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L2 Motivation and Identity in Chinese Students Learning a Second Language

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ABSTRACT

This literature review explores the evolving landscape of L2 motivation, emphasizing the interplay between motivation and identity among Chinese students studying a second language. From Gardner to Dörnyei, the review traces theoretical developments, highlighting the significance of ideal and ought-to selves within the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). Integrating empirical findings, it reveals how Confucian-influenced societal norms shape Chinese students' motivations, particularly in English versus Languages Other Than English (LOTE) contexts. Given the large numbers of Chinese students learning languages abroad and in China, the review emphasizes the need for further research into the dynamic relationship between identity and motivation in multilingual environments, with Chinese learners as a focal point.

KEYWORDS

L2 motivation, L2MSS, identity, Chinese students

Introduction

Motivation has been recognized as an extremely important factor shaping the experience of individuals in second language educational research for the past several decades. Put simply, motivation determines if the envisioned outcome for language learning will be successful or not. Since the start of motivational research in this area in the 1950s by Gardner and Lambert (1959), the area has expanded from a focus on social psychological factors (Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Gardner, 1985) to different perspectives such as cognitive (e.g., Self-Determination Theory; see Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002) and process-oriented (Dörnyei, 2000) perspectives. In 2005, adopting a socio-dynamic perspective, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) made significant contributions to the field through developing a three-dimensional L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) which has become the most popular model for recent L2 motivation research (Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2022). This is the beginning of identity being incorporated in L2 motivation theories. In this article, we briefly look at the evolving process of L2 motivation, from Gardner to Dörnyei, and from L2 motivation itself to the current trends of interconnectedness between identity and motivation in L2 learning. We then turn to studies that focus on Chinese students so that we can explore more about these students' identity and L2 motivation to learn a Language Other Than English (LOTE) in a multilingual global context.

Instrumentality and Integrativeness of Motivation

Prior research on what inspires language learners to study languages has divided possible reasons into instrumental (e.g., better career prospects or financial gains) and integrative (e.g., the capacity to integrate into a new culture) categories (Gardner, 2006). This binary categorization of L2 motivation started with Gardner's motivational research in Francophone Canadian contexts in the 1950s. While Gardner's work

focused on both dimensions, the integrative orientation enjoyed greater scholarly influence in the following years. In earlier definitions, the integrative orientation was framed as the desire 'to learn more about the language group' (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 267) with 'a willingness to be like valued members of the language community' (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, p. 271). This stance recognized a strict dichotomy between native speakers and non-native speakers, with the implication that non-native speakers should speak like native speakers. However, the concept of integrativeness has since evolved from the notion of assimilating within a specific L2 speaking community, to a broader idea of being open and respectful towards the L2 community.

In the context of learning English, integrativeness is now seen as having an interest in being part of the global community of English speakers (Lamb, 2004, 2009; Yashima, 2009). This evolved idea shows that, with the increasing number of multilingual speakers globally, integrativeness as a concept must be able to speak to a more diverse community across spaces. Dörnyei (2005) coined the 'integrativeness enigma' based on work that he and his colleagues conducted in Hungary (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005a, 2005b; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Dörnyei et al., 2006). In other English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, researchers nuanced the concept of integrativeness to highlight positive attitudes towards target language communities without a desire to assimilate into them (Irie, 2003; Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2006; Warden & Lin, 2000). Instead of the traditional perspective of viewing target language community as static, Ryan (2009) found that integrative motivation related more with attitudes about an undefined L2 community than a fixed target language community. In Ryan's study on Japanese English learners, quantitative data also showed that integrativeness correlates with the future self (who the language learner wants to become), which has important emotional implications for how learners feel about the language and its speakers.

In the context of globalization, studies have shown that instrumental reasons are becoming increasingly important for learners of English (Chen et al., 2021), as is developing a 'World English identity' (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 97). In Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), he links the two forms of instrumentality that derive from Higgins' (1998) distinction – promotional and preventional – to ideal and ought-to selves (described below). Generally, promotional instrumentality relates to one's ideal self in a second language, in that it can be utilized to seek success, both on a professional and personal level. On the other hand, preventional instrumentality connects to one's ought-to self, as it is used to control negative outcomes that are associated with any duties and obligations the individual believes they have to others. Taguchi et al.'s (2009) research on Japanese, Chinese and Iranian learners of English suggested that promotion-based instrumentality had a more positive correlation with their ideal L2 selves, while prevention-based instrumentality had a higher correlation to their ought-to L2 self.

L2 Motivation as a Process

Switching to another historical root, process-oriented views of L2 motivation were explored by researchers in 1990s (Ford, 1992; Gollwitzer, 1990; Heckhausen, 1991; Kuhl & Beckmann, 1994; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Similar to the dynamic nature of identity (Norton, 2000), this temporal view posits that motivation is a fluctuating process and could change over time rather than be seen as a traditionally stable emotional and mental state measured by questionnaire at a certain point of time (Dörnyei, 2000). The Person-in-Context Relational View of Motivation, proposed by Ushioda (2009), emphasized that second language learners are not only individuals, but also members of specific cultural and historical contexts. Their motivation and identities are influenced by these contexts, but at the same time, they also have the ability to shape and impact these contexts. In Kozaki and Ross's (2011) study, contextual variables in the classroom environment included perceived peers' normative aspirations and orientations to the social mainstream. This could positively or negatively affect leaner's attitudes towards the target language.

Future images of self are embedded in an individual's perception, but are also socially constructed through the internalization of social values and external environments: class contexts (Kozaki & Ross, 2011), peers (Spolsky, 2000), and family influences (Kormos & Csizér, 2008) have been found to mediate

language learners' motivational state. MacIntyre et al. (2009) highlighted cross-cultural differences in self-perception and their impact on the motivational qualities of learners' possible L2 selves. In Taguchi et al. (2009), for example, the L2 learning experience was found to be a less important motivator than the ideal L2 self (described later) based on the amount of effort Chinese learners tend to invest. In contrast, for Japanese and Iranian learners, L2 learning experience played a more decisive role than the ideal L2 self on learners' willingness to invest learning effort.

Recent studies on Chinese students recognize L2 motivation as a process. For example, Du and Jackson (2018) examined the evolving English learning motivation of a group of Mainland Chinese students in English-stream of a bilingual (Chinese-English) university in Hong Kong. Drawing on theories that acknowledge the dynamic and context-specific nature of L2 motivation, the study sought to understand the participants' heightened motivational trajectories during their transition to learning English as a foreign language through English as a medium of instruction. Liu's (2021) study on Chinese university English majors' perceptions of a content course highlighted that motivation, as a dynamic process, fluctuates throughout the course, and is influenced by various factors such as classroom environment, instructional methods, and individual student attitudes. This process-oriented view of motivation underscores the importance of adaptive teaching strategies to sustain and enhance student motivation in language learning contexts.

Self-Determination Theory

Building on the insights from the L2MSS, which emphasizes the role of an individual's ideal and ought-to selves in driving language learning motivation, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) complements this work by highlighting the importance of competence, relatedness, and autonomy in fostering intrinsic motivation. Noel (2009) discussed these three aspects of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002): briefly, competence refers to the feelings of being able to accomplish an action; relatedness refers to a sense of belongingness with other people within a community; and, autonomy draws a connection between actively engaged behaviors that align with one's values, interests, and needs within one's self. Students' internalization of language learning (self-determined motivation) therefore does not depend solely on themselves, as different people and influences play varying roles in shaping that learning. This idea resonates with Dörnyei's (2005) L2MSS (Noel, 2009). This results in an ideally increasing, though sometimes decreasing, identification with the values and interests associated with the target language community and a sense of belonging to that ethnolinguistic group. For Noel, rather than seeing motivation as a fixed construct, motivation is increasingly recognized as having a socially-situated and dynamic nature which can change over time.

Recent research on SDT emphasizes promoting intrinsic motivation over extrinsic motivation, as an increased sense of autonomy and control enhances learning motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Further, better emotional states typically result in increased intrinsic motivation (Løvoll et al., 2017; MacIntyre & Vincze, 2017). Based on the above theory and findings, Zhang et al.'s (2024) study on 101 Chinese university students found that self-regulated learning (SRL) strategies in self-regulated digital game-based vocabulary learning (SR-DGBVL) notably increased motivation, and this heightened motivation, in turn, significantly advanced vocabulary knowledge acquisition. Similarly, Wang and Wang (2024) investigated the impact of foreign language enjoyment (FLE), trait emotional intelligence (EI), and classroom climate on 346 Chinese EFL students' motivation using structural equation modeling. The findings suggest that promoting a positive classroom climate and cultivating trait EI can enhance EFL students' enjoyment in the learning process. Trait EI, as an internal factor, played a more crucial role in shaping FLE compared to the classroom climate, an external factor. Their findings align with SDT, which emphasizes that intrinsic motivation is enhanced when students experience autonomy, relatedness, and competence – factors that are supported by positive classroom climates and high emotional intelligence. Though potentially used in combination with SDT, this article focuses more on L2MSS as the overarching framework to reflect the more common use in the literature, while still noting these contextual and dynamic elements (Boo et al., 2015).

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L2 Motivational Self System

Although identity was not explicitly linked to motivation in Gardner's dichotomy mentioned above, Dörnyei (2009) proposed a L2MSS to reveal links between identity and motivation in language learning for the first time. Based on Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves theory, and Higgins's (1987) self-discrepancy theory, Dörnyei developed three aspects of L2MSS: ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2009). Dörnyei (2005) links the concept of possible selves to his definitions of ideal self and ought-to self, the potential identities language learners can have while practicing a new language. According to Dörnyei (2009), in reality 'there can be a clash between learner's personal and social identity,' although if possible 'the ideal and the ought selves should be in harmony' (p. 20). The concept of an ideal L2 self refers to a person's intrinsic desire to become proficient in a second language. This may include being able to confidently communicate and interact with others in different contexts, as well as making friends from different countries. Having the identity of an effective L2 user can serve as a strong motivator for learners to bridge the gap between the current self and ideal self. For instance, being motivated to learn the language to achieve an ideal self might produce more gains than just focusing on linguistic improvements.

On the other hand, the ought-to self represents the external expectations placed on language learners by others and the consequences they may face if they fail to meet these expectations. For example, a learner may feel compelled to become fluent in a second language due to social pressures or to avoid negative outcomes. This external pressure can act as a primary motivator for L2 learning. Chen et al. (2021) suggested that a person's desire to assimilate into a second language community is determined by their ideal L2 self, which represents their personal expectations for their future L2 abilities. Meanwhile, their ought-to L2 self reflects their attitude towards meeting the expectations of others regarding their language learning.

Even as these two future-oriented selves guide the learner, there is a third element in the L2MSS: L2 learning experience (Dörnyei, 2009). This refers to the specific learning environments that a learner has encountered in the past or present, and the influence of teachers, peers, curricula, and materials. L2 learning experience is under researched in existing research compared to the other two dimensions and sometimes referred by scholars as 'L2 leaning attitudes' (Dörnyei, 2019). Unlike the ideal and ought-to L2 selves, which focus on future desires and external pressures, learning experience is qualitatively different, being tied to the impact of classroom processes, teachers, peers, and out-of-school experiences that influence the learner's current motivation.

Identity and L2 Motivation

Studies on the role of attitudes and motivations to learn a second language shows that a positive orientation towards the target language group leads to higher levels of L2 proficiency (Dörnyei, 2003, 2005; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). Using L2MSS to investigate the relationship between ethnolinguistic affiliation and L2 proficiency, Segalowitz et al. (2009) drew attention to the different facets of ethnolinguistic language identity among Francophone learners of English. In their study, participants who identified as being Canadian regardless of native language required them to speak English in order to communicate with other members of the larger community. According to Dörnyei (2005), having a double identity may equate to having possessed an ideal L2 self (p. 102-104). However, in this case, identifying exclusively as Quebecois meant these participants lacked an ideal L2 self to motivate them to speak English.

Noel (2009) criticized the line drawn between constructivist theorists claiming people having multiple and dynamic identities (for example, Norton, 2000) and the social psychological perspective of a true and authentic motivational self or internalization (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002; Dörnyei, 2005) as motivation is not isolated from social contexts. Instead of seeing motivation as a fixed construct, motivation is increasingly recognized as having a socially-situated and dynamic nature and can alter over time. This type of L2 motivation can be self-determined or externally imposed on language learners (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Ushioda, 2014).

To construct a cohesive narrative exploring motivation and identity in second language learning,

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Darvin and Norton (2015) expanded their model of investment based on the development of motivation. The model emphasizes the intersection of identity, capital, and ideology, offering a critical lens to analyze power dynamics at both micro and macro levels. Blommaert (2010) complements this perspective by showcasing how languages and varieties index diverse identities, underscoring the importance of sociolinguistic scales. Wortham and Rhodes (2012) similarly advocated for investigating identity formation through critical points in learners' activities across various contexts and timescales, echoing the multi-layered approach proposed by Darvin and Norton (2015). Norton and Early (2011) also emphasized the significance of researchers' self-reflection on their own identities concerning participants and research sites, fostering deeper understanding. Lastly, tracing learners' identity transformations across different contexts, as suggested by Magnan and Lafford (2012), can provide longitudinal insights into how identities evolve over time and space, offering a comprehensive framework for studying motivation and identity in second language learning.

More recently, Darvin and Norton (2023) contend that capital and ideology are fundamental in differentiating investment from motivation. They note that although current research on motivation addresses identity, the conceptualization and application of identity in these two research areas remain distinct. The theorizations of identity include 'race, ethnicity, gender, social class, and sexual orientation shape the way learners and their resources/capital are positioned in different social spaces' (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 36). While the cognitive and social psychological concept of motivation refers to an internal condition that drives an action (such as learning) and involves identifying the factors that trigger this state (Darvin & Norton, 2023). A key distinction between investment and motivation is that investment is a tool used to 'probe these inequalities and to challenge the dominant ideologies that perpetuate these inequalities' (Darvin & Norton, 2023, p. 37). These factors bring an important aspect of criticality to discussions of L2MSS.

L2MSS and Chinese English Language Learners

Internationally, according to the latest report from the Center for China and Globalization, over 1.02 million Chinese tertiary students were studying abroad in 2021, underscoring China's status as the world's leading source of international students (Miao & Wang, 2024). This population is required to use English or the official language of the destination country for their overseas studies. Domestically, it is estimated that approximately 400 million Chinese people are learning English, a number greater than the entire population of the United States (Li, 2020). Given the size of this population, understanding their L2 motivation has implications for educational institutions across the world.

Research on Chinese students' identity in English learning in China and abroad has appeared over recent years (e.g., Gu, 2008; Norton & Gao, 2008). Given the predominance of studies of English, many process-oriented studies of Chinese students' L2 motivation are conducted with this focus. For instance, Jackson (2016, 2017) produced a longitudinal study on Chinese students' English learning which applied L2MSS and the process-oriented view of L2 motivation. She divided her study into two articles to compare Chinese sojourners' pre-departure and post-departure language attitudes and motivation to speak English. Participants expressed that a rather low level of willingness to communicate (WTC) outside class in the home environment, depending on the context although most of them possess an instrumental motivation of obtaining academic and professional advancement. Participants identified ideal selves and ought-to selves to master English, despite their varied attitudes towards the language.

Jackson (2017) discussed the changes of the participants' perceptions and attitudes towards English and the host environment and how the sojourn impacted their motivation to further enhance their English and intercultural communication skills. Some participants reported increasing self-confidence in using English with L1 and L2 speakers while others claimed to make little efforts to use the language. The sojourn also heightened their pre-sojourn view of English as a global language that can facilitate communications for people from different backgrounds. Some participants began to appreciate the social and cultural values of the language rather than just view it as a tool with instrumental function of the motivation they had. Others felt it was difficult to function in English and remained ambivalent towards the language after their return.

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From the process-oriented model of L2 motivation (Dörnyei, 2009), participants still expressed an ought-to L2 self for their future studies and work, while others with higher level of self-confidence when using English identified more with an ideal L2 self to help them initiate conversations to enhance their English and nurture intercultural relationships.

Past research suggests that Chinese learners draw on the ought-to L2 self as a motivator in their English learning. For example, Taguchi et al. (2009) explained that because Chinese learners 'view themselves not only in individualistic terms ... but also as a direct extension of their family' (p. 80), they feel an obligation to their parents and family to study English in order to pursue further studies and be promoted at work. Learners in Confucian-influenced societies, like China, seem to be motivated by social expectations rather than an interest in integration (Chen et al., 2005; Warden & Lin, 2000). A Confucian-influenced society asks learners to fulfill their obligations as students by attending classes, doing assignments, paying attention to lectures, and most importantly, performing well in high-stakes exams (Hwang, 2012; Li, 2012). Learners' perceived obligations may require them to improve exam results rather than to learn the language for communicative purposes.

Recently, Zhang et al. (2024) conducted a quantitative study surveying 900 Chinese high school students and explore the relationship between learners' L2MSS and parental investment behavior in English learning. The study findings include that parental involvement significantly impacts learners' motivational self-concepts and their ongoing motivation process. Participants' dynamic nature of motivation confirm the importance of parental economic and emotional support in shaping and sustaining learners' motivation in language acquisition. An increase in students' motivation to learn English could also encourage greater parental investment, according to Zhang et al. (2024).

Learning experience, as one of the three dimensions of L2MSS, appears to have received less attention than the concepts of ideal and ought-to selves (Huang, 2019). You and Dörnyei (2016) investigated English learners in China and found that learners' attitudes toward their learning experiences have the most significant value associated with their intended effort, followed by the ideal self and then the ought-to self. They described that Chinese learners' 'desire to invest time and energy in language learning seems to be associated first and foremost with the evaluation of the learning process' (p. 512). Similarly, in Huang's (2019) study on Taiwanese college students' motivation on LOTEs, learning experience was the strongest predictor of intended effort, followed by the ideal self and culture/community interest. According to Dörnyei (2019), this third dimension is generally under researched in existing research compared to the other two dimensions, and therefore a potential site of exploration with Chinese students specifically.

Chinese Language Learners and LOTEs

In contrast with English learners, Chinese students learning LOTEs in China do not have the same ought-to L2 self. In Chen et al.'s (2021) study, all the participants stated that they were self-motivated to sign up for the LOTE programs rather than being driven by their parents' expectations or external forces. Huang's (2019) study also concluded that the ought-to self was ruled out in language learners' motivation in the LOTE programs in the Confucian society of Taiwan.

In the multilingual context of Europe, Maeder-Qian (2017) investigated Chinese international students' multilingual competencies and linguistic identity (re)formation in using English and German in Germany. One participant found that he struggled to construct a positive self in his academic English as a lingua franca (ELF) identity. Within a perceived 'hierarchy of L2 speakers of ELF' (Sung, 2015, p. 328), he compared himself to advanced German ELF users although his overall English was generally improving. His ideal self in ELF changed from 'a competent ELF user in everyday life to a competent presenter and writer in the academic settings' (Maeder-Qian, 2017, p. 251). He also suggested that using English would prevent integration in German society because everything was in German. Another participant revealed that she was confident in using ELF with non-native speakers despite an equal power distribution. However, insufficient German language skills put her in an identity conflict of failing to present her ought-to self to construct a

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professional identity in a phone interview. She rejected the self she was afraid of becoming (Dörnyei, 2009) and wished that German was easier to learn. Here, we can see that although their English language abilities – the language for their degree program – is advancing over time, the inability to reduce the distance between the ideal self and actual self in using the German language still makes them a 'bystander' in that society. Negotiating multilingual identities and the potential to realize the possible selves constantly fluctuated in their multilingual social construction.

In the context of China, there were few studies conducted on Chinese students learning LOTEs. Chen et al. (2021) conducted a study involving Chinese university students who were learning French and German as LOTEs. The researchers collected both quantitative and qualitative data of questionnaires and interviews from the participants. In their analysis of the interviews, the participants' learning experience was identified as the most influential factor for both groups. When considering the participants' ideal L2 self and their interest in culture and community, the researchers noted that although some participants expressed a willingness to study abroad in the future, few expressed an intention to work or immigrate to the countries where the target languages are spoken. Here, the language learners' future plans are an important predictor of their motivation for learning that language. In our opinion, this future plan is related to identity or Dörnyei's (2009) future guides of self. As a result, the participants' motivation for language learning appeared to be driven primarily by instrumental purposes rather than integrative reasons. It was also noted that the participants were selected from a Chinese university who chose these LOTEs as elective courses fulfilling a graduation requirement, so their ought-to selves might be less prominent in this context.

Conclusion

By reviewing the evolvement in L2 motivation theories and studies, we conclude by noting that identity and motivation are an increasingly connected variables that influence learners' L2 learning. In the case of Chinese students, influenced by Confucian values, their L2 motivation seems to start from the ought-to self. Confucianism values social and family order and is based on individual roles shaped by societal and familial influences. This emphasis on meeting social standards often fosters a goal-oriented learning environment, where students focus on achieving tangible academic success. As a result, the ought-to self is a more influential factor in English learning than the ideal self. On the contrary, Chinese students learning LOTEs in China do not have the same ought-to L2 self motivation. LOTEs are not usually mandatory in Confucian educational systems, while English may be; thus, learning an LOTE stems not from parental or external expectations but from personal interest and choice. Therefore, the ought-to self may not be relied upon as a motivational source for LOTE learners. In the process of language learning, their motivation might be transferred to the ideal self or mediated by learning experiences. These intersections are under researched in current literature, especially in the target language environment. Examining different dimensions of ideal self, ought-to self, and the learning experience from the perspectives of identity and belonging in Chinese students' learning process will contribute to current motivational research.

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