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The relationship between the L2 Motivational Self System and attainment

David Sandeman

ECC Language Institute, Osaka

davidjsandeman@gmail.com | ORCID: 0000-0002-8497-6371

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Motivation is widely accepted to be a crucial aspect of language learning, and a variety of models of motivation have been proposed over the years. The L2 Motivational Self System is a particularly interesting model that reconceptualizes motivation as a function of possible future self-guides, and has far-reaching pedagogical implications. Critics have pointed out that there is little evidence connecting L2 Motivational Self System to attainment, as it is inconsistently correlated with L2 proficiency and is only a weak predictor of results. However, as this paper details, these criticisms ignore the correlation between the L2 Motivational Self System and other behaviors and attitudes associated with attainment, such as willingness to communicate, self-efficacy, persistent learning, and low L2 anxiety.

Keywords: motivation, L2 Motivational Self System, attainment, L2 proficiency

1. Introduction

Some second language (L2) learners make rapid, seemingly effortless progress, while others languish, unable to improve despite hours upon hours of study. Unfair as this situation may be, it illustrates the fact that language learning is a complex process governed by a myriad of external factors and individual differences. Of these individual differences, motivation in particular has garnered a lot of attention, with some claiming it to be the second strongest predictor (after aptitude) of language success (Saville-Troike 2006). Some even consider it to be the most important individual difference in regards to L2 acquisition, as, unlike a learner's genetically predetermined aptitude for language learning, motivation can be directly influenced and modified.

As interest in motivation continues to swell, an increasingly expansive number of studies into the nature and effect of motivation have been published (see Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan 2015 for an examination of the patterns in motivation research). However, despite

the prodigious amount of research into this area, no single model of motivation has been able to comprehensively explain the temporal and dynamic nature of motivation (Truong 2021), nor has its relation to language attainment been fully understood. One model of motivation that has gained a lot of notice in the past few years is the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), in part because of its relative simplicity and broad explanatory power.

While a strong correlation between motivation (as described by the L2MSS) and intended efforts has been widely demonstrated, the paucity of research utilizing objective measures such as grades and proficiency tests has raised concerns about the degree to which it correlates to actual attainment. However, as motivation is not a direct antecedent to proficiency but rather promotes it through inspiring behaviors and attitudes that facilitate acquisition, it is more worthwhile to examine the connection between motivation and attainment in terms of these facilitators.

2. The socio-educational model: Integrative motivation

It would be nigh impossible to discuss any model of motivation without touching on the seminal work done by Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert in Canada (Gardner & Lambert 1959) in which they proposed that L2 success might be affected by attitudes toward the target language community. This study examined L1 English students studying L2 French (in an English-French bilingual environment) and found students who studied because they wanted to learn more about the language community were more successful (as measured by teachers' ratings of oral and listening skills) than students who studied for more practical reasons.

This work developed into Gardner's socio-educational model (Gardner & Smythe 1975). While the model has undergone a variety of revisions (Gardner 1985; Gardner 2000) the essence of the model remains the contrast between integrative motivation, which reflects a "genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community" (Gardner 2001: 5) and instrumental motivation, which is "related to the potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency, such as getting a better job or a higher salary" (Dörnyei 1994: 3). The socio-educational model holds that achievement arises from a combination of aptitude and motivation, and that integrative motivation is the most facilitative form of motivation (Gardner 2001).

A wealth of research has been undertaken on the socio-educational model. A meta-analysis of 75 studies performed by Gardner and associates (Masgoret & Gardner 2003) has shown it to be highly correlated with achievement (as measured by self-ratings of proficiency, objective measures of proficiency, and grades), and also shown integrativeness, albeit to a lesser extent than motivation, to be consistently positively correlated with achievement.

However, a number of challenges to socio-educational theory and the importance of integrative motivation have been raised. Numerous researchers have posited that achievement may cause integrative motivation rather than result from it (Backman 1976; Hermann 1980; Strong 1984). Others have questioned the impact of the context much of

Gardner's research took place in, as studies undertaken in different contexts have had contradictory results (Au 1988). Oxford and Shearin (1994) argued that motivation's influence might vary depending on whether the students are learning a language prevalent in the community (such as in bilingual Canada where Gardner and Lambert did their original studies) or a language students have little access to. Dörnyei (1990) similarly argued that the learning environment may affect motivation, not because of language availability, but because of its socio-political relevance. He posited that instrumental motivation may play a larger role than integrative motivation in contexts lacking significant contact with the target language community. However, a large scale study of language learners in Hungary (Csizér & Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei, Csizér, & Nemeth 2006) found integrative motivation had a more powerful affect than instrumental motivation, despite the lack of direct contact with the target language community, suggesting that geographical and macrocontextual factors are more important than the learning context, an insight which would lead to the L2MSS.

3. The L2 Motivational Self-System

The L2MSS radically alters the understanding of motivation and integrativeness by shifting the focus from external communities to internal constructs of self. Drawing on the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius 1986) and Higgins self-discrepancy theory (1987; 1996), Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) reconceptualized motivation as a function of possible future self-guides envisioned by learners which "give form, meaning, structure, and direction to one's hopes and threats, thereby inciting and directing possible behavior" (Dörnyei 2005: 100). The L2MSS identifies two types of self-guides: the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self. They, alongside the L2 learning experience, are the major components of the L2MSS (Csizér & Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009).

The ideal L2 self refers to the L2 specific aspects of the learner's ideal self, that is the self which represents all that the learner aspires to be. Dörnyei theorized that it incorporated the concept of integration, as "if one's ideal self is associated with the mastery of an L2, that is, if the person we would like to become is proficient in the L2, we can be described ... as having an integrative disposition" (Csizér & Dörnyei 2005: 4), a supposition supported by consequent studies that found the ideal L2 self significantly correlated with integrativeness (Ryan 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi 2009).

The ought-to L2 self "refers to the attributes that one believes one ought to possess" (Csizér & Dörnyei 2005: 5). This is the future self construed through social pressures, perceived obligations, responsibilities, and duties, which may be wildly different from an individual's own desires and hopes.

The L2 learning experience concerns the impact of the immediate learning environment and the learner's learning experience. This includes aspects such as the teacher, the curriculum, group cohesiveness, and other situation-specific components (Dörnyei 2019).

Much of the research into the L2MSS has focused on self-guides, with motivation theorized to predominantly arise from "the desire to reduce the perceived discrepancies

between the learner's actual self and his or her ideal and ought-to L2 selves" (Csizér & Dörnyei 2005: 5). Possessing vivid, well-realized images of these self-guides enables deeper comparison, creating stronger perceptions of discrepancies and increasing motivation.

In the years since the L2MSS was proposed, a wide range of studies have examined its validity in a variety of contexts. The vast majority of these studies have focused on the influence of the L2MSS's components on motivated learning behavior, in particular in terms of intended effort. On this basis, the L2MSS has been validated in cultural contexts as varied as Hungary (Csizér & Lukács 2010), Indonesia (Lamb 2012), Turkey (Thompson & Erdil-Moody 2014), China, Japan and Iran (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi 2009; Rajab, Far, & Etemadzadeh 2012), and for non-English L2s (Busse & Williams 2010; Csizér & Lukács 2010). All three components of the L2MSS have been shown to be strong predictors of intended effort (Al-hoorie 2018), however it should be noted that the majority of studies have identified the ideal L2 self to be the strongest predictor.

4. Intended efforts and actual results

Despite the evidence that the L2MSS is a valid predictor of intended effort, the dearth of research using objective measures such as academic results or L2 proficiency tests has been raised as an area of concern. Studies which do incorporate objective measures have found that the ideal L2 self, despite consistently being identified as a strong predictor of intended effort, is a far weaker predictor of academic results (Kim & Kim 2011; Dörnyei & Chan 2013) and is inconsistently correlated with L2 proficiency (Lamb 2012; Kim & Kim 2014a; Moskovsky et al. 2016), leading Moskovsky et al. (2016) to argue that the assumption that greater intended efforts to learn an L2 lead to increased proficiency should not be treated as axiomatically true, and suggest that self-reported motivation may not necessarily have behavioral consequences

However, there is a fundamental problem with this "proof is in the pudding" argument. Motivation is far from the only ingredient in the recipe for L2 success. Proficiency comes about through a complex web of factors, of which motivation plays only a part, albeit an important one. A poorly motivated learner gifted with a talent for language learning might well be more proficient than a highly motivated learner with little aptitude. Which is not to say that objective measures are not an important tool – they clearly are. However, motivation alone does not guarantee success or a high level of proficiency. What it does do is facilitate L2 attainment by affecting attitudes and behaviors that promote L2 acquisition. Which is to say that a motivated learner may be expected to achieve a higher level of proficiency than they would have had they been unmotivated, but not necessarily to achieve a higher score on a proficiency test than other, less motivated learners. Objective measures such as these would indeed be quite revelatory given access to parallel worlds where we could measure the proficiencies of L2 learners identical in all regards except motivation. Lacking this, however, it is of more worth to focus on motivation's relationship with the attitudes and behaviors that promote language acquisition. Intended effort is one such attitude, but it is far from the only one.

5. Other attitudes and behaviours leading to attainment

5.1. Willingness to communicate

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is a concept that has gained a lot of attention in L2 research. Simply put, WTC is “the intention to initiate communication, given a choice” (MacIntyre et al. 2001: 36) (see MacIntyre et al. 1998 for a detailed description of WTC). It is considered the most immediate antecedent of actual communication, and is of great importance as it influences the amount and frequency of a learner’s L2 communication (Yashima 2002; Clément et al. 2003), which facilitates successful language acquisition.

WTC has been shown to affect communication in many ways. A higher WTC is associated with more L2 use in the classroom (MacIntyre et al. 1998; Kanat-Mutluoğlu 2016; Munezane 2016), an increased likelihood to use the L2 in authentic communication (Kang 2005), higher levels of fluency (Derwing, Munro, & Thomson, 2008) and language proficiency in general (Yashima 2002).

Substantial evidence linking WTC with the ideal L2MSS has been found. Xie (2014) and Yashima (2009) both found significant correlation between the ideal L2 self and WTC, and Munezane (2013; 2016) found a significant positive causal pathway from the ideal L2 self to WTC. Studies conducted by Lee and Lee (2020) and Lee and Lu (2021) found that students exhibiting stronger ideal L2 selves not only displayed a higher level of WTC inside the classroom, but were also more inclined to engage in L2 communication outside the classroom, such as by posting comments and having conversations using social media. This positive causal link between the ideal L2 self and L2 WTC provides substantial evidence that strong ideal L2 selves leads to increased communication, and ultimately increased language acquisition.

5.2. L2 Anxiety

A high level of L2 anxiety has been shown to pose significant problems for L2 learners as it hampers the acquisition, retention and production of new language (MacIntyre & Gardner 1991). Not only does it negatively affect language production, it also impairs L2 learners’ abilities to receive and process input (MacIntyre & Gardner 1994; Oya et al. 2004), which plays a vital role in language acquisition.

Research into the relationship between the L2MSS and L2 anxiety has clearly shown that both the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience have a negative effect on learner’s levels of anxiety, while the ought-to L2 self exerted a positive effect on anxiety (Papi 2010; Peng 2018; Shih & Chang 2018). This strongly suggests that enhancing learners’ ideal L2 selves should result in learners suffering less from anxiety related impediments to acquisition and being more open to engage in L2 communication.

5.3. Persistence in L2 learning

Persisting in the pursuit of L2 language learning is vital for L2 attainment. While a multitude of factors can aid or hinder acquisition, the surest method of failure is to completely withdraw from the learning environment. As motivation is not only the force required to begin an activity, but the drive to continue, it is not surprising that it has been postulated as significantly contributing to persistence (Clément, Gardner, & Smythe 1977; Northwood & Kinoshita Thomson 2012). Despite this, to my knowledge, there has been only one study to directly examine the L2MSS and its connection to the continued pursuit of L2 learning. Feng and Papi (2020) found that the ideal L2 self was a positive predictor for learning persistence, whereas the ought-to L2 self acted as a negative predictor. It should be noted that L2 persistence in this study was based on measurements of learners' intentions to continue studying, and it could be argued that this may not accurately reflect which learners do actually continue to persist in their language studies – which would require an extremely time-consuming longitudinal study to investigate fully.

The notion that the ideal L2 self plays a role in promoting persistence is collaborated by its strong correlation to intrinsic motivation and the more internalized forms of extrinsic motivation (Yashima 2009), as detailed by self-determination theory, which posits three types of motivation: intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation (for a full account see Deci & Ryan 1985). A number of studies have found that persistence in L2 study is closely correlated to intrinsic motivation and more internalized extrinsic motivation, whereas amotivation is closely correlated with discontinuing studies (Ramage 1990; Noels 2005; Comanaru & Noels 2009). This logically suggests that the ideal L2 self would also be correlated with language learning persistence.

5.4. Self-efficacy and self-regulated learning

Self-efficacy is, essentially, one's belief in their ability to succeed at a given learning task. It is of particular import because it has been closely linked to self-regulated learning (Kim et al. 2015; Kitikanan & Sasimonton 2017), which is the degree to which individuals become metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning processes (Zimmerman 1998). An overwhelming amount of research has demonstrated self-regulated learning's role in improving L2 learning and language learning autonomy (Andrade & Bunker 2009; Gunning & Oxford 2014; Ma & Oxford 2014; Oxford 2011; Pintrich & De Groot 1990; Zimmerman & Risemberg 1997).

Self-guides, particularly the ideal L2 self, have been found to be highly correlated with self-efficacy. Piniel and Csizér's (2013) proposed and found evidence for a circular relationship between self-efficacy and motivation. While Ueki and Takeuchi (2012) found that self-efficacy had a causal effect on the ideal L2 self, Roshandel et al. (2018) found the ideal L2 self to be a powerful predictor of L2 self-efficacy, and Shih and Chang (2018) found that self-guides in general serve as a good predictor for self-efficacy. In addition, a direct link between the ideal L2 self and self-regulated learning has been found, as a stronger perception of one's ideal L2 self correlates to higher levels of

self-regulated learning (Domakani et al. 2016; Kim & Kim 2014b). In short, having a vivid perception of the ideal L2 self leads to both higher self-efficacy and more self-regulated learning, facilitating language acquisition.

6. Areas for further research

There is still much more research required to gain a deeper understanding of the L2MSS and the effect it has on attainment and other aspects of L2 acquisition. As already mentioned, more studies into the role the L2MSS plays in learner persistence, self-efficacy, achievement, and anxiety needs to be undertaken to determine the exact extent that the different components of the L2MSS affect these areas.

Furthermore, to truly capture the nature of the role played by the L2MSS, more qualitative studies are required. To date, this area of L2 research has been swamped with a preponderance of quantitative studies. Qualitative research might give us deeper insight into the nature of the L2MSS and a firmer understanding into the commonly used measure of “intended effort”, and how it relates to actual effort and, ultimately, achievement and attainment.

More research into the nature of the L2MSS itself is also needed. It is very possible that there are other “possible selves” out there that could refine and enrich the model. Thompson (2017), for example, has proposed an “anti-ought self” and presented some evidence that it has an effect on motivation. Additionally, while some research has been undertaken into the role of the L2MSS when studying third or fourth languages (Henry & Thorsen, 2017), there is still much more to explore in regards to multilingual learners.

7. Pedagogical implications

While a full detailing of the pedagogical ramifications arising from the L2MSS is beyond the scope of this paper, it would be remiss not to note the very real potential to increase student motivation it provides. As Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) wrote, “[t]he possibility of harnessing the powerful motivational function of imagination opens up a whole new avenue for promoting student motivation by means of increasing the elaborateness and vividness of self-relevant imagery in the students’ (130). In other words, it is very feasible to increase L2 learner’s motivation through the implementation of vision-inspired activities to help students realize a more vivid conception of their future self-guides.

While the framework for such a program has been described in detail by Dörnyei and Ryan (2015), the essential elements consist of creating and strengthening a learner’s image of themselves as an L2 user and how the L2 could benefit their lives, grounding that vision in realistic expectations, constructing a blueprint of how to actualize that vision, and reactivating that image over time to keep it alive. They also recommend creating a corresponding awareness of the effect and results of failure to help maximize the motivational effect.

These vision based motivational interventions have been shown to have a positive effect on L2 learner's motivation (Fukada, et al. 2011; Sampson 2012; Chan 2014; Mackay 2014; Magid & Chan 2014) and there are numerous activities (see Dörnyei & Kubanyiova 2014) that teachers can use to aid their students in creating deeper, richer images of their ideal L2 self.

Personally, I have found great success with even simple activities that focus students' imaginations towards how their L2 could enhance and improve their lives. Activities such as asking students to imagine and discuss what would be easier if they had a mastery of their L2, how their life would change if they had mastered their L2, or what they would first like to do when they have mastered their L2 are all simple, relatively quick activities that encourage students to engage with and deepen their image of their ideal L2 self. Longer activities designed around future career aspirations are also very easy to tie to the ideal L2 self. Incorporating imagining and discussing the role their L2 could play and the benefits it could bring to a career into activities involving discussing dream jobs or what students want to do in the future has worked well with students of all levels. Students at higher levels might enjoy activities such as asking the class to act out a class reunion set five or ten years in the future, and have them discuss and imagine what experiences their mastery of the L2 has enabled them to have and what career success their L2 has led them to achieve. Developing these positive images of achievement tied to L2 success has seen a noticeable increase in the motivation of my students.

8. Conclusion

The journey to L2 attainment is complex and our understanding of it is far from complete, but the L2MSS does provide some insight into how L2 learners find the impetus to embark on that journey and the persistence to persevere. While being motivated does not guarantee attainment, it does promote behaviors and attitudes that facilitate language acquisition. Despite the need for further research, learners with a vivid ideal L2 self do tend to make more effort, be more willing to communicate, have more self-efficacy, be less anxious, and be more likely to persist in the pursuit of L2 attainment. Given these benefits and the ease with which the vividness of future self-guides can be enhanced through incorporating vision-based activities into the classroom, it very much behooves teachers to be aware of the research being done in this area.

Abbreviations

L2 – second language

L2MSS – second language motivational self system

WTC - willingness to communicate.

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