of the participants were at the high intermediate to advanced proficiency level based on TOEIC scores, ranging from 780 to 900.

The participants were informed at the beginning of the semester that the teacher-researcher was interested in collecting their thoughts about some of the communicative tasks that would be part of the course. It was emphasised that they should be as honest as possible in expressing their views about the tasks, especially in relation to being open to expressing negative thoughts, and that they do so without attempting to please the teacher-researcher. In addition, it was stressed that the research and the tasks under study would have no relation whatsoever with the evaluation for the course which was based on other projects and assignments. Promises of confidentiality and anonymity were also communicated as was the freedom to not participate or to stop participating in the research.

In the interpretation of the results for this study, it will be important to keep in mind the very specific context of the study. These are adult Korean learners of various ages and backgrounds in a TESOL program in Korea in which age-related and culture-related factors will undoubtedly have an influence on the results. The fact that they are TESOL students also indicates that they are already interested in teaching and learning English and may have a higher degree of investment in learning than other learner groups.

Tasks

A total of 15 tasks were part of the conversation course and consisted of various task types including jigsaw/information gap, problem solving, decision making, opinion exchange, and prediction. A variety of texts were also associated with the tasks including television sitcoms, film, short stories, Internet websites, and other reading-based texts. In terms of content, different topics included world peace, world cultures, charities and volunteerism, the death penalty, famous people, issues surrounding the historical event of 9-11, humorous or dramatic situations in TV sitcoms and movies, love and romance, adultery, and stories of personal development. All of the tasks, the average duration of which was 23 minutes, were performed in either groups of three or four.

Procedure and Research Instruments

In order to identify the influence of content-related conditions on task motivation, a mixed methods approach was utilised based on data collected through the use of a post-task motivation questionnaire, structured interviews that followed each task, and a topic

preference questionnaire.¹ As a first step in the analysis, the 15 tasks were ranked from highest to lowest based on results from the task motivation questionnaire. Adopting an extreme case sampling approach to research design (Dörnyei, 2007), in which the more extreme cases become the focus of investigation, the two highest and the two lowest scoring tasks were then selected for deeper analysis in which results from the interview data would help to reveal the impact of content-related features within each task. In order to further identify the influence of task content and to add depth and support to the interview data, a topic preference questionnaire was administered near the end of the semester and after the students had already experienced each of the 15 tasks. In relation to the extreme case sampling approach that was adopted, Dörnyei (2007) has argued that this type of research strategy is likely to reveal “the real core components of the experience” (p. 128) and can provide “as valid results as any other research method” (p. 154).

Task Motivation Questionnaire

The post-task motivation questionnaire was adapted from a questionnaire developed by Boekaerts (2002) and incorporated motivational variables derived from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and expectancy-value theory (Wigfield, 1994). The specific variables and their associated question items are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1

Motivational Variables on the Post-Task Motivation Questionnaire

Variables	Question items
Task enjoyment (3)	How interesting did you find this task? How enjoyable did you find this task? How did you like the topic of this task?
Reported effort (3)	How much focused attention did you give while doing this task? How much did you persist working on the task? How much effort did you put into this task?
Result assessment (2)	How well did you do this task? If you could grade yourself for this task, what sort of grade would you give yourself in comparison to the rest of your classmates?
Perceived relevance (1)	How useful do you consider this type of task for your language learning?

Total post-task motivation for each task was calculated based on an amalgamated total of the four variables. Each item on the questionnaire was based on a 5-point Likert scale and in order to account for the ordering effect, the question items were randomised. To ensure clarity of understanding, a Korean translation was added to the English wording of the first two question items that are part of the reported effort variable. In addition to pilot tests, the questionnaire was also used with the participants for two tasks at the beginning of the semester prior to using them with the 15 tasks that were part of the study. Regarding the internal consistency reliability for the multi-item scales, Cronbach alpha coefficient scores indicated the following levels of reliability: task enjoyment 0.84, reported effort 0.80, and result assessment 0.73.

Interviews

With the purpose of identifying how task conditions, including content-related elements, may have influenced learners' task motivation, post-task interviews were conducted by the teacher-researcher following each task with 16 of the 38 participants. Selection of the participants was based on variety in terms of proficiency level, possessing a certain willingness to communicate², and time availability. The interviewees were provided with a pre-interview questionnaire under the assumption that the extra time to carefully reflect about their answers would ease their levels of anxiety and provide for better quality responses during the interview. The questionnaire included 9-point semantic differential scales and space to write and explain their choice of answer based on the following questions:

- Like/Dislike Task Scale: How did you like the task and why?
- Like/Dislike Topic Scale: How did you like the topic(s) of the task and why?

Interviews were recorded and interview time with each participant ranged between 5 to 15 minutes. Data from both the pre-interview questionnaire and the transcribed oral interview were used for analysis. Learner responses to each question were then categorised into different reasons for liking or disliking the task/topic. Specific reasons, referred to as reference categories, were then tallied based on the number of participants who made a reference to them. Like the task motivation questionnaire, the interview procedure was conducted with two practice tasks at the beginning of the semester.

Topic Preference Questionnaire

In order to measure participant preferences in relation to the various topics they had discussed and experienced in the course, a rank order questionnaire was administered near the end of the semester. The 38 participants were first asked to rank a list of 10 topic categories which were part of the 15 tasks and which were expressed in the following manner:

- Topics related to learning about other cultures.
- Topics related to human interest and inspirational stories that show personal growth in the stories' characters (e.g., stories such as *Forrest Gump*, *Dead Poets Society*).
- Controversial topics (e.g., adultery, abortion, American military in Korea).
- Topics related to movies and discussing interesting scenes in them.
- Topics related to improving the world (e.g., world peace, the environment, poverty, sickness).
- Topics related to love and romance.
- Topics related to humorous situations in American TV sitcoms (e.g., *Friends*).
- Topics related to personal inner improvement (e.g., values awareness, personality development, virtues, moral issues).
- Topics related to current news and issues (e.g., war in Iraq, nuclear weapons in North Korea).

- Topics related to social problems in society (e.g., crime, divorce, violence, lack of equality for women).

In order to more clearly determine their reasons for liking or disliking a topic, the participants were then asked to write an explanation of why they ranked the top two topics the highest and why they ranked the bottom two topics the lowest.

Results

Task Motivation Questionnaire Data

Table 2 displays the title and the total motivation result, in order from highest to lowest, for each of the 15 tasks that were part of the study.

Table 2
Total Motivation for All 15 Tasks

Tasks	Total Motivation	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Dead Poets Society</i> : Character analysis	4.22	0.54
Advice columnist	4.11	0.60
<i>The End of the Affair</i> movie jigsaw	4.08	0.60
Behind the veil: Pros and cons	4.07	0.46
Rainbow war film discussion	4.05	0.61
Peace poster presentation	4.02	0.61
Supporting and defending a charity	3.94	0.69
<i>Jackie Brown</i> movie jigsaw	3.93	0.68
Famous people qualities	3.89	0.72
Death penalty debate	3.88	0.69
<i>Friends</i> sitcom: Questions and answers	3.87	0.70
<i>Can-Can</i> story: Adultery debate	3.86	0.69
<i>Iron John</i> folktale jigsaw	3.85	0.82
<i>Friends</i> sitcom: Problem solving	3.79	0.75
9-11 historical event discussion	3.67	0.90

As previously mentioned, the top two scoring tasks and the two lowest scoring tasks were selected for deeper analysis based on the research strategy of extreme case sampling in order to uncover the possible task content characteristics that may have contributed to the motivational results. As Table 2 reveals, the highest scoring tasks were the *Dead Poets Society* and the advice columnist tasks while the lowest scoring were the 9-11 discussion and the *Friends* sitcom problem-solving tasks. In order to assess whether there was a significant difference between these two groups of tasks, a *t* test was conducted. The results from Table 3 indicate that there indeed was a significant difference.

Table 3

t-Test Results: Higher Motivation Tasks Versus Lower Motivation Tasks

	Higher Motivation Tasks		Lower Motivation Tasks		<i>t</i> (37)	η^2
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>		
Total Motivation	8.33	0.92	7.46	1.38	4.27	0.33

p < .001

While acknowledging that many factors likely interacted to produce the motivational outcomes for these tasks such as various learner-based variables, learning situation-based variables, and task structure-based variables (e.g., task type, cognitive complexity), the aim of this investigation is to strictly identify how task content-related conditions may have influenced the results. Interpretation of the results, therefore, must take into account this consideration. Moreover, due to the discovery that the contributing task-based factors responsible for the lower motivation result for the *Friends* sitcom problem-solving task were associated with task structure features and not task content features, namely pressures to be creative in finding solutions to the particular problem presented in the sitcom, it was dropped from the analysis. The investigation will consequently proceed with a presentation of the interview data for the *Dead Poets Society*, the advice columnist, and the 9-11 discussion tasks in which each will be examined in turn. In order to facilitate understanding, a brief description of the tasks will precede their investigation. To add greater depth and support to the findings, the interview-based analysis will then be followed by an examination of the results from the topic preference questionnaire.

Interview Data

Higher motivation task: *Dead Poets Society* character analysis.

Task description: After watching the movie as homework in which each student was assigned to analyse the developmental growth of one of the characters in the movie, learners with different characters were put into small groups in order to share their analysis and to identify who they thought was the bravest character in the film.

Among the various reasons given by the participants to explain their favourable view of the task, the principle reference categories are identified in Table 4 (along with the total number of participant references listed in parentheses and sample student comments).

Table 4

Dead Poets Society Task: Reference Categories for Liking the Task/Topic

Reference Category	Sample Student Comments
Like watching movies/ Enjoyed movie/story (11)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had a chance to watch a good movie.
Movie content related to teaching/education (8)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's very related to my future career...I'm very interested in education, the topic and my interest are related to each other.
Provided opportunity for inner reflection (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had a chance to think about myself...I had a good chance to think about a lot of things. For example, if I were Todd and Neil, what would I do? • I can learn from the movie... I can learn something important for my life.
Analysing the boys' character (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like to analyze each character and think about their better choice in their own life to improve.
Liked the characters (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like the characters very much.
Not too difficult/complex (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I liked it, it's not too difficult not too easy, so, I was not afraid. The information was very clear, in the movie was clear so I could know easily what to do.
Humanistic content (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like humanistic movie.

While most of the participants enjoyed the task because it involved watching a movie, the thematic material related to the movie appears to have equally contributed to their enjoyment. They liked the story in the movie because it contained elements related to teaching and education and because it included humanistic content. In relation to the latter, they could observe the inner growth of likable characters, which in turn provided an opportunity for self-reflection and for learning something valuable for one's life. In other words, the participants liked the task because it contained a utilitarian value in terms of a real-life association and in terms of personal development. Also of note was that the movie's content was not perceived to be overly complex or difficult to process. As one of the participants stated in explaining his reason for liking the task and for not finding it difficult, the biggest factor was related to the "clarity of movie content and clarity of the characters' development."

Higher motivation task: Advice columnist.

Task description: Learners were given one of the following four letters written by a teenager to an online advice columnist: (a) "All my friends have great bodies but me"; (b)

“I don’t want to go out with him, but I don’t want to cause to kill himself”; (c) “Friend worried about girl in abusive relationship”; and (d) “Girl has bad jealousy problem”. After reading the assigned letter, learners then wrote their own letter of advice to the teenager and shared the content of the assigned letter and their advice in small groups.

Many students liked the task and its content. The most frequently quoted reference categories are highlighted in Table 5.

Table 5

Advice Columnist Task: Reference Categories for Liking the Task/Topic

Reference Category	Sample Student Comments
Like giving advice/like helping people (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like to give someone advice. Listen to their thoughts and problems. • I interested to cure their problems. I want to help other person.
Real life connection/utility (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can experience the real world situation through this task. • This topic seems to be a real situation in our life, so I like this. • Helpful for our life
Common problems (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is common topic that teenagers concern about, everyone is concerning about.
Familiarity and experience with topic (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I experienced it when I was a teenager so I had the same experience.
Interesting stories (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The people’s stories were interesting.

The participants liked the task primarily because of the pleasant feelings associated with the process of helping and giving advice to others faced with important life challenges. Indeed, the task was also well liked because such challenges reflected real-life stories or themes that were contained in the teenagers’ letters, especially thematic elements related to human relationships and to controversy and scandal such as jealousy, stalking, abusive relationships, suicide, drug use, and gossip. While these matters related specifically to teenagers, the participants could still relate to them by having previously experienced teenage life. Like the *Dead Poets Society* task, furthermore, some of the participants highlighted the real-life utility of the task. By being given the opportunity to provide advice and to attempt to solve these problems, the participants could apply such skills to their own lives.

Lower motivation task: 9-11 Historical event discussion.

Task description: After preparing answers, students were asked to discuss the following questions: Why did 9-11 happen? How has the world changed since this event? How have people changed since this event?

Many of the participants voiced a dislike for the task and the reasons cited are outlined in Table 6.

Table 6

9-11 Historical Event Discussion Task: Reference Categories for Disliking the Task/Topic

Reference Category	Sample Student Comments
Dislike for politics/ international affairs/war (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't like to discuss about international political issues... I'm interested in 9-11 but I just interested in people's life, not the war, not the political issue. I become more serious when I think about political issues. • I don't like this topic, politic and about economy. I prefer life, about life. • It is far away from my interesting things. Someone likes it very much who is really good at international affair things but totally not me.
Lack of knowledge (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It's more like far event...it's hard to think about the subject I'm not sure of.
Topic is heavy/serious/ abstract (4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I prefer the light topic like talking about daily life or movie than heavy topic like war...I think everybody does not like heavy and serious topic. I hate. • The questions on the paper it too abstract... I think the answer is too abstract.

An important reason for not liking the task therefore relates to lacking background knowledge about the issues surrounding the historical event of 9-11. While this lack of knowledge may be influenced by culture, in many ways it stems from possessing a dislike of or even a feeling of aversion towards politics and international affairs, which the participants often associated with the topic of war. These topics, along with the questions they were asked to answer, were also viewed as being heavy, serious, and abstract. Indeed, the topics of politics and war are easily associated with highly negative human behaviours and outcomes. It is thus easy to understand why the topic of 9-11 can conjure up negative associations. Some of the participants even voiced the opinion that such topics made them feel "uncomfortable" and made them become "more serious". In a related vein, many of the participants commented that such topics were also too "far away" or "more like far event"

and preferred less remote or more immediate topics related to “daily life” and “people’s life”. In other words, such topics were not viewed as important by many of the participants because they are not related to more immediate or real-life issues and concerns. In this way, therefore, the content related to the 9-11 discussion task can be seen as a kind of antithesis to the content related to the *Dead Poets Society* and advice columnist tasks, which were both viewed as more meaningful, relevant, and closer to the students’ personal lives.

Topic Preference Questionnaire

Data emanating from the topic preference questionnaire are presented in two tables. In the first table (Table 7), the more popular topics are listed based on their most preferred percentage, that is, the number of students who ranked the topic as one of their two most preferred topics among the total of 10 topics (see list of topics in earlier section). For instance, since 15 of 38 students selected the topic category “Stories Involving Character Growth” as one of their top two topic preferences, its most preferred percentage is 39.5%. In the second table (Table 8), the less popular topics are listed based on their least preferred percentage, that is, the number of students who ranked the topic as one of their two least preferred topics. Also included in the tables are the main reference categories that explain why the particular topic was well liked or why it was less favourably liked, the number of participants who made a reference to the specific reference category (the number in parenthesis), and samples of students’ written comments.

Table 7
More Popular Topics

Topic Category and Most Preferred %	Main Reference Category and Number of References	Sample Student Comments
Stories Involving Character Growth (39.5)	• Important topic/opportunity to reflect and learn something valuable for one’s life (8)	• The topic can give us to have time for thinking. I can have the time for thinking about our life, dreams, and so on.
Movies (36.8)	• Interesting and fun/like watching movies (7)	• The biggest reason is that movie is interesting and motivating and I like seeing a movie.
Love and Romance (23.7)	• Interesting/universal topic (7)	• It’s an interesting topic to everyone.
Personal Growth (18.4)	• Important/related to personal life/learn something valuable (6)	• In English class, it’s important to learn the language, but I can learn more valuable thing dealing with that kind of topic. I am really interested in my inner improvements.

Table 8
Less Popular Topics

Topic Category and Least Preferred %	Main Reference Category and Number of References	Sample Student Comments
Current Affairs (50)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not interested/lack of knowledge (7) • Heavy/serious /abstract (7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hate because I have no background knowledge on those topics. • I don't like to talk about current news. Most of things are very serious and there is no correct answer about it.
Global Issues (36.9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficult/complex/abstract (7) • Not interested/lack of knowledge (6) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most of topics are very difficult to think about. Too wide to discuss. • I don't really know that much.
Controversial (34.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dislike for debating/heavy and serious (8) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too serious for the conversation class. We have to argue with the people who have opposite opinion about this topic.

The results from the tables add further depth and support to the interview data. Regarding the more popular topics, the humanistic and utilitarian value of content related to personal growth and character growth in stories are again revealed to be interesting as they trigger meaningful reflection about participants' own lives and "inner improvements". Love and romance are also shown to be interesting universal life themes. Movies, meanwhile, as a visually stimulating medium in which story-based or life-themed content is projected, are further shown to be particularly appealing. In contrast, the more remote topics related to current affairs and global issues are simply viewed as uninteresting. Whether this lack of interest is a result of participants' lack of background knowledge about these topics, or vice-versa, we can conclude that background knowledge, along with perceptions of heaviness, seriousness, complexity, and difficulty, were the primary factors underlying participants' viewpoints toward these two topic categories. Some students' aversion to controversial topics lies in the fact that they connote an argumentative nature. Similarly, topics related to current and/or global affairs involve a certain level of seriousness that can be uncomfortable for some students.

Discussion

In relation to the specific research questions that framed the study, a number of conclusions can be drawn from the findings. These are outlined in Table 9, which identifies the more positive and less positive influences of content-related conditions on learners' task motivation:

Table 9

Motivational Influences of Content-Related Conditions

More Positive	Less Positive
Real-life association and personal identification	Remoteness (e.g., international affairs)
Real-life utility and relevance	Abstract and/or complex
Life themes	Heaviness/seriousness
Mature content associated with life-related dilemmas	Controversial and argumentative
Humanistic (e.g., personal growth, providing advice)	
Movies/stories	
Clarity and ease of comprehension	

Regarding the more positive motivational influences, a central motif concerns the importance of content and topics being perceived as personally relevant in a way that relates to meaningful and immediate life issues and themes such as love, relationship conflicts, challenges, and personal growth. These are all issues that are common to the human condition and represent what was introduced earlier as absolute interests. Through the *Dead Poets Society* film and through the advice columnist task, the students were able to personally identify with the challenges, difficulties, and feelings experienced by the characters and the letter writers, which in turn added to the personal relevance and meaning of the tasks. Moreover, because the learners were familiar with and in some cases had experienced these life-related themes, they could more easily express themselves and access their background knowledge. Utility is also important as learners' need to feel that the content is related to and helpful for their own lives. Life themes and/or dilemmas of the more mature or shocking type such as drug use, abusive relationships, and suicide were also shown to be interesting. This finding adds support to Tomlinson's (1998) argument presented earlier, which states that controversial topics related to life themes, because of their relevancy and high emotional charge, will be more intrinsically motivating than other more neutral-type topics. In regard to humanistic content, meanwhile, it can be argued that its motivational quality may lie in its positive mental-emotional connotations such as qualities and/or feelings related to hope, improvement, and kindness.

Concerning movies, it is no surprise that they were found to be interesting. They are essentially motivating for two reasons. First, they provide a moving image that is visually stimulating and therefore reflects the interestingness characteristic of imagery (Sadoski et al., 1993). Second, movies usually represent a story and because stories are most often based on important life themes they will be inherently motivating to most human beings. Stories, furthermore, are motivating because they involve character identification and because they often contain intense action and/or feelings, important elements which have been found to be positively related to interestingness (Anderson et al., 1987).

Clarity of content and ease of comprehension, both identified by interest theorists to be important factors of interestingness (Hidi, 1990; Schraw & Lehman, 2001), also emerged as positive motivational influences in this study. Such characteristics, furthermore, assume additional relevance from a language learning perspective for learners who may lack the linguistic knowledge needed to successfully process the content.

In regard to the less positive motivational influences, a condition that was particularly indicative was that of remoteness, which emerged as an important contrast to the positive influence of more personal and immediate topics. Thus, while topics related to various life themes were perceived to be interesting and personally meaningful, more remote topics related to global issues, current affairs, and politics were not. Instead, they were perceived by the learners to be distant or “far away”, which lead to difficulties in accessing prior knowledge in relation to these topics. Abstraction and/or complexity were also negative conditions, especially in relation to the intricacies surrounding political and international affairs. Indeed, attempting to understand and then discuss such issues is a difficult undertaking not just in one’s L2 but also in one’s first language (L1). This finding implies that L2 learning content at the thematic and textual level should involve a certain degree of concreteness, previously identified as an interestingness condition (Sadoski et al., 1993). The content should also be accessible in a way that is coherent and easy to comprehend. Current affairs, wider global issues, and controversial topics of debate were also described as being heavy and serious, and their effect on motivation may be explained through the negative mental-emotional connotations that may arise when thinking of such issues. When word associations such as abuse of power, dishonesty, hatred, betrayal, suffering, and aggressiveness arise, one would rather, as one participant explained in the interviews, “simply not think about it”. In many ways, therefore, this condition contrasts with the positive motivational condition of humanistic content, which produced more positive mental-emotional associations.

Controversial topics that lead to argumentation and debate, meanwhile, were also identified as disadvantageous. While this may reflect a cultural bias from a Korean perspective, for some of the participants, the sensitivities surrounding such topics, including a sense of heaviness and seriousness, made them feel uncomfortable. On a certain level, this finding appears to contradict the positive motivational results produced by controversial topics of the more mature or scandalous type. However, a distinction needs to be made between controversy that arouses one’s sense of surprise and curiosity in reaction to slightly scandalous and/or shocking human behaviours, such as the use of drugs or an abusive partner, and controversy that easily leads to an argument and/or disagreement, such as the death penalty.

When interpreting these findings, furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the motivational influence of a particular content condition will depend not only on how it combines with other learner-internal, social, and task structure factors, but also on how it interacts with other content-related conditions. While some of the content related to the advice columnist task contained elements that could be perceived as heavy and serious (e.g., suicide and abusiveness), the task content also contained elements associated with life themes, adult-related dilemmas, a real-life relevance, humanism, and personal stories. The potential negative motivational influence of the content’s heaviness and seriousness, therefore, did not emerge as a factor. In contrast, because the heavy and serious content surrounding the 9-11 discussion task was combined with other less positive motivational

conditions such as abstraction and argumentation, the motivational response of the learners proved to be less than favourable.

Conclusion

Based on the results of this study with Korean adult English learners, some characteristics can be claimed to satisfy the condition of interestingness. Before reviewing and outlining these it is important to restate the situated context in which the investigation was conducted, whose varying influences may have acted as important determinants on the study's findings. These relate to a teacher-researcher working within the Korean context of a TESOL certificate program with a relatively small number of participants of varying ages. In addition, although adopting an extreme case analytical approach to the research process added an element of validity to the study, it is important to acknowledge that the findings are based on a relatively small number of tasks. Thus, further research involving more tasks with the same content would be of empirical value. Furthermore, one must also recognise that many other factors not discussed in this paper, including learner-based, social-based, culture-based, and task structure-based factors also influence learners' task motivation. Cultural influences can also play a role in determining learner interest in particular content and this may have been the case in this study in relation to the topic of 9-11 and topics that lend themselves to debate and argumentation. Lastly, language-related variables were not part of the investigation. As a future research study, therefore, investigating the effect of learner interest and task motivation on language variables would prove meaningful.

The most prominent finding in relation to interestingness was the emergence of life themes as an intrinsically motivating topic. Whether such themes relate to the development of one's character, to love and romance, or to more mature and scandalous life-related issues, they are perceived to be highly interesting. While this finding may appear to be self-evident, some of these themes, particularly the latter, often fail to appear in L2 language programs (Tomlinson, 1998) and therefore deserve greater consideration as language learning material. If such themes, furthermore, involve humanistic content in the sense of positive mental-emotional associations such as hope, change, and/or growth then this may add to their interestingness. In addition, because learners can easily relate to and may have experience with certain life-related themes, a lack of background knowledge does not emerge as a problematic issue. This is especially important from a language learning perspective in which lack of content schema can negatively influence motivation and prevent facilitation of language production.

Movie-based content and/or story-based content can also be claimed to be interestingness characteristics since they most often describe and contain important life themes. They represent a perfect medium through which learners can be intrinsically motivated. As Maley (2001) stated in reference to the use of film in L2 education, the "combination of sound, vision, and language engages and stimulates our senses and cognitive faculties simultaneously, creating a total impact that dwarfs other mediums" (p. ix). Because stories usually follow the same discourse and plot structure and because movies contain visual images, they also add clarity and ease of comprehension to texts. These are important factors not only from a motivational perspective but also from a language learning perspective in which comprehensible input may act as an important determinant of L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1985).

From a pedagogical perspective, therefore, life themes can provide at least an initial motivational basis upon which to select materials and to create and design tasks. One way to do this would be to adopt a story-based approach in which written or audio/visual-based texts that are rich in meaning in relation to important life themes would act as a springboard for active discussion during task-based interaction. Adopting a response-centred approach to the use of story-based materials in which learners meaningfully respond to thematic content in a manner that focuses on “their personal thoughts, images, feelings, and associations” (Tutas, 2006, p. 136) would provide a sound pedagogical framework in which to operate. From a TBLT perspective, therefore, having learners engage with a story-based text that revolves around important life themes and then having them discuss its thematic content in pairs or small groups provides a strong motivational foundation for task design and the promotion of target language development.

A relatively recent trend in language teaching in regard to teaching materials has been to incorporate various content related to global issues (Sampedro & Hillyard, 2004). However, based on results from this study it is recommended that educators approach these topics with caution. Findings indicate that such topics are associated with abstractness, complexity, heaviness, negative mental-emotional connotations, and remoteness. Learners tend to lack the background knowledge needed, both in terms of content and language, to be able to successfully understand and discuss such issues. While it is certain that some learners will be highly interested in these topics, other learners will not. In a task-based framework in which the social and interactive elements function as important influences, the motivational and language learning potential of a particular task will be much more fruitful if all of the participants in the task are interested in the topic.

Cognitive theories of motivation generally acknowledge that learners’ intrinsic motivation is of vital importance to successful learning (Ushioda, 2008). An important element that forms part of intrinsic motivation is learner interest (Ryan & Deci, 2000). When learners are interested they become motivationally, emotionally, and cognitively active all at once and thus, in essence, interest represents what Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) have termed a powerful motivational conglomerate. From a TBLT viewpoint, it is important to identify motivational and/or interestingness characteristics within the content of tasks so that teachers and task designers can provide the motivational “spark” required in order to stimulate and sustain L2 learners’ shorter-term task motivation and by extension their opportunities for language learning development. From a longer-term perspective, furthermore, the more learners become engaged in interesting and motivating tasks, the greater the chance they will also maintain and develop their overall motivation to learn and become successful in the target language.

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Notes

¹ This specific study was part of a larger research project, which investigated task motivation and group work dynamic from a complex and dynamic systems perspective. Several variables were measured including learners' task motivation at the pre-, during-, and post-task stages; various affective traits; topic preferences; verbal and non-verbal language produced during the tasks; and group work dynamic. Data were collected through the use of various instruments including questionnaires, structured interviews, audiovisual recordings, transcription, and a group work dynamic measuring instrument.

² Some individuals, whether in their L1 or L2, possess a trait-like disposition to communicate more than others.

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