

*Towards a better understanding
of the L2 Learning Experience, the Cinderella
of the L2 Motivational Self System*

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Abstract

The theoretical emphasis within the L2 Motivational Self System has typically been on the two future self-guides representing possible (ideal and ought-to) selves, leaving the third main dimension of the construct, the L2 Learning Experience, somewhat undertheorized. Yet, this third component is not secondary in importance, as evidenced by empirical studies that consistently indicate that the L2 Learning Experience is not only a strong predictor of various criterion measures but is often the most powerful predictor of motivated behavior. This paper begins with an analysis of possible reasons for this neglect and then draws on the notion of student engagement in educational psychology to offer a theoretical framework for the concept. It is proposed that the L2 Learning Experience may be defined as the perceived quality of the learners' engagement with various aspects of the language learning process.

Keywords: L2 Motivational Self System; L2 Learning Experience; engagement; motivated behavior

1. Introduction

Since the introduction of the L2 Motivational Self System in L2 motivation research over ten years ago (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), the field has shifted towards a self-based approach in trying to understand what energizes learners to initiate and then sustain the long journey of mastering a foreign/second language (L2) (see Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015). This shift of perspective is partly due to the fact that two of the model's three main dimensions – the *Ideal L2 Self* and the *Ought-to L2 Self* – are conceptualized as future self-guides along the lines of Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves theory. In addition, besides its three core components, the L2 Motivational Self System also involves a set of conditions that need to be satisfied to produce motivational power, and here the dominance of a self-based construal is even more noticeable: every single condition is related to the two self-guides. So, where does this leave the third core component of the L2 Motivational Self System, the *L2 Learning Experience*? Why has it not featured more prominently in either the theoretical or the research developments of the past decade?

In answer to these questions, this paper offers two main reasons for the relative neglect of this motivational component: the first is related to the historical roots of the L2 Learning Experience that are markedly different from those of the two self-guides, as a result of which this component represents a conceptual tradition that cannot be easily harmonized with the well-established theoretical basis of the possible future selves; the second reason concerns the rather under-theorized nature of the L2 Learning Experience, which did not aid efforts to build on this notion and to integrate it into broader theories in a way it has been done with the ideal and the ought-to selves (e.g., their incorporation into theories of vision or directed motivational currents; see Dörnyei, in press). In order to remedy this shortcoming, the last section of the paper proposes a new direction for conceptualizing the *L2 Learning Experience*, defined as the perceived quality of the learner's engagement with various aspects of the learning process.

2. The origins of the L2 Learning Experience

The L2 Motivational Self System was partly the outcome of empirical research conducted in Hungary and partly of theoretical advances in the fields of applied linguistics and psychology. The empirical basis was presented by Csizér and Dörnyei (2005), and Dörnyei, Csizér, and Németh (2006, Chapter 5), describing how the new theoretical construct emerged from a structural equation modelling (SEM) study analyzing data gathered in a large-scale ($N > 10,000$) longitudinal survey in Hungary (for an overview, see Csizér, in press). The key move in this

process involved the equation of the traditional concept of *integrativeness* (Gardner, 1985) with the *Ideal L2 Self*, the latter conceived as a broader construct. Extensive subsequent testing of this hypothesis confirmed that the two concepts were indeed interrelated and that the *Ideal L2 Self* appeared to do a better job at accounting for variance in different criterion measures than *integrativeness* (for a summary, see Dörnyei, 2010). These outcomes offered justification for developing a new theoretical construct that was centered around the *Ideal L2 Self*, with an obvious second component to be included in this construct being the *Ought-to L2 Self*. Dörnyei (2005) offered a detailed rationale and validation argument for the inclusion of these two components, but the third constituent of the theory, the *L2 Learning Experience*, was only discussed in a few lines, stating that it concerns situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience. This brevity was partly due to the fact that the study by Csizér and Dörnyei (2005), which formed the empirical basis of the proposed new construct, included only generalized (i.e., non-situation-specific) motives and thus did not provide relevant information about this dimension. Nonetheless, it was argued that past motivation research had offered ample evidence for the significance of situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience, thereby justifying the addition of this third component.

In other words, the inclusion was explained by the fact that the main lesson of the motivational renaissance of the 1990s – namely, that factors related to classroom events and various characteristics of the learner group significantly affect L2 motivation – warranted a situation-specific constituent in any conceptualization of language learning motivation, similar to how Ushioda (2001) and Noels (2003) also pursued a situated understanding of motivation theory. Thus, a third component was added to the new model under the broad label of *L2 Learning Experience* with the intention that it would serve as a comprehensive rubric to cover the whole range of motivational influences associated with the actual process of learning an L2. The brevity of the explanation and the lack of any concern for the somewhat eclectic nature of the L2 Motivational Self System was due to the fact that the main thrust of the new theory was the *extension* (rather than consolidation) of our existing knowledge through the *addition* of the two novel constituents (i.e., the two self-guides), and therefore most effort went into communicating this development.

In 2009, I offered a more detailed rationale for the new theory, but, regarding the *L2 Learning Experience*, the discussion did not go much further than reiterating the basis for the original inclusion of this component:

I also felt that we needed to add a third major constituent, which is associated with the direct impact of the students' learning environment. After all, one of the main

achievements of the new wave of motivational studies in the 1990s was to recognize the motivational impact of the main components of the classroom learning situation, such as the teacher, the curriculum and the learner group. For some language learners the initial motivation to learn a language does not come from internally or externally generated self-images but rather from successful engagement with the actual language learning process (e.g., because they discover that they are good at it). (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29)

Looking back, I can see that I was aware of the fact that the theoretical justification of the *L2 Learning Experience* fell short of the level of detail offered for the other two components, as I added a caveat: "This component is conceptualized at a different level from the two self-guides and future research will hopefully elaborate on the self aspects of this bottom-up process" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). Unfortunately, no such elaboration has been offered over the past decade, as illustrated, for example, by Dörnyei and Ryan's (2015, p. 88) recent summary:

The third component, the L2 Learning Experience, is different from the first two in that it focuses on the learner's present experience, covering a range of situated, 'executive' motives related to the immediate learning environment (e.g., the impact of the L2 teacher, the curriculum, the peer group, and the experience of success).

In sum, the L2 Learning Experience was originally included in the L2 Motivational Self System in order to do justice to past research on the educational dimension of L2 motivation and to supplement the focal issue of the new constructs, the Ideal L2 Self, and its inextricable companion, the Ought-to L2 Self. It was felt right from the beginning that the label *L2 Learning Experience* was hardly more than a broad, place-holding umbrella term that would need to be fine-tuned at one point, but it appears that the interest in the potentials of the new self-approach has overshadowed this research need, thereby leaving the L2 Learning Experience the Cinderella of the L2 Motivational Self System.

3. The undertheorized nature of the L2 Learning Experience

Curiously, while the theoretical limelight has been on the future self-guides, empirical findings obtained through the application of the L2 Motivational Self System have consistently indicated that the L2 Learning Experience was a strong predictor of various criterion measures such as intended learning effort or L2 learning achievement; in fact, it was not uncommon for it to emerge as the *most powerful* predictor of motivated behavior (e.g., Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013; Kormos & Csizér, 2008; Lamb, 2012; Papi, 2010; Papi & Teimouri, 2012; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). For example, in a large-scale survey in China we found that:

The association with Intended Effort is highest with Attitudes to L2 Learning (.67 for the whole sample), followed by the Ideal L2 Self (.51), with the Ought-to L2 Self considerably lagging behind (.38). Of course, correlations cannot indicate cause-effect relations, but it is still important to note that for Chinese students the desire to invest time and energy in language learning seems to be associated first and foremost with the evaluation of the learning process. (You & Dörnyei, 2016, p. 512)

In You, Dörnyei, and Csizér (2016), we further interrogated the same Chinese dataset by breaking it down to many different subsamples that were formed through the permutation of factors such as gender, degree of development of visionary skills and different learning contexts (i.e., secondary students, university English majors and non-English majors), and every single subsample yielded the above pattern of the L2 Learning Experience considerably exceeding the Ideal L2 Self.

We should note here, though, that the last sentence of the above paragraph needs to be qualified in that the actual variable related to the students' learning experience in You and Dörnyei (2016) and in You et al. (2016) was not labelled *L2 Learning Experience* but rather *Attitudes to L2 Learning*, and this difference reflects a larger issue concerning the unspecified theoretical nature of the L2 Learning Experience construct. In You et al. (2016, pp. 96-97) we reflected on this matter as follows:

Because this component did not originate in possible selves theory, its operationalization in actual research terms has been subject to more variation than that of the two future self-guides. For example, Taguchi (2013) and Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) referred to it as "Attitudes to learning English," Kormos, Kiddle, and Csizér (2011) as "L2 learning attitude," while Csizér and Kormos (2009) used the term "L2 learning experience" and Papi (2010) "English learning experience." This has been, however, largely terminological variation because the specific questionnaire items that were used to tap into this component were broadly similar across the studies.

In other words, while the employed terminology differed across studies, the actual measurement of the concept was more or less the same, typically utilizing a short scale of items assessing the learners' attitudes towards L2 learning. The prerequisite for being able to move beyond this state was to find a new theoretical organizing principle that would allow for a more specific and elaborate measurement focus. The only relevant idea that I have had in this respect over the past decade was to harmonize the three constituents of the L2 Motivational Self System by relating each to the notion of *experience*: "Thus, the new approach concerned two future self-guides associated with *imagined experience* and a third constituent rooted in *actual experience*" (Dörnyei, 2014, p. 9; emphasis added). However, while this formulation made conceptual sense, it did not facilitate the development of any new measurement procedures because of the vagueness of how *experience* should be understood and operationalized. As a

result, while the internal structure of the L2 Motivational Self System appeared to make sense to a wide audience, the L2 Learning Experience component within this structure was treated as a broad and rather unspecified attitude factor. Even the fact that this factor tended to account for the largest amount of motivational variance in empirical studies did not intensify efforts to make this measure more detailed and specific, because the theoretical discussions concerning the L2 Motivational Self System tended to be centered around the Ideal and the Ought-to L2 Selves.

4. The L2 Learning Experience and the quality of learner engagement

It was mentioned above that what has held back the refinement of the L2 Learning Experience component was the uncertainty of how the broad concept of *experience* could be translated into specific and measurable terms. In the final section of this paper, I would like to propose that adopting an *engagement-specific perspective* might offer a fruitful direction for future developments in this respect.

Engagement in educational psychology is understood as active participation and involvement in certain behaviors (cf. Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004), and *student engagement* – which refers to engagement in school-related activities and academic tasks – has recently been hailed as “the holy grail of learning” and “one of the hottest research topics in the field of educational psychology” (Sinatra, Heddy, & Lombardi, 2015, p. 1). The reason for the emerging popularity of the notion is easy to understand: it highlights meaningful learning accompanied by active participation in school life at a time when modern educational theories increasingly stipulate such active student involvement in the learning process to be a prerequisite for any instructional success. It requires little justification that student engagement is equally important in the field of SLA, because the automatization of L2 skills requires an extended period of practice that involves meaningful learner participation. Indeed, the “learning-through-doing” tenet has been a key principle of communicative language learning in general and task-based language learning in particular.

While the essence of the notion of engagement is straightforward, what complicates things is the fact that student involvement has both external and internal dimensions, with the former concerning the amount of actual *learning behaviors* a student displays through their observable actions, and the latter relating to internal aspects such as the learners’ *cognitive* and *emotional participation* (i.e., genuine personal identification with the learning process). Indeed, it is possible for someone to merely “go through the motions,” that is, to exhibit seemingly active participation in a task without involving themselves at the level of thought or affect. This realization has led scholars to define student engagement

as a multi-faceted concept, typically distinguishing between behavioral, cognitive, affective and social aspects (see e.g., Finn & Zimmer, 2012; for a detailed recent application of this multidimensional conception to L2 tasks, see Philp & Duchesne, 2016), but I believe that Skinner, Furrer, Marchand, and Kindermann (2008, p. 778) are still right in their argument that the “core construct, most prototypical of engagement, is behavioral participation in the classroom.” This behavioral aspect is, in fact, what distinguishes the notions of engagement and motivation from each other most markedly: motivation only indicates a student’s *potential* for actively pursuing learning (rather than how this potential is actually realized), and as Henry and Thorsen (in press) summarize, “since motivation rarely flows completely unhindered into action, it is the behavioral outworkings of various motivational sources that are captured in the engagement construct.”

How can the notion of engagement help us to clarify the nature of the L2 Learning Experience? As Mercer and Dörnyei (in press) argue, using the verb “to engage” offers a valuable benefit in that it is an active verb that can be followed by a *target* within the phrase “to engage with TARGET.” In our case, the broad target of engagement involves the students’ language learning process and L2 learning environment, which in turn can be broken down into more specific meaningful facets. Common sense suggests including in such a detailed conceptualization the following aspects to engage with:

- *school context* (e.g., various aspects of belonging to the school community, adopting school norms and developing general academic confidence);
- *syllabus and the teaching materials* (e.g., curiosity about and interest in the content; match between the syllabus to the students’ needs; ownership and personalization of the materials);
- *learning tasks* (e.g., utilizing the principles of task-based language teaching; application of project/problem-based learning; goal-setting and progress checks);
- *one’s peers* (e.g., relevant areas of group dynamics/classroom management, particularly social acceptance, group cohesiveness, norms of cooperation and tolerance);
- *teacher* (e.g., student-teacher rapport; utilizing insights from leadership models; conflict resolution).

In other words, the application of the verb “to engage” offers a natural way of mapping the most important facets of the learning experience, which in turn allows us to capture the key aspects in measurable terms. In accordance with this approach, the L2 Learning Experience can be defined as the perceived quality of the learners’ engagement with various aspects of the language learning process. We should also note that the above list is not conclusive and therefore future research is needed to determine which aspects of engagement to focus on.

How can we measure engagement? In educational psychology there is a body of literature discussing various forms of engagement assessment, and several self-report instruments have been developed for this purpose. Part V of the *Handbook of Research on Student Engagement* (Christenson, Reschly, & Wylie, 2012) specifically addresses “measurement issues, instruments, and approaches,” and the six chapters in it (Appleton, 2012; Betts, 2012; Darr, 2012; Fredericks & McColskey, 2012; Samuelsen, 2012; Yazzie-Mintz & McCormick, 2012) offer a thorough survey of the field. These discussions of course concern general educational engagement, but the flexibility of the targets that can be assigned to the verb “engage” allows for tailoring the measurement to our specific L2 focus. The notion of engagement is also flexible in terms of how widely one throws the net: for one, it can be defined as a multi-dimensional construct, addressing every main aspect of the learning process that we suspect might have a bearing on the learners (as outlined above); alternatively, one can focus only on the commonalities of the various dimensions – for example, the international polling company Gallup (2016) has been conducting an ongoing school engagement survey for secondary school students using as few as eight items: “At this school, I get to do what I do best every day,” “My teachers make me feel my schoolwork is important,” “I feel safe in this school. I have fun at school,” “I have a best friend at school,” “In the last seven days, someone has told me I have done good work at school,” “In the last seven days, I have learned something interesting at school,” “The adults at my school care about me,” and “I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future.”

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the refinement/reconceptualization of the L2 Learning Experience component of the L2 Motivational Self System is a timely task. The challenge of this endeavor is to find an appropriate theoretical framework within which the notion of *learning experience* can be interpreted. I have argued in this paper that tapping into the domain of engagement in educational psychology might be a fruitful way forward in this respect, as *student engagement* offers a well-defined and sufficiently specific conceptual area that can be customized for use in L2 motivation research. Accordingly, I have proposed a definition of the L2 Learning Experience as the perceived quality of the learners’ engagement with various aspects of the language learning process. Besides offering a theoretical base, the adoption of an engagement-centered approach may also be beneficial for allowing researchers to draw on the relevant measurement resources developed in educational psychology.

In a theoretical overview of language learning motivation, self and identity, Ushioda (2011) highlighted the fact that currently we lack a sufficiently robust theoretical framework to link the situated processes associated with the L2 Learning Experience with the future-oriented dimension of possible selves. While the focus in her paper was on developing new, technology-based, situated learner identities that can lead to the development of possible future L2 selves, I believe that understanding the situated learning experience in an active, engagement-specific framework (as outlined earlier) may also establish a platform for creating links between concrete aspects of actual student engagement and concrete aspects of future student aspirations. This could potentially reduce, or even eliminate, the existing theoretical discordancy amongst the three main dimensions of the L2 Motivational Self System.

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