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# From vision to action: Inquiring into the conditions for the motivational capacity of ideal second language selves



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## ABSTRACT

Although the ideal L2 self as the proposed key driver of self-motivation in L2 learning has received considerable scholarly attention over the past ten years, the conditions for its motivational capacity remain largely unexplored in empirical studies. This article details a quantitative measure that operationalizes the ideal L2 self in terms of specific properties that have been associated with its motivating capacity and links these with effort expended towards its attainment. The results of a study into the properties of the ideal L2 selves of 97 German upper-intermediate to advanced learners of English are discussed, in which levels of self-motivation to attain a specific ideal L2 self were most strongly associated with how frequently the ideal L2 self was envisioned, followed by the perceived present-future self-discrepancy and the extent to which this ideal L2 self was desired. Although the perceived plausibility of a specific ideal L2 self was also positively associated with effort expended towards its attainment, its unique contribution to predicting effort did not reach significance when the variance explained by the other properties was controlled for. The implications of these findings for researchers and language educators are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Given that developing proficiency in a second language (L2) requires considerable long-term commitment, researchers and educators in the SLA domain have had a long-standing interest in understanding the forces that drive self-motivated engagement in L2 learning in the classroom and beyond. A number of self-based conceptualizations of human motivation to learn and develop have been introduced into L2 motivation research, including *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1977; Graham, 2006; Mills, Pajares, & Herron, 2006), *self-determination* (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000) and most recently *possible selves* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and *self-discrepancy theory* (Higgins, 1987), which were adopted by Dörnyei (2005) as core constructs in explaining L2 learning motivation.

The *L2 motivational self system* (Dörnyei, 2005), which has inspired much of the recent work in L2 motivation research, posits three primary sources of motivation in learning a second language: the *ideal L2 self* that a language learner envisions, the *ought-to L2 self* that a learner may hold and the learner's own evaluations of their on-going *L2 learning experience*. In proposing that language learners hold mental representations of themselves as L2 users in the future, which can act as strong self-motivators in their learning, Dörnyei draws on *possible selves theory* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and *self-discrepancy theory* (Higgins, 1987). Markus and Nurius (1986) argue that all individuals hold future self-conceptions, which they refer to as

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possible selves. They conceptualize three different types of possible selves: desired possible selves, which are “selves that we would very much like to become”, feared possible selves, which are “selves we are afraid of becoming” and those future selves “that we could become” (1986:954). Higgins' self-discrepancy theory holds that the perceived discrepancies between desired future selves and the corresponding parts of one's present self-concept constitute a source of discomfort and motivate individuals to achieve a state of congruence between the two (Higgins, 1987).

Within the L2 motivational self system, the ideal L2 self, which is a mental representation of the L2 user a learner wishes to become, is proposed as the key driver of self-motivated engagement in L2 learning behaviour (Dörnyei, 2005). In line with self-discrepancy theory, Dörnyei argues that it motivates engagement in L2 learning insofar as “if the person we would like to become speaks an L2 [ ...], the ideal L2 self is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because we would like to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves” (in Dörnyei & Chan, 2013:438). Indeed, the empirical validity of the ideal L2 self and its links with motivated L2 learning behaviour have been evidenced by a substantial body of research, including larger correlational studies (e.g., Al-Shehri, 2009; Cszér & Kormos, 2009; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Kim and Kim, 2014; Kormos, Kiddle, & Cszér, 2011; Papi, 2010; Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009), qualitative work (e.g., Hsieh, 2009; Lamb, 2011) and an increasing number of mixed method inquiries (e.g., Busse, 2013; Sampson, 2012).

The L2 motivational self system framework has also been critiqued on several grounds, most importantly perhaps for neglecting the present L2 self-concept (Mercer, 2011) despite conceptualizing the perceived discrepancy between a learner's present and future self-conceptions as the key source of self-motivation (e.g., Busse, 2013; Taylor, 2010). While the L2 learning experience does refer to the present and is undoubtedly important in shaping a learner's L2 self-concept it is in the first instance external to the self. Moreover, it has been noted that the L2 learning experience and the ought-to L2 self remain considerably under-theorized compared to the ideal L2 self dimension (e.g., Taylor, 2013).

Another point of criticism concerns the construct validity of conventionally used ideal L2 self measures, which do not operationalize this key construct in sufficient detail, including specific properties of the ideal L2 self that have been hypothesized to be associated with its capacity to motivate engagement in L2 learning behaviour (e.g., Taylor, 2013). These operational issues are reminiscent of Dörnyei's central hypothesis above, which seems to suggest that ideal L2 selves are effective self-motivators so long as they are part of the individual's array of desired future selves. However, as shown by a line of inquiry in social cognition research by Oyserman and colleagues, desired future selves do not automatically have motivating properties. Rather, their capacity to motivate behaviour is contingent on a number of characteristics, such as the ease and frequency with which the future self is constructed in the mind and activated in the working self-concept, the perceived discrepancy from the present self and the perceived likelihood of its attainment, the extent to which the future self is associated with action plans and its constellations with other types of future selves within an individual's self-concept, including ought-to and feared future selves in the same domain (e.g., Cross & Markus, 1991; Destin & Oyserman, 2009; Leondari, Syngollitou, & Kiosseoglou, 1998; Norman & Aron, 2003; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006; Oyserman & James, 2009; Oyserman & Markus, 1990, 1993).

Taking these findings into account, nine key conditions for the motivating capacity of the ideal L2 selves that language learners envision have been proposed (as listed in Dörnyei, 2015), including that the learner indeed “has a desired future self-image” and, further, that the desired future L2 self “is sufficiently *different* from the current self”, “is *elaborate* and *vivid*”, “is perceived as *plausible*”, “is *not* perceived as *comfortably certain* to reach”, “is in harmony—or at least does not clash — with other parts of the individual's self-concept”, “is accompanied by relevant and effective *procedural strategies*”, “is *regularly activated* in the learner's working self-concept” and “is offset by a counteracting *feared possible self* in the same domain” (pp.9–10). However, despite great interest in the links between the ideal L2 self and self-motivated engagement in L2 learning over the past ten years, the proposed conditions for the ideal L2 self's motivating capacity remain largely unexplored in empirical studies and therefore still have strongly hypothetical character. Thus, little is known about what kind of ideal L2 selves are likely to translate into self-motivated engagement in L2 learning. This is not only a key concern with regard to theory development, but also of great practical importance to teachers who seek to raise their students' levels of self-motivation by enhancing the motivational potential of the future selves their students endorse.

In the following, an argument is made that this significant knowledge gap is mainly a function of the ways in which the ideal L2 self has been operationalized as part of quantitative studies that have established its links with engagement in motivated L2 learning behaviour and other motivation variables. The article then details a quantitative measure for operationalizing the ideal L2 self construct in terms of the present-future self-discrepancy and other properties that have been associated with its motivating capacity, and links these with the amount of effort learners are ready to expend towards its attainment. The application of the instrument is then illustrated with a study into the properties of the ideal L2 selves of 97 German upper-intermediate to advanced learners of English, in which the associations between specific properties of their ideal L2 selves and effort expended towards their attainment were examined.

## 2. Major limitations of the ideal L2 self scales that are widely used in the field

Within the field of L2 motivation research, studies have typically employed very similar Likert-type multi-item scales for operationalizing the ideal L2 self as part of standardized questionnaires (see Fig. 1 for example items). This rather narrow methodological approach has ensured comparability and replicability of results and has contributed considerably to building confidence in the validity of the ideal L2 self and its links with engagement in motivated L2 learning behaviour. However, the scales that have been widely used for capturing the ideal L2 self also bear significant limitations, which have constrained the

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