

Probing Students' Future Possible Self as a Motivator for Learning استكشاف الذات المحتملة للطلاب في المستقبل كدافع للتعلم

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Abstract:

The aim of the undertaken qualitative study is to investigate students' future possible selves. The research involves semi-structured interviews with ten first year English Foreign Language (EFL) students from the English Department at Souk-Ahras University in Algeria to gain more understanding of key issues from their perceptions. The main results uncover that the participants underline the importance of their future projected selves in terms of the language study. Additionally, they underscore the salient role of their Ideal L2 possible self in boosting their future academic success and later professional achievements. Significantly enough, a number of students desire to identify themselves among the world wide populations who speak the English language to communicate with other FL/L2 speakers in the future, and yet providing validity to Dörnyei's tripartite construct of the L2 motivational self system and its applicability across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

Keywords: EFL students, possible selves, Ideal L2 Self, perceptions, future projected selves, L2 motivational self system.

ملخص البحث:

تهدف هذه الدراسة النوعية إلى استكشاف الذات المحتملة للطلاب في المستقبل. لجمع البيانات النوعية تم إجراء مقابلات فردية مع عشر طلبة من السنة الأولى من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة سوق أهراس من أجل التعرف على وجهات نظرهم وتحليلها. خلصت نتائج البحث إلى تأكيد المشاركين على أهمية توقعاتهم المستقبلية فيما يتعلق بدراسة اللغة الإنجليزية. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، أضافوا اللثام على الدور البارز لذاتهم المثالية وارتباطها بالإنجليزية كلغة ثانية لتعزيز نجاحهم الأكاديمي مستقبلا والإنجازات المهنية لاحقا، كما عبروا عن رغبتهم في التواصل مع من يتحدثون اللغة الإنجليزية عبر العالم، و بذلك يقرون بصلاحيات نظرية الذات التحفيزية لدورناي وإمكانية تطبيقها عبر سياقات لغوية وثقافية مختلفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية، الذات المثالية للغة الثانية، وجهات نظر، الذات المحتملة في المستقبل، نظرية الذات التحفيزية.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a wealth of publications has gained the research ground and resulted in reconceptualising L2 motivation concepts and processes by a number of researchers (Dörnyei, 2005; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Dörnyei, 2018; Dörnyei, 2020) due firstly to the paradigmatic shift of Second Language (L2) motivation research and secondly due to the massive inquiry of research into concepts related to the self in learning L2. Thus, more focus has been placed on students' desirable possible selves and the future vision they have in mind, as a crucial source of motivation, and its impact on their learning environment. Dörnyei (2019) has stated that vision has been widely used in various professional contexts including education as an effective tool for promoting human motivation and performance.

Indeed, the everyday living experience of individuals can be determined by a number of forces that make learners' motivational powers ebb and flow in many and different directions. The real situations that learners find themselves in urge them to expend more effort and construct an image of themselves that will rather self-guide and fuel them with energy to, ultimately, attain a future goal. Dörnyei (2019) has expressed that the vivid mental image of the experience of effectively achieving a future goal and the self-image of being a successful L2 speaker or user appears to be one of the most reliable indicators of long-term commitment and effort expenditure.

In a similar context, Muir and Dörnyei (2013, p. 357) have considered vision as "the mental representation of the sensory experience of a future goal state..., and in recent years it has been seen increasingly more often in the motivational tool kit of practicing language teachers". That is, vision, as a concept, has gained the educational ground and more importantly has inspired motivated actions in the language classroom so as to allow the achievement of future possible selves. It has, as well, drawn attention and emerged, as a construct, in L2 motivation theory. Muir and Dörnyei (2013) have stated, from a practical perspective, that vision has been boosted by the theory of possible selves and imagery in addition to the L2 Motivational Self System construct to facilitate its practical application in the field of language teaching.

This new area of motivating learners through generating a language learning vision is, in fact, a progression of the Ideal L2 Self as the first component of Dörnyei's recent theory of L2 Motivational Self System (2005). According to this theory, Dörnyei (2018) has indicated that the L2 motivational self system is a tripartite construct that is made up of the Ideal L2 Self, as a key concept, and depicted it as an ideal self-image that the L2 speaker would desire to be in the future in addition to the second component the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience as the last component. It bears emphasizing that this crucial concept will be more detailed and reviewed in the literature afterwards. Significantly enough, several recent studies have revealed that Dörnyei's tripartite

construct is widely applicable across different linguistic and cultural settings (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid & Papi, 2009).

So, the point in emphasising vision, as a concept, and the Ideal L2 Self of Dörnyei's theory in the study at hand is to gain a better understanding of some Algerian university students' beliefs regarding their future vision and its impact on their motivation in the language classroom and, equally important, help them construct their Ideal L2 self and create the desired image of who they would like to become in the future so as to persist and expend more effort along the learning process. Yet, our main research question is what vision (s) do first year students of English hold about their future projected or desired selves to boost their motivation and engagement in the learning of the English language and more importantly to persist in the face of difficulty to achieve their objectives.

2. Literature Review

A review of the published literature on developments in motivation research in the last decades has uncovered recent research studies and new concepts owing to the shift in research on second language motivation.

Following the same path of research, Magid and Chan (2011) have conducted a research study based on Dörnyei's theory of L2 Motivational Self System. They investigated two different programmes. The first one was a voluntary programme and conducted at the level of a university in England; while the second one was carried out at a university in Hong Kong. The latter was a compulsory credit-bearing English course. The results uncovered the effectiveness of both programmes in terms of not only motivating the university students to learn the English language but boosting their linguistic self-confidence as well via strengthening their vision of their Ideal L2 Self.

Dörnyei and Chan (2013) have indicated that imagery, as a crucial aspect of the L2 Motivational Self System, has been stressed by a number of researchers and studies in various areas of L2 learning and teaching in the past few decades such as in grammar teaching, in vocabulary learning, in reading, in writing, and in listening comprehension. Equally important, both researchers have conducted an empirical study in 2013 on secondary school pupils in Hong Kong to examine the impact of vision on learners' overall motivational setup. The findings confirmed the connection between future self-guides and salient imagery aspects in the learning of both English and Mandarin.

Additionally, Kim and Kim (2018) have conducted a study to probe the impacts of perceptual learning styles, imagination, and the Ideal L2 self on 283 college students' motivated L2 behaviour. The findings unveiled that the college students were found to prefer, mostly, a visual learning style, then auditory and kinesthetic styles. It was concluded from the carried research study that the Ideal L2 self had the most powerful impact on the college students, followed by imagination, auditory style, and visual style.

In 2016, You and Dörnyei surveyed a sample of more than 10,000 Chinese university students and secondary schools learners based on the L2 Motivational Self

System (Dörnyei 2005, 2009). Both participants were chosen from urban and rural locations and stratified in accordance to teaching contexts and geographical areas. The study's findings proved once more the relevance of Dörnyei's theory of L2 Motivational Self System in another different context the Chinese one albeit it was constructed in Western cultural contexts as stated by the researchers themselves offering validity to the cross-linguistic and cultural aspects of the theory. According to You and Dörnyei, their results disclosed a picture that runs in the opposite direction of the belief that claims that Chinese learners are primarily motivated instrumentally.

Yet, we shed more light on our context and explore Dörnyei's theory upon which all the aforementioned studies have been founded. Dörnyei (2005) has conceptualised the L2 Motivational Self System theory to firstly describe the learning process of L2 and secondly to explain the individual differences of language learners. Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System construct is made up of three main components.

To start with, the Ideal L2 self dimension of Dörnyei's system is the first component and it represents the L2 person that one would like to become. It functions as a motivating force that makes us want to reduce the dissimilarity between the existing self and the ideal or desirable one that we aspire. In other words, it symbolises an ideal projected image of the type of L2 speaker that he/she desires to be in the future. If, for example, someone hopes to be fluent in English as a speaker and interacts with foreigners, the vision of his/her 'self' as a fluent Language speaker might empower his/her motivation to diminish the dissimilarity between the real 'self' in which he or she has not yet mastered the language and this ideal or desired future image as a competent language user. In line with, Csizér and Kormos (2009) have underlined the importance of the Ideal L2 self for motivating students and mentioned its relevance in studies in various contexts such as Hungary.

The second system's component is the ought-to L2 self. It represents an L2-“knowing” person that one feels he/she ought to become to evade any possible negative outcomes. According to Dörnyei (2005) this less-internalised component of the L2 self refers back to the characteristics that a person thinks he/she ought-to have as a result of perceived duties. For example, someone desires to learn the English language to satisfy the expectations of his/her parent or teacher. This second component can function as a major motivating force for L2 learning. Significantly enough, Csizér and Kormos (2009) conducted a research study in Hungary and found out a positive relationship between parental encouragement and the ought-to L2 self. Consequently, the ought to L2 self impacts externally on the learner as perceived internally by the learner himself/herself.

The third component deals with the L2 learning Experience. In this context, Dörnyei (2005) has said that it has to do with the situation-specific motives that are linked to the current environment of learning and experience. That is, it focusses on the attitudes of students towards the L2 learning, and the learning environment, and

experiences in that environment. Clearly enough, Dörnyei (2014) has indicated that this third component covers a number of teaching and learning aspects such as: the influence of the teacher, the language course, and the experience of success as situation-specific motives connected, as already mentioned, to the learning environment and experience.

Equally important, Dörnyei (2014) has argued that regarding the L2 motivational self-system as a new framework, we cannot detach learners from their social environment. Yet, practically speaking, the teacher has to take into consideration the complexity of many factors impacting on a student. They can be either internal to the student, or external arising from the student's family and social context, or from the learning context itself.

It is worth mentioning that the difference between Dörnyei's (2001) Motivational teaching practices system and the L2 motivational self system (2005; 2009) resides in the way motivation, as an elusive construct, is considered. On the one hand, motivational teaching practices system views it from the teaching perspective and more precisely from teachers' lens; it embraces the strategies or techniques teachers use to motivate their students. On the other hand, the L2 motivational self system places more emphasis on integrating the self and the students' learning process. In other words, how student characteristics and the learning environment impact the learning process.

In the current paper, we will focus more on the Ideal L2 self that refers to the students' vision of what they would like to be in the future and how it is perceived by students. The ought-to L2 self, as an L2 self system dimension, is rather external to the student and refers the student's perception of what significant people expect from him/her. Those significant others may be parents, friends, or teachers. In our case, teachers' perceptions are not also probed. The third component of the system, the L2 Learning Experience, is associated with a wide range of techniques that can promote motivation and I will not focus on it here (for more details, see Dörnyei, 2001).

3. Research Methodology

In this section, the researcher describes, in details, how the study has been carried out in terms of research design, population and sampling, and research method.

3.1 Research Design

The undertaken research study applied a descriptive design to investigate the perceptions of some students about the crucial role of students' vision and its impact on their desired image of who they would like to become in the future as mentioned previously in the introduction. Therefore, the researcher adopted the descriptive survey approach in which semi-structured interviews were used for the purpose of data collection.

3.2 Participants of the Study

Ten EFL students were selected conveniently from 101 first year students of English at Mohamed Cherif Messaadia University in Souk-Ahras to participate in the present

study. Both male and female participants were enrolled in the first year English Language. The researcher opted for ‘convenient sampling’ as a sampling technique. That is, the population sample was conveniently chosen owing to its availability and relevance to the conducted research. It was a nonrandom sampling method and defined by Mackey and Gass (2005, p. 122) as “the selection of individuals who happen to be available for study”.

3.3 Instrument

The study was carried out with a qualitative research design based on a six-phase visionary training approach designed by Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014). To collect qualitative data, semi-structured interview was used to explore students’ perceptions and beliefs. The conducted interview focussed primarily on the students’ possible L2-related selves to investigate at which degree the notion of the Ideal L2 selves can help in informing the analysis of Algerian University students’ L2/FL motivation. The interview main research questions were based on students’ reasons for studying English and their future plans.

3.4 Data Analysis Techniques

Students’ answers were transcribed then coded to guarantee the confidentiality and the anonymity of the participants. Besides, the data were analysed to explore the students’ perceptions about the role of their visions in motivating and boosting them to learn the foreign language. More emphasis was placed on the themes that could be relevant to the research aims.

4. Findings and Discussion

The main results unearth that students underscore the salience of their future vision and desired future selves. The students place emphasis on their future academic and professional life in addition to their plans in terms of language study. All the interviewed students seem to agree in terms of Ideal L2 self in constructing an image of themselves in the future related to academic success and professional achievements. Interestingly enough, some students desire to identify themselves among the world wide populations who speak the English language and to communicate with other FL/L2 speakers in the future. Below, some students’ quotations are mentioned and discussed based on Dörnyei’s Motivational L2 System (2005) and Dörnyei and Kubanyiova’s visionary training approach (2014) revealing how it enhanced the Algerian university students to create visions of their Ideal L2 selves to study and learn the English language.

According to students the ‘Ideal L2 self’ plays a central role in motivating students in FL/L2 classroom. They talked about some points that can contribute to create an attractive vision of their L2 selves and help them create desired future selves of who they could become as FL users and what this could bring or add to their lives. Thus, our first question was ‘As a first year student of English, what do you intend to do in the future?’ Student A said:

‘Well, let me think... I think I have to make something in the future, I travel abroad.

Actually, in any country I go to, I have to speak English, you can communicate with language. It's the language of the world. It's like a second language.' (Student A)

She further added:

'It's also simple and easy language and it is the language of the world everywhere you go, you need English in your life. I think I want to be a professor of English perhaps like you!' (Student A)

Student F stated:

'When I see my teachers who teach us... that's why I'm motivated a lot.'

He added:

'All what I can tell you is that English is an international language and we need it. I can say... instead of French... but I feel myself motivated...I am an active person, that's why I believe I can study the whole day without being tired.' (Student F)

Other students are more concerned with motivation and the vision they carry about their future possible selves, the ideal L2 self for them is considered as a powerful booster or motivator that aids them to learn the FL since they are holding desires and dreams they would like to achieve in the future. They already had mental images of what they want or hope to be in the future. They imagine themselves in future high positions which they can achieve and yet they are rather strengthening their vision and accompany it with future imagery to stimulate and motivate themselves to take action.

Student (B) said:

'I want to be a teacher at the university or continue and study translation... I feel so comfortable to learn it because it's a beautiful language.' (Student B)

She further added:

'The whole world speaks English. If you go to another place, so you can communicate with others and they will understand you. You connect with them and make contacts and friends.' (Student B)

Student C stated:

'I choose English because I love it and I would like to be a journalist or a teacher... Maybe I would like to travel to countries who speak English. I realise my dreams, so I need to cross this step.' (Student C)

Student D voiced:

'I love the English language. It was my dream since I was young. I want to be a good example for my children and encourage them to study...to be motivated to teach them and realise my dreams... to have my degree and to speak the language.' (Student D)

Another student (E) said:

'What I like to say is ...it's a modern language and I want to develop and enjoy myself. I am just studying to gather more information about everything.' (Student E)

He later added:

'Maybe if I go out from Algeria, it will help me to communicate with people. Maybe in

work there, you should know the language and like I said... is to know at least new information each day. French is a dead language...English is a modern language as I said... It's a global language, so for example, if we go to Korea or Japan or to western countries, you have to speak and communicate with people in English.' (Student E)

Student F said:

'I want to be a teacher. It's my dream to be a teacher even in a middle school or a secondary school. I enjoy teaching students. After finishing my license, I will study master ...' (Student F)

So far, students B, C, D, E, and F spoke about their 'Ideal L2 self'. They firstly indicated the positive affective aspect of the language in addition to the impact of having an Ideal L2 self for their L2 progression and future career. They seem to believe that with these mental images they will progress better in their learning, as well as their academic attainment and professional achievement. They also made a special reference to the status and the position of the English language in the world in which they can foresee themselves communicating and interacting with other English speakers in various imagined international settings.

In another context of substantiating their vision to have a clear image of their future hoped-for L2 selves, students endeavour to exploit and get profit from all what they see, read, and listen to in terms of songs, films, and internet sources.

Student F said:

'First I begin with listening to songs then movies. Now I read a lot in Google and I try to listen a lot. So, I try to read a lot articles... everything written in English. I try to read it to write it even in my hands sometimes! ...to remember it yes! Not to forget it...Yes! That's why I am so motivated to learn this language and I believe I can do a lot of things with it.' (Student F)

He has as well added:

'...Maybe I go to foreign country to perfect my language and going back to Algeria. I want to do something for my country.' (Student F)

In the same direction, student C stated:

'I watch films and serials and even documentaries. I feel comfortable to speak English, sometimes, I feel I understand and sometimes no because I don't have the whole dictionary.' (Student C)

Another student (A) said:

'...I love English since I was a little girl, so I start to watch movies and drama to enrich my language...' (Student A)

In a similar vein, students hold a vision of their 'Self' as competent speakers and yet they may empower their motivation and expend more effort to shorten the distance between their 'real self' and the 'desired future self' as fluent language speakers. In accordance with this, some interviewed students responded as follows:

Student E declared:

'I feel jealous when I hear for example a student or a colleague talk fluently or have good level in English I want to reach that level that's what motivates me.' (Student E)

Student F said:

'I love the English language so much and believe in my capacities.' (Student F)

More importantly, student F added:

'...Of course! I love the language when natives speak... and I love British accent.' (Student F)

Student I said:

'...Sometimes I connect with people from the United States. Sometimes I have problems in communicating.' (Student I)

As for student H:

'I think that English is the first used language in the world everyone knows English, so you can communicate with people and interact in English... it's easier and also English is the first used language in technology, so everything is about English now.' (Student H)

She later added:

'I don't want to stay here in Algeria... I want to do something else in another country. So if does not go I just go to my aunt in UK and stay there...' (Student H)

Student A said:

'I want to travel to know the world. I want to learn new staffs. I don't want to be inside a box, so I need something to communicate with. So English is the best thing especially as a language.' (Student A)

What is even more interesting about students F , H, and A is the fact of providing some information to substantiate their vision as a desired cognitive goal such as being a future teacher of English, visiting English speaking countries and joining its wide speaking population in terms of realistic expectations.

Besides, student F added:

'I have many things in my mind that I can change, I believe I can change many things in this university, the method of teaching, how to speak with students how to deal with problems here.' (Student F)

Student A once more stated:

'I think I will be good at English. I will work hard. I have to because this is how life goes, because if you want to achieve something, you need to work for it...this is how life goes in our country.' (Student A)

Student I said:

'I love English as a language. I want to see myself as a PhD student then I want to be a teacher. I want to see myself as a successful teacher. I want to be independent. To get money and visit countries...' (Student I)

Student J stated:

'I always love English but as a hobby. Someone who read books, I even collect books...I always thought to get my PhD in literature. I will finish my studies...' (Student J)

Significantly enough, students F, A, I, and J want to transform their vision into action. As for student F to be a successful future teacher, it is the right time to take some steps in terms of change or remediation and put them into practice. Equally important, student A is mentioning concrete actions that will lead to these possible projected selves as expending effort. For student I it is essential to have a potential future self as being a PhD student then an independent successful teacher.

5. CONCLUSION

The current research study probed a crucial component of the tripartite construct of Dörnyei (2005) in the Algerian EFL learning context based on a qualitative design. The gathered and analysed data brought to light an explanation to students' motives for studying English in the research context. The results appeared to run in the same vein of previous studies and disclosed that the students hold a vision about their future possible selves that motivated them to expend more effort to study and learn English as a FL, and yet providing validity to Dörnyei's tripartite construct of the L2 motivational self system and its applicability across different linguistic and cultural contexts. However, a number of limitations need to be stressed.

The first study's limitation resides in the small number of participants who were interviewed. Yet, interviewing a large size sample of students would have produced more data and hence more learners' viewpoints. Secondly, the undertaken study was conducted in one university and in an Algerian context, generalisations should be handled with caution and further studies and exploration are encouraged in various contexts and should be carried out with larger samples and from different categories as middle and secondary school learners to obtain robust results.

Moreover, this study targeted only students; it would be better to include teachers as a major actor and stakeholder in the teaching and learning process and investigate their beliefs. Furthermore, the findings of this study were achieved qualitatively and yet using a quantitative approach would have led to more clarifying results and increased our understanding of the theme.

After all, the findings of this research paper will undoubtedly serve as a future baseline for further research studies in addition to contributing to the already existing body of research and literature on the concept of vision and L2 Ideal Self. Finally, it is worth to mention that Dörnyei (2019) has proposed a research agenda to make the process of L2 learning and teaching more principled and effective by ways of integrating the principles of one of the most powerful psychological learning paradigms, the explicit/implicit learning dichotomy and the related contrast of procedural versus declarative knowledge. Yet, more efforts should be geared towards such an agenda to

reach more promising research findings.

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Appendix

-What follows below is the semi-structured interview conducted with the ten students who participated in the present study.

Students' Semi-structured Interview

Introduction

Students who come to the university often dream or paint a picture of what they would like to become in the future or hold a plan to realise. Yet, they become more motivated to do so. Well, our first question is as follows:

Researcher: Why have you chosen to study the English language?

Interviewee...

Researcher: What are your plans for the future/ what do you intend to do?

Interviewee...

Researcher: Tell me about the reasons that you see as motivational for you to study and work hard?

Interviewee...

Researcher: In your opinion, do you think that a future image of yourself can motivate you to expand more effort?

Interviewee...

Researcher: What about combining your dream / desired self with future goals?

Interviewee...

Researcher: Now, Let's speak about the steps you undertake to realise your dreams.

Interviewee...

Researcher: Do you want to conclude with something?

Interviewee...

Researcher: Thank you very much indeed for your kind cooperation!