

The influence of international online distance learning experiences on L2 motivation and ideal L2 selves of master students in language education

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Abstract: During the Covid-19 pandemic, many international students have chosen to pursue their postgraduate studies through online distance learning while residing in their home country. This qualitative study investigated the influence of international online distance learning experiences on the language learning motivation of language education master students and their future self-images as language learners and language teachers. Data about the academic, technological and sociocultural aspects of these students' online distance learning experiences were collected from six participants through six hour-long semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that, first, the academic aspect of the international online distance learning experience had the most powerful impact, followed by the technological and sociocultural aspects. Second, the international distance learning experiences exerted a mixed impact on L2 motivation, with the negative influence overshadowing the positive one. The influence of these experiences on the formation of the participants' ideal L2 learner and teacher selves was more positive, and the impact was greater on the participants' ideal L2 teacher identity than their ideal L2 learner identity. These findings have several implications for improving online pedagogy and supporting language education students. Further research could focus on the lasting influence of international distance learning on L2 learning.

Key words: International online distance learning experiences; L2 motivation; ideal L2 learner self; ideal L2 teacher self

1 Introduction

Motivation has long been deemed important in second language (L2) learning, and the concept of L2 motivation has been reconceptualized from multiple dimensions. As a synthesised framework of L2 motivation, Dörnyei's L2 motivational self system (L2MSS) understands L2 motivation from a self-concept perspective, acknowledging the role of future L2 self-images and the influence of L2 learning experiences on L2 motivation [1]. In recent years, other studies have investigated the motivational power of L2 learning experiences in macro contexts, such as study-abroad contexts [2]. Nevertheless, L2 learning contexts are ever-changing and dynamic, and more research is needed to understand how learners' new situation and distance learning contexts during Covid-19, influenced their L2 motivation and L2 self-images using the L2MSS framework.

The specific research questions are as follows:

1. In what ways do different elements of the international distance learning experiences of language education master's students influence their L2 motivation?

2. In what ways do different elements of the international distance learning experiences of language education master's students shape their ideal L2 selves as language learners?

3. In what ways do different elements of the international distance learning experiences of language education master's students shape their ideal L2 selves as language teachers?

2 Literature review

2.1 L2 motivational self system (L2 MSS)

The L2 motivational self system was proposed by Dörnyei [1]. It centers on self-conceptions and has been employed to reflect and explain L2 learners' motivation toward effective language learning. L2 MSS consists of three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and the L2 learning experience. Among these, the ideal L2 self (i.e., an L2 users' image of what they want to become in the future) is the central component and a strong driver of long-term L2 motivation. The L2 learning experience includes contexts and experiences related to L2 learning, which serve as situational and executive motivations [3]. Language education students are studying to become language teachers in the future, so their major L2 identities are L2 learners and L2 teachers, and the dynamic L2 learning experience plays a vital role in the formation of their ideal L2 selves and L2 motivation.

Despite Dörnyei's reconceptualisation of integrative orientation, L2 MSS is compatible with and complementary to the social-educational model. L2MSS also borrows self-concepts from psychological theories, which focuses on situational learning experiences and acknowledges that L2 motivation involves a dynamic process of identity formation from the present status to the future possible selves. Hence, L2MSS is a synthesis and progression of previous theories [4].

2.2 Learner and teacher identities of language education students

In this study, language education master students' main L2 identities include both L2 learner and L2 teacher identities because these students were learning both the L2 and L2 teaching methods. Although the theoretical perspectives discussed above are mainly applied to language learner identity research, they are also applicable to language teacher identities [5]. These identities are multiple, contradictory and dynamic, constantly changing through social interaction with other individuals and material interaction with non-human actors, such as classrooms, institutions, and online spaces, places, and objects.

2.3 Applying L2 MSS in international online distance learning context

Many L2 motivation studies have been conducted with students in the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) context -- a virtual version of the foreign-language classroom context where students learn a L2 in a formal way. Most studies of CALL contexts have adopted the cognitive-situated perspective [6]. According to this perspective, L2 learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can be affected by classroom tasks, teachers' feedback, personal interest and environmental factors.

However, L2 learning in the international online distance learning context can be less formal than that in the CALL context because it occurs both in the L2-mediated online classroom and during communication with online communities outside the online classroom. Using both L1 and L2 to engage in online communities may help L2 learners construct more global and multicultural identities [7]. Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by using the concepts of the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience from L2MSS to understand how the specific learning experience influences L2 motivation and ideal L2 selves from a psychosocial, sociocultural, poststructural and new materialist perspective.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research design

This study adopted a qualitative approach with semi-structured interviews to gather rich data [8]. The flexible deductive method was used in the data coding process, beginning with codes extracted from the literature review and applicable theoretical frameworks, and adding and modifying codes that emerged from the data.

3.2 Participants

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants from whom I could obtain rich information of central importance to the inquiry [9]. Six participants from one UK university volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews to share their distance learning experiences and their perceptions of their L2 motivation and ideal L2 selves. All the participants (aged 22 to 25) signed the information sheet and consent form before the interviews. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' privacy.

3.3 Data collection

A semi-structured interview was conducted to collect rich data concerning respondents' experiences, views and opinions, because they helped gain new insights from the participants while focusing on relevant and important topics [10]. A pilot study was carried out with one of my friends before data collection to modify the interview questions.

3.4 Data analysis

Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed and translated from Chinese to English. Thematic analysis, by means of Nvivo 20, was used to code and analyse the data in a flexible deductive way. First, I drew some codes (e.g., academic pressure) from the literature review and L2MSS. Then, new codes (e.g., inadequate English communication opportunities) that emerged from the data were added and irrelevant codes (e.g., specific events) were deleted or changed in light of the research questions [11]. After coding, the codes were categorized into different themes using the thematic analysis steps suggested by Braun and Clark [12].

4 Findings

This study explored international online distance learning experiences to investigate the influence of such experiences on L2 motivation and ideal L2 learner and teacher selves. The first major finding was that the academic aspect of international distance learning experiences had the most influence on the participants' L2 motivation and ideal L2 selves, followed by the technological and sociocultural aspects. The participants' L2 motivation fluctuated, but their ideal L2 selves were relatively stable.

The online English-medium academic programme promoted implicit L2 learning, but the participants' experiences generally had a negative impact on their L2 motivation. By contrast, the participants' distance learning experiences had a more positive influence on their ideal L2 selves, with a stronger effect on their ideal L2 teacher self. The participants' ideal L2 learner and teacher selves showed a tendency to be more communicative and open to different cultures, mainly for practical reasons. Overall, the changes in the participants' ideal L2 selves reflected the sociocultural perspective on identity most, while the other perspectives (i.e., psychosocial, poststructural and new materialist) were not apparent.

5 Implications

The findings have several practical implications for motivating L2 learning in an international online distance learning context. First, measures should be taken to increase the online communication between students and teachers and among students. For example, online hobby groups could be built among students from different nationalities and programmes so that group members could frequently discuss their shared interests [13].

The second implication of the study's findings concerns strengthening digital support for the learners. The participants

mentioned the limited access to digital support for academic English courses, so it would be better if the university could open the English learning resources to all learners. Strengthened digital support could satisfy the learners' need for autonomy and engage them more deeply in online L2 learning [14].

The last suggestion is specific to language education master' students. Any experience can greatly influence their ideal L2 learner and teacher identities. Therefore, regular reflection on their experiences is beneficial for them because they can apply these reflections in their future L2 learning and teaching. They can even record the micro-teaching, if permitted, to watch and analyse it repeatedly. After their international distance learning experiences, the university could continue to hold reflection sessions in which the learners could reinterpret their experiences and reflect on their inner teacher selves [15].

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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