

From self to ideal self: Re-theorizing L2 motivation

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Abstract

The paradigmatic shift in second language (L2) motivation theory re-examines our thinking and understanding about issues of language learning motivation in the modern globalised multilingual world, put simply in the context of contemporary notions of self and identity. Thus there is now very real potential for much greater synergy between L2 motivation theory and second language acquisition (SLA). This paper attempts to re conceptualize language learning motivation through a theoretical consideration of Dörnyei 's (2005) L2 self to the L2 motivational theory by reframing and reinterpreting of Gardner's (1985) concept of the integrative motive within the frame work of psychological theories of 'Possible selves'.

Keywords:

L2 (second language), SLA (second language acquisition), FL (foreign language), SDT (Self-Discrepancy theory)

1. Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) is a way of life. Total commitment, total involvement and a total physical, intellectual and emotional response are necessary to successfully send and receive messages in a second language. Thus the learning of a L2 has always been a complicated and controversial issue which is related to various aspects of factors, like biological, psychological, neurological, social factors, and so on. Numerous researchers have discovered the factors, such as age, sex, culture, identity, the emotional factors, learner variables, and so on affecting L2 learning and to provide L2 teachers with the possible ways to facilitate their students. Among these, second language learners' motivations have been claimed to bring out the paramount importance in influencing in the achievement or the proficiency level of second language learning. Since then, a vast amount of theoretical discussion and empirical studies examining the complex nature of language learning motivation and its role in the process of SLA have been done. At the same time, "over the past decades, the world has encountered linguistic and socio-cultural diversity and fluidity where language use, ethnicity, identity and hybridity" had witnessed the phenomena of globalization, the fall of communism and European reconfiguration, widespread political and economic migration, ever-developing media and technologies – "all contributing in one way or another to the inexorable spread of Global English" (Dörnyei, 2009:3). Thus the L2 motivation field has started to re-examine and re-theorize the existing motivational theories in the context of *self* and *Identity* to learn 'Global English' aspiring to acquire 'Global identity' in particular.

2. Literature Review

The history of second language (L2) motivation research can be divided into three distinct periods (Dörnyei, 2001b) - the social psychological from 1959 to 1990, the cognitive-situated of the 1990's and the process-oriented period covering the last five years.

The social psychological period was marked by the work of Gardner, Lambert and Associates being largely influenced by Mowrer (1950, cited in Larson-Freeman and Long 1991), whose focus was on first language acquisition. Mowrer proposed that a child's success when learning a first language could be attributed to the desire to gain identity within the family unit and then the wider language community. Using this as the basis for his own research Gardner went on to investigate motivation as an influential factor in L2 acquisition as “attitudinal motivational characteristics of the student are important in the acquisition of a second language” (Gardner, 1968: 149). Although in his original model, the well known integrative vs. instrumental motivation was not mentioned as part of the motivation-construct, but in later versions of the integrative motivation construct, the term instrumental orientation was implied (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). The basic premises underlying the integrative concept are:

- a) It “implies an openness to, and respect for other cultural groups and ways of life. [...] it might well involve integration within both communities” (Masgoret & Gardner 2003, 172).
- b) Attitudes towards the Learning Situation, or “the individual’s reaction to anything associated with the immediate context in which the language is taught.” (Masgoret &

Gardner, 2003: 172). Concepts like the teacher, the material and the course are related to this subpart of integrative motivation.

- c) Motivation, which is called “goal directed behavior” (173), consists of motivational intensity or effort, the desire to learn the L2, and the attitude towards learning the target language.

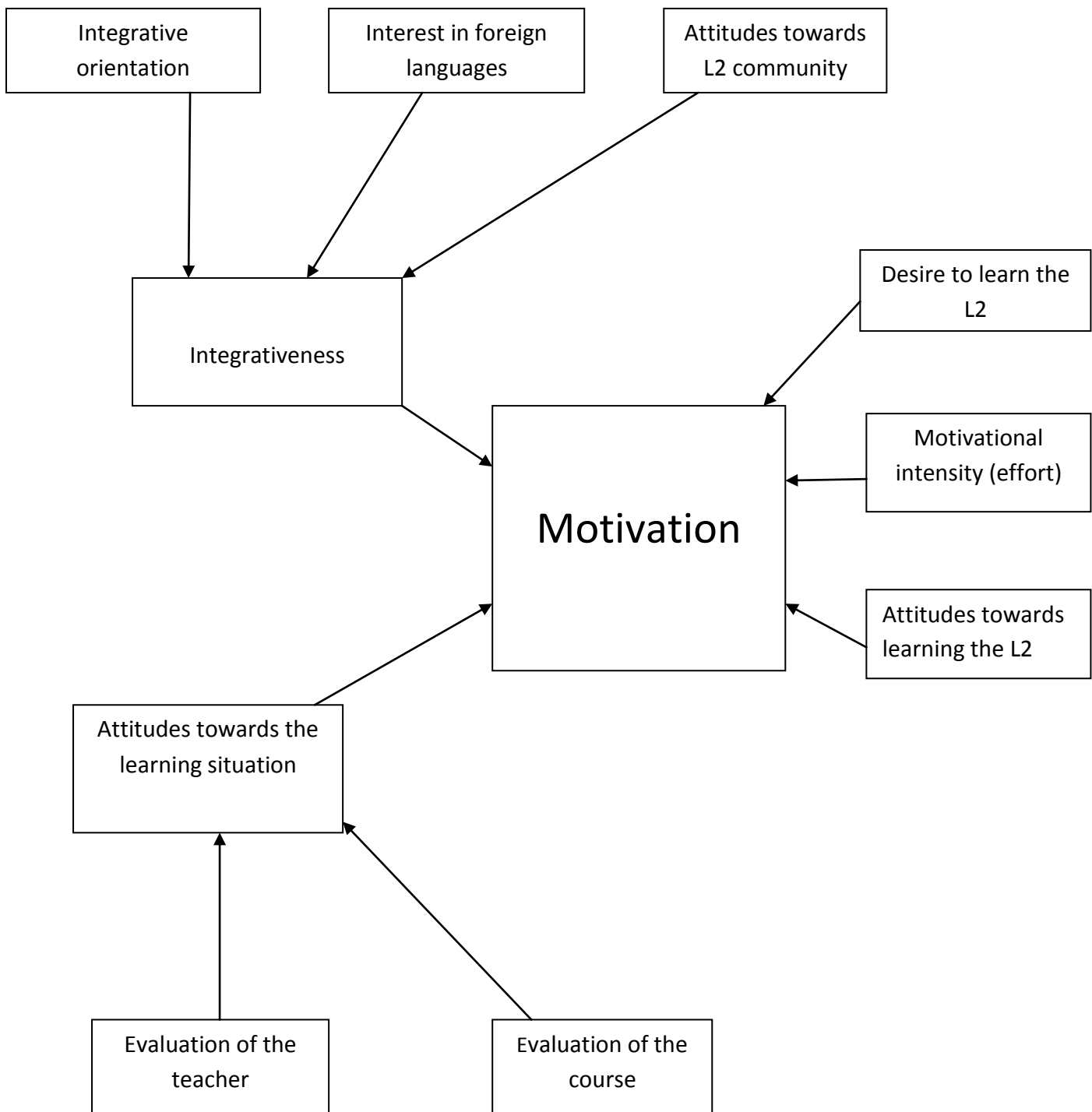


Fig1: Gardner's (1983) conceptualization of the integrative motive

Figure 1 shows that Integrative motivation is a more complex, multi-componential construct, consisting of three main constituents: 'integrativeness', 'attitudes towards the learning situation' and 'motivation' (Dörnyei 2009b:25).

The cognitive-situated period was marked by the willingness to “catch up with advances in motivational psychology” (Dörnyei 2005:74) by adopting a more cognitive approach to L2 motivation, and to move from a macro- to a micro perspective on learner's motivation, and how this motivation works in the classroom context. The focus switched to the actual learning practice: the quality of the course, the tasks, the teacher, and the learners' autonomy. Some important theories in the cognitive-situated period were self-determination theory, attribution theory, and task motivation. Self determination theory asserts that “there are two general types of motivation, one based on intrinsic interest in the activity per se and the other based on rewards extrinsic to the activity itself.” (Noels et al. 2000:60). Attribution theory states the importance of the factors that language learners consider as cause of the success or failure they experience in their language learning. Finally, researching task motivation is very much in line with the shift from a macro perspective in a language community to a micro perspective in the classroom.

The process-oriented period began at the start of the new millennium. Its focus was and is the dynamic nature of motivation. As argued by Dörnyei (2005:83) “there is a need to adopt a process-oriented approach/paradigm that can account for the daily ups and downs of motivation to learn, that is, the ongoing changes of motivation over time”. Within a process-oriented approach, motivation is viewed as dynamic system displaying ‘continuous change’ and ‘fluctuation’ over time (Dörnyei 2009a:210). In line with the field's move to incorporate

psychological research, the L2 Motivational Self System is a construct of motivation proposed by Dörnyei in 2005. The system ‘re-orient[s]’ L2 motivation ‘in relation to a theory of self and identity’, proposing ways in which motivation for second language acquisition is generated, sustained and changed over time (Dörnyei 2005:93). Conceptualizing the nature of L2 motivation, the system opens up ‘new avenue[s]’ for the promotion of ‘student motivation’ in language teaching and subsequent success in second language acquisition (p116).

3. Dörnyei’s Reconceptualization of the Integrative Motive (L2 Motivational Self System)

Dörnyei outlined the basis of a new approach to conceptualizing second language (L2) learning motivation within a ‘self’ framework (Dörnyei, 2009a), calling the new theory the ‘L2 Motivational Self System’. He asserts that the L2 Motivational Self System is composed of three elements - the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self and the L2 Learning Experience and that each component acts as a ‘possible attractor basin’ (Dörnyei 2009a:218):

3.1. Ideal L2 Self

The Ideal L2 Self is based on the individual’s aspirations and goals as a language learner.

3.2. Ought-to L2 Self

The Ought-to-L2 Self is a product of the individual’s perceived obligations and responsibilities as a language learner.

3.3 L2 Learning Experience

This dimension is derived from the learning environment and learners’ perceptions of their previous language learning successes and failures.

And Dörnyei (2009b:5) hypothesized that “if proficiency in the target language is the part and parcel of one’s ideal or ought to self, this will serve as a powerful motivator to learn the language”.

The genesis of the ‘L2 Motivational Self System’ represents a major reformation of previous motivational thinking by its explicit utilization of psychological theories of the ‘self’ by Markus and Nurius (1986) and Higgins (1996:102). The first two attractors stated by Dörnyei draw on previous self-research in psychology relating to possible selves. Dörnyei asserts that among the confusing plethora of self-related issues, from a motivational point of view one area of self-research stands out with its relevance: the study of *possible selves* and *future self-guides* (2009a:10) which gradually replace the traditionally static concept of self-representations with a self system that mediates and controls ongoing behavior (Markus and Ruvolo: 1989). Markus and Nurius (1986) assert that there are three main types of possible selves – ‘ideal selves that we would very much like to become’, ‘selves that we could become’ and ‘selves we are afraid of becoming’ and these selves act as ‘bridges between the present and the future’ indicating ‘how individuals may change from how they are now to what they will become’.

Represented in the ‘same way as the here and now self’, possible selves use self-images to stimulate the motivation necessary to move an individual from their current self towards or away from their hoped for or feared selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986: 961). An important element pertaining to the motivational function of possible selves is highlighted by Dörnyei (2009a) – the idea that possible selves involve ‘tangible images and senses’ ensures they receive ‘phenomenological validity’ and are experienced by the individual as a ‘reality’ (p213). Ideal selves exert a ‘guiding function in setting to-be reached standards’ and in this respect act as ‘future self-guides’ (p214).

The types of possible selves included in Dörnyei's construct are those introduced by Tory Higgins (1987; Higgins et al. 1985) in a more precisely defined technical terms in his general theory of motivation and self-regulation. Higgins emphasizes three domains of the self – *the actual self*, a representation of the attributes that you or another person believes you possess; *the ideal self*, a representation of the attributes that you or another person would ideally like you to possess, for example, hopes, wishes and aspirations and *the ought-to self*, a representation of the attributes that you or another believes you ought to possess - a duty, obligation or responsibility (p320-321). The motivational capacity of these self-guides is highlighted through Higgins's the most coherent framework *Self- Discrepancy theory* (SDT) - motivation is triggered by an individual's desire to reduce the discrepancy between their actual selves and their projected behavioral standards of ideal or ought-to selves (Higgins, 1987).

In the L2 Motivational Self System, the ideal L2 self refers to 'the L2-specific facet of one's ideal self'. That is, "if the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the Ideal L2 self is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves" (Dörnyei, 2005:105). Indeed, L2 researchers have always believed that a foreign language is more than a mere communication code that can be learnt similarly to other academic subjects, and have therefore typically adopted paradigms that linked the L2 to the individual's personal 'core', forming an important part of one's identity. Thus Dörnyei points out that the new model does not 'conflict' with Gardner's original highly influential concept of 'Integrative motivation' but provides a 'broader frame of reference' to account for the motivation of learners that do not have direct contact with speakers of the target language (p453). In other words, the theory proposed a system that explicitly focuses on aspects of the individual's self is compatible with the whole-person perspective of past theorizing (Dörnyei, 2009a).

4. Conditions for the Motivating Capacity of the Ideal and Ought Selves

As part of a dynamic system, the presence of possible selves in a learner's consciousness does not determine a linear cause and effect action leading to L2 motivated behavior. Instead, the motivational force exerted changes over time as a result of complex interaction with other variables. Change in one factor leads to changes in another and the motivating force exerted (Oyserman et al. 2006; Yowell, 2002). Drawing on past research, Dörnyei (2005) asserts that certain conditions can "enhance or hinder the motivational power of a possible self" (p116). These conditions are as follows (Dörnyei 2009b:19):

- For possible selves to exert a motivational capacity they have to exist. Research (Higgins, 1987) shows that expected self-guides are not possessed because individuals vary to generate successful possible selves. So Dörnyei (2009b: 21) emphasizes that the degree of elaborateness and vividness to be effective to generate motivational force.
- The future self guide also has to be deemed plausible to be effective by the individual. Possible selves are only effective when they are 'perceived as realistic within the person's individual circumstances' (Dörnyei 2009b:19)
- For effective desired possible selves an individual should feel congruent with important social identities; that is the ideal and ought selves should be in harmony (Dörnyei 2009b:19). As Oyserman et al. (2006:118) purport – 'A particular possible self may fail to sustain regulatory action because it conflicts with other parts of the self-concept'.
- Oyserman et al (2006) asserted that future self-guides are only effective if they are accompanied by a set of specific pre-developed and plausible action plans. In other words, in order to approximate the ideal self, the individual should have a procedural strategies and "it will turn from a hoped-for into an expected self" (Yowell, 2002)

- In an educational intervention study, Oyserman and Markus (1990a) proposed that a desired possible self will have maximal motivational effectiveness when it is balanced by a counteracting feared possible self in the same domain (Dörnyei 2009b:24)

5. Empirical Validation of the L2 Language Self System

Several quantitative studies have been conducted over the last few years in Hungary, Japan, China, Iran and Saudi Arabia to specifically test and validate the L2 language Self System. The most important researchers are Dörnyei, Ryan, Taguchi et al, Al-Shehri, Csizer and Kormos. Their studies involved over 6,000 participants in four different sample types: secondary students, English as major and non-major (tertiary students) and adult learners. Dörnyei (2009b:31) summed up that all the studies found solid confirmation for the proposed self system by pointing out as:

- Across the various sub-samples, the two variables Integrativeness and the Ideal L2 Self produced an average correlation of 0.54, “leaving no doubt that the two concepts are closely related” (Dörnyei, 2009b:31)
- The correlation between the Ideal L2 Self and the criterion measure (Intended learning effort) was consistently high
- All studies found higher correlations of the Ideal L2 Self with *instrumentality – promotion* than *instrumentality – prevention* (Higgins: 1987, 1998) while the Ought-to self displayed reverse. Thus it proves that “traditionally conceived *Instrumental motivation* can be divided into two distinct types, one relating to the Ideal L2 Self, the other to the Ought-to self” (Dörnyei, 2009b:31)
- “Structural equation models including the full L2 Motivational Self System displayed fine goodness of fit with the data” (Dörnyei, 2009b:31)

6. Practical Implications of the Self-based Approach to Motivation

L2 motivation within the L2 Motivational Self System offers “new avenues for motivating language learners” (Dörnyei, 2009b:34). Taking into account those conditions for the L2 Motivational Self System, Dörnyei (2009b) proposed the following six strategic implications:

- Construction of the Ideal L2 Self: Creating the vision (future self-guides need to exist)
- Imagery enhancement: Strengthening the vision (elaborateness and vividness of the vision)
- Making the Ideal Self plausible: Substantiating the vision (vision should have valid and realistic expectations)
- Activating the Ideal L2 Self: Keeping the vision alive (innovative, enthusiastic and engaging activities)
- Developing an action plan: Operationalising the vision (concrete and appropriate plans, self-regulatory strategies)
- Considering failure: Counterbalancing the vision (potential utilization of cumulative impacts)

7. Conclusion

This paper tries to discuss the major theoretical shift in L2 motivation research, describing how a new paradigm has emerged from both theoretical considerations and empirical studies, and then presenting the main components of ‘L2 Motivational Self System’. As a conceptual scheme, the L2 Motivation Self System (Dörnyei, 2005) including the concept of possible selves, holds a great deal of promise (Harrison: 2008). The strength of the concept lies in its focus on the learner as applicable to education research contexts, its focus on who individuals plan to use language apart from a specific cultural group, and its ability to integrate multiple,

sometimes conflicting motives. Thus this is a notion creating exciting opportunities for language teaching as well as the future advancement of L2 motivation research. I would like to conclude my paper by quoting Markus's (2006) retrospective overview:

“As humans our great evolutionary advantage is our capacity for self-making and world making. In fact our futures may rest with our shared willingness to experiment with possible selves and possible worlds and to redesign ourselves and our worlds so that there is room for all of us” (Markus, 2006: xiv)

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