Structural relationships between second-language future self-image and the reading achievement of young Chinese language learners in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Based on the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), the present study explores the structural relationships between second language (L2) learners' L2-specific future self-guides (comprising both ideal and ought-to selves), motivated learning behavior, and L2 achievement among young Chinese as a second language (CSL) learners in Hong Kong. Although studies have been conducted on CSL learners' difficulty in acquiring Chinese literacy, the influence of learning motivation has yet to be scrutinized. The study participants comprised 121 primary students, whose L2 reading comprehension was assessed during grade 5, and in grade 6 they responded to an L2MSS questionnaire and took another set of reading tests. The results of structural equation modeling showed that while only the students' ideal L2 self, not the ought-to self, was related to their grade 5 reading achievement, both L2 selves were predictive of motivated learning behavior. Moreover, controlling for grade 5 reading achievement, the relationships between students' L2 selves and grade 6 reading achievement were better represented in a model with motivated behavior as a mediator. Recognizing the influence of prior achievement, the findings of the present study thus support the predictive influence of the L2 selves, with motivated behavior as a mediating link, on L2 achievement.

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1. Introduction

Learning motivation has long been a focus of second language (L2) studies due to its relationship with success in L2 learning (Al-Hoorie, 2017; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The relationship between motivation and achievement is specified in the socio-educational model, an influential L2 learning motivation framework proposed by Gardner and associates in the 1960s (Gardner, 2010). Based on this and other earlier models of L2 learning motivation, but marking a shift from the socio-psychological perspective to that of motivational psychology and its way of viewing the self, the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) was proposed to explore the relationship between learner self-identity and L2 learning (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). The L2MSS has been applied to, and validated with, L2 learners in various contexts (Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), and has become the most commonly used theoretical foundation of recently published empirical studies on L2 motivation (Boo, Dörnyei, & Ryan, 2015). As specified Dörnyei (2005, 2009), the motivated learning

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behavior of L2 learners is predicted by their future L2 self-images, that is, their *ideal* and *ought-to* L2 selves, as well as their L2 learning experiences. In turn, learners' motivated behavior, when interacting with and affected by various factors, predicts their L2 achievement. However, these structural specifications have not yet been fully verified by studies in relation to the L2MSS-achievement relationship. While correlations between L2 selves, learning experiences, and motivated behavior have generally been observed (e.g., Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009), the systematic nature of these components and any predictive effects on achievement, with motivated behavior posited as a mediating link, have yet to be confirmed. Moreover, related studies have rarely considered the effects of learners' prior L2 achievement, including its relationship with the L2 self. This study intends to fill this research gap by examining the relationships between young Hong Kong Chinese as a second-language (CSL) students' L2 selves and reading achievement. These young CSL learners have difficulty developing Chinese reading skills and attain far lower Chinese literacy than do their Chinese-speaking counterparts (Ku, Chan, & Sandhu, 2005; Wong & Shiu, 2009). Their CSL learning motivation has also been studied (e.g., Gu & Cheung, 2016) but its influence on literacy attainment has not yet been scrutinized. Given these considerations, this study collected longitudinal data on students' reading achievement and investigated the relationships among achievement, their L2 selves, and motivated behavior. In particular, the L2 self-achievement relationship was studied with consideration of: (1) the reciprocal influences of the ideal L2 self and achievement, as suggested by Dörnyei (2010), and (2) the influence of the structural specifications of the L2MSS on achievement as outlined by Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) through the mediation of motivated behavior.

2. Literature review

2.1. L2 learning motivation and achievement

The L2MSS was developed under the influences of psychological theories of self and earlier models of L2 learning motivation (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). One of its theoretical roots is the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985, 2010), in which relationships between multifaceted L2 learning motivation and L2 achievement are determined from a social psychological perspective. The model specifies that learners' orientations and attitudes toward L2 learning, such as integrativeness (e.g., learning the L2 to know more about the L2 community and communicate with its members) and instrumentality (e.g., learning the L2 for potential practical gains), influence their learning motivation, which, in turn, influences language achievement. As demonstrated in the review by Masgoret and Gardner (2003), these structural relationships, in which motivation mediates the relationship between L2 learning orientation/attitude and L2 achievement, are supported by studies employing this model. Emerging from these theoretical foundations and empirical findings, the L2MSS is constructed to represent the cognitive underpinnings of L2 learning motivation by incorporating the concept of "self" as proposed by psychological studies (Al-Hoorie, 2017; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015).

At the core of the L2MSS is the concept of the ideal L2 self, which, as described by Dörnyei (2005, 2009), serves as a future self-guide and concretely reflects how much one would like to become a person who is proficient in the target language. This ideal self consists of both an integrative motive, indicating an agreeable disposition toward L2 users, and a promotion-focused instrumental motive, involving striving for success, which may be promoted by L2 use. In contrast, the ought-to L2 self, which is the other future self-guide in the system, represents the L2-specific attributes one thinks one should possess to meet social expectations or avoid negative consequences such as failure in study or work, which are related to prevention-focused instrumental motives. The L2 selves are predictive of learners' motivated behavior, such as intended effort, in their L2 learning, which, as specified in Csizér and Dörnyei (2005), functions as a mediating link between future self-image and language achievement. Pertaining to the relationship with achievement, the mediating role of motivated behavior in the L2MSS is similar to that of motivation in the socio-educational model, but with an emphasis on its behavioral aspects. Moreover, as with the L2MSS, it is cautioned that even favorable L2 selves that accompany highly motivated behaviors do not guarantee learning achievement, as the latter also depends on other factors like learning opportunities and instruction quality (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011).

The relationship between the L2 selves and motivated learning behavior has been supported by empirical studies with a wide range of L2 learners. With English as a second language (ESL) learners of different Asian cultural backgrounds (Japanese, Chinese, and Iranian), Taguchi et al. (2009) found that both L2 selves, in tandem with L2 learning experiences, predicted motivated behavior—learners' intended effort in learning English. These structural relationships between the L2MSS and motivated behavior were also observed in Papi's (2010) study of Iranian adolescent ESL learners. Comparing the two L2 selves, Csizér and Kormos (2009) and Kormos, Kiddle, and Csizér (2011), in investigations of ESL learners' learning motivation in Hungary and Chile respectively, found that while the selves were related in some cases, the contribution of the ideal L2 self to motivated learning behavior was much more substantial than that of the ought-to L2 self. The predictive influence of the L2 selves on motivated learning behavior were also observed by Dörnyei and Chan (2013) with Hong Kong students learning both English and Mandarin as second languages, and by Moskovsky, Racheva, Assulaimani, and Harkins (2016) with Saudi ESL learners. However, regarding the relations between the L2 selves, motivated behaviors, and achievement, the picture that emerged from the studies' findings was mixed and not in total accordance with the model's predictions. This is further examined in the following section.