

Study on College Students' L2 Motivational Self System and Willingness to Communicate

Siyao Wu

Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, 311100, China

2827405070@qq.com

Abstract

Motivation has long been seen as one of the fundamental determinants of second language acquisition. Willingness to Communicate (WTC) in English is regarded as an effective indicator for predicting whether language learners will be engaged in L2 communication. The present study college students' Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, L2 Learning Experience, and L2 Willingness to Communicate inside and outside the classroom in the Chinese EFL context. The findings can provide some pedagogical implications and suggestions for English teaching on how to stimulate college students' L2 motivation and to improve their willingness to communicate both inside and outside classroom.

Keywords

L2 Motivational Self System; Ideal L2 Self; Ought-to L2 Self; L2 Learning Experience; L2 Willingness to Communicate.

1. Introduction

Motivation has long been seen as one of the fundamental determinants of second language acquisition and an important research theme in this domain. For a foreign language learner, the direct driving force of learning the target language is motivation, which has been defined by Gardner (1985) as consisting of effort to learn the language (motivational intensity), "desire to learn the language", and "attitudes toward learning the language". According to Dörnyei, L2MSS consists of the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience. This theory has been proved its validity in accounting for motivated learning behavior in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts (Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Papi & Teimouri, 2012; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009).

Nowadays, there is pressing need for improving language learners' ability to use English fluently and to communicate with foreigners effectively. However, Chinese students have long been labelled as passive learners because of their unwillingness to communicate inside and outside of the classroom (Liu & Littlewood, 1997). Therefore, the research of L2 WTC and L2MSS is crucial for English language teaching and learning in China.

2. Literature Review

Motivation plays an indispensable role in second language acquisition or learning. Many researchers have explored learners' motivation from the motivation theory put forward by Gardner and Lambert (1959). After drawing on the psychological theories of possible selves and self-discrepancy, Dörnyei proposed the framework of L2 motivational self system (L2MSS) with following three dimensions in this theory: (1) Ideal L2 self: an ideal self-image that learners would like to be proficient in the target language. (2) Ought-to L2 self: the purpose of learning a second language to meet the expectations of others or avoid the negative results that

may result from their failure to learn it well. (3) L2 learning experience: it derives from the initial L2 learning experience and is related to specific learning situations and objects such as teachers, learning partners and textbooks etc.

The concept of WTC was originally regarded as a personality trait in the first language (L1) communication by McCroskey and Fayer, Richmond. L2 WTC is often conceptualized to exhibit both trait-like characteristics and situation-specific characteristics. MacIntyre defined it as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2” (p. 547). According to McCroskey and Baer (1985), the trait level WTC represents a learner’s stable personalities that display no fluctuations in various contexts and the situation-specific characteristics of WTC is a temporary disposition which changes in different contexts. That is, language learners may display “an inclination to communicate on a certain topic with a specific interlocutor at a particular time and in a specific circumstance” (Lee & Lee, 2019). Therefore, the notion of L2 WTC was extended from a personality-based attribute into a fairly comprehensive construct, which incorporated a variety of affective, cognitive, and situational factors (MacIntyre et al., 1998).

As for the latest motivational theory – L2MSS, there were several studies focusing on the predicting influence of the Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to Self on L2 WTC. According to Peng (2015), the Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self all had an indirect effect on L2 WTC through foreign language anxiety in Chinese context. However, researcher Lee found that high school students who displayed stronger Ideal and Ought-to L2 Self had a higher level of L2 WTC inside and outside the classroom. The controversy indicates that the relationship between L2 Motivation and L2 WTC remains to be complicated and inconclusive.

3. Research Methodology

A total of 149 college students from Hangzhou Normal University have participated in the survey. Among them, there are 68 English majors and 81 non-English majors.

The questionnaire was adopted to obtain participants’ perceived level of L2MSS and L2 WTC.

The L2 Motivational Self System Scale was adopted from Taguchi et al. (2009) with small revision. It consists of three sub-scales: the Ideal L2 Self scale, the Ought-to L2 Self scale, and the L2 Learning Experience scale. The participants were required to rate the statements on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1=totally disagree, 2=disagree, 3=uncertain, 4=agree, 5=totally agree.

The L2 Willingness to Communicate Scale was adopted from MacIntyre et al. (2001) and Peng (2013). This scale consists of two subscales: WTC inside the Classroom and WTC Outside the Classroom. It consists of 11 statements altogether in a 5-point Likert scale format, ranging from 1 to 5 (1=almost never willing, 2=sometimes willing, 3=willing half of the time, 4=usually willing, 5=almost always willing).

4. Results and Analysis

4.1. Statistics and Descriptive Analysis of L2MSS

As is shown in Table 1, the mean scores of all three L2MSS profiles of non-English majors are lower than 3.5, which suggests that non-English majors display a moderate level of motivation to learn English. Among them, L2 Learning Experience has the lowest score.

As for English majors, the average scores of three dimensions are all higher than non-English majors. Both Ideal L2 Self and L2 Learning Experience among English majors have comparatively high mean scores (Mean=3.798, 3.674), which represents a positive tendency towards English learning. Ought-to L2 Self has the lowest score (M=3.076) for English majors.

It can be concluded that participants may not feel much pressure and obligation from parents and friends to promote them to learn English.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Students' Motivational Profiles

Variable	Participants	Number	Mean
Ideal L2 Self	Group A	68	3.798
	Group B	81	3.236
Ought-to L2 Self	Group A	68	3.076
	Group B	81	3.319
L2 Learning Experience	Group A	68	3.674
	Group B	81	3.213

(group A are English majors; group B are non-English majors.)

4.1.1. Descriptive Analysis of Ideal L2 Self

Ideal L2 Self represents the idealized self-image language learners aspire to become.

Table 2. Descriptive Analysis of Each Item of Ideal L2 Self

Items	Group	Mean
5. I can imagine myself using English effectively in future job.	A	3.93
	B	3.63
2. I can imagine myself writing emails in English proficiently.	A	3.88
	B	3.41
17. I can imagine myself speaking English with international friends, classmates, or colleagues.	A	4.02
	B	3.34
14. I can imagine myself speaking English as if I were native speaker of English.	A	3.55
	B	3.13
8. I can imagine myself studying at a university where only English is used.	A	4.02
	B	3.21
11. I can imagine myself living abroad and communicate with the locals in English effectively.	A	3.93
	B	3.32

As is shown, English majors get higher scores in each item of Ideal L2 Self than non-English majors. English majors get the highest score in both Item 8 and 17, which indicates that English majors tend to be able to imagine themselves using English to talk with native speakers and in English-speaking contexts. While Item 14 has the lowest score, showing that they feel not so confident in being like a native speaker to use English so fluently and proficiently.

As for non-English majors, they get higher scores in Item 5. It means that using English in future jobs is easy to imagine. Item 14 also scores lowest for non-English majors because it may be hard for foreign language learners' spoken English as native speakers.

4.1.2. Descriptive Analysis of Ought-to L2 Self

Ought-to L2 Self involves obligations to meet others' expectations and avoid negative outcomes. The mean scores of Ought-to L2 Self range from 2.01 to 3.94 for English majors and 2.17 to 4.16 for non-English majors. Item 3 score highest for both English majors and non-English, which shows that positive evaluation from others can promote students to learn English to some extent. Item 9, Item 12, and Item 15 score quite low, which suggests that others' opinions on English learning have little impact on students' language learning motivation. Group A and Group B have the same score in item 9, which suggests that others' disappointment has great impacts on both English majors and non-English majors. But compared with English majors,

non-English majors display more obligation from others' expectation and the pressure of fearing failure in exams to learn English.

Table 3. Descriptive Analysis of Each Item of Ought-to L2 Self

Item	Group	M
3. Learning English is important to me in order to gain the approval of my peers/teachers/family/boss.	A	3.94
	B	4.16
6. It will have a negative impact on my life if don't learn English.	A	3.67
	B	3.90
12. Learning English is necessary because my friends consider it very important.	A	2.01
	B	2.17
9. People surrounding me will feel disappointed at me if I don't learn English well.	A	2.75
	B	2.75
15. I consider learning English important because the people I respect think that I should do it.	A	2.58
	B	2.93
18. Learning English is important to me because other people will respect me more if I have a knowledge of English.	A	3.67
	B	3.03
19. Learning English is important to me because an educated person is supposed to be able to speak English.	A	3.32
	B	3.24

4.1.3. Descriptive Analysis of Learning Experience

L2 Learning Experience encompasses situated motives, including the impact of significant others, the experience of success, the curriculum etc.

Table 4. Descriptive Analysis of Each Item of L2 Learning Experience

Item	Group	M
1. I find learning English really interesting.	A	4.12
	B	3.48
4. I always look forward to English class.	A	3.62
	B	3.35
10. I like the atmosphere of English class.	A	3.74
	B	3.23
7. I am willing to take more English classes.	A	3.76
	B	3.21
13. I feel that time is flying when I am learning English.	A	3.34
	B	3.14
16. I really enjoy learning English.	A	3.79
	B	3.45

As for English majors, the scores of each item are all higher than non-English majors. Item 1 and Item 16 has the highest mean scores (M=4.12, 3.79), which shows that English majors show great interest and enthusiasm in English learning. Item 13 has the lowest score among the six items for both English and non-English majors, which indicates that language learning needs much dedication and energy. For non-English majors, the mean scores of these items are comparatively low (all below 3.5 except for Item 1).

4.2. Statistics and Descriptive Analysis of Students' Willingness to Communicate

Table 5. Overall Descriptive Statistics of Students' WTC

Variables	Group	N	M
WTC inside the classroom	A	68	3.978
	B	81	3.357
WTC outside the classroom	A	68	3.624
	B	81	3.114

As is suggested in Table 5, for English majors, the mean values of WTC inside and outside the classroom are respectively high (M=3.978, 3,624), which indicates that English majors are willing to communicate both inside and outside the classroom.

As for non-English majors, the mean scores of WTC inside and outside the classroom are lower than English majors, which are 3.356 and 3.114 respectively.

Both English and non-English majors are more willing to communicate inside the classroom than outside the classroom.

4.2.1. Descriptive Analysis of L2 WTC Inside the Classroom

Table 6. Descriptive Analysis of Each Item of WTC Inside the Classroom

Item	Group	M
1. When you have a group discussion in English class.	A	3.79
	B	3.38
3. When you are playing the game which needs to speak English in English class.	A	4.03
	B	3.66
5. When you have different opinions on a topic in English class.	A	3.85
	B	3.23
7. When your English teacher asks a question in English.	A	4.09
	B	3.52
9. When you have an opportunity to talk with your partner in English (pair work).	A	3.93
	B	3.42
11. When you have a classroom discussion proposed by an English teacher	A	4.13
	B	3.73

From the above Table 6, English majors get high score in item 11 (M=4.13, item 7 (M=4.09) and item 3 (M=4.03), which indicates that English majors are willing to participate in English games and discussion activities organized by the teacher with the whole class. The mean scores of item 1 (M=3.79) and item 5 (M=3.85) are relatively lower, which suggests that English majors are relatively reluctant to express their different opinions.

As for non-English majors, item 11 and item 3 also get the highest score (M=3.73, 3.66), which indicates that the whole-class discussion activity and games are effective ways to encourage students to engage in English communication. Various forms of English games can attract students' interests in English learning and then stimulate their sense of excitement, which serves as one of the antecedents of situational WTC (Kang, 2005).

To conclude, English majors have a comparatively high level of WTC inside the classroom compared with non-English majors. The level of WTC appears to be influenced by the familiarity with the topic, security level students may feel, as well as the atmosphere and environment of the class.

4.2.2. Descriptive Analysis of L2 WTC Outside the Classroom

Table 7. Descriptive Analysis of Each Item of WTC Outside the Classroom

Item	Group	M
2. When you find a foreigner, who encounters some language obstacle and needs help at the supermarket.	A	3.97
	B	3.73
4. When you meet one or a small group of foreign friends on your campus.	A	3.23
	B	3.11
6. When you are given an opportunity to take part in the English speech contest.	A	3.68
	B	2.73
8. When you have an opportunity to join the English Corner on your campus.	A	3.84
	B	3.24
10. When your classmates or friends talk with you in English outside the classroom.	A	3.95
	B	3.72

As is clearly illustrated in Table 7, participants including both English majors and non-English majors get higher mean scores in terms of item 2 (M=3.97 and 3.73, respectively) and item 10 (M=3.95 and 3.72, respectively). Most participants are willing to communicate with the foreigner to offer help, because it may only require some basic expressions which are not difficult for them to acquire. In addition, students show higher willingness when their classmates or friends talk with them in English, which can also be attributed to the familiarity and security students may experience during communication.

4.3. Relationship between Motivational Profiles and WTC

Table 8. Relationship between Motivational Profiles and WTC

		WTC Inside	WTC outside
Ideal L2 Self	≥ 3.5	4.12	3.98
	< 3.5	3.23	3.14
Ought-to L2 Self	≥ 3.5	3.74	3.61
	< 3.5	3.63	3.74
Learning Experience	≥ 3.5	4.24	3.94
	< 3.5	3.47	3.14

As is shown in the Table 8, participants who have higher scores of ideal L2 self and learning experience, are more willing to communicate both inside and outside the classroom. It can be concluded that Ideal L2 Self and L2 Learning Experience play predicting roles in stimulating both L2 WTC inside and outside the classroom among participants.

On the contrary, students who have higher scores in Ought-to L2 Self do not show higher performance in WTC. Students whose Ought-to L2 Self scores are lower than 3.5 are even more willing to communicate both inside and outside the classroom. Thus, it can be concluded that Ought-to L2 Self has no predicting effect on L2 WTC both inside and outside the classroom among both English and non-English majors.

5. Conclusion

The present study investigates the current situation of college students' L2MSS and their WTC inside and outside the classroom, and also examine the possible relationship between them. Several conclusions can be drawn as follows.

Firstly, as for the L2MSS, Ideal L2 Self got the highest mean value, followed by L2 Learning Experience, and Ought-to L2 Self got the lowest mean value for both English majors and non-English majors. English majors showed stronger ideal English selves, and had positive attitudes towards using English efficiently.

Secondly, as for the L2WTC, students appear to show a moderately high level of willingness to engage in English communication. It is also suggested that English majors are significantly more willing to speak English inside and outside the classroom than non-English majors.

Finally, Ideal L2 Self and L2 Learning Experience play predicting roles in promoting both L2 WTC inside and outside the classroom among both English and non-English majors, while Ought-to L2 Self does not.

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