



Motivations of Second Language Learning: Application of L2 Motivational Self System in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract: Second language (L2) motivation as a factor that facilitates effective language learning has been the focus of research in the field of second language teaching and learning. Particularly for EFL learners, L2 motivation may draw a crucial impact on their learning outcomes. Employing Dörnyei's second language motivational self system (L2MSS) as the theoretical framework, this paper explored the influence of learners' L2MSS on their second language learning achievements by reviewing and discussing three current empirical studies and evaluating the application of L2MSS in the EFL classroom. This paper finds that ought-to L2-self drew a more intensive impact on learners' L2 learning outcomes than the ideal L2-self. However, the ideal L2-self made a direct contribution to learners' learning intentions. The application of the second language self system in EFL classrooms is worth being encouraged to assist second language teachers be more effective in enhancing learners' L2 motivation to learn second language, leading to better learning outcomes and higher achievements.

Keywords: L2 motivation, second language learning, L2 motivational self system, EFL

1. Introduction

According to the observation in previous teaching process in the EFL classroom in China, high-motivated learners tend to work longer and enthusiastic about their language learning. As a result, they often achieve successful outcomes to a certain extent. There is no doubt that various affective factors will influence the second language (L2) learning outcomes. Researches on individual differences variables, which include age, gender, personal traits, language aptitudes, learning strategies, motivation, etc, indicate that the factors is crucial for learners' SLL, and influence their learning speed and learning effectiveness (Robinson, 2012). However, motivation is a crucial factor, which could promote and encourage learners to continue learning. In particular, the influence of the L2 motivational self system (L2MSS) works on learners (Dörnyei, 2005). This paper attempts to inquire lightly into the influence of learners' L2MSS on L2 achievements of SLL based on three current empirical studies and analyze the benefits of its application in EFL classroom teaching practice.

2. Summary of relevant theories

In 1950s, Lambert and Gardner (1959) initiated research on L2 learning motivation from a social psychological standpoint, first introducing the influential concept of integrative motivation, which was centred and highly praised for decades, promoting the further development of L2 motivation research. Early research concluded that the L2 motivations were divided into integrative orientation and instrumental orientation (Lambert & Gardner, 1972). During the period between the 1980s and 1990s, the medium-term stage of L2 motivation research, psychologist Deci and Ryan (1980) put forward self-determination theory, dividing motivation into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The former is generated by the individual himself, while the latter is mainly affected by external factors (i.e., getting high scores, or avoiding punishment.).

After the 1990s, L2 motivation theory has developed into a new stage. Unlike Gardner's theory, which focussed more on the social environment of L2 learning, Dörnyei (2005) presented a new interpretation based on Gardner's integrativeness, which paid more attention to the classroom environment, enlightened by possible selves theory raising by Markus and Nurius (1986), then proposed the L2MSS theory under the influence of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987).

L2MSS theory contained the following three components.

Ideal L2-Self, which refers to students' desire to have a sense of self that could use L2 proficiently, which is a powerful motive for learners' L2 learning, promoting them to strive to narrow and bridge the gap between actual and ideal selves. It could cover the integrative and internalised instrumental motives.

Ought-to L2-Self, means the features that students have certain self-requirement that they desire to meet the expectations or prevent from possible inimical results. It could better explain the more externalized instrumental motives.

L2 Learning Experience signifies the motive connected with specific learning environment and experience (i.e., the influence of teachers, peers, experience of success).

The elemental hypothesis of the L2MSS theory is that if the proficient use of the target language is integral components of the learner’s ideal or ought-to L2-self, he will have an intense motive to learn the target language, owing to that the learner has the psychological desire to eliminate the gap between the actual self and possible self (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009).

Researches on L2 motivation has become an essential component of second language teaching studies. Based on the specific classroom situation, focusing on the actual learning process, the motivation research has enlightened the L2 teaching to a varying degree. Particularly, the development of motivational strategy system can be applied to stimulate and maintain learners’ learning motives. Dörnyei (2001b) presented the framework of categories of motivational strategies, which classified the strategies into four components, which are listed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The categories of motivational strategies

1. Create the basic motivational conditions.	2. Generate initial motivation of learners.
2. Maintain and protect motivation.	4. Encourage positive self-evaluation.

A certain number of studies in different countries have been conducted to examine and prove the validity of L2MSS. Three empirical studies in the last five years will be discussed in light in the following sections.

3. Relevant empirical studies

3.1 Study 1 — Whether L2MSS certainly has a positive-relationship with L2 achievement?

In this study, Moskovsky et al. (2016) investigated that whether the L2MSS theory was able to predict the learners’ L2 achievement, which evaluated in terms of the language proficiency by assessing for reading and writing. The data was collected from university students in Saudi, who major in English and have a typical EFL learning context.

This research employed Dörnyei’s (2005) L2MSS model and referred to several researches (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013), indicating that three main components of L2MSS indeed having the capacity to forecast desired behavior. However, the finding conducted that high (higher) motive of learning has not to be transferred into actual L2 achievement, which concluded that these components are not always related to L2 achievement in this crowd of learners.

It was not a reverse of the theory. Instead, it proved that the motivation-achievement relationship plays a more important role in L2 outcomes than self-guides. The finding related to the Saudi learning context to a certain extent. The L2 proficiency of participants is low in general, which reminds the researchers to pay attention to the influence of different contexts and social-cultural background drawing to the investigation area. Moreover, this study enlightened the L2 learning and teaching process. Teachers and learners have to realize that learners’ attitudes and motives are not able to guarantee to reach high achievements. To achieve successful outcomes, while building the sense of the three elements from L2MSS, focusing on gaps between learner’s actual self and achievements, more detailed measures and strategies should be taken.

3.2 Study 2 — A comparison of the L2MSS between two types of learning contexts of learners in China

This research was designed with two main purposes (Jianying, 2016). In the first place, validate Dörnyei’s L2MSS in both EFL and ESL learning contexts in China. Secondly, compare the L2MSS model in the two settings. The EFL and ESL participants were Chinese learners studying in domestic universities and Canadian universities respectively. There were some similarities and differences between the two contexts in the findings.

For similarities, firstly, the L2 learning experience made decisive contributions to motivate learning behavior in both contexts. In addition, the role of ideal L2-self was regulated to the greater extent by the L2 learning experience, which could be concluded as ideal L2-self played an indirect role in both contexts.

For differences, however, the most obvious differences were reflected in the role of ought-to L2-self and ideal L2-self respectively. Ought-to L2-self had a more intensive impact on ESL learners than that on EFL learners, owing to that using English proficiently is essential for ESL learner as it is related closely to the success of their social activities. They might win identity recognition, well-paid works, and meet their parents’ expectations. With regard to the role of ideal L2-self, it contributed to EFL learners directly on the learning intention, whereas there was merely little impact on the ESL learners, due to the pessimistic attitude of ESL learners towards the ideal L2-self as they always subconsciously expect that their English proficiency could reach the level of mother-tongue speakers around them.

3.3 Study 3 — Role of L2MSS on willingness to communicate (WTC) of EFL learners

This study inquired into the influence of L2MSS working on the L2 WTC of Korean EFL university and high school students (Seong, 2019). The findings indicated that secondary L2 learners who showed more intensive ought-to L2-self and ideal L2-self performed a higher level of L2 WTC, whereas the undergraduates who showed more intensive ideal L2-self work better on L2 WTC in both contexts. Additionally, the CSAT language test was another crucial factor, which made efforts on enhancing EFL secondary students' ought-to L2 self images, as students have the strong desire to prevent their teachers and parents from disappointment. Moreover, comparing with the secondary students, ought-to L2-self might not work efficiently for undergraduates' L2 WTC.

The study also suggested that educational support might promote the EFL learners' L2 WTC in English exam-oriented countries. Educational authorities could put forward some guidelines and instructions that help teachers to implement performance tasks, cultivating L2 learners with building their ideal L2 self-images, and encourage English-speaking activities inside the classroom environment.

In today's globalized era, English communicative ability showed an increasing trend of becoming essential. Thus, helping learners improve their L2 WTC is crucial for language educators. The influence of the L2MSS on both inside and outside the classroom is still worth further exploration.

4. General implications and applications for teaching in the EFL classroom

In the study of Moskovsky et al. (2016), there was a reminder of language teaching in terms of ignoring the gap between the ideal L2-self and actual self and behaviour of learners and the social context that may affect learners' classroom testing outcomes. Thus, when teachers design the classroom teaching activities, they should make efforts on adopting well-considered motivational strategies (Dörnyei, 2001b) to assist the learners to transfer their motives into achievements.

The second study (Jianying, 2016) provided a different perspective that comparing EFL and ESL learning context in China, which offered implications on L2 teaching practical activities. Whether in EFL or ESL learning context, teachers have the responsibility to build an active and inspiring classroom through well-designed activities, so that the learners could enjoy their learning process. Additionally, it is fortunate for EFL learners as classrooms offer them possible and frequent English learning opportunities (Jianying, 2016). Establishing harmonious teacher-student relationships in class may become beneficial.

The findings of the final study (Seong, 2019) provided several implications for practical L2 teaching practice. In the first place, according to the educational environment of learners, it is necessary to consider the specific contextual pedagogic methods. For instance, considering that the positive role of ought-to L2-self played on learners, teachers could set oral English tasks as part of performance-based activities, making them more willing to communicate in English (Seong, 2019). Moreover, as EFL learners with strong ideal L2-self awareness perform better in L2 WTC, teachers could help students build their ideal L2-self through the methods that offering tasks or learning materials, promoting them imagine their ideal L2-self (e.g., becoming an interpreter in the future, studying abroad).

In my perspective, the L2MSS could be well-employed in EFL classroom for teachers to design practices to enhance the learning motives of students, and lead to higher achievements of their L2 outcomes. Here are my suggestions for applications in EFL classroom in the following content. According to the differences among learners' L2 learning experience and expectations, the activities should be designed into two categories under the guideline proposed by Dörnyei (2001b). One adapts to learners who are affected to a greater extent by ideal L2-self, while the other is more suitable for learners who are mainly affected by ought-to L2-self.

With regard to the former, the activities could be created based on situational approach, carrying out some role-play activities that related to future-self imagination. In addition, employing English movies or songs which contain the target language features to design the multimedia teaching activities, as well as introducing foreign cultures and background to students, which could help them create the ideal L2-self much easier. As for the latter, task-based activities with explicit and achievable goal setting by teachers could be put forward. Furthermore, some game-based activities are necessary as well, owing to that it could create a relaxed and harmonious classroom learning environment, which provides guarantees for positive L2 learning experience.

5. Benefits from the activities

As for the effects of the activities proposed above, these activities would benefit the L2 learners in numerous ways. I will teach English in the Chinese EFL classroom, the target learners will be high school students, which means that they have a certain level of L2 proficiency that could be rated as intermediate (upper-intermediate). According to the three studies

mentioned above, high school students can be affected strongly by all three elements in L2MSS. In terms of the situational teaching activities, which are set as the real scenes of life abroad, students would be promoted to imagine the future self, which is beneficial for building the ideal L2-self images. It is also followed the first motivational strategy (see Table 1, p.3) of Dörnyei (2001b). In terms of multimedia teaching activities, they would enhance learners' interests in English itself and even raise wondering of the cultures of English-speaking countries, which could help students develop their sense of ideal L2-self, then become a long-term motive for L2 learners.

Task-based activities with unambiguous and reachable goals following the third strategy (see Table 1, p.3) of Dörnyei (2001b), benefit the students in building ought-to L2-self. Students would be promoted to reach the goal as they desire to meet the teacher's expectations and win peer's respect. As to the game-based activities, it would contribute to creating a comfortable classroom learning atmosphere, leading to a positive L2 learning outcome.

6. Evaluating the effectiveness of in the EFL classroom

To evaluate the effectiveness of these activities I mentioned above, there are several methods for testing whether the activities are appropriate in the Chinese EFL classroom. I would choose the classroom observation in the first place as it is a direct visual way to recognize and compare the changes in the learners' classroom performance. In addition, I would like to design the questionnaire surveys to collect more detailed data in terms of the three components of L2MSS (ideal L2-self, ought-to L2-self, and L2 learning experience) of students. This questionnaire should be taken twice, before applying the activities and after implementing the activities for a semester respectively and compare the two data results. Students are expected to finish the questionnaire in class as the EFL classroom offers the opportunities and convenience of collecting data centrally, which could ensure the quantity of the result to some extent. Otherwise, the students may treat the survey carelessly due to varying reasons (e.g., do not have enough time, ignore the importance of the survey), which might affect the accuracy of the survey result. Furthermore, a face-to-face interview with learners would be a good choice as well. However, this method has certain time limitations that it is not appropriate to interview every student in the class because of the numerous numbers of students in the classroom.

7. Conclusion

L2MSS theory has a high practical value for L2 learning and teaching. The research and development in this field are able to help language teachers motive L2 learners effectively, reach greater teaching effects and higher learning achievement. The research on L2MSS could promote the continuous development of L2 learning motivational strategies, perfecting the implementations and applications of teaching, achieving the best effects as well. However, shortcomings exist in this theory, and the theoretical framework and model are still under continuous research. Meanwhile, the empirical study on this theory in China, especially for EFL learners, still belongs to the initial stage, which would become a new direction for academic research and learning motivation at home and abroad in the sooner future.

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