

# Second Language Motivational Self System in Adult Second Language Learning: Mediating Roles of Vision Intervention and Roadmaps

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**Abstract:** This article presents a critical review of the literature on the Second Language Motivational Self System (L2MSS) and its application in adult second language (L2) learning. By analyzing the three components of the L2MSS—the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience, it demonstrates that for adult learners, the ideal L2 self and direct learning experiences serve as the primary motivational drivers, while the ought-to L2 self exerts a comparatively weaker influence. The paper further investigates the mediating roles of vision intervention and roadmaps in translating motivation into sustained learning behavior. It argues that vision intervention is a critical mechanism for strengthening the ideal L2 self by making it vivid and attainable, while detailed roadmaps are essential for operationalizing this vision into concrete, actionable steps. The discussion culminates in pedagogical implications, suggesting that effective adult L2 instruction should integrate systematic vision-building exercises and provide structured roadmaps to bridge the gap between motivational states and actual learning effort, thereby fostering long-term engagement and proficiency.

**Keywords:** Second language motivational self-system; Vision intervention; Roadmaps; Adult learners

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## 1. Second language motivational self system

The Second Language Motivational Self System is grounded in self-discrepancy theory and possible selves<sup>[1-2]</sup>. L2MSS comprises three key components: the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience<sup>[3-4]</sup>.

The ideal L2 self is conceptualized as what the learner would ideally like to become, specifically, their future achievement as an L2 user<sup>[3-5]</sup>. For most L2 adult learners, developing L2 ability enables them to create a new language identity based on the existing one to fulfil the needs for a positive social identity<sup>[6-7]</sup>. In China, the ideal L2 social identities for adult learners could be of various types, for example, a supervisor to work with foreign colleagues in a transnational corporation, a speaker to give a public speech in English in an annual meeting, or a successful salesperson negotiating with foreign clients in English.

Ought-to L2 self indicates the attribute that the learner believes they should possess for meeting the social expectations which may come from family, examinations, or jobs <sup>[3-5]</sup>. Besides meeting others' expectations, the ought-to L2 self also plays a role in avoiding possible negative consequences, such as studying hard to avoid failing the exam <sup>[3]</sup>. It emphasizes that L2 learners study English to live up to others' expectations. Adults possess well-established personalities and a capacity for independent thought. Some studies suggest that external expectations exert less influence on adult learners <sup>[8-10]</sup>. It indicates that the ought-to L2 self may not be powerful enough to motivate adult learners. While addressing the problem of L2 adult beginners with low motivation, the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience should be emphasized more.

L2 learning experience concerns learners' past and existing learning experiences, which could be affected by the curriculum, successful learning experience, classmates, and teachers <sup>[3]</sup>. The L2 learning experience is the direct experience to encourage or discourage students in language study. Notably, the L2 learning experience pays attention to evaluating current learning situations rather than guidance for future selves. L2 learning experiences are likely to be the decisive factor for adult L2 learners to continue L2 study. The level of learners' comfort in the classrooms, strong social network, visible progress in L2 learning, and self-efficacy are essential components of the L2 learning experience for adult learners to stay in the language program <sup>[11]</sup>. It is very crucial to take advantage of the L2 learning experience in motivating adult learners for long-term study.

## 2. The impact of L2MSS on intended learning behavior

From many research findings in the L2MSS framework, the ideal L2 self has been proven as the strongest force to motivate learners in L2 study since the ideal L2 self was found to have a strong positive correlation with positive L2 attitudes and motivated behaviour <sup>[12-14]</sup>. Furthermore, those with ideal L2 selves are more likely to succeed in language proficiency <sup>[10, 15]</sup>. A quantitative study (N>10,000) in China confirms that the ideal L2 self has the dominant positive impact on L2 learners regardless of age, region, or levels of language proficiency <sup>[5]</sup>. In summary, the ideal L2 self functions as a powerful motivator in the context of adult L2 learning.

Ought-to L2 self tends to have less impact than ideal L2 self on motivating L2 learners. The marginal relationship between ought-to L2 self and motivated behaviour has been found in research <sup>[13, 16-17]</sup>. Although L2 learners in Asian countries, such as China and the Republic of Korea, ought-to L2 selves probably play a more important role than ideal L2 selves in shaping learners' motivation in Western countries, as the learners in Asian countries would bear more family expectations or obligations. It is true for teen L2 learners but not for adult learners <sup>[18-19]</sup>. Take China's adult learners for example, their motivation is greatly driven by ideal L2 selves instead of ought-to L2 selves <sup>[10, 20]</sup>. Therefore, the ought-to L2 self would be paid less focus while transferring motivation to actual learning behaviour in Chinese adult L2 learners.

Regarding the L2 learning experience, the most straightforward and visible component in L2MSS plays an important role in adult L2 learners. The L2 learning experience has been highlighted as its decisive function in adult learners' attitudes towards study in different studies <sup>[5, 10, 21]</sup>. Indeed, studies on EFL contexts suggest that this situated motive plays a more decisive role in participating in classroom activities and long-term study and stimulating motivation, especially for low-level learners <sup>[5, 10, 21]</sup>. Adult L2 learners would be more likely to stop the study if the L2 learning experience seems less likely to fulfill their needs.

### 3. Vision intervention and actual learning behavior

The ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience would be more crucial than the ought-to L2 self in adult learners. The former two components would be more emphasized in the following discussion associated with actual learning behaviour.

The following discussion focuses on the use of vision intervention to strengthen the ideal L2 self. The vision intervention cooperating with roadmaps would be an effective tool to make the intended effort from L2 motivation into reality from the perspective of the L2 learning experience.

Vision, as the vivid mental image, is closely associated with imagery not limited to the visual sense but involves different modalities, including sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell <sup>[5]</sup>. In a motivational context, the vision is the future image of the L2 self, personalized by combining imagination and personal experience <sup>[22]</sup>. The combination of personal reality is because an effective ideal L2 self strengthened by the vision intervention should be applicable, reasonable, and coordinated with social contexts <sup>[3]</sup>.

Notably, the vision is different from an abstract goal. It allows learners to immerse and experience their future ideal state in L2 study in the present instead of merely endpoints, which provides positive attitudes towards study <sup>[10]</sup>. It would be crucial to increase their engagement and joy in learning tasks.

### 4. Vision intervention and ideal L2 self

Within the L2 Motivational Self System framework, vision serves as a critical enhancer of the ideal L2 self—the primary motivator for adult learners. Within the L2 Motivational Self System framework, vision serves as a critical enhancer of the ideal L2 self—the primary motivator for adult learners. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that visualization techniques significantly strengthen ideal L2 selves, whereas learners lacking vision tend to rely more on externally-driven ought-to L2 selves <sup>[23-25]</sup>. Since ought-to selves often fail to internalize and sustain motivation, particularly among adults, vision becomes essential for maintaining consistent engagement. Research in Chinese contexts confirms the vision's motivational efficacy <sup>[5]</sup>. Beyond motivation enhancement, vision offers particular value for diverse adult learners by providing a sustained future focus that transcends immediate learning experiences or social pressures, thereby fostering greater intended effort and enabling teachers to guide heterogeneous learners toward tangible outcomes <sup>[25]</sup>.

### 5. Vision intervention and L2 learning experience

Vision intervention not only strengthens the ideal L2 self but also enhances engagement through the positive effects it generates. While some studies propose that the L2 learning experience (the present) contributes to forming the ideal L2 self (the future), other evidence indicates a reverse pathway <sup>[16, 26-28]</sup>. Specifically, by providing a vivid future self-image, vision intervention makes learners more willing to engage in tasks, transforming perceivedly boring activities into meaningful steps toward their ideal selves <sup>[4]</sup>. This demonstrates that the ideal L2 self can exert a backward influence, enriching the immediate learning experience <sup>[4]</sup>. Supporting this, Sato's study found that learners without initial vision intervention reported more frustration, whereas an experimental group receiving it showed greater engagement <sup>[29]</sup>. Thus, for goal-oriented adults, this pathway from future self to present experience is highly persuasive, underscoring the value of applying vision intervention at the outset of learning.

## 6. The framework of an effective vision

According to the L2 Motivational Self System, vision serves as a powerful imagery enhancer that motivates L2 learners to increase their learning effort. An effective vision should be developed through six foundational principles: it begins with helping learners imagine themselves as successful L2 users in domains such as career, academia, or daily life; this vision then requires strengthening through regular exposure to vivid future self-imagery <sup>[3, 30]</sup>. To maintain motivational efficacy, the vision must be substantiated as achievable, personalized, and grounded in reality, while also being translated into concrete action through structured learning plans. Furthermore, sustaining the vision demands periodic reactivation to prevent its erosion amid competing distractions, and it should be counterbalanced by introducing a feared self to enhance motivational tension. For adult learners with diverse objectives, personalized yet realistic visions are particularly crucial. Therefore, visions should be periodically refined throughout the learning process to preserve both relevance and feasibility.

## 7. Roadmap: The key to actual learning behavior

A vision intervention enhances motivation, but a roadmap is crucial for translating intended effort into actual learning behavior. It operationalizes the ideal L2 self by breaking it into manageable sub-goals, creating a bridge between motivation and action. Although adult learners are often self-directed, they typically lack the expertise to construct a coherent learning path. A roadmap provides this necessary guidance, making the abstract ideal L2 self achievable.

Realizing an ideal L2 self requires sequential steps. A personalized roadmap gives direction to vision interventions, making them meaningful <sup>[10]</sup>. Evidence indicates that learners with detailed roadmaps possess clearer short- and long-term goals than those without, increasing their confidence and self-assurance <sup>[29]</sup>. Furthermore, a well-designed roadmap helps learners recognize the discrepancy between their actual and ideal L2 selves, ensuring that external obligations are considered alongside personal aspirations in the learning journey.

## 8. Implications for teaching and learning

Teachers applying the L2MSS should help learners reduce discrepancies between their actual and ideal L2 selves. The ideal L2 self is personalized, requiring vision interventions for its development. This is challenging in large classes where learners have different goals. A feasible approach is to group learners by their ideal self types and provide tailored vision interventions in separate, weekly sessions. This increases efficiency and manages teacher workload. For example, inviting successful former learners to share experiences can make ideal selves more tangible and inspiring, which is particularly valuable in EFL contexts with limited L2 community exposure.

Regarding the L2 learning experience, adult learners are often driven by specific needs and expect visible progress. Carefully selected teaching materials are crucial. While meeting all individual needs is difficult, one-on-one customized courses that focus on learners' specific interests can effectively address this diversity.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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