

A Survey of the Literature About the L2 Motivational Self System Theory

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Abstract: The second language (L2) motivational self system (L2MSS) literature has been analyzed for this investigation. The results offer a theme-by-theme comprehensive summary of L2MSS research. The field has shown strong growth since 2005, and a wide range of interesting issues have emerged. The most common approach uses cross-sectional data, quantitative techniques, university students, English as the target language, and Asian contexts, including China. A significant discovery of the research is the parallel expansion of studies on multilingualism and English as a foreign language in recent years, suggesting an acknowledgment of the significance of both strands for a thorough comprehension of language learning motivation. This trend implies that the discipline is actively working to overcome its bias toward monolingual speakers and is growing more accommodating to the requirements of a wider variety of language learners. This study provided fresh insight into the conceptual knowledge structure of a topic from a methodological standpoint, highlighting areas for future research and providing insights into knowledge gaps.

Keywords: L2 motivation; L2 motivational self system (L2MSS); Multilingualism; Languages other than English (LOTEs); English as a foreign language (EFL)

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1. Introduction

According to Dörnyei and Ushioda ^[1], motivation is a crucial element in attaining success when learning a second or foreign language. Understanding the reasons behind learning a second or foreign language is the subject of a fast-growing corpus of study ^[2]. The L2 motivational self system (L2MSS) idea has become more well-known within this expanding corpus of study ^[3,4]. L2MSS was determined to be the predominant theoretical framework in the field of L2 motivational research, according to two literature studies on the subject: one on research from 2005 to 2014 and the other on research from 2010 to 2019 ^[2,5]. Because of L2MSS's leadership position and volume of research, it is critical to comprehend and synthesize L2MSS research to develop the area.

However, a thorough analysis of the L2MSS literature has not yet been carried out. The two types of

L2MSS syntheses that currently exist are critical research synthesis and meta-analysis^[6-8]. Although these reviews have produced insightful analyses of L2 motivational research, their breadth was inevitably constrained by their concentration on a small section of L2MSS research. Yousefi and Mahmoodi^[8], for example, only included quantitative research from six journals in the field, which may have excluded significant earlier studies on the subject. Similarly, Mendoza and Phung's critical review was restricted to languages other than English (LOTEs), which meant that studies on English could not be included and that it was not possible to compare studies on LOTEs with English^[6]. It is necessary to give a brief synopsis of the L2MSS framework, which serves as the basis for this review, before delving into the specifics of the current investigation.

2. L2 motivational self system

As an alternative to Gardner's socio-educational model^[9], which had previously dominated the paradigm for analyzing L2 motivation, Dörnyei first developed the L2MSS in 2005. The socio-educational paradigm emphasizes integrative motivation in bilingual environments in Canada^[9,10]. Here, language learning motivation is influenced by the desire to integrate with the target language community. Although integrativeness is highly relevant for French language learners in Canada's bilingual environment, its explanatory value is limited, particularly for English language learners in foreign language contexts. Dörnyei presented a broader framework from a self-concept standpoint^[3,4], building on theoretical strands in personality psychology. The notion of imaginary integration (cf., Norton's idea of imagined communities^[11]) could enhance the utility of integrativeness. Specifically, Dörnyei's model consists of three constructs. The first is the ideal L2 self, which focuses on qualities of a successful L2 user that one hopes to have in the future; the second is the ought-to L2 self, which focuses on qualities of a successful L2 user that one feels one must have to meet expectations and prevent potential negative consequences; and the third is the L2 learning experience, which represents situated motives regarding the learning environment, including peers, teachers, and curriculum.

The two theories that served as the basis for the language-specific future self-guides were the self-discrepancy theory and the possible selves theory^[12,13]. Three basic categories of potential selves were explored^[13]: "ideal selves that we would very much like to become," "selves we are afraid of becoming," and "selves that we could become." The first two categories had higher motivating potency. The motivating process of possibility selves — the drive to lessen the gap between one's actual and future selves — is further illuminated by Higgins' self-discrepancy hypothesis^[12].

Although the L2 learning experience has been empirically proven to be the strongest predictor of intended effort^[7], it has been criticized for being under-theorized and challenging to operationalize^[14]. Dörnyei responded to mounting criticism with a conceptual article that defined the term and operationalized it as student engagement, or the active engagement and participation in behaviors related to education^[15]. This can be seen as a major improvement for L2MSS, particularly from a measuring standpoint, since the engagement, as opposed to the learning experience, is a well-researched and operationalized construct^[15]. It opens up new directions for future study on L2MSS as well. Apart from Dörnyei's endeavors to enhance the model, certain other academics in the domain have also contributed to its development. The 2×2 model of L2 self-guides is one prominent example among others^[16,17], which distinguishes L2 selves in terms of the regulatory domain (i.e., ideal, ought) as well as viewpoint (i.e., own, other). The 2×2 model is significant because it offers a more nuanced perspective on the varying characteristics of future self-guides and further links the L2MSS with Higgins' original idea^[12]. Further empirical study supports the validity of the bifurcation of self-guides based on viewpoints and suggests intriguing avenues for further investigation^[18,19].

3. Research themes

3.1. Overall themes

When examining the fundamental themes in the field, the theme with the top keyword “ideal L2 self” emerges as the largest theme. We may observe the other two L2MSS components as well as typical criteria variables like planned effort, which collectively can be understood as the fundamentals of L2MSS research. This issue is prominently covered in two conceptual papers: Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie redefine the learning experience as engagement^[20], while Dörnyei rethinks motivational selves for LOTEs^[15]. The empirical literature comprises a variety of studies, ranging from early validations of the theory to more recent investigations on motivational interventions for vision^[21,22].

Although somewhat less than the topic of the ideal L2 self, communication readiness is another fundamental subject. One common example of a variable closely associated with L2MSS is the willingness to communicate^[23,24]. LOTEs lead to another fundamental theme. This theme is distinguished by its heavy emphasis on multilingualism. The fundamental focus of this theme is encapsulated in two conceptual articles: In multilingual education, Serafini argued for the use of dynamic methods to better understand the intrinsic dynamic, emergent, and contextually embedded nature of motivational selves^[25]. Henry proposed the idea of the ideal multilingual self as a higher-order construct emerging from interactions of language-specific selves^[26]. Similar themes, including multiple language learning and LOTE learning^[27], are shared by empirical investigations addressing this issue^[28]. In Asian cultures like China and Japan^[29-32], the ideal multilingual self seems to be a driving factor behind the rising interest in multilingualism^[33].

The motor themes quadrant contains the English as a foreign language (EFL) theme. This subject is covered in one of the early conceptual works: Ushioda talked about how globalization and English’s dominance in society led to a theoretical change in L2 motivation’s focus from motivation to self and identity^[34]. The majority of research on this issue focuses on English in environments where it is spoken as a foreign language, such as South Korea^[35], China^[36], and Indonesia^[37]. Another popular term is “vision,” which is frequently connected to research on interventions^[38,39]. As shown by the shared studies between the two themes^[23,40], this topic is likewise closely tied to the ideal L2 self. The theme of linguistic competency is considerably more compact and resembles a basic theme more closely. This subject has a lot of terms related to learning outcomes, like motivated learning behavior and proficiency, which are again strongly related to the ideal L2 self theme^[15].

The gender-led subject is important. The theme’s keywords point to an emphasis on the function of demographic factors in relation to motivating selves, such as age and gender^[41-43]. Another little but extremely well-developed specialized theme is English medium instruction (EMI). In contrast to research on the EFL subject, this theme looks at L2MSS in situations where instruction is given in English rather than English as the learning target^[44]. Self-discrepancy is an unusual theme. The top keyword indicates that research in this theme expands L2MSS in terms of viewpoints of self and domains of self^[16,17,45,46], and revisits and revises L2MSS by going back to Higgin’s self-discrepancy theory^[12].

There is the self-determination theory (SDT) theme, a small strand characterized by research that combines L2MSS with SDT or compares L2MSS and SDT^[45,47]. The possible selves theme is a relatively small theme characterized by research that involved the two future self-guides in L2MSS or revisited Markus and Nurius’ possible selves theory^[13, 45,48-50]. Both themes are comparatively low in terms of centrality and density. Whether they are emerging or declining would require a temporal perspective.

3.2. Themes over time

To shed light on the thematic evolution of the field over time, the literature was divided into four periods.

Overall, the field has enjoyed significant diversification, from three themes in the first period to at least seven themes in later periods. Judging by the top keywords in themes, two keywords persist through at least three periods: ideal L2 self and EFL. The ideal L2 self theme, composed of the core elements of L2MSS and criterion variables, remained largely stable over time and can be interpreted as the foundational theme of the literature. In contrast, the EFL theme has been shifting its content over the years. For instance, in 2012–2016, EFL appeared together with keywords such as age ^[36]. In 2017–2019, different keywords such as resilience and demotivation occurred with EFL ^[51]. Most recently, EFL was investigated together with different keywords such as vision ^[22]. In other words, research on EFL is evolving to encompass a wider range of topics and perspectives.

It is important to draw attention to the rise of LOTEs and multilingualism in recent years. Though Henry is credited with coining terms like plurilingualism ^[44], this theme has mostly emerged in the last five years. A possible explanation for this trend is that learners' (developing) repertoire of multiple languages is taken into account in a multilingual perspective, which replaces the monolingual focus and views LOTEs and multilingualism as interdependent concepts (e.g., approaching LOTEs/English learning from a multilingual perspective). This interpretation appears to be supported by the surge of research in 2021 that focuses on both English and LOTEs.

4. Discussion on the literature on L2MSS

Since 2005, the field of L2MSS literature has shown substantial expansion. When it comes to design features, university students, quantitative research, cross-sectional data, English as a target language, and Asian contexts—like China—are the most common. Although these traits predominate in the sector, other emerging patterns have also been noted. Studies on LOTEs (e.g., German, French, Chinese) and multilingualism (i.e., both English and LOTEs), studies on secondary learners, research in Asian contexts (e.g., South Korea), and research using longitudinal qualitative design are a few examples of the growing fields in research. Further evidence of the rich affordances of L2MSS for a variety of research approaches comes from the trend toward more inventive and diverse methods (e.g., person-centered quantitative methods, narrative inquiry), especially in recent years ^[2].

Regarding themes, this is a broad field with several strands that have comparable effects; no single strand “monopolizes” the subject. Basic themes (like the ideal L2 self and LOTEs) concentrate on using and validating L2MSS, whereas niche themes (like self-discrepancy) and emerging/declining themes (like self-determination theory) concentrate on changing the L2MSS framework. The existence of both kinds of study shows that L2MSS is developing sustainably, striking a balance between establishing and expanding on current knowledge and investigating novel and cutting-edge concepts. From a temporal standpoint, while research on EFL is continuously expanding to cover a greater range of issues and perspectives, the theme typified by the essential elements of L2MSS remains constant and durable across time. Alongside the expansion of EFL study, LOTEs and multilingualism studies have also emerged in more recent times.

5. Reacting to the multilingual trend: reciprocal growth vs. competitive displacement

How L2MSS researchers as a group responded to the multilingual turn in applied linguistics is one of the review's key findings. It was discovered that the monolingual bias that has long dominated the SLA area has been actively challenged and addressed by the field of L2MSS. One may argue that there has been a recent trend toward multilingualism, as seen by the sharp rise in LOTE research since 2017 and the sharp rise in LOTE research focused on both English and LOTEs in 2021. Multilingualism is becoming more and more important

in today's globalized world ^[51,52]. This trend toward multilingualism is probably also a result of the need to better understand the special opportunities and challenges faced by language learners in multilingual contexts ^[20,53]. This trend might also be seen as a logical byproduct of the work done on developing the model, motivated by the desire to further evaluate the model's variability in various target languages and circumstances. The formation of the ideal multilingual self is a significant step in this direction ^[26], moving L2MSS away from its previous monolingual concentration and beyond language-specific self-guides.

However, there is also evidence in the area of a continuing interest in EFL, with no sign of a slowdown in EFL research. This mutual advancement could indicate that the field is actively attempting to find a middle ground between investigating the complex nature of multilingualism and recognizing the unique aspects of EFL learning. Here, what was shown was not competitive displacement, whereby a reduction in English research was attributed to increased interest in multilingualism, but rather an acknowledgment that both paths were important and required for a whole understanding of language learning motivation. Furthermore, the area of EFL appears to be growing and adjusting to new issues and circumstances, as seen by the study on the subject covering a greater range of topics and views. It is imperative, of course, to continue to be aware of the possibility of sustaining the monolingual bias that results from an excessive dependence on English. Since the topic of multilingualism is still relatively new, it will be interesting to see if future research confirms that one strand is displacing the other.

6. Future directions and trends

When combined, the results point to several potential paths for the future that are either developing trends or areas in need of more research. It is hoped that readers will find the suggested study directions derived from this literature review helpful for their upcoming studies.

There are significant opportunities in three directions for meaningful attention. First, there is a growing trend toward future self-guides that are language-general — that is, multilingual — instead of language-specific. This change can be explained by the emergence in applied linguistics of complex dynamic systems theory (CDST) ^[54]. Indeed, CDST notions like emergence have a major influence on the increasingly popular construct of the ideal multilingual self ^[26]. In light of the numerous unexplored areas covered by the CDST framework, multilingual motivation and self-guides research is a promising area of study.

Second, revisiting the basic assumptions that gave rise to the L2MSS is a potentially fruitful avenue for innovation. Research that revisited self-discrepancy and possible selves theory had multiple small research strands, as revealed by the text network analysis. For example, reexamining the basic principles of self-discrepancy theory led to the proposal of the 2×2 model of L2 self-guides ^[12,16], which in turn led to the exploration of new avenues for investigation. This implies that reexamining core ideas can resolve any gaps or inadequacies in the current framework and offer a deeper grasp of the guiding assumptions and principles of L2MSS.

Third, one major gap in the L2MSS literature is the lack of diversity among language learners and language learning situations. Only 20% of L2 motivation research from 2005 to 2014 focused on secondary-level learners, a criticism made by Boo and colleagues back in 2015 ^[2]. According to the data (30%), it can be stated that the state of L2MSS research has improved on this front, but there is still much space for development to create more inclusive theories of L2 motivation. The focus on classroom language instruction, whether in secondary or higher education, may have resulted in part from L2MSS's development as a reaction to Gardner's socio-education model ^[9], which has little capacity to explain the experiences of EFL students. That being said,

a more thorough comprehension of L2 motivation necessitates examining the entire spectrum of learners — not just those enrolled in conventional classrooms — including self-taught individuals, international students, and those pursuing other forms of informal or non-formal education.

The need for ongoing investigation of novel research methodologies is highlighted by the growing trend of advances in mixed, quantitative, and qualitative research methods. Some difficulties warrant more attention as we continue to explore methodological advancements. The first is the dearth of longitudinal studies, especially those that are quantitative. While large-scale quantitative evidence is necessary to understand group-level trends and general patterns that can guide policy and the creation of large-scale intervention programs, qualitative longitudinal research can offer insightful information about the subjective experiences of language learners. Conversely, the prevalence of cross-sectional research further demonstrates how urgent it is to properly examine the dynamic relationships between motivation and different learning outcomes to move beyond a static view of motivation ^[54].

The investigation of heterogeneity using person-centered methodologies is another exciting avenue. The current state of quantitative second-language acquisition (SLA) research is reflected in this, as more studies are utilizing sophisticated statistical modeling to produce insights that go beyond the limitations of conventional analysis ^[55]. One common criticism of quantitative research on L2 motivation is those traditional methods, including correlational analyses, force learners to be seen simplistically and homogeneously ^[56]. Person-centered quantitative approaches enable a more nuanced understanding of heterogeneity, even while they do not allow for the same depth of research as qualitative approaches. Such methods as latent profile analysis and latent transition analysis are a few examples that might lead to innovative research directions ^[57,58]. Meanwhile, basic techniques like structural equation modeling (SEM) can also be improved upon, as demonstrated by exploratory SEM applications to SLA research.

Additionally, it is critical to reconcile the disparity between the quantity of quantitative research and the dearth of replication studies. Replication study confirms the robustness and generalizability of findings, which is essential for growing the field and constructing trustworthy scientific knowledge ^[59]. The field of second language learning in general and L2MSS research specifically lacks replication studies, as noted by Marsden and colleagues ^[60]. Nonetheless, a classic example of replication research on L2MSS is the preregistered replication by Hiver and Al-Hoorie of the large-scale survey study by You and colleagues ^[61,62], which found a fundamental motivating function for vision. Surprisingly, the initial findings did not replicate, and an alternate model that questioned the way intended effort has traditionally been modeled in L2MSS research received support. Given the importance of vision and intended effort in the literature, it is clear that important L2MSS research findings should be verified and replicated rather than assumed to be replicable by default (Al-Hoorie and colleagues for empirical findings that highlight validity issues in the field ^[63]). Replication is an open research technique that should be included in the agenda of the field of L2MSS, as the field of applied linguistics as a whole is moving toward greater openness and transparency.

7. Conclusion

This study delves into the analysis of the L2MSS literature. The field has experienced significant and robust growth since 2005, encompassing a wide array of themes and research areas. The most frequently noted design features include cross-sectional data, quantitative techniques, English, university students, and Asian environments. Despite the prevalence of cross-sectional data and a lack of research on learners outside of traditional classroom settings and replication efforts, the field exhibits geographical diversity and is expanding

to encompass a broader range of topics, perspectives, and methodologies.

A recent development in the field is the parallel expansion of EFL and multilingualism research, indicating an acknowledgment of the utility and importance of both approaches for a comprehensive understanding of language acquisition motivation. These findings underscore the dynamic and responsive nature of the L2MSS field and point toward the potential for exciting discoveries and further research to enhance our comprehension of L2 motivation.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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