



## Socio-dynamic motivating through idealizing classmates

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### ABSTRACT

This action research study reports results from students (449 in phase one; 341 in phase two) in conversation-based, EFL classrooms. In phase one, we asked students, “Please describe a group of classmates that you could learn English well with. What would you all do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably?” Then in phase two, we coded their answers into 16 general descriptors and returned these to students, asking them to respond to three Likert questions: (a) this is important, (b) my classmates are doing this, and (c) I am doing this. We found that sharing these descriptors of Ideal L2 Classmates among and across classrooms enabled students to imagine further how they could help their classmates’ learning. Quantitative and qualitative results indicate a resonating group-framed motivation effect in which students tend to become more helpful and resourceful for each other. We hypothesize this effect occurs through first formulating ideals about others and then identifying self-reflexively with these ideals, which we call reciprocal idealizing. Findings suggest that pedagogical applications of possible selves theory would do well to include active participation of imaginings within a lived experience, proximal peers and environments, past and present self guides, and possible others.

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## 1. Introduction

Much theoretical and empirical work has uncovered the motivational power of imagining a possible self in the future using a second language (L2) in specific situations (e.g., Csizér & Lukács, 2010; Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009), although little has yet been published documenting pedagogical applications within classrooms. In particular, research based on *possible selves theory* (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and the related *L2 motivational self system* (Dörnyei, 2009) focuses on using the images of the individual self in the future for motivational effect. We propose imagining something different: possible proximal classmates behaving positively toward the self in the present. These images of ideal classmates in the present can become introjective (i.e., applied to the self) through a process we call reciprocal idealizing. Once others’ helpful learning behaviors toward the self are recalled or imagined, these idealizations can generate self motivations with behavioral outcomes, which themselves in turn positively influence the motivations and behaviors of other classmates that interact with the self. This is a resonating natural emotional contagion (Hatfield, Cacioppo, & Rapson, 1994) in classroom dynamic networks.

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After asking our students to imagine how others around them might assist in their L2 learning, we collected, read, and categorized their responses. Then we shared their own ideas with them, looping the common points from their own descriptions back to the students for their reflections and further responses. We hoped these procedures would allow our students to better understand and appreciate their own and their peers' responses of what would be helpful from others for their own learning, which might seed some ideas for ways of engaging and helping each other. We believe as teacher-researchers that whatever we do in the classroom has the potential to influence our students, and thus we try to ask questions that we esteem will help our students to develop in positive and productive ways. Thus, these procedures are our attempt to influence, through learners' own reflections, their cooperative efforts when interacting in the L2 and learning from each other.

In sum, this paper investigates the socio-dynamic motivational and behavioral influences of asking students within classrooms to imagine what others might do for them to help promote their learning, and then looks at how much the students think their classmates and they themselves are actually behaving helpfully in the ways that they say they value and desire.

## 2. Possible selves theories and applications

We see a short but established history of the pedagogical benefits from imagining one's future self in a better position than in the present, such as seeing one's self using the L2 fluently, winning a speech contest, or negotiating a difficult business transaction with aplomb. These visions of a future self can contain a continuum of possible situations, from success through failure, that offers a reference point, a perspective, from where you are now toward where you want to go. *Future self guides* or *possible selves*, as these imaginings are called, “provide the essential link between the self-concept and motivation” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). How students think about themselves and how they want to become, therefore, relates powerfully to proactive step-taking in learning.

Future self guides influence students' behaviors to the degree that they are vivid and frequent. The power of these imagined future selves to help people rethink, refine, and adapt their strategies to meet their goals comes from what Higgins (1987) calls *self-discrepancy*, meaning dissonance, imbalance, or incongruity, between the self seen in the present and the future. Evaluations of these incompatibilities can generate a resolution through planning and self-regulated action toward *self-consistency*. The two principle motivational functions of self-discrepancy are a *promotion focus*—aiming toward that which one prefers to become—and a *prevention focus*—avoiding progression toward that which one does not want to become (Higgins, 1996, 1998).

Different types of future self guides have been identified as having their own regulating properties or effects. Visions of what one would like to become (*ideal self*), what one could become (*expected, likely, or probable self*), and what one is afraid to become (*feared self*), were first described by Markus and Nurius (1986) as bringing people “a sense of what is possible” (p. 960) and motivating “by giving a specific *cognitive* form to the end states (goals and threats), to the associated plans or pathways for achieving them, and to the values and affect associated with them” (p. 961). While unique to the individual and generated from within, these visions result directly from “previous social comparisons in which the individual's own thoughts, feelings, characteristics, and behaviors have been contrasted to those of salient others. What others are now, I could become” (p. 954).

What one ought to become (*ought self*) relates even more directly to social perceptions and experiences. Higgins (1998) considers the ought self to develop initially from caretaker-child interactions, and supplies empirical evidence that its motivational effects primarily stem from a prevention focus. In other words, people following an ought-self guide strive not toward what they feel significant others think they ought to become, but away from what they ought *not* to become. In this way ought selves trigger externally-regulated behaviors, meaning people plan and act based on their perceptions of the socio-dynamic values and expectations (i.e., social rules and norms) upon them. Perhaps such images have been externally generated; for example, a parent warning a child of the unacceptability of becoming a school dropout.

In respect to language learning, Dörnyei (2009) merges and incorporates these self-guide theories into his three-part L2 motivational self system. The first part is the *ideal L2 self*, which is seen as powerfully motivating L2 learning through promotion-focus use of internal regulation. Students who envision themselves as fluent users of the language might be drawn forward in their studies through this type of imaginary guide. The *ought-to L2 self* primes and propels learning behaviors via an externally regulated prevention focus. Some students might work hard to pass their exams mainly to meet the expectations of their parents or teachers (I ought not disappoint them), forging onward from the sense they ought to continue their learning and ought *not* to fail to enter university. The third part is the *L2 learning experience*, in which the immediate learning environment and experience influences situation-specific motives.

In the theoretical framework of *present communities of imagining* (Murphey, Falout, Fukada, & Fukuda, 2012), past experiences help form the *antecedent conditions of the learner*, which relate to students' images of themselves as learners in their pasts. Past self images fit within possible selves theory as far as they can “define the individual again in the future” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955). Past selves inform the present self of “enduring concerns and the actions that give rise to these concerns” and of evolving self developments that “can be seen as a process of acquiring and then achieving or resisting certain possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 955).

A remarkable study applying possible selves theory in the academic setting comes from Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2006). Their intervention explicitly linked students' positive possible selves with appropriate strategies to attain them, and for negative possible selves, appropriate strategies to avoid them. The program included drawing role models in one session, and in another drawing timelines into the future; pathways complete with possible roadblocks and sidetracks away from goals. A key

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