Examining the Relationship Between L2 Motivational Self System and L2—Learning Among TESL Students

Hamid Roohbakhsh Far, Azizah Binti Rajab, Atika Etemadzadeh
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru, Malaysia

The present study intends to show the relationship between three motivational variables known as “ideal L2 (second language) self”, “ought-to L2 self”, and “attitudes to learning English” and students’ intended effort to learn English. A questionnaire of 33 items was administered to two groups of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) students—first-year students (53 samples) and final-year students (55 samples) in Mashhad Azad University, Iran. The results of the correlation coefficient proved a strong relationship between the “ideal L2 self” and the intended effort to learn an L2 for final-year participants. The results, however, were different for first-year students which highlighted the importance of the long-dominant concept, i.e., “integrativeness”. The major pedagogical implication is for teachers so that they can help their students to form an “ideal L2 self” by proposing tasks that provide situations for contacting with native speakers.

Keywords: ideal L2 (second language) self, ought-to L2 self, attitudes to learning English, intended effort to learn English

Introduction

Studies devoted to SLA (Second Language Acquisition) have pointed out to the importance of motivation as an important factor in language learning without which even gifted individuals cannot accomplish long-term goals. Motivation often compensates for deficiencies in language learning ability (Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Thus, other factors involved in SLA may presuppose motivation to some extent. As a result, the concept of motivation has become central to a number of theories of SLA (Clément, 1980; Gardner, 1985; Krashen, 1981; Spolsky, 1988).

The most comprehensive research in this area was carried out by Gardner and his associates in the 1970s (Stern, 1983). Gardner (1985) clearly defined motivation as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity” (p. 10). Moreover, Gardner (1979), studying the main incentives that motivated learners, made a distinction between “integrative” and “instrumental” orientations. Later, the result of a series of studies by Gardner and his colleagues (Gardner, 1985) revealed that individuals with higher integrative motivation tend to accomplish the complex task of L2

Hamid Roohbakhsh Far, Ph.D. candidate at Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.
Azizah Binti Rajab, Doctor at Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.
Atika Etemadzadeh, TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) master student at Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN L2 MOTIVATIONAL SELF SYSTEM AND L2

(second language) learning with more success. However, other researchers, such as Dörnyei (2005), Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh (2006), and Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009), have criticized the idea proposed by Gardner (1985). Consequently, Dörnyei’s criticisms led to a new reinterpretation of integrative motivation within a broader scope known as “self system”. Furthermore, with the spread of globalization as an event, which ties communities to each other and requires people’s communication even more than before, English language condition has also been completely changed. As a result, English is not the language of “inner-circle” countries such as US or UK any more rather it is spoken as an L2 by a lot of “outer-circle” countries such as India or Malaysia. Accordingly, English learners’ attitude toward a specific community as the sole owner of English, as discussed by Gardner and his associates, was blurred. Therefore, new horizons into examining the concept of “integrativeness” conceived within “L2 motivational self system” were established by other researchers in the field which has opened.

The L2 motivational self system considers the idea of “possible selves” that “give form, meaning, structure, and direction to one’s hopes and threats, thereby inciting and directing possible behavior” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 100). The concept of possible selves is also taken from self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987, as cited in Dörnyei, 2009; MacIntyre, MacKinnon, & Clément, 2009), which states that “future, as-yet-unrealized selves have the potential to be powerful motivational influences on behavior” (MacIntyre et al., 2009, p. 47). In this framework, ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self constitute the possible selves in the L2 motivational self system. The ideal L2 self refers to the person we would like to become who speaks an L2. The ought-to L2 self, on the other hand, refers to “the attributes that one believes one ought to possess… in order to avoid possible negative outcomes” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 106). It should also be noted that ideal L2 self is closely connected to the concept of integrativeness in the socio-educational model (Dörnyei, 2005; MacIntyre et al., 2009; Ryan, 2009). The ought-to L2 self also corresponds more with instrumentality. The L2 motivational self system adds a third dimensions called the L2 learning experience, which is concerned with situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment (Dörnyei et al., 2006). As a new theory in the field, less researches have been conducted based on the L2 motivational self system. Some studies have previously evaluated the model in different contexts (Dörnyei & Clément, 2001; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002; Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005). However, for a new model to be firmly established in a given field, it needs to provide more evidence from different sources to support it. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to address such a need. The study intends to evaluate the components of “L2 motivational self system” within the context of Iran. It also intends to compare the findings of “ideal L2 self” as a key component in this model with the results found for “integrativeness”. A brief summary of the definitions of the concepts investigated with the help of the questionnaire as well as some sample items is presented in the followings:

1. **Ideal L2 self** (seven items): This variable highlights the attributes a person would like to possess. Example: “I can imagine a situation where I am speaking English with foreigners”.

2. **Ought-to L2 self** (seven items): This variable measures “the attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e., various duties, obligations, or responsibilities) in order to avoid possible negative outcomes” (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 106). Example: “Learning English is necessary because people surrounding me expect me to do so”.

3. **Attitudes to learning English** (seven items): It deals with “situation-specific motives related to the
immediate learning environment and experience” (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009, p. 75). Example: “I like the atmosphere of my English classes”.

(4) The criterion measure (eight items): The criterion measure assesses the learners’ intended efforts toward learning English. The dependent variable depicts students’ effort, interest, and readiness to invest time and energy to learn the language. Example: “I am working hard at learning English”.

(5) Integrativeness (four items): It addresses possessing a positive attitude toward the L2, its culture and the native speakers of that language (Dörnyei et al., 2006). Example: “Studying English can be important to me because it will allow meeting and conversing with more and varied people”.

**Method**

**Participants**

There are 108 TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) students studying in Azad University of Mashhad, Iran, participating in this study. All participants were Iranian students who had the same educational background. Moreover, since the main purpose of the study was to compare “ideal L2 self” and “integrativeness” among two groups, participants were selected from two groups of first-year and final-year students. The interval of at least two years also maximized the differences and makes the comparison more distinct. While first-year group participants were passing some general English Language courses such as Effective Writing, final-year students were studying some academic courses like Language Testing. However, they participated in the study voluntarily and they were assured that the information provided by them would be kept confidentially and be used only for this study.

**Instrument**

Variables in the study were measured by a 33-item questionnaire. The questionnaire was a six-point Likert scale format. The questions were adopted from a newly devised questionnaire by Taguchi et al. (2009), and in order to tap into students’ integrative orientation, some new questions were also adopted from Gardner’s (1985) AMTB (Attitude Motivation Test Battery) test. The variables highlighted students’ ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, integrativeness, and students’ intended efforts to learn English.

**Procedure**

Initially, the questionnaire was piloted with a small group of samples from the same population. The Cronbach alpha index of reliability for the items was calculated and the results of some items with low indexes were deleted. Some other items were also reworded since some respondents had difficulty comprehending them in the course of pilot study. All questionnaires were administered by the researchers through observing classes. Prior to responding, students were given a brief account of the aim of the study and the format of the questionnaire. After collecting the data, items were carefully coded and analyzed by SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) 18.0 Software for Windows. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to demonstrate the possible relationship among variables in each group and also to indicate the possible differences between groups.

**Results and Discussion**

After analyzing the data, the results revealed different patterns in students’ responses within each group (see Tables 1-2).
Table 1

Correlation Matrix—First-Year Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion measure</th>
<th>Ideal L2 self</th>
<th>Ought-to L2 self</th>
<th>Attitudes to learning English</th>
<th>Integrativeness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criterion measure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal L2 self</td>
<td>0.351**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought-to L2 self</td>
<td>0.248**</td>
<td>0.110</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes to learning English</td>
<td>0.438**</td>
<td>0.177*</td>
<td>0.169*</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrativeness</td>
<td>0.432**</td>
<td>0.215**</td>
<td>0.282**</td>
<td>0.379**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at 0.05 and ** significant at 0.01.

Table 2

Correlation Matrix—Final-Year Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion measure</th>
<th>Ideal L2 self</th>
<th>Ought-to L2 self</th>
<th>Attitudes to learning English</th>
<th>Integrativeness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Criterion measure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal L2 self</td>
<td>0.553**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought-to L2 self</td>
<td>-0.008</td>
<td>0.038</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes to learning English</td>
<td>0.614**</td>
<td>0.448**</td>
<td>-0.070</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrativeness</td>
<td>0.492**</td>
<td>0.373**</td>
<td>0.082</td>
<td>0.527**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** significant at 0.01.

The noticeable difference in the data is the one between “ideal L2 self” and “criterion measure”. While first-year respondents tend to attribute their efforts to learn an L2 to their desire to integrate with the target-language community, the final-year respondents focused more on their ideal self. In other words, they visualized an L2 component in their ideal self as responsible for their efforts to learn an L2. However, since correlation is not causation, this is not to say that “ideal L2 self” is the cause of students’ efforts to learn an L2. Nevertheless, the results demonstrate how participants in each group relate their efforts to learn an L2 to either “integrativeness” or “ideal L2 self”. Therefore, the results indicate that “ideal L2 self” might not be yet a suitable substitute for “ideal L2 self” since in some contexts students have still a desire to integrate with the social and cultural community of the target-language group, thus, considering it as a source of motivation especially at the initial stages of learning a foreign language. Furthermore, the results suggest that this pattern might change, as students are more involved in learning an L2. In other words, L2 learners might establish an L2 identity and L2 self as they progress in the course of L2 learning. This, in turn, highlights the flexibility and dynamic nature of “ideal L2 self”.

Conclusions

The main reason for conducting this study was the importance of the role played by motivation which is a multidimensional construct. L2 motivation has also undergone many changes since last decades. One such a change was a re-conceptualization of L2 motivation within a broader framework conceived as “L2 motivational self system”. As a new model in the field, it needs to receive supportive evidence from studies conducted in different contexts. This study was carried out to meet this purpose. However, the results obtained from 108 TEFL
students studying in Universities in Iran partly support the new model. The study, nevertheless, demonstrated the importance of the “integrativeness” as a determining factor in L2 motivation. However, it covers only a small range of samples and any further generalization regarding the results should be done with caution. This study also is also limited in the design it addressed the issue. It was carried out as an quantitative case study plan which, in comparison to qualitative and longitudinal ones, might not provide in-depth explanations of change. Future attempts to investigate “L2 motivational self system” need to view it as a more individualist aspect on one’s disposition towards L2 learn, thus, providing more qualitative tools to examine it.

References


