



# Ideal L2 self, acculturation, and Chinese language learning among South Asian students in Hong Kong: A structural equation modelling analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This study takes the initiative to use structural equation modelling to evaluate a motivational model which subsumes some hypothesized links between L2 ideal self, acculturation to the mainstream society, acculturation to the heritage culture, and learners' intended effort to learning the mainstream language as an L2 among immigrant students in a host context. Data was collected from 390 secondary students with ethnic minority backgrounds in Hong Kong. It is found that L2 ideal self has a direct effect on intended effort and an indirect effect through the acculturation to mainstream culture. It is also found that parental encouragement contributes to intended efforts both directly and indirectly via impacting L2 ideal self. The findings imply that promoting ethnic minority students' Chinese language ideal self would help construct their bicultural identity.

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## 1. Introduction

Since Gardner and Lambert (1972) initiated motivation research in the second language (L2 hereafter) learning field, research into language learning motivation has undergone something of a revolution. The multi-faceted nature of L2 learning motivation has inspired many researchers to examine it closely, so as to unwrap its hidden mysteries. Building on previous conceptualizations of L2 motivation, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) proposed the L2 motivational self system, which has been widely tested in different settings (e.g., Al-Shehri, 2009; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009) and is compatible with such mainstream theoretical frameworks in general motivational psychology as the possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). Among the three components of the L2 motivational system (the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and language learning experiences), the ideal L2 self is the strongest predictor of learners' motivated behaviours (e.g., Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013).

Acculturation is important in the study of learner selves, especially for immigrant learners in host societies, because learner selves affect their acculturation attitudes and processes (Gu, 2009; Norton, 2000). It is reasonable to assume that individuals' low motivation will influence their acculturation into the host society and, in turn, their motivated learning behaviours. This study uses structural equation modelling to evaluate a motivational model that subsumes some

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hypothesized links between (a) ideal L2 self, (b) acculturation to the mainstream society, (c) acculturation to the heritage culture, and (d) learners' intended learning L2 effort, which mediates motivation and success (Papi, 2010).

Although much research attention has been given to the motivation of English language learners in their home countries, some recent research efforts have addressed immigrants' local language learning in the global context, such as ethnic minority students in Hong Kong (Gu & Patkin, 2013; Hue, 2010; Kennedy, 2011). According to the most recent census data, Hong Kong's ethnic minority population increased by 31.2% over a single decade – from 343,950 in 2001, to 451,183 in 2011 – and now accounts for 6.4% of Hong Kong's total population (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). Ethnic minority students, mainly from south and south-east Asian countries, constitute 4.9% and 1.9% respectively of the whole population aged under 15, and aged 15 and over studying full-time courses in educational institutions in Hong Kong (Census and Statistics Department, 2012). They went largely unnoticed by mainstream Hong Kong culture until the July 2008 enactment of a Racial Discrimination Bill, which later became the Racial Discrimination Ordinance (RDO). Since then, a great deal of public attention has been given to this relatively small number of ethnic minority students (Ku, Chan, & Sandhu, 2005; Loper, 2004; South China Morning Post, 2006; Yang Memorial Methodist Social Service, 2002). The RDO mandates equitable education provision for minority students, a legal requirement Hong Kong schools have been exploring ways to meet (Hue & Kennedy, 2012).

It has been found that ethnic minority students enjoy little family support when faced with difficulties in learning Chinese (Shum, Gao, Tsung, & Ki, 2011). Their parents generally do not speak, read or write Chinese, participate in few, if any, social activities outside of their own community, and firmly believe that their heritage language should be preserved and kept free from any other identities (Gu & Patkin, 2013). However, lacking a full sense of belonging to either Hong Kong or their mother country, the participants in the study of Gu and Patkin are confused about and ambivalent towards this imposed identity.

Low motivation to learn Chinese has been found to impede ethnic minority students' socialization with mainstream society and, to a certain extent, to lessen their identification with the local identity, despite the fact that most are permanent residents of Hong Kong (Gu, 2015; Kennedy, 2011). Most ethnic minority students do not have a clear plan to pursue tertiary education and recast, to a certain extent, their perceptions of their home countries, received mainly from their parents, to make sense of the social reality in the host region (Kennedy, 2011). They thus have limited space to negotiate and contest the unfavourable positions imposed upon them by society, or to balance the unequal power relations between themselves and the mainstream community, and little chance to utilize their multilingual and multicultural resources. It would be desirable if they were to see education as a means of becoming integrated into the host society and as an avenue for occupational and career mobility (*c.f.*, Hue, 2010).

Given the low Chinese language proficiency of the ethnic minority students in Hong Kong, and their reported low identification with the local society, it is meaningful to investigate whether parental encouragement can promote the ideal L2 self, and whether the acknowledged links between the ideal L2 self and intended efforts will be mediated by acculturation to the mainstream culture in the host society and/or acculturation to the heritage culture.

## 2. The review of literature

### 2.1. L2 motivation and L2 motivational self system

The quantitative studies conducted by Gardner and his associates (*e.g.*, Gardner, 1985, 2000; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995) provided insights into the identification of variables associated with individuals' motivation to learn a second/foreign language, in addition to establishing related scientific research procedures and standardized assessment techniques and instruments (Dörnyei, 1994). Integrative and instrumental orientations are two important notions proposed by Gardner. Integrative orientation refers to the learners' desire to learn a foreign/second language in order to identify with and have contact with the members of the target community. Instrumental orientation describes both “an open and positive regard for outside groups who speak L2”, and a group of factors related to motivation to learn a language that emerge from a pragmatic assessment of the value of language proficiency, such as better career prospects or higher credit ratings (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Conrod, 2001, p. 373).

A key principle of Gardner's socio-psychological approach is that “the individual's attitudes towards the second/foreign language and the L2 community, as well as his or her ethnocentric orientation in general, exert a directive influence on his or her L2 learning behaviour, which makes intuitive sense” (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 48). Integrativeness is the central component of Gardner's socio-educational model, and represents the desire to identify and interact with English-speaking people and their culture (Gardner, 1985). Integrativeness is composed of three factors – integrative orientation, interest in a foreign language, and attitudes towards the L2 community.

Deci and Ryan's (1985, 2002) self-determination theory (SDT) is one of the main cognitive psychology theories applied in L2 motivation research, and one of the most influential and well-known approaches in motivational psychology (Dörnyei, 2003a). According to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000), three different types of motivation (intrinsic motivation (IM), extrinsic motivation (EM), and amotivation) can be identified based on the extent to which a learner participates in an activity, due to his or her inner drive. In a language learning context, IM refers to “the degree of effort a learner makes to learn a second/foreign language as a result of the interest generated by a particular learning activity” (Ellis, 1997, p. 140). EM refers to the degree of effort a learner expends to learn a second/foreign language in order to attain some extrinsic reward or to avoid punishment (Vallerand, 1997). Amotivation refers to the absence of intent to take action; when amotivated, “a person's

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