

Negotiating Obligation: Investment, Positioning, and Identity in Duty-Based Korean Language Learning

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Abstract

This study examines how duty-based adult learners of Korean construct and negotiate learner identities in an institutional setting where language study is mandated as part of professional roles. Drawing on Positioning Theory, Gee's discourse/Discourse distinction, and Norton's investment framework (Davies & Harré, 1990; Gee, 2011; Norton, 2013), the study analyzes multiweek reflective writings from adult learners in a Korean language program linked to occupational assignments. Using discourse-analytic coding, the analysis focuses on four domains: identity positions (self-as-competent or self-as-struggling, role conflict), investment and motivation (instrumental, integrative, resistant, reframed orientations), Discourses and ideologies (institutional performance discourses, cultural essentialism, critical awareness), and emotional and affective stances (confidence, anxiety, ambivalence, empowerment). Findings reveal persistent tensions between institutional expectations and personal agency, with investment fluctuating according to perceived relevance, modality, and opportunities for learner choice. Learners articulate diverse forms of agency—strategic use of Korean media, preference for kinesthetic and competitive activities, meticulous self-regulation, and deliberate participation—which reframe obligation as meaningful practice. Simultaneously, deficit positioning and performance pressures emerge in narratives of perfectionism, introversion, neurodiversity, and time-constrained proficiency targets, illustrating how institutional Discourses shape participation and self-understanding. The study contributes theoretically by integrating positioning, Discourse, and investment to explain identity work under institutional constraint, and pedagogically by outlining equity-oriented, multimodal, and asset-based strategies for designing more inclusive duty-based language programs.

Keywords: duty-based language learning, learner identity and positioning, learner agency

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Introduction

In institutional language education, learner identity is shaped not only by personal motivation but also by broader structures and expectations that frame the learning experience. While much second language acquisition research focuses on voluntary learners who choose to study a language for personal, academic, or professional growth, less attention has been paid to learners who engage in language study as part of professional obligation (Ady, 2020; Budiman & Ganap, 2024). These duty-based learners—individuals assigned to language training as part of occupational roles—occupy a unique space where institutional expectations, personal agency, and cultural negotiation intersect (Budiman & Ganap, 2024; Gao, 2025; Manacpilli et al., 2012).

This study is situated in a Korean language classroom composed of adult learners studying the language as part of professional assignment. These learners are not pursuing Korean for leisure or academic credit but as a requirement tied to institutional roles. Their experiences offer a valuable lens for examining how language learning is perceived, negotiated, and internalized when framed by duty rather than choice. Understanding how these learners construct identities through language is critical for developing more equitable and inclusive teaching practices. Educators working with duty-based learners must navigate a delicate balance: honoring institutional goals while creating space for learner agency, voice, and identity development. This is particularly important in transnational contexts where language learning is often entangled with issues of power, representation, and belonging.

Using discourse analysis to explore how duty-based learners position themselves in written reflections and classroom discourse, this study asks:

1. How do duty-based learners position themselves as language learners in classroom discourse and reflective writing?
2. What discursive strategies do they use to express motivation, resistance, or alignment with the language learning process?
3. How do these identity-constructions reflect broader institutional or cultural ideologies?
4. What implications do these discourses have for equitable and inclusive language teaching?

This study aims to illuminate the dynamic interplay between institutional expectations and individual agency, revealing how duty-based language learners navigate identities within the classroom context. The findings suggest that recognizing the complexities of learner agency is essential for fostering supportive environments that encourage meaningful engagement and identity development in language education.

Literature Review

The relationship between language learning and identity has become central in second language acquisition (SLA) research, particularly in contexts where learners navigate complex institutional expectations alongside personal aspirations. While much SLA literature focuses on voluntary learners, less attention has been paid to learners who engage in language study as part of professional obligations. These duty-based learners—individuals assigned to language training as part of occupational roles, such as those in military, diplomatic, or government-sponsored programs—occupy a unique space where institutional expectations, personal agency, and cultural negotiation intersect. Understanding how these learners invest in language learning, negotiate identities through discourse, and navigate institutionally mandated

environments is essential for developing inclusive pedagogical approaches that recognize the complexity of duty-based language learning.

Theoretical Frameworks: Investment, Identity, and Imagined Futures

Norton (2013) argues that language learning is not merely a cognitive or linguistic process but a deeply social one in which learners invest in language as a means of accessing imagined identities and future possibilities. This concept of “investment” reframes traditional notions of motivation by emphasizing the learner’s desire to be recognized and valued within specific social contexts rather than simply measuring interest or effort. Investment is inherently tied to power relations and social positioning: learners invest in language learning when they believe it will expand access to valued social networks, professional opportunities, or desired identities. Similarly, Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004) highlight how multilingual learners negotiate identities across shifting linguistic and cultural landscapes, often resisting or reconfiguring dominant discourses that position them as deficient or marginal.

These perspectives are especially salient for duty-based learners, whose engagement with language is shaped not by personal choice but by institutional mandate. In military language training contexts, learners face distinct motivational profiles characterized by obligation-driven effort and professional identity tensions (Alqahtani, 2017; Jodaei et al., 2018). Research on Iranian military English learners reveals that while many begin training with high integrative motivation and genuine interest in the target language and culture, contextual demotivators—including rigid scheduling, inadequate facilities, and institutional gatekeeping—can shift learners from motivated to demotivated states over intensive programs (Jodaei et al., 2018). Similarly, studies of Saudi military cadets demonstrate that the Ought-to L2 Self, reflecting external obligations and expectations, serves as a principal determinant of learning effort, often acting more powerfully than the Ideal L2 Self, which represents intrinsic aspirations and personal visions of multilingual competence (Alqahtani, 2017). This suggests that in duty-based contexts, obligation and external accountability may override personal interest as drivers of engagement.

For duty-based Korean language learners at institutions such as the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), where learners are expected to achieve high proficiency in strategically important languages within intensive 64-week programs, identity construction involves navigating tensions between obligation and agency, compliance and resistance. Ady et al. (2022) found that learners in mandatory instructional contexts exhibited distinct motivational self-systems compared to voluntary learners, with duty-based learners showing heightened sensitivity to institutional pressures and instrumental career concerns. These learners must negotiate imagined professional selves—such as the “competent linguist-soldier,” “effective diplomatic communicator,” or “operationally ready intelligence analyst”—alongside immediate demands of performance metrics, proficiency testing, and compressed timelines (Gao, 2025). Understanding how duty-based learners invest in Korean language learning, despite or because of institutional obligation, requires examining both the social identities they aspire to and the institutional discourses that position them within hierarchies of competence, compliance, and professional readiness.

Discourse, Positioning, and the Construction of Learner Identities

Discourse plays a central role in identity construction, particularly in educational settings where language is both the medium and object of learning. From a sociocultural perspective, identity

is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing process shaped through interaction and language use. Positioning theory, introduced by Davies and Harré (1990), offers a useful lens for examining how individuals locate themselves and others within conversations, narratives, and institutional discourses. Positioning is both interactive and reflexive: individuals are positioned by others (through explicit or implicit evaluations, role assignments, and social expectations) and also position themselves (through self-presentation, stance-taking, and alignment with or resistance to dominant norms). In classroom contexts, learners are constantly positioned—as competent or struggling, motivated or disengaged, compliant or resistant—by both teachers and peers, and they also position themselves in ways that reflect or challenge these roles.

Gee (2011) further distinguishes between “small-d” discourse (language-in-use at the level of utterances and interactions) and “big-D” Discourses (socially situated identities, practices, and belief systems enacted through language, gesture, dress, and behavior). This distinction is particularly relevant for learners in military or government-sponsored Korean language programs, where the language of obligation, performance, and operational readiness may dominate classroom discourse. For instance, institutional discourses at the DLIFLC frame Korean language proficiency not as personal enrichment or cultural exploration but as professional responsibility tied to national security, strategic communication, and U.S.-ROK military cooperation (Gao, 2025). Such framing privileges instrumental orientations and can position learners as instruments of institutional goals rather than autonomous agents of their own learning trajectories. This positioning is reinforced through assessment regimes, attrition tracking, and performance-based career advancement systems that link language proficiency to professional identity and future opportunities.

Bucholtz and Hall (2005) highlight the interactional nature of identity, arguing that it emerges through linguistic choices, stance-taking, and alignment with or against dominant norms. In duty-based Korean language classrooms, learners’ written and spoken discourse reveals how they negotiate institutional positioning while asserting personal agency. Research on military language learners demonstrates that when institutional practices constrain perceived autonomy—through high-stakes gatekeeping, inflexible curricula, or top-down assessment regimes—learners’ motivation and identity investment decline (Farr, 2016; Jodaei et al., 2018). Conversely, when learners are afforded opportunities to negotiate materials, select profession-relevant tasks, or engage in authentic communicative projects, they report increased engagement and a stronger sense of professional identity alignment (Gao, 2025). These findings suggest that the discursive practices of duty-based language classrooms—how teachers talk about learning, how assessment is framed, how learners are invited (or not) to exercise choice—directly shape learners’ sense of agency and willingness to invest in language learning.

Methodology

Coding Framework for Discourse Analysis

To operationalize the study’s sociocultural and critical theoretical framework, a discourse-analytic coding framework was developed to capture how identity, motivation, and agency are enacted in learners’ reflective writing. Rather than treating reflections as transparent representations of internal states, the analysis focused on the discursive functions of language (Gee, 2011), examining how learners position themselves, negotiate obligation, and articulate affect within institutional contexts. Drawing on Positioning Theory (Davies & Harré, 1990),

Norton's (1995, 2013) investment framework, and sociocultural approaches to affect, the framework comprises four interrelated analytic categories.

The first category, Positioning and Identity Roles, captures how learners locate themselves and others within discourse, including self-as-competent or self-as-struggling positions, perceived evaluations by instructors or institutions, and expressions of role conflict between personal identity and institutional expectations. The second category, Investment and Motivation, focuses on how learners discursively construct reasons for engagement or disengagement, including instrumental and personal motivations, resistance, conditional or fluctuating investment, and reframing of obligation into personal meaning (Norton, 2013). The third category, Discourses and Ideologies, examines how learners reproduce, negotiate, or contest broader institutional and cultural Discourses (Gee, 2011), such as references to performance standards, language hierarchies, or moments of critical awareness about power and culture. The fourth category, Emotional and Affective Stance, attends to the affective dimension of identity construction, coding expressions of confidence, anxiety, frustration, ambivalence, empowerment, and enjoyment, and tracing how affect interacts with agency and investment.

Coding was conducted iteratively, beginning with theory-informed open coding and followed by axial coding to identify patterns across cases. This framework enabled a principled yet flexible analysis of learner discourse, foregrounding identity negotiation and agency in duty-based language learning contexts.

Table 1

Summary of Coding Framework

Analytic Category	Focus	Examples of Coded Phenomena
Positioning and Identity Roles	Discursive self- and other-positioning	Self-as-struggling, self-as-competent, role conflict
Investment and Motivation	Reasons for engagement or resistance	Instrumental motivation, conditional investment, reframing
Discourses and Ideologies	Institutional and cultural Discourses	Test-oriented discourse, language hierarchies, critical awareness
Emotional and Affective Stance	Affective positioning toward learning	Anxiety, confidence, frustration, empowerment

Analysis of Student Samples

This section presents a discourse-analytic examination of coded Korean learner samples, focusing on how identity, motivation, and agency are constructed through learners' reflective writing. Rather than treating learner statements as transparent representations of internal states, the analysis attends to how learners position themselves through linguistic choices and how these positions align with or resist institutional discourses.

Learner 1: Identity Tension and Conditional Investment

As shown in Table 2, the first learner's reflection is characterized by strong negative self-positioning, evidenced by the opening statement, “저는 느린 학생이고 나쁜 학생이라고 생각합니다” (I think I'm a slow and bad student). This deficit-oriented identity suggests internalization of institutional or comparative standards that equate speed and accuracy with competence. Such positioning aligns with Davies and Harré's (1990) notion that individuals

often adopt subject positions made available within dominant discourses—in this case, the discourse of institutional performance.

Simultaneously, the learner articulates clear resistance to imposed learning content, particularly when it does not align with personal interest: “원하지 않은 것을 공부해야 하면 너무 어려워요” (It’s especially hard when I have to study something I don’t want to). This resistance reflects conditional investment, consistent with Norton’s framework, in which motivation fluctuates depending on whether learners perceive symbolic or personal value in the learning activity. Importantly, the learner reclaims agency by asserting preferred learning styles, emphasizing competition, games, and hands-on activities. The disclosure of ADHD and kinesthetic learning preferences further complicates deficit framings, reframing difficulty not as lack of ability but as a mismatch between instructional modes and cognitive needs.

Table 2
Coded Analysis of Learner 1

Excerpt	Code	Category
“저는 느린 학생이고 나쁜 학생이라고 생각합니다.” (I think I’m a slow and bad student.)	Self-as-Struggling, Negative Self-Positioning	Positioning and Identity
“특히 원하지 않은 것을 공부해야 하면 너무 어려워요.” (It’s especially hard when I have to study something I don’t want to.)	Resistance, Institutional Discourse	Investment and Motivation
“배우고 싶은 것이 나오면 동기가 높지만... 배우고 싶지 않은 것이 나오면 동기가 낮아져요.” (When it’s something I want to learn, I’m motivated; when it’s not, I lose motivation.)	Fluctuating Investment, Agency	Investment and Motivation
“좋은 학생 되기 위해서 공부하는 것을 열심히 공부해야 합니다.” (I have to study hard to become a good student.)	Compliance, Institutional Positioning	Positioning and Identity
“저의 스타일은 게임하는 것이나 손을 이용하는 여러 가지를 좋아합니다.” (My style is that I like games and using my hands.)	Learning Preferences, Agency	Emotional/Affective /Identity
“야구랑 미식축구 선수라서 경쟁이 잘 맞아서 게임을 좋아합니다.” (I’m a baseball and football player, so I like competition and games.)	Empowerment, Self-as-Competent	Positioning and Identity
“경쟁이 있으면 동기가 높습니다.” (If there’s competition, I’m more motivated.)	Instrumental/Contextual Motivation	Investment and Motivation
“ADHD가 있어서 특히 손을 사용하면 배운 것을 잘 기억합니다.” (Because I have ADHD, I remember better when I use my hands.)	Learning Strategy Disclosure, Critical Awareness	Emotional/Affective /Discourses

Learner 2: Competence, Self-Regulation, and Quiet Resilience

In contrast, the second learner positions themselves positively from the outset: “제 생각에 저는 좋은 학생입니다” (I think I’m a good student). This self-as-competent stance is reinforced through repeated references to effort, strategy, and self-regulation, including time investment in homework and systematic vocabulary review. Such discourse reflects a growth-oriented identity and aligns with institutional values of diligence and responsibility, but crucially, it is framed as internally driven rather than imposed.

Nevertheless, the learner acknowledges affective and interactional challenges, including perfectionism and introversion. Rather than positioning these as failures, the learner frames them as manageable constraints, demonstrating reflexivity and resilience. The recognition that participation is necessary for learning, despite discomfort, illustrates a process of reframing in which institutional expectations are reinterpreted as personally meaningful learning goals. This learner’s discourse exemplifies how compliance and agency can coexist in duty-based learning contexts.

Table 3

Coded Analysis of Learner 2

Excerpt	Code	Category
“제 생각에 저는 좋은 학생입니다.” (I think I’m a good student.)	Self-as-Competent, Positive Identity Claim	Positioning and Identity
“학습 태도는 제가 노력을 잘 하면 좋은 결과를 딸 수 있습니다.” (If I try hard, I can get good results.)	Agency, Growth Mindset	Investment and Motivation
“숙제 할 때 가장 정확하고 완전한 대답을 하기 위해서 많은 시간을 걸립니다.” (I spend a lot of time to give the most accurate and complete answers.)	Perfectionism, Self- Regulation	Emotional/Affective /Identity
“복습이 큰 가치를 가지고 있는데 특히 단어에 대한 복습을 많이 해요.” (Reviewing is very valuable to me, especially vocabulary.)	Learning Strategy Disclosure, Metacognitive Awareness	Discourses and Identity
“약간 어려운 과제를 선호하고... 더 많이 배울 것 같기 때문입니다.” (I prefer slightly difficult tasks because I think I learn more.)	Challenge-Seeking, Empowerment	Investment and Motivation
“자세한 사항을 너무 집중하기 때문에 과제를 느리게 거치고...” (I focus too much on details, so I work slowly.)	Self-as-Struggling, Perfectionism	Positioning and Identity
“내성적인 성격을 갖여서 대화하기 어렵습니다.” (I’m introverted, so it’s hard to speak in class.)	Anxiety, Affective Barrier	Emotional and Affective Stance

“수업 동안 배울 수 있는만큼 하려면 대화 잘 참여할 수 밖에 있는 걸 알아서...” (I know I have to participate in conversation to learn as much as I can.)	Critical Awareness, Reframing	Discourses and Identity
“되도록 대화에 참여합니다.” (So I try to participate in conversation as much as possible.)	Agency, Self-Regulation	Investment and Motivation

Learner 3: Balancing Curiosity and Resistance Through Personalized Learning

The third student’s writing reveals a dynamic interplay between curiosity, challenge, and resistance, shaped by both affective responses and learning preferences. The learner begins by positioning themselves positively: “저는 새로운 것을 배우기 좋아합니다” (I like learning new things). This self-ascription reflects a curious and growth-oriented identity, suggesting openness to new knowledge and willingness to engage with unfamiliar content. However, this positive stance is immediately followed by a candid acknowledgment of difficulty: “하지만 한국어 공부하는 것이 어렵습니다” (But studying Korean is difficult). This juxtaposition illustrates a common tension among duty-based learners—between intrinsic interest in learning and the cognitive or emotional demands of the assigned language.

The student’s awareness of their learning process is evident in their reflection: “계속 공부해야 합니다. 안 하면 배운 것이 빠르게 잊어버립니다” (I have to keep studying. If I don’t, I forget quickly). This statement reflects both self-regulation and an internalization of institutional discourse—the idea that consistent effort is necessary to meet performance expectations. Rather than passively accepting this, the learner takes initiative: “이 때문에 한국어 영화하고 비디오 자주 봅니다. 재미있는 공부하는 방법입니다” (Because of this, I often watch Korean movies and videos. It’s a fun way to study). This shift demonstrates agency and reframing—the learner transforms a perceived burden into an opportunity for enjoyment by integrating authentic, interest-driven materials into their study routine.

Simultaneously, the student expresses clear resistance to traditional literacy practices: “읽기로 공부하는 것을 싫어합니다. 제 생각에는 읽기가 심심합니다” (I don’t like studying through reading. I think reading is boring). This preference signals a potential barrier to engagement if instruction relies heavily on text-based materials. However, it also offers insight into how educators might adapt instruction to support inclusion—by incorporating more multimodal, media-rich content that aligns with learners’ interests and cognitive styles.

Overall, this student’s discourse reflects a learner who is actively negotiating their identity and investment in the language learning process. While institutional expectations and personal challenges are present, the learner demonstrates resilience and creativity in shaping their own path. Their writing underscores the importance of recognizing learner agency and designing instruction that accommodates diverse preferences and emotional responses.

Table 4
Coded Analysis of Learner 3

Excerpt	Code	Category
“저는 새로운 것을 배우기 좋아합니다.” (I like learning new things.)	Self-as-Curious, Positive Identity Claim	Positioning and Identity
“하지만 한국어 공부하는 것이 어렵습니다.” (But studying Korean is difficult.)	Self-as-Struggling, Challenge Acknowledgment	Positioning and Identity
“계속 공부해야 합니다. 안 하면 배운 것이 빠르게 잊어버립니다.” (I have to keep studying. If I don't, I forget quickly.)	Self-Regulation, Institutional Discourse	Investment and Motivation/Discourses
“이 때문에 한국어 영화하고 비디오 자주 봅니다.” (Because of this, I often watch Korean movies and videos.)	Learning Strategy Disclosure, Agency	Discourses and Identity
“재미있는 공부하는 방법입니다.” (It's a fun way to study.)	Empowerment, Reframing	Emotional and Affective Stance
“읽기로 공부하는 것을 싫어합니다. 제 생각에는 읽기가 심심합니다.” (I don't like studying through reading. I think reading is boring.)	Resistance, Learning Preference	Investment and Motivation/Emotional Stance

Discussion

Taken together, the coded analyses reveal that duty-based language learners engage in complex identity work that cannot be adequately captured by traditional motivational dichotomies such as motivated versus unmotivated or compliant versus resistant. Across all three cases, learners actively negotiate their positions within institutional discourses, drawing on personal histories, learning preferences, and affective responses to make sense of their experiences.

A central finding is the prevalence of conditional investment. Learners' motivation is not fixed but fluctuates depending on perceived relevance, interest, and alignment with preferred learning modes. This supports Norton's (2013) argument that investment is socially situated and contingent upon learners' access to meaningful identities and practices. Even expressions of resistance, such as frustration with imposed content or traditional literacy practices, function as identity-affirming acts rather than signs of failure.

The analysis also highlights the importance of recognizing diverse forms of agency. Agency is not limited to overt resistance; it also appears in strategic compliance, reflective self-regulation, and quiet perseverance. Learners disclose neurodiversity, introversion, and perfectionism not merely as personal traits but as factors that shape their engagement with institutional expectations. Such disclosures challenge deficit-oriented interpretations and call for more inclusive, asset-based pedagogical responses.

Finally, these findings underscore the pedagogical implications of discourse-informed analysis. When educators attend to how learners position themselves through language, they gain insight

into the invisible identity negotiations occurring alongside formal instruction. For duty-based learners in particular, equitable and inclusive teaching requires flexibility, multimodality, and opportunities for learners to reframe obligation as personal meaning. By bridging theory, discourse analysis, and pedagogy, this study demonstrates how learner voice can inform more responsive and humane institutional language education.

Conclusion

This study underscores the complex identity negotiations duty-based Korean language learners undertake within institutional frameworks. Far from passive recipients of imposed curricula, these learners actively construct and reconstruct their identities through discourse, revealing tensions between institutional expectations and personal agency. By applying Positioning Theory, Gee's Discourse Theory, and Norton's Investment Framework, the research reveals patterns of resistance, empowerment, conditional motivation, and strategic learning. Learners' reflections highlight the critical role of inclusive pedagogy that acknowledges neurodiversity, honors learner agency, and accommodates diverse cognitive and affective needs. Ultimately, equitable language education must move beyond uniform expectations to embrace the plurality of learner identities and trajectories.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly was used for grammatical and spelling corrections and minor rephrasing for clarity. Perplexity was used to search for relevant references. AI tools were not used to generate substantive content or influence the research outcomes.

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