
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The L2 Motivational Self System and L2 Achievement: A Study of DNTU's Students

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ABSTRACT

The study detailed in this article investigates the connection between the L2 competency level of Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners and Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) Second Language Motivational Self System (L2MSS). Descriptive and inferential analyses of the collected data revealed expected—that the components of the L2MSS were a good predictor of the learners' intended learning efforts. However, the study also established that in this learner population, these components were not consistently correlated with L2 achievement. The findings can be treated as evidence that self-reported motivation does not always have behavioral consequences.

KEYWORDS

L2 Motivational Self System; L2 Achievement; DNTU's Students; Vietnamese English; second language acquisition; Motivation

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1. Introduction

1.1 Literature Review

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), there is a broad consensus about the important role that motivation plays in the process of learning a nonprimary language and also with regard to its product, the learner's emerging second language (L2) competence. As Cohen and Dörnyei (2002) point out, "Motivation is often seen as the key learner variable because without it, nothing much happens" (p. 172). Studying learners' motivation not only enables us to establish the factors that drive learners' efforts toward L2 achievement but also offers valuable insights into how L2 learners relate to their immediate social environment and even the world at large (Ryan, 2008).

Motivation can broadly be described as a set of reasons or motives that, individually and together, guide or even determine a person's behavior (Nevid, 2013). Historically, L2 motivation research dates back to the late 1950s and early 1960s, especially the work of Gardner and his colleagues in Canada. This early work gave rise to Gardner's (e.g., 1985) influential Socio-Educational Model, which conceptualized motivation as having three components: motivational intensity, desire to learn the target language (TL), and attitudes toward the TL. In addition to motivation, the model involves two separate attitudinal components: integrativeness (incorporating attitudes toward the target language group, interest in foreign languages, and integrative orientation) and attitudes toward the learning situation (incorporating teacher evaluation and course evaluation). These two attitudinal components are regarded as the key antecedents of motivation.

More recently, there has been a shift to a cognitive-situated and process-oriented approach to the study of motivation. This research typically draws on leading motivation theories from the field of psychology, such as the theories of expectancy-value, attribution, self-efficacy, and self-worth. According to Dörnyei (2007), "the cognitive-situated period of second language motivation research shifted the attention to classroom-specific aspects of motivation and created a fertile ground for educational implications directly relevant to classroom practice" (p. 111). Eventually, it gave rise to Dörnyei's influential L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) theory (2005, 2009).

2. The L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei's L2MSS theory emerged from studies (e.g., Dörnyei, Csizér, & Nemeth, 2006) that involved collecting data regarding L2 motivation from over 13,000 Hungarian school students in several longitudinal waves. On the basis of this research, Dörnyei challenged the role of the integrative variable with regard to learners' motivation (MacIntyre, MacKinnon, & Clément, 2009), claiming that in foreign language (FL) contexts, that is, in situations in which the L2 is not being acquired within the TL community, and learners have no (direct) contact with the TL speakers— the TL group lacks salience for the L2 learners, a fact that substantially diminishes the role of the integrative motive.

Instead, drawing on concepts from possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), Dörnyei (2009) posits two possible selves: the 'ideal L2 self' and the 'ought-to L2 self.' The source of the ideal self is from within the individual; it is the product of the individual's aspirations. It is an image of a perfect future self that integrates every desirable characteristic that the individual wishes to possess, such as prosperity, happiness, success, achievement, and in the case of L2 learners— TL competence. The ought-to self, in contrast, can be described as a combination of characteristics that are necessary to enable us to live up to what is expected of us. The source of the ought-to self is outside of the individual; it is a reflection of what others expect to see in this person. It can be understood as a product of the views of those who constitute the individual's social environment (family, friends, etc.). That said, the ought-to self image, although not stemming from within the individual, can be internalized gradually and can, at some point, feed into that individual's ideal self (Dörnyei, 2009; Kim, 2009; Ryan, 2008). Within this self framework (Higgins, 1987), motivation can be described as the individual's drive to reconcile his/her actual self with the ideal and the ought-to selves.

The ideal L2 self as a theoretical construct has, in Dörnyei's view, a much greater capacity than Gardner's integrative orientation to explain learners' motives for learning the L2. Integrativeness was conceived as a driving force for learners learning the TL within the TL community (as is the case with most L2 learners in Canada). Globally, however, the vast majority of L2 learners, especially learners of English, learn the TL within their first language community. In such situations, the integrative variable seems to play little or no role as a motivational force since learners are prepared to expend considerable effort toward learning a new language, not so much because they are keen to engage in social contacts with or gain membership in, the L2 community, but because in their idealized vision of their future selves, they are competent speakers of the TL. This also explains the important role of learner attitudes to the L2 speakers. As Dörnyei (2010) puts it, "It is difficult to imagine that we can have a vivid Ideal L2 Self if the L2 is spoken by a community that we despise" (p. 79).

The third major component in Dörnyei's theory, alongside the ideal L2 and the ought-to self, is the L2 learning experience (L2LE). Conceptually, the L2LE construct is quite different from the two self guides: while the latter has a strictly future orientation, the former is concerned with aspects of the learning situation here and now, such as teacher, textbook, teaching methodology, classroom environment, and learner group dynamics. With that focus, the L2LE seems to overlap with Gardner's attitudes to the learning situation, which, in Dörnyei's (2009) view, plays a key role in determining learners' learning experience. The L2LE essentially relates to the situated type of motivation derived from learners' immediate experience of the L2 learning process.

In Dörnyei's (2009) model, the two self guides, together with the L2L, E correlate with learners' intended learning efforts. The latter refers to the efforts that the participants report intending to make toward achieving a particular goal. Intended learning efforts are typically elicited via statements, such as "If they offer additional night-time classes, I would like to take them." Actual learning efforts, on the other hand, refer to actual learning behavior that learners deliberately undertake, for example, "I am taking additional night-time classes."

For this tripartite self system to operate to its full potential, certain conditions have to be met (Dörnyei, 2008): Most especially, learners must have carefully conceived action plans in place that are designed to enable them to realise their vision. As noted in the Discussion part of this article, action plans (in the sense of Oyserman, 2008; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006) may be an essential condition of the motivational model because high intended learning efforts may not be realised in actual efforts and L2 achievement in the absence of a well thought out action plan.

In summary, the key claim of Dörnyei's theory concerns explaining motivation in terms of the interplay of the two self guides and the learners' L2LE. As discussed in the following section, L2MSS-related research has most commonly examined the relationship between the theory's three main constructs (especially the self guides) and learners' intended learning efforts (ILEs). However, while Dörnyei (2009) regarded learners' intended learning efforts as predictive of their proficiency levels, the effect of the self guides and the L2LE on actual L2 achievement has not been conclusively established by Dörnyei or by other advocates of his theory. Showing that the self guides correlate with, and even predict, ILE can presumably be seen as a validation of the self guides as motivational forces, more so than the integrative variable or other factors. Ultimately, SLA is about achievement, that is, about attaining an adequate level of proficiency in the TL. Therein lies the real test for the theory in the capacity of the self guides to predict L2 achievement. The current study was specifically designed to examine this possibility.

3. Empirical Studies on the L2 Motivational Self System

In recent years, Dörnyei's L2MSS theory has strongly influenced L2 motivation research. Most commonly, L2MSS studies have sought to examine the role that the two self guides and, in some cases, the L2LE play in relation to learner motivation and motivated behavior (e.g., Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Kim, 2009; Lamb, 2009, 2012; Ryan, 2008; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). Some studies have also investigated the effects of the self guides on related factors, such as learners' visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles (Kim & Kim, 2011) and learners' mental imagery (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

3.1 Methodological Issues

Methodologically, most of the L2MSS studies cited here, including Csizér & Kormos (2009), Ryan (2008), and Taguchi et al. (2009), have used learners' intended learning efforts as the criterion measure. A small number of studies (e.g., Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2011) have incorporated participants' course grades as a measure of academic achievement. Lamb (2012) is, to our knowledge, the only study that employed a language proficiency test, a C-test, to establish the extent to which L2 proficiency covaries with the components of the L2MSS. Specifically, Lamb's C-test consisted of five short texts in which the second half of every second word was removed.

Generally, quantitative research findings support Dörnyei's theory. Taguchi et al. (2009) is the largest such study, involving around 5,000 participants in three different countries, Japan, China, and Iran. It revealed that the ideal L2 self guide has a greater capacity than integrativeness to explain variance in the intended learning efforts (the dependent variable). In another study involving 432 participants, Csizér and Kormos (2009) established that the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience were better predictors of L2-motivated learning behavior than the ought-to L2 self. Among Kim & Kim's (2011) findings, the ideal L2 self was a good predictor of the learners' L2 motivated behavior but was not a good predictor of course grades. Dörnyei & Chan (2013) confirmed the capacity of the self guides, especially the ideal L2 self, to predict learners' intended efforts, although the ought-to L2 self was not successful in predicting the L2 learners' course grades. The results from a recent Saudi study by Almuaawi (2013) are generally in line with previous research on L2MSS in that they confirm the ability of self guides to predict learners' learning intentions.

Support for the theory has also come from longitudinal studies. Lamb's (2009) research, tracking the levels of motivation of Indonesian high school students over a 2-year period, established that the ideal L2 self underlies a more committed approach to L2 learning and more openness to practice the TL, ultimately leading to better L2 learning outcomes. In line with Dörnyei's theory, Kim (2009) found that the internalization of utilitarian and practical reasons for learning the L2 improves language learning outcomes.

Ryan's (2008) investigation of Japanese learners of English is one of a small number of studies to have used a mixed quantitative-qualitative method to test the L2MSS theory. The results revealed a strong correlation between the main motivational variables and participants' intended learning efforts.

The only study that deployed a language proficiency test—Lamb (2012)—found that the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience only marginally influenced L2 achievement among 527 Indonesian school students (13–14 years of age) in three different socioeconomic contexts: a metropolitan city, a provincial town, and a rural area. Notably, regional differences were found to be the strongest predictor of L2 proficiency, followed by participants' parents' level of English proficiency and level of education. In this context, it is worth reporting that Segalowitz, Gabonton, and Trofimovich's (2009) study established a link between ethnolinguistic affiliation and attained L2 proficiency and suggested scenarios "for how this link may be mediated by language use and psycholinguistic processing considerations" (p. 188). Their work alerts researchers to the variety and complexity of factors that mediate or suppress the relationship between the L2MSS constructs and proficiency as an individual difference variable.

There are a handful of studies that have used course grades, alongside intended learning efforts, as indicative of learners' L2 achievement, although most have not specifically sought to test the capacity of the L2MSS components to predict L2 achievement. Yang and Kim (2011) examined the effect of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles on the ideal selves and the motivated learning behavior of 100 Chinese, 70 Japanese, 104 Korean, and 56 Swedish high school students. Among the study's main findings, the ideal L2 self demonstrated a substantial capacity to explain the variance of the learners' L2 motivated behavior ($R^2 .52$) but was not a good predictor of academic achievement.

A similar study conducted by Kim & Kim (2011) involving 495 secondary school students found that, whereas learners' ideal L2 selves and their visual learning styles explained more than half of the variation in their motivated learning behavior, these factors were not good predictors of learners'

academic achievement (operationalized in terms of course grades). The authors hypothesized that the learners' ought-to self (rather than ideal self) guides must have been the driving force behind academic achievement instead. However, no data were collected with respect to the learners' ought-to selves as part of this study.

A third study that used learners' course grades, alongside intended learning efforts, as an indication of L2 achievement was conducted by Dörnyei and Chan (2013). The two researchers examined the relationship between imagery and possible selves among a sample of 175 Chinese-background learners in Hong Kong aged between 13 and 15 learning two target languages, English and Mandarin. The study confirmed the power of the self guides (especially the ideal self) to predict motivated language behavior, that is, intended learning efforts. L2 achievement (operationalized in terms of L2 course grades) was also found to be sensitive to the ideal self guide; however, the established correlations were distinctly lower than those with the intended learning efforts and only reached statistical significance for the ideal Mandarin self. As regards the ought-to self, it was found to correlate positively with and to predict intended learning efforts for both languages but demonstrated no predictive capacity in relation to the learners' L2 course grades in either language.

3.2 Outstanding Concerns

In view of the fact that the studies reviewed here were carried out in a variety of diverse sociocultural and educational contexts and involved a range of different qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments, the convergence of their results is generally regarded as a strong endorsement of Dörnyei's theory and validation of its three central constructs, the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2LE. That said, it is important to bear in mind that most of these studies, including Dörnyei's Hungarian research, took learners' intended learning efforts as the relevant criterion measure, assuming—but not demonstrating—that L2 achievement is related to intended learning efforts. Research in psychology, however, has shown that for over 30% of people, intentions do not match actions (Godin & Conner, 2008; Sheeran, 2002). Indeed, one of the key findings in Ryan's (2008) research was that not all positive attitudes have behavioral consequences, thereby establishing "the need for a greater role for observation of actual behavior rather than a reliance on reported intentions" (p. 275, our emphasis).

In relation to this point, Alqahtani's (2015) research stands out, inasmuch as it involved participants from the same linguistic, sociocultural, and educational background as the research reported here. Once again, Alqahtani found a link between self guides and intended learning behavior, although, in his study, language learning attitudes were a better predictor of intended learning behavior. But Alqahtani's research also related the self guides to actual behavior, namely Saudi learners' level of engagement in intercultural contact. The results indicated that the self guides were generally a poor predictor of learners' intercultural engagement, considerably less so than a range of social, cultural, and personal factors. Alqahtani's findings reinforce the point that the capacity of L2MSS's components to predict learners' intentions cannot automatically be extended to the actual behavior and that the link between the self guides and L2 achievement may be impossible to establish without reference to actual L2 proficiency data.

Whereas the focus of L2MSS research has mostly been on the two self guides, some attention has also been given to the third major construct of Dörnyei's theory, the L2LE, a construct that is notoriously difficult to operationalize. Dörnyei (2009) conceptualized this component as a situated type of motivation deriving from learners' attitudes toward the classroom, the teacher, the peer group, and the curriculum. However, in most of the research discussed here, the L2LE was operationalized in terms of the participants' overall experience, with no specific reference to the components that make up this experience

4. Goals of the Current Study

The present study seeks to address this lacuna. Drawing on Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery, it adds a number of assessment instruments: (a) a scale tapping into specific aspects of the participants' previous learning experience (e.g., teacher, textbook, etc.), (b) scale items related to fear of possible future failure, and (c) and most importantly, an assessment of L2 proficiency, based on a dedicated reading and writing proficiency test, as the main dependent variable. It pursues two principal objectives, first, to examine the relationship between the L2MSS theory's three main constructs and learners' intended learning efforts (ILEs), and second, to inquire whether the theory's predictive power extends to L2 achievement, here operationalized in terms of L2 proficiency and assessed for reading and writing. It is part of a larger-scale study that also collected and analyzed qualitative data from representative participants of the same sample group. Space limitations do not allow us to present this material in this article.

5. Conclusion

Much of the recent research on L2MSS has been devoted to exploring the capacity of Dörnyei's L2MSS to explain issues of L2 learner motivation and, by extension, L2 achievement. Data from a variety of sociocultural and educational contexts are generally supportive of a link between Dörnyei's self guides and learners' intended motivated behavior, but only limited evidence has been presented in support of a link between the self guides and learners' actual behavior and/or actual L2 achievement. This study aimed to contribute to this growing body of research by presenting data collected from Vietnam

EFL learners' results unequivocally show that the three main L2MSS constructs do have the power to predict intended learning behavior, thus providing another piece of evidence that the core theory is solid. However, results also suggest that the intuitively appealing proposition that greater L2 learning efforts, at least as self-reported by research participants, will result in increased

proficiency should not be treated as axiomatic. For this participant sample, high(er) learning intentions were not translated into actual achievement.

These findings should not necessarily be treated as a setback for Dörnyei's theory but rather as evidence that a lot more is at play in the motivation–achievement relationship than the operation of the self guides. In the case of this participant sample, factors specific to the Saudi context may have determined this outcome to one degree or another (see, for instance, Elyas & Picard, 2010). The participants' uniformly low level of L2 proficiency at the time of the data collection also deserves a note; further research will gain from collecting proficiency data from a sample with a much more varied L2 competence. In addition, it is necessary to acknowledge the inherent limitations of what quantitative surveys of the type used in the current study can reveal. Most importantly, causality inferences cannot be made on the basis of such data. Ultimately, our findings reinforce the need for further investigations (both quantitative and qualitative) into the effort–proficiency link in different sociocultural contexts in order to advance L2 motivation theory from an L2MSS perspective.

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