



European Journal of English Language Studies

Volume 2, Issue 2, 89 - 96.

ISSN: 2770-9752

<https://www.ejels.com/>

Exploring Chinese Senior High School Students' L2 Motivational Self System

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Received: July 19, 2022 ▪ Revised: September 18, 2022 ▪ Accepted: November 23, 2022

Abstract: In this paper we report the results of an investigation into the levels of motivation related to English learning among Chinese senior high school students based on the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). The study also investigates the factors that affect the motivation of Chinese students to learn English during the course of their senior high school studies. In this mixed-methods study we applied questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to acquire our data. A total of 934 high school students responded to the questionnaire and seven students were interviewed. According to the results, there was a moderate level of L2MSS among the senior high school students. The level of their L2 learning experience ranked highest among the three dimensions, followed by the level of their ideal L2 self and the level of their ought-to L2 self. Additionally, the results indicated that the students' ideal L2 self was shaped by their educational level, their attitudes towards English as an instructional language, and their cultural background. The students' psychological and mental development also had an influence on their construction of their ideal L2 self. The parents' expectations and school requirements as well as China's educational environment all had an effect on their ought-to L2 selves. It was also found that the students' L2 learning experience was mainly impacted by their teacher's teaching approaches and the classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: Chinese senior high school students, influencing factors, learning English as a foreign language, L2 motivational self system.

To cite this article: Zhang, Y., & Liu, H. (2022). Exploring Chinese senior high school students' L2 motivational self system. *European Journal of English Language Studies*, 2(2), 89-96. <https://doi.org/10.12973/ejels.2.2.89>

Introduction

On the current multilingual world stage, accelerated globalization is further enhancing the international status of English (Rose et al., 2021). In the learning context of China, the National English Curriculum Standards for primary and secondary schools set specific objectives of English courses to cultivate learners' core qualities such as their language ability, thinking quality, and learning ability as well as their cultural awareness, which further strengthens the essential status of English learning. However, in spite of the prioritized role that English plays in their education, Chinese students have only a moderate level of proficiency, ranking 49th out of 112 countries (Education First [EF], 2021). Against this backdrop, there has been growing research interest among academics in learners' psychological factors, such as flow (Liu & Song, 2021), demotivation (Gao et al., 2022), and resilience (Liu & Han, 2022). There has long been research in the field of language education that examines motivation as the driving force behind becoming proficient in a language and maintaining it over a long period of time (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Due to its strength of applicability and explanatory power (Boo et al., 2015), this study adopts the L2MSS of second language motivation (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009).

Thus, this paper aims to investigate the level of learners' L2MSS and the factors that have an effect on motivation to learn English among Chinese senior high school learners. Theoretically, the current study applies the L2MSS to analyze the students' motivation in relation to English learning. Practically, we find that in the process of English education attention should be paid to the effects of engaging diverse stakeholders from various contexts in language teaching and learning, including not only the development of education policies and curriculum standards and evaluation at the macro level, but also the teacher's actual classroom management and parental participation at the micro level.

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Literature Review

Motivation has long been a research object in second language acquisition (Boo et al., 2015; Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2021) since it serves as a driving force to begin and maintain the lengthy language learning process (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Dörnyei (2005) recognized problems in previous research on motivation, such as the lack of explanatory power of integrative motivation and the lack of a clear target community due to the popularity of English in the context of globalization. Therefore, Dörnyei put forward the L2 Motivational Self System, which consisted of three parts: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience.

The 'ideal L2 self' is the L2-specific aspect of the 'ideal self': the desire to reduce the discrepancy between one's actual and ideal selves motivates one to learn an L2. To meet expectations and avoid potential negative outcomes, an individual should be able to identify certain attributes that they believe they should possess in their ought-to L2 self. Their L2 learning experience is related to the immediate learning environment, such as the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, and their experience of success.

There has been growing research interest in exploring the L2MSS from three aspects, including the levels of students from different grades (e.g., You & Dörnyei, 2016), the relationship between students' L2MSS and learner-internal or external factors (e.g., Lee & Lee, 2020; Magid, 2012), and influencing factors (Taguchi, 2013). You and Dörnyei (2016) found that learners of different grades had different levels in all dimensions of the L2MSS. The level of the middle school students' ideal L2 selves was higher than the moderate level ($M=3.67$) but lower than those of college students ($M=3.97$). Meanwhile, Lee and Lee (2020) used a mixed-methods approach to explore the L2MSS of 105 college students and 112 high school students in South Korea. They found that the level of the high school students' ought-to L2 selves ($M=2.56$) was higher than those of the college students ($M=2.00$). Finally, Magid (2012) found that college students' ideal L2 selves were more specific and comprehensive than those of middle school students. The older students were able to establish a comprehensive and mature ideal L2 self because they were able to achieve pleasure from learning English, and they paid more attention to the importance of using English successfully in their future career development.

In terms of research on the relationship between students' L2MSS and internal or external factors, a negative correlation between ideal L2 self and anxiety in language learning was found by Papi (2010). However, anxiety was positively related with ought-to L2 self. Additionally, Khany and Amiri (2018) found that the main motivating factors in Iranian high school students' learning behavior were their ideal L2 self and their L2 learning experience. A questionnaire study conducted by Kim and Kim (2014) found that motivational behavior and ideal L2 self greatly influenced the English proficiency of Korean EFL students. According to Moskovsky et al. (2016), ideal L2 self, learning experiences in L2 and expected effort, are positively correlated.

Meanwhile, Gao et al. (2007) believed that high school students were more likely to experience a "split change" (identity conflict between different cultures and languages). Since most high school students have formed mature and stable local cultural identities, they may have contradictory feelings about their identity after learning a second language, which could have an impact on the construction of their ideal L2 self (Magid, 2012). Ryan (2009) explored the English learning motivation of 2397 Japanese middle school and college students in a mixed-methods study, and found that the students with a positive learning attitude and good learning experience were motivated to obtain a higher social status through proficient English. Li (2019) used another mixed-methods design to explore the English learning motivation of 128 Chinese senior high school students within the framework of L2MSS, finding that senior high school students' English learning was more inclined to be influenced by language learning experience, with the correlation between English learning experience and expected effort being the highest when it was compared with ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self.

In terms of the introduction of the L2MSS, there is a growing amount of interest in studying student motivation from the perspective of the L2MSS, its relationship with learner-internal and external factors as well as other influencing factors. Thus, this study poses two research questions in relation to Chinese senior high school students in an EFL context, in order to examine the levels of students' L2MSS and the influencing factors.

1. What are the levels of senior high school students' L2 Motivational Self System in terms of the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience?
2. What are the influencing factors related to Chinese senior high school students' L2 Motivational Self System?

Methodology

Research Design

A Quan-Qual mixed-methods research design (Dörnyei, 2007) was adopted in the current study, in which the quantitative results played a leading role while the qualitative data were used to supplement the quantitative research findings. We investigated the motivational levels of senior high school students for learning English and the factors that influenced their motivation through a questionnaire survey and interviews.

Sample and Data Collection

The research participants in the current study were 934 students from two senior high schools, both city schools in China. There were 452 male students (48.4%) and 482 female students (51.6%). Among the 934 students, 272 were from the first grade (29.1%), 422 were from the second grade (45.2%), and 240 were from the third grade (25.7%).

The qualitative data were obtained from interviews with students after administering questionnaires. After getting consent from the teacher and parents, a total of seven senior high school students (two females and five males) participated in semi-structured interviews to describe their personal experiences and feelings about English learning. Among the seven students, there were two first-graders, two-second graders, and three third-graders. The names of the student interviewees were coded as Student A to Student G.

The questionnaire used in the study was written in Chinese and consisted of two sections. The first part aimed to gather the research participants' demographic information, including their gender and grade. The questionnaire survey was anonymous. The second part was used to measure the senior high school students' L2MSS, including the levels of their ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience.

The questionnaire was derived from the *English Learner Questionnaire* compiled by You and Dörnyei (2016), which included 16 items reflecting three sub-dimensions, namely ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience. The present study adopted the 16 items to investigate the senior high school students' L2MSS, with an overall reliability coefficient of 0.887. The ideal L2 self sub-dimension included five items, the ought-to L2 self included six items, and L2 learning experience included five items. The reliability coefficients of the three dimensions ranged from .696 to .769 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Information of L2MSS Scale

Dimension	α	Items	Item Example
Ideal L2 Self	.696	1, 2, 3, 4, 5	Q01 I can imagine myself speaking English in the future with foreign friends at parties.
Ought-to L2 self	.704	6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11	Q07 Studying English is important to me in order to gain the approval of my family.
L2 Learning Experience	.769	12, 13, 14, 15, 16	Q13 I really like the actual process of learning English.

The semi-structured interview was used as a supplementary method to offer in-depth explanations of the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires in this study. The follow-up one-on-one interviews were conducted with students face to face or by telephone. On average, each interview took 15 minutes to complete. The questions for the interviews constituted a guideline for the researcher, with interviewees being encouraged to expand on their feelings and personal experience of English learning.

Analyzing of Data

A total of 934 valid questionnaires were collected for analysis. The Statistics Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 24.0 was used for data entry and analysis. The quantitative data were entered into SPSS 24.0, and descriptive statistics for the L2MSS (i.e., maximum, minimum, mean, and standard deviation) were calculated to answer the research questions. The qualitative data from the interviews were transcribed, read, and discussed by the researchers in order to supplement the quantitative results. In terms of reliability, the data collection and analysis processes were balanced by being reflective about subjectivities, and the researchers adopted both emic and etic views towards the interview transcripts regarding the students' opinions about their ideal L2 self, their ought-to L2 self, and their L2 learning experience.

Findings/Results

In order to answer the first research question in this study, all the variables related to the students' L2MSS were analyzed descriptively. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for all the dimensions of the L2MSS of the senior high school students in this study, including extreme values (maximum and minimum), means, and standard deviations. The mean of the senior high school students' global L2MSS was 3.18 ($SD=0.63$), slightly higher than the moderate level of 3.

Table 2. Descriptive Analyses of Dimensions of L2MSS

Dimension	Max	Min	M	SD
Ideal L2 Self	5.00	1.00	3.22	0.71
Ought-to L2 self	5.00	1.00	3.06	0.65
L2 Learning Experience	5.00	1.00	3.29	0.74
Global L2MSS	4.88	1.00	3.19	0.63

Ideal L2 self mainly referred to the learners' ideal self-image and ideal characteristics related to L2 learning that they wished to have, such as imagining that they could skillfully use their L2 to talk to foreign friends or make speeches in English in public (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). The mean of the Chinese senior high school students' ideal L2 self in the current

study was 3.22 ($SD=0.71$), higher than the moderate level. The mean values of the five related items (i.e., imagine yourself talking to foreign friends at a party, speaking in public in English, doing business with foreigners, chatting easily with foreign friends in a café, discussing with foreign friends in English) were 3.19, 3.32, 3.24, 3.40, and 2.95 respectively. The standard deviations were between 1.01 and 1.11. These results show that most of the senior high school students could create or already had an ideal second language self-image. They had a strong desire to communicate in English, but many of them may not have felt confident about the proficiency of their English knowledge.

The ought-to L2 self is mainly determined by external factors such as fulfilling duties or meeting expectations as well as avoiding negative results (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). In general, the mean of the senior high school students' ought-to L2 self in the current study was 3.06 ($SD=0.65$), slightly higher than the medium level. The mean values of the six related items (i.e., my parents believe that to become a well-educated person I must learn English, learn English to be recognized by society, classmates, good friends, teachers and people I respect) were 2.09, 3.10, 3.26, 3.19, 3.54, and 3.18 respectively. The standard deviations were between 0.91 and 1.08. These results show that most of the high school students believed that learning English well was their responsibility, influenced by parents' expectations, school requirements, and peer pressure. The mean of item Q05, "Learning English is to be recognized by teachers", was the highest ($M=3.54$), indicating that teachers' expectations and recognition were critical motivational factors for these Chinese senior high school students.

The high school students' primary motivation for learning English seemed to be to achieve good grades, according to the interview data. The following excerpts from the interviews illustrate this, and reflect the building of the students' ought-to L2 self. For example, in Extract 1 below, Student A says that there are two reasons for learning English, suggesting that external factors like school requirements and job searching would impact students' English learning motivation. The first reason was that "the school offers this course and it is compulsory", while the second was that learning English well would be beneficial for future career prospects.

Extract 1

Researcher: Why do you think you should learn English?

Student A: First of all, I think it is because the school offers this course and it is compulsory. And it is not like the music and art courses, which are not in the exam. Next, because English is widely used now, I think I will use a lot of English in job searching or other aspects in the future. So I think it will be beneficial if I get good grades in learning English.

In Extract 2, Student C mentioned that their motivation was "for the exam". Although Student C's English learning was initially influenced by her ideal L2 self, which was "completely for fun", she had to give up "leisure and fun" when she entered high school, and her motivation for English learning in high school had changed to "how to get higher scores and obtain better grades".

Extract 2

Student C: For me now, the motivation is for the exam. But as far as I'm concerned, my goal was entirely for fun, such as listening to English music or watching TV series in English. I used to think learning English was to understand their language, just like entering another world, to understand how people who say different things from us live in the world, or to know their cultural customs. Now, for the sake of the examination and score, I have to give up all the leisure and fun about English learning and focus more on how to get higher scores and obtain better grades.

The above reasons were influenced by the pervasive examination culture in Student C's social context and a consideration of her career prospects. Both Student A and Student C recognized that it was important to learn English well for college entrance examinations. Furthermore, a similar reason was also pointed out in the interview with Student E who mentioned that they were learning English because of the college entrance examination.

The students' English learning motivation was also influenced by their parents' expectations and encouragement. Extract 3 shows that Student D believed that his parents' encouragement provided "spiritual motivation" for him to learn English.

Extract 3

Student D: My parents wanted me to learning English well so I could go to a better university. But I thought it was difficult for me to have the perseverance to stick to a goal. For example, I cannot get up early in the morning. However, my parents always encouraged and supported me, which gave me a kind of spiritual motivation. I realized that my parents expected me to behave well and gave me a lot of support, and I had a stronger motivation to learn English in order not to disappoint them.

Extract 4

Student E: Why do I study English? In fact, just for taking the college entrance examination. Learning English in junior high school was also for the exam. The total score for English in the college entrance examination is 150, which is very

high and occupies a large proportion in the examination. So I have to work hard to get higher scores. There is no other reason for learning English.

Extract 4 shows that Student E's only reason for learning English was "taking the college entrance examination". The score for English took a large proportion of the total score, so Student E's English learning motivation was mainly exam-oriented since he desired to achieve academic success in the examination.

A student's own learning experiences and learning environment have a large impact on their L2 learning experience. The mean of the L2 learning experience in the current study was 3.29 ($SD=0.74$), higher than the moderate level. The mean values of the five related items (i.e., I look forward to English class, I like the process of learning English, I feel that learning English is very interesting, I feel time passes quickly when studying English, and I like learning English very much) were 3.22, 3.07, 3.51, 3.21, and 3.44 respectively, with standard deviations between 0.98 and 1.06. Among the three dimensions in the L2MSS, L2 learning experience scored highest, indicating that most of the students had a positive attitude toward their English learning.

However, the interview data also showed that the senior high school students' English learning classroom experience was influenced by the gap between teachers' teaching methods and students' expectations. Teachers focused on explanation and the consolidation of knowledge points, reducing the time and opportunities for students to discuss interesting topics, which was one of the reasons why some students were not very positive about the English learning experience. The following are excerpts from two of the interviews.

Extract 5

Researcher: How do you feel about the English learning class?

Student B: Actually, English learning is almost the same every day. In fact, I think I can master the teaching routine of every unit – that is, first the text analysis, then the analysis of words in the text, and finally the exercises. I think it's tedious because the teaching approach of a unit is the same as the previous one. As for the interesting topics in some units, I expected the teacher to talk about more interesting topics and have a lot of interaction, but there are few of these in senior high school. Most teachers focus on discussing English knowledge. As for fascinating topics, the teacher just says three or two words to pass over them, and I felt very bored. Each unit is just like this, and interesting topics are useless. The teacher just talks about the grammar points and then analyzes the text.

Extract 6

Researcher: What do you think of your English class?

Student G: I think sometimes the English class is all about the exam, because the English teacher teaches us the language points and grammar most of the time in the English class. The grammar is difficult to learn, and sometimes I feel bored when the teacher talks about language points and grammar in preparation for the tests and exams. I think teachers care more about our grades and academic performance.

In Extracts 5 and 6, both Student B and Student G thought that English classes in senior high school were tedious and followed the same pattern, and the daily routine became "the same as the previous one". Concerning the teaching mode, Student B had "mastered the routine", which made the course "boring" and "tedious". Interesting topics were not discussed because the teacher just used "two or three words" to pass over them. In Extract 6, Student G also mentioned that the English class was sometimes boring because grades and academic performance were of great importance and the teaching content was influenced by the exams.

Discussion

In this study the senior high school students reported a moderate level of ideal L2 self, indicating that they had a relatively clear future self-guide in relation to learning English but they might not be confident about their proficiency of English knowledge. These results align with findings from You and Dörnyei (2016), who claimed that the ideal L2 self was affected by educational level. The higher the students' education level or the richer their professional knowledge was, the stronger and the more specific their ideal L2 image would be. This seems to occur because further education can broaden students' horizons and enhance their understanding of foreign cultures and their appreciation of English (Mahmoodi & Yousefi, 2021; You & Dörnyei, 2016).

Dovetailing with other results from previous research, the students' attitudes towards L2 culture and the instrumental role of English had a particular impact on establishing their ideal L2 self-image (Magid, 2012). Zhao et al. (2022) also found that the international posture had a positive influence on students' ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience. However, the middle school students were concerned primarily with becoming excellent English speakers without considering the possibility or utility of using English in their careers, which meant that defining their ideal L2 self-image was not so easy.

The moderate level of high school students' ideal L2 self may also be related to the characteristics of middle school students' physical and mental development. The identity conflict faced by adolescents may affect the establishment and stability of their ideal L2 self-image (Magid, 2012), raising the possibility that the construction of the high school students' future L2 selves might have been influenced by the identity conflict between their L1 culture and the target language culture (Gao et al., 2007).

The students in this study reported a moderate level of ought-to L2 self, lower than the level of their ideal L2 self, indicating that the expectations and recognition of important others were essential motivational factors for senior high school students in learning English. This research result is in line with You and Dörnyei (2016), who suggest that students' ought-to L2 self-image building may be influenced by parents' expectations, reflecting the principle of "reciprocal duty" in Chinese society. Therefore, parents felt that English was not just an ordinary subject because English learning was closely associated with their children's future career development. However, this places a significant focus on the importance of English learning for students' future career development (Magid, 2012; Taguchi et al., 2009). Other research has found that senior high school students are also highly motivated to learn languages in order to fulfill the expectations of and achieve recognition from other people, such as family, teachers, and peers (Lee & Lee, 2020).

Magid (2012) found that middle school students had lower levels of ought-to L2 self than college students. A possible reason for this could be that parents' expectations for their middle school children are mainly to get good grades in English exams. However, when the students are in college their parents expect them to open up more career opportunities by learning English. Therefore, compared with college students, middle school students' main learning goal was more likely to be obtaining good academic results in examinations.

In addition, Chinese students' English learning is examination-oriented, with English being one of the main curriculum subjects and also one of the most important subjects in the college entrance examinations (Taguchi et al., 2009). Chinese students might experience pressure from family, friends, teachers and other sectors of society, and they often place great pressure on themselves (Magid, 2012). Therefore, the establishment of students' L2 self-image may be influenced by parents in the family environment, teachers and classmates in the school environment, as well as examination policy and examination culture in the social environment, so students will be motivated to achieve personal progress and seek benefits for their families through achieving academic success (Al-Hoorie, 2018; Yousefi & Mahmoodi, 2022). The building of their ought-to L2 self therefore not only involves the fear of academic failure or the desire for academic success; it may be regarded as a combination of test values and educational expectations at the social and family levels (You & Dörnyei, 2016).

A moderate level of L2 learning experience was observed in the present study, above the levels of the ideal and ought-to L2 selves, suggesting that most students felt positive about their English learning experience. The results of this study are similar to those of Ryan (2009), who found that students showed a positive learning attitude and were motivated to obtain a higher social status through proficient English. The same is also true for middle school students; if they speak English well, they will be admired and favored by teachers and students in their class, which will also help to facilitate a better English learning experience (Magid, 2012). The quality of the learning experience plays a more decisive role for middle school students (You & Dörnyei, 2016). Students' motivation towards English learning may be enhanced by a relaxing class atmosphere and a close relationship between teachers and students (Csizér, 2019; Dörnyei, 2018).

The L2 learning experience and the ideal L2 self are also positively related to students' engagement in reading (Abdollahzadeh et al., 2022). Students' ideal L2 self is a future self-image, while the L2 learning experience is related to the students' past and present experiences (Al-Hoorie, 2018). The idealized future self needs to be equipped with an appropriate and accessible learning environment to ensure high L2 learning proficiency (Zhao et al., 2022).

Finally, the teacher's teaching focus on grammar points and text analysis led to decreasing learning interest and motivation among the students. This focus on explaining knowledge and consolidating practice was a direct result of preparation for the college entrance examination. The teacher emphasized explaining, consolidating, and strengthening the students' English knowledge rather than teaching them to use it in the real world, which may negatively impact their classroom English learning.

Conclusion

Through a mixed-methods approach, this study has explored students' motivation for learning English within the theoretical framework of the L2MSS. Following a detailed descriptive analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data, we can draw the following conclusions.

The first major finding was that senior high school students showed a moderate level of L2MSS, which indicated that they had a relatively clear self-image and identity in relation to their future language learning. Among the three dimensions, the level of the students' L2 learning experience was the highest, followed by the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self.

Second, the students' attitudes toward L2 culture and the role of English in instruction may affect their ideal L2 self in senior high school. The students' psychological and mental development also had an influence on the construction of their ideal L2 self. The ought-to L2 self of the senior high school students was affected by their parents' expectations and

school requirements, as well as the social educational environment. Furthermore, the classroom atmosphere and the teacher's teaching methods had an effect on the students' L2 learning experience.

Recommendations

First, the present study confirms the importance of building an ideal L2 self, which indicates that teachers should focus on building a supportive teaching atmosphere that provides opportunities and effective feedback to inspire students to form their ideal L2 selves. Second, parents' emotional involvement in their child's learning can build good and close parent-child relationships, providing children with opportunities to access and pass on family cultural and social capital. Thus, parents should endeavor to create a comfortable learning atmosphere and offer their children emotional support and encouragement, considering the psychological characteristics of adolescents without overemphasizing their academic achievement or making social comparisons among their peers. Third, English education is a systematic project. The development of education policies, curriculum standards and evaluation at the macro level should be considered alongside teachers' actual classroom management and parental participation at the micro level in the improvement and evolution of language teaching.

Limitations

The present study is subject to two limitations. First, with regard to research methods, this study was limited by the fact that it only obtained data by questionnaires and interviews. Further research should be undertaken using different methods to collect data, such as observation, students' journals, and interviews with parents and teachers, so as to provide a more in-depth analysis and understanding of students' motivations while they are studying English. Second, this study examined the levels of senior high school students' motivation through a cross-sectional design due to the availability of the data. Future studies could be extended to examine the dynamic evolution of students' English learning motivation by adopting a longitudinal approach.

Funding

This paper was supported by the Project of Discipline Innovation and Advancement (PODIA) —Foreign Language Education Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University (Grant number: 2020SYLZDXM011).

Authorship Contribution Statement

Zhang: Conceptualization, data analysis, writing, and reviewing. Liu: Data collection, framework construction, critical revision, and supervision of the manuscript.

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