

Motivation and Possible Selves: An Interview Study of Taiwanese EFL Learners

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Abstract

This article is based on an interview study which the author conducted to conceptualize Taiwanese EFL learners' L2 motivation through using the possible selves framework. Based on this interview study, the recently developed L2 Motivational Self System exerts its explanatory power in the Taiwanese EFL context; the *ideal L2 self* and the *ought-to L2 self* are helpful in informing the analysis of student motivation. The ideal L2 self illustrated with empirical evidence corresponds to its theoretical construct proposed by Dörnyei (2005). Interestingly, however, the ought-to L2 self found amongst the student interviewees seems inconsistent with the original theoretical concept as it probably contains a mixture of prevention- and promotion-focused instrumentality in studying English. The shaping of the Taiwanese ought-to L2 self by the broader social context will be discussed in this article.

Motivation is one of the most important variables of language learning, especially in second language (L2) acquisition. The extent of wanting to learn can make a difference in how willing and successful L2 learners can be. Discussions on L2 motivation theory were once dominated by goal-directed learning orientations in social psychological terms. Language learners would be classified as either integratively- or instrumentally-oriented (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) to achieve a needed proficiency in L2 use for identification with a specific ethnolinguistic group or for pragmatic gains. Over the past decade, this theoretical focus has shifted to a new realm of self and identity in explaining the internal identification process within learners' self-concept to stimulate motivation for L2 competence. Motivation to learn a particular language can be interpreted through inward aspirations towards certain kinds of linguistic, cultural, personal, or professional identities or possible future selves speaking the language fluently.

The new L2 Motivational Self System proposed by Dörnyei (2005; 2009b) facilitates this conceptual shift through the concepts of the *ideal* and *ought-to L2 selves*. Mental images of possible future L2-related selves that learners aspire to can motivate them to learn the L2 well. Some L2 researchers began empirical testing of the L2 Motivational Self System at different levels of education in different countries (e.g., Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Henry, 2009; Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009) or tried to connect this approach and other established motivation constructs to examine its explanatory power (e.g., Kim, 2009; Lamb, 2009; Noels, 2009; Yashima, 2009). Large-scale studies generated empirical support for the applicability of the possible selves dimension of the L2 Motivational Self System in EFL

contexts worldwide (e.g., the studies in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009a), adapting measurement techniques and statistical procedures. Such quantitative methods are important in testing and validating a new model in a variety of contexts.

Exploring the local uniqueness of EFL learners and any EFL context-specific features of their possible selves often necessitates a more qualitative approach. This article presents empirical evidence from an interview study of Taiwanese secondary-level EFL learners conducted with a possible selves framework.

Literature Review

The L2 Motivational Self System

Dörnyei (2005; 2009a; 2009b) followed the speculative conclusion in his study with Csizér (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002), and further developed the L2 Motivational Self System by drawing on the possible selves and self-discrepancy theories. As Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954) suggested, possible selves refer to people's mental imagery of "what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming." These possible images of future selves are likely to fuel people's desire for goal accomplishment and to initiate motivating behaviors to become their possible selves. According to Higgins' (1987) self-discrepancy theory, it is human nature to approach pleasure and avoid pain by bridging the gap between current self-states and desired end-states. Therefore, among many possible selves held by the individual, the *ideal self* and the *ought-to self* function as the most influential future self-guides. Motivation and action can be energized to progress towards what one wishes to become. Drawing on Carver and Scheier's (1981; 1990) self-regulatory system, Higgins (1998) suggested that the ideal self with a promotion focus (e.g., advancement, growth, accomplishment) involves internally-driven motivation and self-regulation to achieve positive outcomes as the valued reference point. In contrast, the ought-to self with a prevention focus (e.g., safety, security) aims to avoid matches to undesired results through more externally-regulated duties, obligations, or necessities. Moreover, the ideal self is reflected by one's own future self-images, whereas the ought-to self represents the hoped for end-states others have for the individual (Higgins, 1987).

Dörnyei (2009b, citing Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006) further defined the ideal and ought-to selves and clarified the impact of immediate context and interpersonal relationships on one's construction of possible selves. Since possible selves are shaped by social influences, the ideal / ought-to self does not necessarily originate from the individual, but is probably a product of one's conformity with socio-contextual influences embedded within the wider world. The degree to which people internalize the ought-to self may differ from what others expect. Deci and Ryan (1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000; 2002) classified these varying levels of internalization of non-intrinsically motivating tasks in their Self Determination Theory [SDT], which illustrates the process of internalization along a continuum of the extent to which one's extrinsic motivation originates as part of the self. SDT has four subtypes of extrinsic motivation (external, introjected, identified, and integrated regulation), ranging from complete external to complete internal regulation of fulfilling achievement demands. The further one feels self-regulated, the closer one's extrinsic motivation approaches the self-determined end of the continuum. Drawing on SDT, Dörnyei (2009b) related the ideal self to identified and integrated regulation with higher degrees of perceived autonomy and the ought-to self to external and introjected regulation. Additionally, Ryan and Deci (2000) claimed learners may experience a situated orientation shift moving either way along the self-determination continuum. The facilitation of internalization with regard to extrinsic motivation relies on supportive, meaningful others (e.g., parents, teachers, peers) who can satisfy one's

psychological needs of relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The ought-to self is likely to be shifted towards the more autonomous end of extrinsic motivation, be fully internalized into learners' self-concept, and turn out to be the ideal self, if social contextual conditions render one connected, effective, and agentic in achieving extrinsic goals.

Interpreting through the self theory, Dörnyei (2005) gave suggestions on the revised implication of integrativeness, or the desire to identify with and approximate to the ideal self with high proficiency in the L2, and then derived his two self-concept constructs of L2 motivation. The first, the language-specific facet of the ideal self, is the ideal L2 self. Pragmatic benefits associated with being able to speak the L2 in personal, social, or professional contexts have been internalized into one's ideal self. The promotion focus of the ideal L2 self aspires learners to inwardly regulate their motivation for L2 mastery as a long-range goal. In this sense, the ideal L2 self highlights a chance for a successful future for L2 learners. The second construct, the ought-to L2 self, contains the less internalized forms of instrumental motivation to avoid possible negative outcomes and to meet other people's expectations through L2 learning and use. The ought-to L2 self reflects the social pressure to accept other people's views about language learning and has a prevention focus to keep learners away from undesired consequences (e.g., failing exams, disappointing one's parents) through obeying social expectations to study the L2 hard. Learners believe it is their duty to do so, yet might cease engaging in these enforced learning tasks once external requirements are removed.

For those who start language learning without internally or externally generated self images, L2 motivation might be shaped by the immediate learning environment and ongoing learning experience, such as the quality of classroom learning, teachers, peers, curricula, and learning success or failure. This dimension of the L2 Motivational Self System was given much consideration during the cognitive period of L2 motivation research in the 1990s. This article will not discuss how a variety of motivational factors affect one's involvement in L2 learning during the learning process.

Possible selves cannot be solely shaped within the individual without reference to social / cultural forces. L2 identities need be understood within the particular learning context under investigation. As Taiwanese senior high schools are an exam-dominant learning context, to what extent may this external incentive influence students' internal construction of their possible language selves?

L2 Motivation Research in Taiwan

Before Dörnyei (2005) relabeled integrativeness as the ideal L2 self to interpret L2 motivation in diverse EFL contexts, a number of L2 researchers in Taiwan argued that integrativeness was unable to properly explain learners' motivation for studying English. Warden and Lin (2000) found that exam requirements (labeled as *required motivation*) appeared to motivate Taiwanese EFL learners more effectively than integrative or instrumental orientations. Chen, Warden, and Chang (2005) surveyed 567 Taiwanese learners' motivational orientations, expectancy, and self-evaluated language proficiency. Required motivation was found to have the strongest relationship with learners' past / future expectancy and self-evaluation, whereas integrative motivation failed to play a significant role. The three researchers (2005) coined the term *Chinese Imperative*: a historically- and culturally-specific motivation for future family glory through studying for exam success.

This type of motivation also implies that exam requirements have been internalized by language learners in Chinese cultural settings where everyone is supposed to pass exams to

meet societal, educational, and familial expectations. Either required motivation or the Chinese Imperative reflects the exam-bound characteristics of L2 motivation in Taiwan, where students have quite limited contact with English speakers and immerse themselves in everyday quizzes, monthly tests, sample tests, mock placement exams, and entrance exams.

In addition, after 2002, the Taiwan Ministry of Education initiated a multi-channel university admission system in lieu of the annual Joint College Entrance Exam. Secondary-level students now are given increased opportunities to enter university through the General Scholastic Ability Test [GSAT] and the Department Required Test [DRT]. Students take the GSAT in the middle of their third year in senior high school. If their grades meet the universities' requirements, they can apply to university departments matching their interests. Alternatively, they can take the DRT later and apply for university admission based on their grades in three to six designated subjects (Department of Higher Education, 2008). Whilst the number of higher education institutions has vastly increased from 78 in 1997 to 147 in 2006 (Department of Higher Education, 2008), the gross enrolment rate has evidently soared from 44.31% in 1995 ("Evaluating the Problems," 2006) to 90.44% in 2011 ("University Enrolment Rate," 2011).

As mentioned, possible selves are constructed through one making sense of everyday life within a particular sociocultural and historical context. When exploring possible L2-related selves reported by Taiwanese EFL learners, the impact of the exam culture may need to be considered.

More detailed explorations of the ideal / ought-to L2 self are called for to corroborate the explanatory power of the new theoretical framework in understanding EFL learners' motivation in the globalized world. The need to examine personal meaning-making in language learning urges researchers to employ approaches to explore the local / individual uniqueness of EFL learners as well as context-specific features of their self-concepts. As qualitative research into possible L2-related selves is relatively scarce, a clear need exists for contextually grounded research to illuminate the understanding of the ideal / ought-to L2 self conceptualized by language learners. Thus, this interview study is intended to qualitatively investigate the possible selves dimension of the L2 Motivational Self System in the Taiwanese EFL context.

Methodology

This interview study focuses on the participants' possible L2-related selves to examine the extent to which the notion of the ideal / ought-to L2 selves can help in informing the analysis of Taiwanese secondary-level learners' L2 motivation. An interview study with qualitative data is appropriate for the nature of the key constructs to be defined through the perception of research participants. In October 2008, the author conducted the study in one local senior high school in southern Taiwan.

The interview questions were based on the main research concerns: students' reasons for studying English, reflection on the university admission system, and future plans. A semi-structured interview guide was formulated and modified over two stages before the author individually interviewed 26 senior high school students in Mandarin Chinese for 30 to 40 minutes. Informed consent was obtained in advance from administrators, teachers, and students. All student interviewees realized their participation was completely voluntary.

The interview transcripts were coded through content analysis by ignoring tones and normal pauses. The author specifically focused on themes that could respond to the research concerns and evidence for students' possible L2-related selves. Through an iterative and recursive process of initial coding, further coding, and theme elicitation, students' learning orientations

and motivational classifications of possible language identities emerged. Conceptual categories were developed and related to relevant literature. The outcomes of the interview analysis were then translated into English.

Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the data revealed two L2 motivational constructions within the domain of possible selves. The first speaks to students' elaborated ideal life in the future, in which they can foresee themselves speaking English fluently in imagined international settings. According to Dörnyei (2009b), the ideal L2 self can motivate learners to advance their language proficiency to integrate L2 competence into their future ideal self. To explore indirectly this motivational self-concept among senior high school students, questions concerning future plans were asked. Seven out of 26 interviewees clarified their future plans in terms of academic development and / or preferred occupation, whereas other students either expressed uncertainty or sketched out many possible versions of their future self-images.

For Lucy, her ideal future plan is to become a professional interpreter who can live and work internationally and speak English with native-like fluency.

Interviewer: What would you like to do in the future?

Lucy: I want to be an interpreter. I prefer interacting with other people. If I can speak multiple languages, oh, that's awesome, I can help people understand each other by using the language they are familiar with. . .

Interpreting is not easy. I need to be very responsive all the time. I must translate what I just heard from one language into another language immediately and correctly. . . Feelings are important to me. I want to do what I am very into.

She also reported that she learned lines from her favorite English movies after repeatedly watching them with English subtitles. Fully engaging in this self-initiated learning activity, she said, "makes me feel like I'm in a foreign country." Through memorizing and practicing the lines, Lucy appears to imagine English-speaking settings in which she can articulate herself in English and interpret for her imagined interlocutors. Lucy sees her ideal self as competent in speaking English in the professional context of L2 use, which might make her feel closer to her idealized future life and preferred international job. As Dörnyei (2009b) suggested, the ideal L2 self encompasses both instrumentality associated with the L2 and the identification process underpinning integrativeness. Having a world citizen identity in the foreseeable future becomes a motivator for students to realize this ideal self through keeping up with English studies.

Based on the interview data, not all of these seven students have a completely genuine idea of the ideal L2 self. Possible selves are the product of personal conceptualization and social influences; therefore, the ideal L2 self may be the entirely internalized ought-to self that the surrounding people think one should be. For example, Nicole completely internalizes her mother's expectations for her to avoid a bad future by getting a higher degree in law at a reputable university overseas and finding a respectable job with good pay. Nicole said,

My mom told me if I want to go overseas, my English must be good. . . I want to be like my mother. She is a Harvard [graduate]; she is my goal. . . I must study harder in order to be exactly like her. She is my super idol, everything about her, her life style, her degree, her steady job and salary, etc. I really want to follow her steps and study in a well-known university abroad. . . I cannot slack off in learning English.

Although this possible self does not originate from Nicole, she seems to have integrated into this self the utilitarian benefits deriving from being able to speak English professionally. By imagining being exactly like her mother, Nicole diligently studies English to reduce the discrepancy between her actual self and her mother, the perfect role model. The ought-to self constructed by her mother seems to have shifted to Nicole's own wishes, and mastery of English is closely linked to her personal need to become this ideal self.

Thus, while pursuing their idealized identity, students may come to bridge their actual and hoped-for English-speaking self through improving their English proficiency. Their individualized plan provides them with a personally meaningful rationale for studying English. This ideal-like L2 identity may render students well motivated to exert effort in learning for the future to acquire L2 competence and accomplish personal identity pursuits.

In contrast, when asked about university entrance exams, 18 students mentioned their fears of negative outcomes if they could not perform well in learning English. The finding and its implications could be related to the concept of the ought-to L2 self. As many popular departments in Taiwan universities have English test score requirements, senior high school students are well aware that abandoning English studies might affect their future. Double-weighted English test scores in university entrance exams can substantially raise students' overall exam grades and facilitate their admission to a higher-ranking university.

Without a diploma from a key university or a recognized English proficiency test certificate, students might face unemployment and family disappointment and feel that the money and time spent on learning English were wasted. Laura emphasised,

I cannot study in a low-ranking university. Otherwise, I am wasting my parents' money. . . I should study hard to get higher grades for a better university. Also, my parents will be pleased and won't get disappointed at my performance.

Seven of these 18 interviewees repeatedly mentioned what their parents said, thought, or expected them to do when explaining L2 motivation. They seem to study English because other people stress its importance and appear to abide by a life prearranged by their parents. Nancy admitted, "I don't know. I might just follow my parents' wishes" when she was asked about her own idea of the future. As Dörnyei (2009b, p. 29) stated, the ought-to L2 self refers to "the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to meet expectations and to avoid possible negative outcomes." This dimension of L2 motivation is helpful in understanding students who obey expectations to avoid vexing possibilities through studying English.

However, closer analysis of the qualitative interview data suggests that the ought-to L2 self in the study seems to diverge from the theoretical definition of the concept, as it contains a dual focus both of promotion and prevention-focused instrumentality in studying English. While the students obey and study English for exam success, they are anticipated to enter a brand-name university to obtain a good job, be a responsible breadwinner, and have an enviable future. Some students mentioned that they would like to persevere in getting high scores in English

exams to enter a good university and major in the specialist subjects recommended by their parents to improve their own and their family's prospects. Andy explained,

. . . studying hard to enter a good university is the only way to get my family out of living in poverty. . . So I force myself to study English as hard as possible to get into a good university and find a good job later. . . Then I will be able to make more money in the future.

In this regard, their ought-to L2 self may be considered upwardly mobile and tied to the promotion-focused instrumental value of studying English for a potential bright future. Passing English exams is vitally important to satisfy other people's wishes and attain future goals.

To explore why the results partially mismatch the concept, a need exists to take the local social context into account and consider the role of exams in Taiwan, since exams play an important part in how students perceive their possible L2-related selves.

Historically, rigorous civil service examinations for selecting officials were implemented to execute Confucian meritocracy and social mobility in China (Woodside & Elman, 1994; see Chen et al., 2005, p. 613). Families would use all their resources to prepare children for these exams in the hope of glorifying the family and clan through individual exam success. No one would question the necessity of studying for exams in terms of obtaining the desired social and material returns. Although exams are the pressure of social forces external to learners, Chen et al. (2005) argued that this unique learning orientation has been internalized into Chinese learners through generations and is characteristic of motivated Taiwanese EFL learners. This likely internalized sociocultural awareness of exam success as the means to achieve social and personal change probably has socialized Taiwanese learners into the belief of lifting exam results for social mobility and the fulfillment of various expectations / requirements.

This localized perspective may help interpret the Taiwanese ought-to L2 self with a twofold instrumentality in studying English, and in understanding its inconsistency with the theoretical definition of the ought-to L2 self associated with the prevention-driven and non-internalized extrinsic motives that make up instrumentality. As long as an exam culture governs Taiwan formal education, studying might equal exam preparation for many. The speculation might be that exam pressure has been internalized into senior high school students to some extent. Hence, based on the interview data, their ought-to L2 self seems to present the dual-focused nature of learning English. Considering the social context, researchers cannot entirely deny the possibility of internalized exam requirements in Taiwan or in the research context. The interview findings reveal the impact of the broader context on one's L2 motivation and the role of contextual / cultural factors in shaping one's possible L2-related selves.

Pedagogical Implications

The exam-oriented climate exists in many Asian countries and exerts its multidimensional impact on the construction of L2 motivation among secondary-level learners. If the influence of exams can assist students in developing English proficiency, teachers could shift their foci to developing students' identified regulatory type of extrinsic motivation for studying English, that is, to help externally regulated students develop personally endorsed understandings of the importance of studying English. As Noels (2009) argues, identified regulation is often a stronger predictor of continuous behavior associated with farsighted goal attainment than intrinsic motivation. Since individual motivation is socially-mediated and co-constructed with meaningful others, teachers could explicitly guide students to invest meaning in their learning

mission and visualize a contingent path between current study and the future instrumentality of using English for intercultural communication. A possible auxiliary medium would be teachers as role models by sharing personal reasons for learning English, demonstrating real-life examples of using English outside of the class, showing a professional profile with English competence, etc. Teachers can encourage students to imagine their future selves as competent English speakers in international settings. The construction of one's future self-images undergoes considerable change during adolescence (Kormos & Csizér, 2008); teachers have a good chance to positively affect students' ideal L2 selves. As Henry (2009) notes, devoting time and resources to enhance students' L2 self-concepts is of particular importance in the classroom to sustain learner enthusiasm over a demanding period of time. Through clarifying the personal significance of studying English from within, students are likely to feel self-motivated to enhance their commitment to learning English and, more importantly, to persevere with their EFL studies.

Conclusion

This interview study has qualitatively examined the constructs of the ideal and ought-to L2 self in the Taiwanese EFL context. The data generated from 26 senior high school students showed the two self-concept types of L2 motivation were helpful in explaining learner motivation for studying English in the research context. However, the Taiwanese ought-to L2 self found in the study might be inconsistent with the theoretical concept, since it reflects both promotion- and prevention-focused instrumentality in studying English. This article does not imply that the concept of the ought-to L2 self is problematic. Rather, it sees the results as a contextualised response to the theoretical definition through viewing the ought-to L2 self from the participants' point of view. As MacIntyre, Mackinnon, and Clément (2009) argued, the various culture-bound definitions of self might affect the motivational properties of possible selves. The Taiwanese ought-to L2 self found in this study lends some support to their argument, and may turn researchers' attention to "cross-cultural variation" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009b, p. 352) in possible selves. The findings not only exhibit the culturally-valued characteristics of self, but also suggest that the self is unlikely to be a context-free concept.

The results also underline the need to adopt a qualitative research approach to the possible L2 self, which may explore in greater depth the nature and extent of sociocultural influences on the construction of the self and allow a richer understanding of the context of possible L2-related selves. Hopefully this interview study can provide possible directions for future research into interesting dimensions of possible L2 identities in this culturally diverse world. More qualitative studies should be dedicated to the multiplicity of possible selves and the examination of the relationship between the possible L2 self and language learning to unveil more dynamic changes of L2 motivation / identities during the learning process.

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