Retrospective case studies of successful Chinese learners of English: Continuity and change in self-identities over time and across contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates possible second language (L2) self-identities of 20 Chinese PhD students learning English in China (i.e., English as a Foreign Language—EFL) and in overseas (i.e., English as a Second Language—ESL) contexts. A retrospective case study approach is used to examine self-identity histories. The study reveals that both the ‘ideal L2 self’ and the ‘dreaded L2 self’ were important sources of motivation in learning English in Chinese schooling and overseas education as well as in the lives of these students. Moreover, this study shows both continuity and change in students’ possible self-identities. Specifically, continuity of the ideal L2 self was present over time and across the two contexts for the majority of the students, whereas change from ideal L2 self to dreaded L2 self (or vice versa) was seen in all stages of English learning for a notable minority. These results indicate that successful language learners’ self-identities are multifaceted and that the formation of self-identities is a dynamic process and contingent upon levels of schooling or learning contexts.

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1. Introduction

Learning a language involves multiple goals and motives that sustain engagement in the learning process (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Qin, 2007). Simultaneously, foreign language learning success depends, in part, upon the personal identity the learner has about himself or herself in relation to the target language and community (Gardner, 2001). The range of possible selves or identities was first outlined by Markus and Nurius (1986). These selves have been labelled as the likely self, ideal self, and dreaded self (Carver, Reynolds, & Scheier, 1994). One further self was proposed by Markus and Nurius: “the ought self” (1986, p. 958). Dornyei (2005, 2009) popularised the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self as important facets of the second language (L2) motivational self system. Although some studies have found positive correlations between these two selves and intended learning effort (Jiang, 2011; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009), the present investigation revisits the dreaded self as a possible valuable factor in understanding the motivation and identity of L2 learners of English.

The dreaded L2 self refers to a future-oriented imagined person with lower L2 competence whom learners might fear or dread becoming (e.g., a person who fails in a study programme). Hence, the dreaded self is derived from negative external...
consequences (e.g., school failure) that can be internalised because of its relation to personal future development. This is partly coincident with Şimsek and Dörnyei’s (2017) suggestion that “anxious self or the anxious me” (p. 63) was a useful concept in making sense of Turkish undergraduates who had symptoms of debilitating language anxiety. While dreaded self seems little different to the “feared self” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 21), Dörnyei argues that the feared self is the opposite of the ideal L2 self in the same domain, whereas the Markus and Nurius’s (1986) framework suggests, in contrast, that the dreaded L2 self is an independent self rather than simply a contradiction of the ideal self. Unfortunately, Dörnyei (2009) has not provided an elaborate explanation for the non-existence of dreaded L2 self in his L2 motivational self framework.

The potential value of including the “dreaded self” in the conceptualisation and measurement of possible selves related to L2 learning seems particularly strong in a collectivistic context such as China, where shame of failure and guilt are used to motivate people (Wong & Tsai, 2007). Shame and guilt are more positively valenced in collectivist cultures because they can lead to more adaptive and positive consequences (such as self-improvement) when compared with their effect in individualistic contexts (Wong & Tsai, 2007).

Furthermore, success in the high-pressure Chinese examination-oriented education system (Huang & Pan, 2011) requires higher competence in English as a foreign language (EFL), and thus there is likely to be a strong sense of dread (e.g., shame brought on family by performing poorly on examinations) in relation to English language study. Since success in English is of great importance within the National College Entrance Examination, it has a significant possible impact on students’ imagination of their future self. Without L2 English success, opportunities to be an overseas student or have a high-standing job are limited. Hence, fear of becoming a failed L2 learner is a potentially powerful motivating identity for Chinese students.

Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) was proposed based on a longitudinal, national survey of middle school students in Hungary studying five target languages (Dörnyei, Csizer, & Nemeth, 2006). Recently, more longitudinal studies on L2 motivational selves have been conducted from the perspective of dynamic systems theory (e.g., self and the specific situations interact over time; Dörnyei, Maclntyre, & Henry, 2015). However, these studies are predominantly in an EFL learning context and seem to capture the learners’ motivational possible selves at a specific study stage (e.g., high school) and the timelines reported cover at most one semester or one academic year. Accordingly, the present investigation uses a retrospective case study design to examine learners’ motivational possible selves across the full length of time in which they have been L2 learners (i.e., different study stages and language learning contexts). Theoretically, this study aims to contribute to the literature on L2 motivational possible selves through the inclusion of Markus and Nurius’s (1986) “dreaded self” alongside Dörnyei’s (2005) L2MSS. In doing so, it is hoped to broaden prevailing conceptions of possible selves in L2 by examining the development of motivational possible selves among a sample of successful language learners from China.

2. Motivational selves and context in language learning

2.1. L2 motivational self system

Motivation plays an important role in L2 learning because it helps learners maintain effort (Dörnyei et al., 2006). Motivation increases success in English learning (Gardner, 2001) and promotes the autonomy of language learners (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). More recently, self theory has been integrated into the L2 motivational field, and language learning researchers interested in self as a motivational construct have relied heavily on the L2 Motivational Self System developed by Dörnyei (2005). L2MSS includes three components: “Ideal L2 Self”, “Ought-to L2 Self”, and “L2 Learning Experience” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). Specifically, the “Ideal L2 Self” is the desired self in acquiring a second language (e.g., fluent and competent in using this language), and it includes integrative motives (e.g., to learn the second language to come closer to the L2 community) and internalised instrumental motives (e.g., learning English for professional development). The “Ought-to L2 Self” focuses on the instrumental qualities that the individual believes he/she should possess in order to fulfill obligations to significant others (e.g., learning English to meet parents’ expectations) and to avoid bad consequences (e.g., failing in exams). Importantly, the ought-to L2 self does not distinguish between the sense of fulfilling an obligation, an especially prominent construct in Chinese philosophy (Schwartz, 1985; Wong, 2006), and desire to avoid a dreaded possible self which focuses on preventing feared negative consequences. Finally, the “L2 Learning Experience” is the specific situation in which learners’ motives link with the immediate study surroundings and experiences.

Higgins, Klein, and Strauman (1985, 1987) suggested that the ideal self (i.e., desired attributes that a person hopes or wants to possess) and ought-to self (i.e., attributes that the person ought to possess in order to meet obligations) function in order to guide behaviour towards attaining the possible self. Building on these ideas, Dörnyei (2009) further suggested that the likely or expected self (e.g., a person whom he/she might become) in “possible selves” theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) would not guide behaviour since it was already presumed to be likely.

Although Dörnyei’s theorisation relied on “possible selves” theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the dreaded self seems to have been overlooked as an independent facet of motivational possible self. This is surprising given the fact that anxiety in English learning has been found in numerous empirical studies across different countries (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Liu, 2006; Tóth, 2008). Indeed, Tóth’s (2008) survey of Hungarian undergraduates identified three forms of dread-like feelings associated with English learning: communication apprehension (e.g., dread of communicating with others in English), fear of negative evaluation (e.g., dread of being evaluated by peers and parents and teachers), and test anxiety (e.g., worry about an English test).
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