Lots of Selves, some rebellious: Developing the Self Discrepancy Model for Language Learners

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a new language learning motivation model, which is, like the currently dominant model by Dörnyei, based on Higgins' (1987) *Self Discrepancy Theory*. Increasing evidence of 'non-fit' of Dörnyei's model, especially (but not solely) from language learners with English as a first language, let to the author revisiting Higgins' original, which had more complex delineation of different Selves that adopted by Dörnyei. After critically reviewing the body of literature suggesting 'non-fit' of Dörnyei's model, a model with Higgins' original delineations of Selves is proposed and adapted to the language learning context, and then applied on novel data from two different learner groups with English as first language: mature university and adolescent school students. The proposed *Self Discrepancy Model for Language Learners* contributes to solutions of several problems raised in current discussion of language learner motivation: it provides a better fit of data seemingly incompatible with Dörnyei's model, especially a learner type labelled 'rebellious', offers a better embedding of a range of contextual influences on motivation, and facilitates developmental perspectives on language learner motivation. The empirical data delivers on the first two goals, and offers pathways regarding the last.

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1. Introduction

Of all individual differences in second language learning (L2), motivation is considered one of, if not *the* most important factor determining success; moreover, a factor subject to influence through good pedagogical practice. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the vibrant research area of L2 motivation has experienced greater innovation and diversity (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015) than related L2 research areas.

Among the conceptual frameworks of L2 motivation, the *L2 Motivational Self System* (L2MSS: Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) is currently undoubtedly dominant (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015). The L2MSS is based on the psychological theory of *Self Discrepancy* (Higgins, 1987), whereby tensions between *Actual* and *Possible Selves* generate motivational dynamics. The L2MSS distinguishes between two possible Selves: *Ideal*, stemming from the learner's own desires, and *Ought-to*, related to external wishes and demands upon the learner, while adding a further learner-context dimension, that of the L2 Learning Experience (teacher, materials etc.).

The L2MSS is often adopted with 'an air of creativity and room for expansion within the L2MSS concept, with nonorthodox [...] methodologies playing a decisive part in ongoing research' (Boo et al., 2015:154). Overall, there is evidence, the authors conclude, 'that a self-based approach has provided a welcoming framework for innovation, thereby proving capable of

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accommodating radically new theoretical perspectives' (op.cit., 153). One such recent expansion is the integration of the L2MSS within *Complex Dynamic Systems Theory* (Dörnyei, McIntyre & Henry, 2015), in an attempt to better embed contextual factors. The L2MSS model has greatly enriched our understanding of L2 motivation and offered a valuable foundation for pedagogical applications to foster L2 motivation.

However, concerns remain, including from the author himself (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), as to whether a concept as vast as 'self' might be the best anchor for the research area. Ambiguities exist regarding the delineation of core concepts, such as *Ought-to*, which several studies have flagged up, especially studies with Anglophone language learners (= English as (one of) first language(s); see section 2.2.).

L2 motivation research is dominated by studies investigating *learners of English* (Boo et al., 2015). This skewedness might have -inadvertently- contributed to a bias in conceptualizing L2 motivation. Indeed, empirical studies looking at L2 motivation in Anglophones have described seemingly 'outlying' profiles, i.e. not fitting the L2MSS. Given the relative novelty of the discovery of such profiles, further studies will need to determine if this exposes a conceptual problem of the L2MSS generally, or if certain learners (e.g. with specific L1s, such as English) fit the L2MSS badly, and why. In this article, special attention is given to the lack of fitness to Anglophone language learners in particular (section 2.2.2.)

Overall, the L2MSS has yielded many pedagogically valuable insights, and has proven itself adaptable to conceptual innovations. Two examples of recent extensions of the L2MSS are, on the one hand, the incorporation into the meta-theory of *Complex Dynamic Systems Theory* (Boo et al., 2015; Dörnyei, McIntyre & Henry 2015) and *Visions of L2 Self* (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013).

One asset of any Self-based model is that the notions of *Own* and *Other* permit a reasonable conciliation of those theories that emphasize individual differences (roughly corresponding to the *Own* dimension in *Self Discrepancy Theory*), and those that focus on socio-contextual influences (roughly corresponding to the *Other* dimension). Thus, a Self-based model promises not only good scope for adaptation, to better account for Anglophone learners, but also offers a better grip on conceptual influences *if* we return to Higgins' (1989) original theory first of all.

This article is organized in the following way: the next section presents three self-based motivational models, starting with Higgins' (1989) original, followed by the L2MSS and a further Self-based L2 motivation model. There follows a review of empirical studies applying the L2MSS (or its variants), focusing on results which indicate lack of fit or lack of delineations of Self. These reviews form the basis for an alternative L2 motivation model, named *Self Discrepancy Model for Language Learners*. Next, in the empirical section of this article, data from two learner groups (compulsory adolescent and mature adult learners) are applied to the new model. Results reveal four different learner profiles, three in young learners and one in adults, permitting enhanced insight into the development of L2 motivation.

2. Literature review

2.1. Higgins' Self Discrepancy Theory (SDT) and its adaptations

The origin of SDT lies in (clinical) psychology. At its core, it stipulates that discrepancies between what we are, what we would like to be, should be, and what others expect of us lead to tensions. Higgins distinguished between three Self *domains* (*Ought, Ideal, Actual*) and two Self *standpoints* (*Own/Other*), resulting in four Self *guides* (*Own/Ideal, Own/Ought, Other/Ideal, Other/Ought*). The current, or *Actual* Self can be viewed either by *Own* or *Other(s)*. Conflict can arise between the *Actual* Self and *any* of the others. However, in well-balanced language learners, discrepancies are considered a motivator for change (see Table 1).

Own Selves describe Selves that stem from self-determined goals (*Own/Ideal*); conversely, the learner might have internalized goals that stem from outside (*Own/Ought*). *Ideal* refers to representations of attributes that either yourself or others would like you to possess, while *Other Selves* could be specific others as well as others as wider (societal) influence (Higgins, 1987:320); *Ideal Other* refers to attributes that others would like you to possess, and *Ought Other* to attributes that other think you should possess. No individual can ever claim full and accurate insight into what others' wishes and demands on the Self might be: thus, the *Other* standpoint has to be understood as mediated by Self perceptions of *Others'* wishes and demands.

In educational contexts, differentiating between *Ideal* and *Ought Other* allows to distinguish between those Selves that another person might impose as a duty (*Ought Other*) and those relating to *Ideals* for the learner (*Ideal Other*). One might imagine, for instance, a teacher wishing for their students to develop confidence in speaking in L2 (*Ideal Other*); by contrast, another teacher might emphasize the need to coach students to pass exams (*Ought Other*).

For the language learner, some discrepancy between Self guides and Self concepts is pedagogically desirable, as it encourages appropriate learner behaviour (Carver & Scheier, 2001), without, however, impinging on the learner's sense of self efficacy. Large discrepancies could be adjusted in two ways: a) change the *Actual Own* self concept (e.g. *I actually CAN learn languages*, modifying self perception), b) lower *Own Ideal* or *Ought* Self guide (e.g. *I don't need to be 100% correct to communicate well in the target language*). A further possibility, avoiding experiences of the discrepancy between Self guides and Self concepts, is pedagogically undesirable, as it would lead to reducing/stopping (language) learning activities.

Markus and Nurius (1986) focus on *possible* Selves, arguing that only positive, not (equally existent) negative or neutral possible Selves are suitable motivators for learning and change. The authors' pedagogical focus might explain why L2 motivation research is largely based on their work, rather than Higgins'. Both works differentiate between *Own* and *Other* standpoints, but Markus & Nurius argue that, as others rarely engage in contemplating possible visions of oneself, and