

The Effects of Student-Centered Learning on First-Year College Students' Perceptions of and Investment in English Learning

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Park, Hyona. (2023). The effects of student-centered learning on first-year college students' perceptions of and investment in English learning. *English Teaching*, 78(3), 55-84.

This study investigated how student-centered learning affects first-year college students' perceptions of and construction of investment in English learning. After finishing two reading assignments using a student-centered approach, 50 students completed open-ended written surveys, and 15 students participated in open-ended interviews. Thematic analysis of the data, which consisted primarily of the translated interview transcripts and secondarily of the survey responses, showed that initially the students recognized the importance of learning English but had ambivalent attitudes towards the language. However, after completing the student-centered reading assignments, they expressed self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a will to learn, which helped them to concretely construct their investment in English learning. These findings indicate the positive impact of student-centered learning on students' perceptions of English and their construction of investment in learning the language, highlighting its importance in helping students, particularly as an alternative to exam-driven instructional approaches common in Korea's environment of English fever and similar contexts.

Key words: student-centered learning, reading assignments, English fever, construction of investment, identity

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Received 30 June 2023; Reviewed 18 July 2023; Accepted 11 September 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

This study was motivated by such questions as how Koreans generally perceive English and what aspects of the process critically affect these perceptions. Influenced by “English fever,” most Koreans perceive English proficiency as essential to their socioeconomic success (Park, 2019). English fever, a concept derived from Korea’s equally intense education fever, has been pervasive in Korean society for decades. Therefore, a huge number of children from early ages are subject to extreme measures to promote their acquisition of English, such as supplementing their regular schooling with private instruction and tutoring that often goes late into the night or being sent to foreign countries to learn English (Park, 2009).

However, Koreans have never had smooth a relationship with English (Cho, 2015). English education in Korea, which is transmission-based and grammar-oriented (Uysal & Bardakci, 2014) has not produced the outcomes that most Koreans seek. According to Uysal and Bardakci (2014), despite the worldwide emphasis on meaning-focused communicative approaches for years, most language teachers still pursue traditional grammar instruction. As a consequence, many who have been learning English for more than 20 years, whether in public or private education settings, lack English communication skills and the confidence to engage in active oral interactions in English speaking although they may be confident in reading and writing. Indeed, many English teachers rated their students’ speaking skills as lower than their listening and reading skills and so did the students (Jeon, Lee, & Kim, 2011).

In addition, many Koreans, having been exposed to English instruction from early ages, have been subjected to the pressures of English fever such as parental expectations at home and test scores in school. Struggling with these external pressures may result in unpleasant memories of and negative attitudes towards English learning, which gradually accrue to form deep-seated resentment of the requirement to learn English that is highly demotivating. In a news article, Kim (2007) reported a survey of 471 elementary school students showing that nearly 18 percent felt stressed due to English instruction and often worried about language exams. As they get older, they may question why they need to learn English and simply give up. Fouser (1994) found that students who experienced great pressure to perform well in school developed negative attitudes towards English, which were reinforced by the educational system. Therefore, a new paradigm for English learning, student-centered learning, needs to be introduced into Korean EFL instruction. It is not that student-centered learning has never been introduced into Korean EFL contexts; there are some studies (Guk & Kellogg, 2007; Lee, 2005) examining the effectiveness of student-centered learning in Korea. However, student-centered learning should be applied to English learning in Korea at a practical level, particularly in tertiary education.

Given that Korean society remains under the influence of English fever, in this study, I

investigated how college first-year students perceived English learning and how they experienced student-centered learning after completing two reading assignments using a student-centered approach. I also examined how they were constructing their investment (Norton, 2013; Norton Peirce, 1995) in English learning. Unlike the conception of motivation, which conceives of a language learner as unitary, fixed, and ahistorical, from the perspective of the notion of investment, a language learner is perceived not as having a fixed position over time but as having a complex social history and multiple desires (Norton, 1997, 2013). Thus, I viewed the notion of investment as able to provide better understanding not only of changes in learners' perceptions of English learning after experiencing a student-centered approach, but also of what Norton (2013) described as a "socially and historically constructed relationship" with the target language (p. 6).

2. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this section, the scholarly literature on three issues central to this study, English fever, student-centered learning, and the concept of investment, is reviewed. First, the literature on Korean English fever will be reviewed on the assumption that college students' perceptions of English learning and English fever are related. Second, the literatures on student-centered learning and the concept of investment are reviewed in relation to the primary question of the study, how their perceptions of and investment in English learning change after they experience student-centered learning.

2.1. English Fever

In a larger sense, my research interests are related to social issues, so-called "English fever," which has prevailed in East Asian countries, especially in Korea, for decades. English fever is a particular social phenomenon in which people are obsessed with mastering English, regarding it as inherently powerful and a ticket to socioeconomic success. Having a culture that has traditionally been passionate about education in general, Koreans are highly susceptible to "education fever," and are indeed considered to have originated the phenomenon (Park, 2009). Thus, as Park observes, most Koreans, believing that education itself is the most important means of moving up socially and economically, are avid for their children to master English.

However, English fever has been not only a prevailing but also a controversial issue in Korean education for a long time due to the explosion of English private education as an unregulated industry in the country. Some parents, wanting their children to have strong English competency, start their children's English education as early as age two or three,

even before they have established a basic command of their mother tongue and their linguistic identity. In an *Edaily News* article, Heo (2014), who was critical of early-childhood English education, reported that a survey administered by a civic group in Korea to 7,600 parents living in Seoul showed that 35% of five-year-old kindergarteners had started their English education at the age of three. Earlier, Lee (2000) reported a sharp expansion of the domestic market for private English education in Korea, on which over 4 billion US dollars had been spent on courses for 11.6 million Koreans from kindergarteners to adults, with a premium on instruction by native English speakers. Cho (2015) also reported that Korean people spend about 15.8 billion US dollars a year for standardized English tests and study abroad programs.

Consequently, English fever affects learners of all ages and circumstances as they suffer diverse external pressures such as unrealistic parental expectations and constant competition for high test scores, admission to prestigious schools, and lucrative employment, all contingent on English proficiency. The Korean exam-centered, rote-learning educational practices also exert cognitive pressures. These negative experiences often result in negative attitudes towards English learning. Park (2019) found that learners' negative attitudes toward English were largely influenced by parental pressures, test scores indicating low English proficiency, and poor relationships with peers. Thus, understanding learners' previous learning experiences and how they affect attitudes toward learning are considered as critical factors to pursue.

2.2. Student-Centered Learning

This study was focused specifically on how student-centered learning (henceforth SCL) affected college students' perceptions of EFL learning and their construction of investment. Diverse studies (Al-Humaidi, 2015; Kassem 2019; Lak, Soleimani, & Parvaneh, 2017; Zohrabi, Torabi, & Baybourdiani, 2012) have addressed SCL in higher or tertiary levels. As Al-Humaidi (2015) observed, "the rapidly changing education environment" (p. 195), in which teaching and learning methods keep evolving, has encouraged use of SCL, which differs greatly from teacher-centered learning (TCL), a banking education approach, which has prevailed in all areas of education, including ESL and EFL contexts (Park, 2019).

In TCL, students are treated as recipients rather than main agents of learning. As such they passively receive information from a teacher, who actively provides the information and evaluates the extent to which learners have retained it (Zohrabi et al., 2012). Given that teachers, not learners, do most of the work in the learning process, TCL does little to promote students' educational growth (Duckworth, 2009; Kassem, 2019). Al-Humaidi (2015) described TCL as mainly focused on covering content in textbooks and providing students with a "good set of notes" (p. 195) in preparation for formal, summative assessment as the

primary if not sole measure of their knowledge (Lynch, 2010; Zohrabi et al., 2012). Korean education has been pursuing TCL, including in EFL context, which may have negative influences on students' achievement and affective variables, including perceptions of learning English, anxiety, motivation, learning autonomy, and attitude. Borrowing Shaaban and Ghaith's (2005) idea about learner motivation, Park (2019) argued that it needs "a balanced instructional approach" that develops "the learner's linguistic as well as pragmatic competencies through the provision of classroom opportunities for interaction and practice" (p. 40), which has barely existed in Korean EFL teaching context.

Being rooted in constructivist theory (Zohrabi et al., 2012), SCL takes an entirely different educational path. In SCL, students are active in the learning process and have choices and control over their learning, while teachers try to help them to restructure their existing knowledge (Al-Humaidi, 2015). While students take responsibility for their own learning, teachers throw their teaching notes and PowerPoint presentations away for what characterize as a more active, engaging, collaborative style of teaching (Lak et al., 2017). Rather being passive learners, students become the designers of their own learning and makers of knowledge (Lak et al., 2017). Al-Humaidi (2015) characterized student-centered teaching as comprising "innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning and take students as active participants for their own learning by fostering transferable skills such as problem solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking" (p. 195).

However, it should be noted that learners' initiative and active involvement in curricular decision-making is crucial for the proper practice of SCL, so the teachers' dispositions toward the practice are also crucial (Kim & Joh, 2022). As Nunan (1996) affirmed earlier, the distinctive feature of a learner-centered curriculum is that "key decisions about what will be taught, how it will be taught, when it will be taught, and how it will be assessed will be made with reference to the learner" (p. 14). As a student-centered curriculum is by nature flexible so that tasks or activities can be implemented in accordance with learners' needs, abilities, interests, and learning styles (Larasati, 2018), Kim (2002) describes it as a "process-oriented curriculum" (p. 2). Thus, I characterize SCL as totally by the students, of the students, and for the students while teachers serve as facilitators of the learning process.

Because a key principle of SCL is the promotion of students' self-direction, the connection between learner-centeredness and autonomy is important. Nunan (1996) borrowed Holec's (1981) definition of autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 15) and emphasized its relationship to self-direction, learner-centeredness and individualization. Chen (2007) also considered learners' active involvement, self-direction, and autonomy as central to SCL. Kassem (2019) found that these benefits of SCL positively impacted EFL learners' achievement, attitudes towards the target language, self-efficacy, autonomy, and beliefs about language and reduced their anxiety. Thus, students who had been discouraged by coercive instructional methods could be motivated by SCL and "have stronger belief in

[their] own competence, take more ownership of [their] own learning, and develop more favorable beliefs about the language and its learning” (p. 144). In accordance with Nunan’s (1996) proposition that “to take charge of one’s learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” (p. 15), this investigation focused on how first-year college students take responsibility for their own learning, make decisions, and exhibit learning autonomy and self-directedness when experiencing a learner-centered approach to reading assignments. As discussed in the following section, it was also proposed that SCL could also motivate the students to construct investment in their learning.

2.3. The Concepts of Investment and Social Identity

Norton Peirce’s concept of investment, introduced in her 1995 study, “Social Identity, Investment, and Language Learning,” is a critical part of the theoretical framework in this study. In this study, Norton Peirce (1995) argued that theorists in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) had not sufficiently addressed what makes a language learner “sometimes be motivated, extroverted, and confident and sometimes be unmotivated, introverted, and anxious” (p. 11). She further argued for the development of “a comprehensive theory of social identity that integrates the language learner and the language learning context” (p. 12) and “a conception of the language learner as having a complex social identity” (p. 13).

Norton Peirce (1995) mentioned that the concept of motivation has limitations to explain “a learner’s commitment to learning the target language” (p. 16) or clarified how power, identity, and language learning are intricately intertwined (Park, 2022). Rather, the conception of investment accurately “signals the socially and historically constructed relationship of the language learners to the target language and their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it” (Norton, 2013, p. 6). Learners “invest” their efforts in learning the target language because they understand that they might acquire “symbolic recourses” such as language, education, and friendship and “material resources” such as capital goods, real estate, and money, which will later bestow social power upon them (Norton, 2013).

Two decades later, Darwin and Norton (2015) contemplated the notion of investment in light of developments in technology and mobility. While they drew on Norton’s 1997 concept of identity as “how people understand the relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 410) and 1995 original frame of investment, their current goal was to propose a more comprehensive model of investment, “which occurs at the intersection of identity, ideology, and capital” (p. 36). Darwin and Norton (2015) rejected traditionally dichotomous ways of thinking about learner identity, such as good/bad, motivated/unmotivated, anxious/confident, or introverted/extroverted in favor of

conceptualizing learner identity as “fluid, multiple, and a site of struggle” that depends on “the dynamic negotiation of power in different fields,” so that learning “investment is complex, contradictory, and in a state of flux” (p. 37). In their new model, they proposed that learners invest in particular practices, such as language learning, for two reasons: 1) they want to acquire benefits from material or symbolic resources and 2) they are aware that they can afford their learning through their own capital (p. 46). They also argued that by asserting their own identities, learners can not only discuss symbolic capital but also rethink power relations and normative ways of thinking to pursue “the right to speak” (p. 47).

Norton’s concept of language learner identity evolved consistently over to its current status. She emphasized how learners’ socioeconomic status influenced their identities and investment in learning a new language. To illustrate social identity as a site of struggle, she used the example of Martina being compelled to invest in learning English in order to negotiate her multiple identities, “an immigrant, a mother, a language learner, a worker, a wife” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 21). As a result, she could successfully protect her family’s housing situation by engaging in a lengthy communication with her native English-speaking landlord. She also resolved issues with her young Canadian co-workers, drawing on “her symbolic resources as a mother to reframe the power relations between herself and her co-workers” (p. 22), thus claiming “the right to speak by resisting the subject position immigrant woman in favor of the subject position mother” (p. 23). On the other hand, Eva who had immigrated to Canada from Poland at the age of 22, was fluent in Italian and had always wanted to learn English, which finding employment in an English-speaking workplace helped her do. However, it took some time for her “conception of herself as an immigrant changed to a conception of herself as a multicultural citizen” (pp. 23-24).

Norton (1997) related West’s (1992) claim that “identity relates to ... the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety” to “the distribution of material resources in society” (p. 410). She also referred to Weedon’s (1987) theory of subjectivity, which posited that subjectivity was produced by the integration of “language, individual experience, and social power” in particular social sites, in which individuals take up “subject positions” within structures of power relations, so the subject is considered as active with “human agency” (p. 411).

Norton and Gao (2008) succinctly described a language learner as “having a complex identity, changing across time and space, and reproduced in social interaction” (p. 110). Thus, as Norton (2013) asserted, investment should be understood within a sociocultural framework, focusing on a meaningful connection between the language learners’ “desire and commitment to learn a language and their complex and changing identity” (p. 6). In relation to this perspective, Park (2019) emphasized the flexible characteristic of investment and the crucial roles of language teachers and supportive learning materials methods in learners’ construction of investment. Accordingly, this study was an exploration of how experiencing

student-centered learning affected learners' desire and commitment to learn a language, guided by the following questions:

- 1) How did the participating college first-year students perceive learning English before experiencing student-centered learning?
- 2) How did the first-year students experience student-centered learning, and how did their perceptions of learning English change after experiencing it?
- 3) How did student-centered learning help them to construct their investment in language learning and negotiate their identities as language learners?

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Context

This research was conducted in the Fall semester of 2021 at a four-year university in a major city in Korea. The setting was a required English reading course designed to help first-year students improve their English reading, grammar, and vocabulary skills through reading texts and completing tasks and activities. The instructor was given flexibility in the design of the course and instructional methods as long as six reading texts were covered during the semester. Therefore, as an instructor of the course, I used diverse teaching materials and methods, mostly invented by me, to provide a supportive learning environment for all students. However, though I wanted to guarantee students' autonomy and responsibility by employing a student-centered learning approach, I bumped into limitations because as a mandatory course it required students to take midterm and final exams and submit two individual reading assignments. As I was responsible for preparing the students for the mandatory exams and summative evaluations, I employed teacher-centered methods most of the time so as to impart the specific knowledge and skills they would need for interpreting reading passages. Thus, I was the active information provider, and the students were passive recipients of information. However, I wanted the students to have some experience with SCL, so I designed two reading assignments following its principles. At the time of data collection, the university had started to gradually offer on-site classes after a period of online instruction due to Covid-19, so I was able to have face-to-face communication with the students and directly witness how their learning progressed in the classroom, which helped me to consider the students' English abilities and their learning interests when I designed assignments based on the materials I taught. The course consisted of 75-minute classes two times a week for 15 weeks. The language of instruction was mainly Korean.

In the Fall semester of 2021, I taught two sections of the course, one for intermediate

proficiency (Level 2 out of 3) students majoring in police administration (n = 22) and the other for beginner proficiency (Level 1 out of 3) students majoring in textile, fashion, and general design (n = 28). Overall, fifty students participated in this study. For close examination of their perceptions of English learning and experiences with SCL, I selected fifteen focal participants, eight from the police administration major course (including one student majoring in law) and seven from the design major course. The two sections had almost the same class format but used two different required textbooks. The focal students' demographic information is presented in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1
The Focal Students' Demographic Information

Participant (pseudonym)	Gender	Major	English Proficiency	First Exposure to EFL
Hyein	Female	Police Administration	Intermediate	8 years old
Taeho	Male	Police Administration	Intermediate	10 years old
Eunbi	Female	Police Administration	Intermediate	6 years old
Minah	Female	Police Administration	Intermediate	13 years old
Gaeun	Female	Police Administration	Intermediate	6 years old
Sungjun	Male	Police Administration	Intermediate	7 years old
Junho	Male	Police Administration	Beginner/Intermediate	6 years old
Sooah	Female	Law	Beginner/Intermediate	9 years old
Ahyoon	Female	Design	Beginner	8 years old
Dahye	Female	Design	Beginner	7 years old
Suji	Female	Design	Beginner/Intermediate	6 years old
Minjeong	Female	Design	Beginner	10 years old
Seungho	Male	Design	Beginner	8 years old
Heeji	Female	Design	Beginner	9 years old
Seunghye	Female	Design	Beginner	7 years old

In the following section, I provide descriptions of these two reading assignments.

3.2. Reading Assignments Using Student-Centered Learning

As noted, the course requirements included six reading texts appropriate to the proficiency level of the students in each section and two reading assignments, which I designed to be student-centered. I firstly selected one of the reading passages and had the students read it. Then I asked them to choose any two paragraphs in the passages that interested them and make a video teaching the language features of these paragraphs, emphasizing the key phrase, "as if you were a teacher," I specifically wanted them to experience being an active provider

of knowledge and the one who does most of the work in the learning process. Being a teacher requires thoroughly studying the vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structures of the passage and planning ways to convey the knowledge effectively. In this process, the students would be involved in active, self-directed, and autonomous learning as the principal agents of their own learning (Chen, 2007). The reading assignments and principles governing them were provided online as follows:

- This student-centered reading assignment promotes students' direct, active, voluntary participation in the learning process.
- You are to read the passage thoroughly before class, then choose two paragraphs and make a video to teach their important words, grammar, and sentence structures *as if you were a teacher*.
- After making the teaching video, you are to check it for completeness and make any needed linguistic improvements.
- You can use any technological tools to make the video, which has no length limit as long as you explain the target material in the two selected paragraphs.

These reading assignments were designed to include the most important principles of student-centered learning, autonomy, and self-directedness (Nunan, 1996), which I intended to promote by granting them total creative freedom, flexibility and control in making their videos. Being accustomed to teacher-centered instruction, they might have difficulties at first, but I hoped that by overcoming challenges through trial and error and making their own decisions concerning all aspects of the assignments, they would experience a sense of accomplishment and take charge of their own learning. By making their own teaching materials using resources of their choosing, the students would become cultivators of knowledge and designers of their own learning (Lak et al., 2017). In the following section, I discuss my methods for evaluating this approach, specifically, its impact on EFL learners' achievement, affective variables, and construction of investment.

3.3. Data Collection and Data Analysis

To explore the roles of SCL on the college first-year students' perceptions of EFL learning and their construction of investment, I utilized four surveys in both sections to investigate the students' previous linguistic backgrounds, ongoing narratives about English learning and perceptions about the SCL reading assignments and conducted individual interviews with fifteen selected focal students. The first survey, administered before the first reading assignment, concerned their general perceptions of learning English, and the second,

conducted after the first SCL reading assignment, elicited their perceptions of it. I conducted the third survey before the second reading assignment to compare their thinking now with their thinking before the first assignment and determine how they approached this reading assignment, and whether the first reading assignment had been helpful for their language learning. I conducted the last survey after the second assignment to determine whether their perceptions of English learning had changed and the extent to which they were willing to invest English learning. Moreover, in the surveys, I occasionally had them illustrate their personal reflections about English learning and their relationships with English in drawings for an alternative representation of their perceptions. These visual artifacts greatly enhanced some students' presentations of their perceptions. Also, I read the focal students' surveys thoroughly, so I could prepare individualized, in-depth interview questions for each interviewee.

The primary data were the individual interviews with the focal students after they submitted their reading assignments. These students were selected on the basis of their attitudes in the class, and the quality of their reading assignments on the assumption that they would generate the richest data related to my research questions. The interview questions concerned their previous experiences learning English, their emotions/attitudes towards learning English at the beginning of the semester, their experiences with the student-centered approaches used in class, changes in their emotions/attitudes towards English after experiencing the student-centered approaches, and extent to which they would invest efforts in learning English in the future. Interviews were conducted via Zoom for 10-15 minutes, which, although the duration may seem brief for a comprehensive exploration of their narratives, enabled me to gather significant information and illustrative excerpts. The interviews were conducted in Korean, audio-recorded, transcribed in Korean, and partially translated into English for reporting purposes. When I invited the students to be interviewed, I explained the content and procedure of the interview. I also clearly conveyed that participation was entirely voluntary and declining to participate would not affect their final grades. Those who verbally agreed to participate in the interview were the focal students.

I employed thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to discover themes that emerged from the data. I first read the interview transcripts multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. While reading, I manually color-coded each transcript to find potential patterns in the interview data. To generate initial codes, I used In Vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016), which, according to Saldaña, "prioritizes and honors the participant's voice" (p. 106). Then, I listed and organized all the codes by each focal participant and categorized the data into recursive and possible themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) described this process as "sorting the different codes into potential themes and collating all the coded data extracts relevant to the identified themes" (p. 89), resulting in multiple "candidate themes" (p. 91), some of which may be collapsed into single themes and others divided into separate themes. Through this refining

process, I identified two themes pertinent to research questions one and two, and one theme to question three. Lastly, to increase the credibility of the interview data analysis and to seek data triangulation, I compared each emerged theme with the survey data, which also involved other narratives of the participants, and with my reflective notes on teaching the reading course.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Recognition of the Importance of English and Ambivalent Attitudes Toward Learning English

The first research question concerned the college first-year students' perceptions of learning English before they experienced student-centered learning. Basically, I try to investigate the students' original notion about English learning. Two themes that emerged were relevant to this question: 1) the students recognized the importance of learning English and 2) most had ambivalent attitudes (Park, 2019) toward learning English. It is interesting to note that the two themes are interrelated and, more importantly, exist in the center of English fever. In their interviews, all fifteen focal students reported having felt pressure to learn English since they were young children, which might have negatively influenced the affective variables of their language learning. While external sources of pressure included parental expectations and the need to obtain high test scores to stay on their preferred educational and career paths, they also felt internal pressure from their own belief in the importance of learning English.

Hyein, a female student, thought that English was something she had to master to succeed for the rest of her life. In compliance with her father's wishes, she had prepared for her university studies by taking an English standardized test called IELTS prior to her first year in college. In the interview, she expressed how important she considered studying English to be:

When I didn't like English and when I liked English, I always thought I should learn English for lifelong purposes. I think I can use it in whatever kinds of jobs I have in the future and for travel... I will need English lifelong because English is the most necessary thing that people should learn, and it will be very useful later on. My parents think so too. [Hyein, police administration major]

Although Hyein, unlike most of her peers, had studied for and taken the IELTS because

of her parents' wishes but also her own belief in the importance of English to her future, she revealed that she had not liked English when studying for IELTS because she felt pressure from her parents to obtain a high score. Park (2019) pointed out that anxiety about test scores is closely relevant to parental pressure, and both may influence the learners' affective responses such as an aversion toward language learning. While Hyein did not express aversion, she mentioned that she experienced a sense of distance when she felt pressure to get a high score.

Ahyoon, a female student in the design major class, said that since she was young, she had been told about the importance of learning English and that she must learn the language, which created a feeling of pressure that made it difficult for her to learn.

Since a long time ago, I have heard that English is an official world language and that it is very important. So, the adults around me said no matter what I do, being fluent in English would be a plus for everything. And so was the atmosphere around me. Therefore, I also thought, shouldn't I speak at least one second language? So, I tried to study, but it didn't work out well. Even though I tried, it didn't go well. So, I realized that one or two years of study could not change my ability a lot. I was interested in learning English at first, but later on, feeling that I had to learn it no matter what, I had difficulty. [Ahyoon, design major]

Having heard from an early age that being fluent in English is very beneficial, Ahyoon wanted to learn the language well. She liked Western pop music and American drama, so she was favorably disposed toward English itself. However, she became discouraged when, as a learner with beginner proficiency, she encountered material that was difficult, and she revealed in the interview that she wanted to give up. She knew that English was necessary, but she did not know how to deal with the difficulties she faced with such tasks as studying for the TOEIC.

Park (2019) claimed that as cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), a learner's current language proficiency has "a deep relationship with how the learner performs [and] participates...in the EFL classroom" (p. 80), and that for some learners with low English proficiency, "the level of learning materials was a sensitive factor because they easily got frustrated and lost interest in the face of difficult materials" (p. 113). Even though Ahyoon believed that English is important and that she should learn it, she was frustrated by materials she found difficult due to her beginning level proficiency, which made her attitude toward English ambivalent.

Taeho, a male student majoring in police administration, also considered learning English very important for his future life but had an ambivalent attitude toward the language:

I have a dream to be a police officer in the future, and I live in an era in which English is indispensable. I can't say that English is as important as Korean in Korea, but it plays a big part in my life. So, I have to learn it despite my feelings of unwillingness to learn. I am not saying that I don't want to do it, but even if I don't want to, I think I will have to carry the necessity with me for the rest of my life. [Taeho, police administration major]

When asked whether he liked English, Taeho answered, "I don't think I have any feelings for English. I don't hate it that much and it's not that I like it so much." Although he had fairly good English proficiency and was an active learner in class, Taeho admitted that whether or not he wanted to, he had to learn English because it was very important in his life. Many of the focal students expressed similar thoughts, suggesting that the external pressure they were under to gain proficiency in English was often counterproductive to their learning. In short, they were convinced of the importance of English but the ongoing pressure to master the language produced ambivalent attitudes toward it. It is also notable that more police administration students than design students acknowledged the importance of English, perhaps because they needed to have high TOEIC scores for their future career, even though they faced difficulties studying.

The interview data shows that before experiencing the reading assignment using the student-centered approach, most of the focal students had negative attitudes toward learning English, finding it difficult, boring, and unenjoyable. Students in both majors vividly expressed their ambivalent attitudes toward learning English as illustrated in the following excerpts from the students' interviews:

I didn't really like English in high school, but I don't think I hated it compared to other subjects. It was fun when I learned, but when I reviewed it on my own or memorized vocabulary, I felt like I really didn't want to do it. (Interviewer: Do you like English now?) My answer is a triangle. Because I still have a love-hate relationship with English, I both do and don't like it. (Interviewer: Why is that so?) English itself is fun when I watch English dramas or movies, thinking I wish I could speak like that. But when I study, there are many difficulties, so then I don't like it. [Eunbi, police administration major]

Eunbi's reference to her love-hate relationship with English clearly conveyed her ambivalent attitude toward learning it, particularly when she encountered difficulties.

When I was in middle and high school, English was hard because I had to study for exams. So, I was like, “why do I have to learn like this?” I was very skeptical about memorizing all the vocabulary even though I couldn’t communicate with English native speakers in real life. But I had a great sense of accomplishment in the process of knowing English. (Interviewer: So how was your relationship with English?) I felt like it wasn’t that bad, and it wasn’t that good. I liked English itself, but I wasn’t that quick to learn, so I got tired easily when I tried to learn. [Dahye, design major]

Dahye also expressed her ambivalent attitude due not only to rote-learning and exam-centered practices of schooling but also to learning difficulties and fatigue.

Another student also expressed her ambivalence:

I really hated English when I had to study it for exams. Basically, I liked and hated it. I just went back and forth. When I actually watched a movie or drama without subtitles, I thought it is good to learn English and it was fun. If you keep watching it without subtitles, you’ll get better, right? So, I thought it was really fun watching it, but I don’t have any good memories about school exams or anything like that. [Suji, design major]

These three focal participants all said that they enjoyed learning the language in realistic situations like watching English movies but not when they were under pressure to memorize vocabulary and elements of grammar for exams.

Figures 1 and 2 show how some students depicted their ambivalent feelings about English learning in drawings:

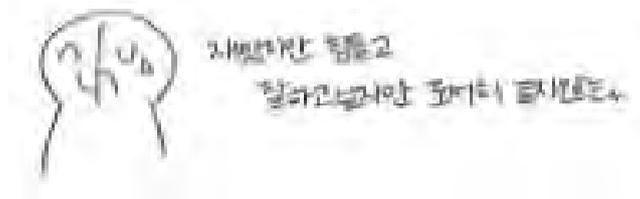
FIGURE 1**Minah's Drawing of Her Attitude Toward Learning English****FIGURE 2****Eunbi's Drawing of Her Attitude Toward Learning English**

Figure 1 shows Minah's picture of her face on which one half was smiling and the other half crying, with the words in Korean, "it's fun, but it's hard. I want to do well, but it is hard to improve." Figure 2 shows Eunbi's drawing of herself crying with the words "I like English, but I don't like it." The picture also shows her being pulled in two directions by two different shapes, one being a heart and the other an X mark, both labeled "reading comprehension." On top of the drawing is titled in Korean, "a love and hatred relationship." In these drawings, both students vividly reflected their ambivalent attitudes toward learning English. In particular, Eunbi's drawing exactly matches her interview above.

Referring to Bourdieu (1991), Park (2019) asserted that if students' resolve to learn English collapses when they feel frustration in the face of difficulties, "their desire to become legitimate speakers will become ambivalent" (p. 218), which in turn may significantly influence their construction of investment.

4.2. Changes in Perception After Experience with Student-Centered Learning

The second research question concerned the students' perceptions of learning English after completing the SCL reading assignments. Two themes emerged: 1) The students responded positively to the reading assignments, and 2) after experiencing the assignments, they felt self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a will to learn.

Most of the students reported having positive feelings about the reading assignments. Dahye, who had expressed ambivalent attitudes toward English learning, made an effort to produce a good quality teaching video, as vividly shown in the captures of her teaching video below, and positively described her experience with the assignment:

It was my first time doing a reading assignment like this. It was something new. The previous English classes I took were really lecture classes, so I was like “phew.” But honestly, this reading assignment was really fun. Like you did, I prepared for the reading assignment a lot, so I downloaded an app and used colored pencils. When I was preparing the video, I first considered that someone else would be watching it, so I tried not to make any mistakes. I read the text carefully and checked every word I didn't know. And later, when you explained in the lecture the text I covered, I thought, “Oh, I did interpret it like that, too.” or “that can be interpreted like that.” Basically, it was really fun. [Dahye, design major]

FIGURE 3

The Captures of Dahye's Teaching Video

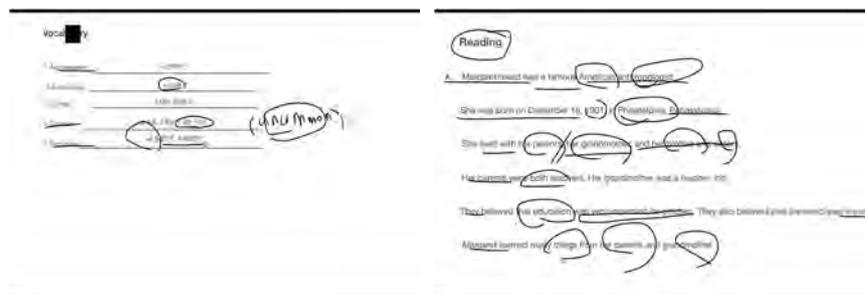


Figure 3 shows that Dahye read the text carefully, reviewed every word she didn't know, and underlined and circled words and text that she considered important. It also indicates that she tried to make a video that taught the text as if she was a teacher.

Sungjun, a male student, who had a positive attitude before the reading assignment, also

revealed his positive experience with the reading assignment as follows:

The reading assignment was to make a video teaching a reading text as if you were a teacher, right? I like to teach someone, so I really enjoyed the preparation process like finding grammatical elements such as subject/verb agreement in a sentence. [Sungjun, police administration major]

After completing the reading assignment, the students who were accustomed to teacher-centered learning felt that the reading assignment was fun and had a new perspective on English reading. In particular, when they actively engaged in and controlled their learning (Al-Humaidi, 2015) rather than being passive knowledge received, they found learning pleasurable, as expressed by Suji:

I like to interpret reading texts. When I study for English reading, I can look up a word that I don't know and I learn the word. If I get to know the word, I can interpret the sentence. Like doing a puzzle, it was really fun for me to learn words first and interpret sentences. [Suji, design major]

Moreover, the students stated that the reading assignment was very helpful for learning English and developing practical reading skills. Minjeong, a female student, described how the reading assignment helped her learn.

I think it's completely different when you just learn a word you don't know and when you actually look up the word on your own. In this way, you can really learn well. So, I was confused with everything else, but I could remember the part about Margaret Mead, the anthropologist, very clearly after doing the assignment. [Minjeong, design major]

Minjeong's perception was depicted similarly in her drawing in the survey, as illustrated in Figure 4.

FIGURE 4
Minjeong's Drawing of Herself Doing the Reading Assignment



The drawing shows her sitting at her desk as she does the assignment, smiling and reading the words “Margaret Mead” and “anthropologist” aloud from the screen. Like her interview, the drawing emphasizes that the reading assignments were beneficial for her learning and shows that she learned the passage about ‘Margaret Mead’ well through the reading assignment.

Other students also shared how the reading assignments helped them study English reading.

In the case of vocabulary, I reviewed the reading texts ... in class after the reading assignment, right? ... I could correct [misunderstandings] and learn some vocabulary that I didn't know well. And as I looked up words on my own, it was more memorable, and I felt like my basic knowledge of English expanded. [Suji, design major]

What was good about doing the reading assignment was that I studied grammar and vocabulary on my own and tried to explain it to others, so I felt that my English skill improved.... That influenced how I study other English texts. In connection with that, it was good to learn how to study English. [Seungho, design major]

As the beginning learners, these two design majors developed their own ways of learning to read English and became the designers of their own learning and makers of knowledge (Lak et al., 2017). Thus, by actively investing time and efforts in the reading assignments, they created a space for their personal growth (Lak et al., 2017) while learning how to study English on their own. As Zohrabi et al. (2012; cited in Duckworth, 2009) stated, learners show “better performance when they are asked to think about the matters” (p. 21). Thus, completing SCL reading assignments not only encouraged positive attitudes but also

benefitted students' English learning.

It is also notable that the students felt self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a willingness to learn after experiencing the reading assignments. In other words, their perceptions of learning English had changed. As discussed previously, multiple students expressed their initial ambivalent attitudes toward English learning, and some students expressed extremely negative emotions such as frustration or hopelessness. Multiple interviewees reported that they started to have positive attitudes such as self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, open mind, and a will to learn after engaging in the SCL reading assignments.

It's like, "I can do it." I gained a bit of confidence. Originally, when I needed to do something related to English, I just put it off. I was like, "Oh I don't want to do it," so I kept putting it off. But as I did the reading assignment, I became knowledgeable about English. I could understand it while interpreting it, whether it was one or two sentences or more. When I encountered one or two words that I knew in the sentence, I was like, "Oh, I know this." I gained confidence from that. [Sooah, law major]

It is no longer difficult. Since I did it once, it's not as hard as I thought. Since my perception of English changed, I have a new mindset that "I can do it." [Taeho, police administration major]

I gained hope and confidence that "I can do it" beyond my expectations. There was a difficult part because I didn't know many words. Now I think that I can do well if I know the key words. [Heeji, design major]

All three students mentioned gaining confidence and had a new mindset of "I can do it," indicating that they were building a strong will to learn English after experiencing the student-centered assignments. Similarly, Dahye mentioned a sense of accomplishment and clear change in her English learning:

I think I learned an interesting way to study English. After the reading assignment, I studied reading as if teaching other people, so sometimes I was muttering to myself, like "well-." I wasn't that passionate about English tests when I came to college, but I worked really hard on this midterm exam. And I got a fairly good score. I felt a great sense of accomplishment and had no feeling of failure after the reading assignment. (Interviewer: How is that so?) I used to always put off English

assignments. But for this assignment, I was like, ‘Oh I need to prepare hard,’ or ‘I want to participate in the class after doing the reading assignment by myself.’ [Dahye, design major]

These four excerpts from the interview data convey the positive perceptions of English expressed by most of the interviewees, and as one said, “English is not that difficult anymore.” When working on the SCL reading assignment, they were positioned at the very center of their learning process, thought deeply about how to make a teaching video, and experienced responsibility for their learning as well choices and control over the process. As Al-Humaidi (2015) stated, when a learning environment “promotes the highest levels of motivation and achievement for all learners,” the students’ perceptions of learning English were positively changed (Kassem, 2019, p. 134).

Kassem (2019) argued that taking charge of their own learning gives students “stronger motivation, better attitudes, higher levels of self-efficacy and autonomy, and more facilitative beliefs” (p. 144) than being dependent on teacher-centered lectures. By giving the students complete freedom and flexibility in the reading assignment, I hoped to encourage them to be the designers of their own English learning processes. In that way, they could gradually reduce their feelings of frustration, anxiety, and hopelessness about English learning, which had been growing for a long time due to external pressures, and increase their motivation, self-efficacy, and hopefulness as English learners. In this regard, the following comment by Eunbi is relevant:

I used to have a very fixed way of thinking about learning English, but after the reading assignment, I was able to have a broader and more open point of view about English and learning it. [Eunbi, police administration major]

It seemed that experiencing the reading assignment using the student-centered approach helped the students not only to change their perceptions of English, but also to position themselves as legitimate agents of their English learning (Park, 2019).

However, not all of the responses to student-centered learning were positive. For example, the assignments did not change Minah’s initially ambivalent attitude:

I don’t think my attitude toward English has changed. I just did the assignment because I had to. [Minah, police administration major]

Minah and Gaeun both felt that the SCL assignments did not affect their reading skills:

I am not sure about improvement of my English skills because what I covered in the assignment from the text is not difficult. [Minah, police administration major]

I don't feel that my English skill has improved after the reading assignment because I'm not studying English right now outside of the class, so I don't have a chance to feel the change. [Gaeun, police administration major]

Having started the class with a relatively high level of English proficiency, Minah did not find the material for the assignments challenging, so she perceived no improvement in her English skills and maintained her ambivalent attitude. Gaeun stated that she maintained a positive attitude toward English early in the interview, but if she continues to learn English only in class, she may remain on the same level and experience no improvement in her English skills, which underscores the importance of motivation. Although the agency they gained in SCL activates many students' will to learn, others may have other learning preferences and will not respond to it in that way. Given differences in students' language learning styles, the teachers must listen to each one's voice, think from student-centered viewpoints, and help each learner develop autonomy and self-directedness. Therefore, he or she can say, as Minjeong did, "English is fun to learn," which captures the essence of student-centered learning.

4.3. The Students' Construction of Investment and Negotiation of Identity

All the interviewees indicated that experiencing the reading assignment changed their perceptions of English and inspired them to construct investment in their English reading and general English learning. In particular, they expressed gaining self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a will to learn, which, as Norton Peirce (1995) suggested, could if sustained promote their "commitment to learning the target language" (p. 16).

I feel like I can study English and it is worth studying now. I think investment is necessary because I need to study for the TOEIC or aspects of English. In terms of reading, I am thinking of taking a mock TOEIC for practice. And I bought a book for reading, and there is a link to an online lecture in the book, so I'm thinking about studying with those materials. [Suji, design major]

Investment.. Yes, I would invest in English reading. I will take online lectures or study by myself. And I will invest in English in general. Like, as I study reading, I get to know more words. So as I know more, I want to study more. [Minjeong, design major]

I have already bought books and taken online lectures on my own, so I have already been investing in English learning and plan to continue to do so. [Seungho, design major]

These three students' interview excerpts, in which they articulated concrete actions for investing in English learning, such as accessing various resources, show the beginnings of their commitment. Their culture had already taught them that learning English as a symbolic resource could give them concrete benefits such as friendship, education, and material resources, which would increase their social power. Through the values instilled in them by society and their own personal experiences, they had internalized the conviction that being fluent in English would provide both symbolic and material rewards.

The SCL reading assignments gave them a sense of accomplishment, which helped them to gain self-confidence and think "I can do this." By giving them opportunities to learn and practice English as legitimate speakers (Park, 2019), it broadened their learning spectrum and awakened their willingness to invest time and efforts into learning and specifically plan how to do so. It is also noteworthy that the students stated that they would construct investment not only in English reading but also in their overall English learning.

I think I will invest. I just planned to study English before, but now, I have these thoughts like, "Oh, I should really try it now," or "I can do it, too." I don't think I can do many things at once during vacation, but I have in mind, "let's study at least English conversation during this vacation." All my friends are in the fashion design department, and I will take English conversation class with them. [Dahye, design major]

I'm not really good at English, but I really want to talk to native speakers. So, I wanted to visit the "English café" at the university, where I could communicate with foreigners. If there was a foreigner on the street, I wanted to talk to him and to ask him to be my friend. However, because I didn't have confidence and was not good at English, I didn't think I could communicate with foreigners, but just say "hello." But after the reading assignment, I felt like I built a foundation and gained self-confidence, so I will invest with this self-confidence. [Sooah, law major]

I have a desire to learn English conversation. I really want to travel abroad while I am a college student, so I really want to learn English conversation. One of my friends will lend me her pass for an online English conversation class, so I will try it for two months. [Seunghye, design major]

In these excerpts, it is interesting to note that the students were especially willing to invest in English speaking. It seems that after gaining self-confidence in English, they wanted to improve their speaking skills which many Koreans feel anxious about. Norton's (2013) data suggested a learners' anxiety is most connected with their oral rather than literacy skills, so it affects the degree to which they create and respond to opportunities to practice the target language. With reduced anxiety and increased self-confidence gained through student-centered learning, the learners in this study felt willing and able to increase their investment in their oral skills.

Norton (2013) asserts that self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a will to learn encourage learners to construct their social and historical relationship to English and "their often ambivalent desire to learn and practice it" (p. 50). Some interviewees mentioned that not only did they have more positive attitudes toward English learning, but they felt closer to English. The SCL reading assignment helped break down the mindset that "English is difficult and boring," opening the way to a newly shaped relationship with English, which can promote their investment in learning the language. As Norton and Gao (2008) predicted, by constructing their investment in English learning, they may develop "a sense of ownership of English that enables them to better negotiate their current circumstances and articulate a vision for the future" (p. 111). They may have little incentive to invest in learning English before, but they experienced the possibility when completing the SCL reading assignments. As Norton (2013) said, learners can expect to "have a good return on that investment – a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources (p. 50).

Norton (2013) also claimed that when language learners speak, they are simultaneously "organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world" (p. 50). Darwin and Norton (2015) pointed out that the concept of investment positions a language learner as "a social being with a complex identity that changes across time and space and is reproduced in social interaction," and therefore, as cited from Norton (2013), "complex, contradictory, and in a state of flux" (p. 37). Park (2022) affirmed this view by acknowledging that a language learner is a "multiple, changing, and contradictory" being (p. 832). These perspectives underscore the critical influence of student-centered learning not only on the learners' construction of investment but also on their negotiation of identity.

Norton Peirce (1995) described Martina's social identity as a site of struggle, which was true for the students in this study because of learning difficulties and external pressures. They

believed in the importance of learning English, but because they found it very difficult, they developed ambivalent attitudes toward English, which decreased their commitment to learning and using the language (Norton, 2000). However, experiencing the SCL reading assignments, helped them gain self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a will to learn, so they not only claimed “the right to speak” (Norton Peirce, 1995, p. 23), but also changed their view of themselves as language learners, as shown by their references to “effort” in responding to the question I asked at the end of each interview, “how do you see yourself as an English learner?”

I am an English learner who needs to learn constantly with effort. [Hyein, police administration major]

As an English learner, I should put more effort into learning. [Eunbi, police administration major]

I am an English learner who tries to do something and to put in effort. [Minjeong, design major]

I am an English learner who needs to put more effort. [Minah, police administration major]

Like Eva in Norton Peirce’s (1995) study, the students in this study were re-negotiating their social identity “over time,” from a site of struggle to a position as active and invested learners who “respond to and create opportunities to practice English” (p. 23). Norton (1997) defined the concept of identity as “how people understand the relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how people understand their possibilities for the future” (p. 410). To support students in this process of growth and change, teachers need to provide them with meaningful activities and innovative learning materials. In this study, as the students experienced the SCL assignments, most began to move to a positive construction of their learning experiences. However, to fulfill their promise, beginnings need to be nurtured and students need to be helped to understand their future possibilities as learners.

5. CONCLUSION

In this study, I examined college first-year students’ perceptions of learning English before and after experiencing SCL reading activities and the role of these experiences on

their construction of investment in English learning. The results of the study show that the learners had ambivalent attitudes toward English but recognized the importance of learning due to external pressures. Also, the study indicates that the students had positive impression about the reading assignment, which led to feelings of self-confidence, a sense of accomplishment, and a will to learn after experiencing the reading assignments. Lastly, the study reveals that the students' positively changed perceptions of English promoted their construction of investment in learning the target language.

This study has some limitations which suggest directions for future research. One limitation is that I played several roles as a designer of the assignments, a teacher of the class, an interviewer, and a researcher. During the interviews, I asked for their opinions about not only the assignments I gave them but also my ways of instruction, which they might not have answered with complete honesty. To avoid such conflicts, I recommend separating the roles of a researcher and an interviewer from that of a teacher so that students feel comfortable expressing their true feelings and opinions and to ensure the validity of the data (Park, 2019).

A second limitation is that the interviewees' responses may be skewed as a result of loss of neutrality in the interview questions. For example, I used the term "invest" when asking the students about their English learning intentions after completing the SCL reading assignments, which might have influenced their response, a reminder of the need for attending to language in conducting research. Despite this researcher's error, I argue that the findings of the study are well aligned with other evidence supporting the value of student-centered learning experiences in shaping students' positive attitudes towards English and investment in future learning.

A third limitation is that the SCL reading assignment was completed by students individually and did not require peer collaboration, which is often associated with student-centered learning. Two types of the student-centered instructional strategies are frequently studied: Cooperative Learning (CL) and Task-Based Language Learning (TBLL). Both instructional strategies involve learners' cooperation, social skills and "meaningful interaction" (Olsen & Kagan, 1992) in the classroom. While the reading assignment encouraged the learners' autonomy, flexibility, and wills to learn, it did not promote their cooperation or meaningful interaction with peers. Therefore, I suggest focusing future research on reading assignments that involve small group collaboration.

English fever in Korea is getting increasingly intense and has already become a social phenomenon, as shown by the extreme competitiveness in securing admission for young children in private English kindergartens and the large number of Koreans who take the TOEIC every year, reported by Cho (2015) as 1.68 million and undoubtedly higher nearly a decade later. As noted above, English fever puts pressure on learners at all ages, in response to which they develop negative attitudes towards learning English that may generate ambivalent perceptions of English, such as some of the interviewees expressed, that affect

them the rest of their lives. To avoid this outcome, understanding and applying principles of student-centered learning may help improve learners' attitudes and willingness to invest in language learning. Despite those limitations above, this study demonstrates that a reading assignment using the student-centered approach could help change learners' negative mindsets about English learning and to promote their construction of investment. Therefore, to help the learners' construct their investment more concretely and, in Park's (2019) words, to "build positive relationships with the target language and their changing social world" (p. 238), using instructional strategies, assignments and teaching materials with focus on the student-centered learning is very important, particularly to counter the negative effects of Korean English fever.

Applicable level: Tertiary

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APPENDIX A

Interview Questions

1. Describe your English learning experiences before college (pleasant or unpleasant).
2. Describe your attitudes toward or perceptions of English over time.
3. What did you like about doing the reading assignments? What was easy?
4. What did you find difficult in doing the reading assignments?
5. What did you gain from the reading assignment?

6. How do you think that the reading assignment helped you learn English?
7. In what English skills have you improved by doing the reading assignments?
8. How have the reading assignments affected your attitudes towards English?
9. How do you think about investment of your time and effort in studying English?
10. How do you feel about English now?
11. How do you think of or look at yourself as an English learner?