



Ideal L2 Self: A Source of Motivation for Language Learners¹

Ümran ÜSTÜNBAŞ²

Received: 26 August 2017, **Accepted:** 09 November 2017

ABSTRACT

Learner motivation has always been in the core of second language acquisition (SLA) research for decades, and its popularity as a prominent research focus has increased with the promotion of learner-centeredness in language teaching. Among the highlighted issues of SLA is the importance of factors affecting language learning. Considering those factors, L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2009) has emerged as a recent issue within the scope of motivation studies. In this respect, various implications and suggestions have been proposed to provide effective language teaching. However, more studies with new findings are to be conducted in order to better understand one of the primary elements of language teaching and learning: motivation. Therefore, this paper presents the findings of a survey designed to explore L2 motivational self-system among EFL learners by focusing on a) learners' motivation to learn English by ranking the elements of self-system as effective factors for this purpose, and b) potential variables such as gender and past learning experience that might influence learners' motivation. In light of these research concerns, participants were recruited among EFL learners who study at the language program of a university by considering the background variables aforementioned. Subsequent to validity and reliability analyses, a questionnaire including items on the related issues was administered to the participants. The quantitative data were analyzed statistically and the findings were associated with the existing literature and they proposed that L2 learning motivation is primarily caused by learners' ideal L2 self. Based on the findings and theoretical background, the study offers implications for understanding of learners' motivation and the factors affecting it.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Motivation, L2 Motivational Self-System, Background Factors.

¹ This study was presented in SCOFOLA'17 conference on 8-9-10 September 2017

² Instructor, Bulent Ecevit University, School of Foreign Languages, uustunbas@beun.edu.tr

Yabancı Dil Öğrenenlerin Motivasyon Kaynağı: İdeal Dil Benliği¹

Ümran ÜSTÜNBAŞ²

Başvuru Tarihi: 26 Ağustos 2017, **Kabul Tarihi:** 9 Kasım 2017

ÖZET

Öğrenme güdüsü, yıllardır ikinci dil edinimi araştırmalarının merkezinde olmakla birlikte bu konunun son yıllarda çok önemli bir araştırma alanı olması dil eğitim ve öğretiminde öğrenci merkezliliğinin vurgulanmasından kaynaklanmaktadır. İkinci dil ediniminin başta gelen konuları arasında dil öğrenmeyi etkileyen etkenler yer almaktadır. Bu etkenler göz önünde bulundurularak, öğrenme güdüsü konusunda son olarak yabancı dil öğrenme güdüsü benlik sistemi (Dörnyei, 2009) ortaya çıkmıştır. Bu bağlamda, etkili dil öğretimini sağlamak için çeşitli önerilerde bulunulmuştur, fakat dil eğitim-öğretiminin en önemli konularından olan öğrenme güdüsünü daha iyi kavrayabilmek amacıyla yeni çalışma ve bulgulara ihtiyaç duyulmaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma İngilizceyi yabancı dil olarak öğrenen öğrenciler için öğrenme güdüsü benlik sistemini, öğrencilerin dil öğrenme güdülerini etkileyen etkenleri ve bu etkenlere sebep olabilecek cinsiyet ve önceki öğrenme deneyimleri gibi durumları araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaç doğrultusunda çalışmanın katılımcıları bir üniversitenin yabancı dil öğretimi programında eğitim gören öğrenciler arasından seçilmiştir. Katılımcılara geçerlilik ve güvenilirlik analizleri yapılmış, ilgili konularda maddeler içeren bir anket uygulanmıştır. Çalışmanın nicel verisi istatistiksel olarak incelenmiş ve literatürdeki çalışmalarla desteklenmiştir. Buna göre; ikinci dil öğrenme güdüsü önemli ölçüde öğrenenlerin ideal dil benliklerinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Çalışmanın bulgularına ve kuramsal dayanaklarına bağlı olarak bu çalışma, öğrenenlerin öğrenme güdüsünü ve buna etki eden etkenleri anlamak için bir takım önerilerde bulunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dil Öğrenimi, Öğrenme Güdüsü, İkinci Dil Öğrenme Güdüsü Benlik Sistemi, Etkenler.

1. Introduction

Learner motivation that is basically defined as having a desire to learn has always been a core issue in educational research. As for motivation to learn a second language, it seems obvious that motivational research has never been stable since new findings and ideas have triggered change and innovations in the related research. While Gardner and Lambert's (1959) motivational theory sufficiently explained the psychology behind learning an L2 at their time, new theories were needed. In this respect, Gardner (1985) suggested that there were three components of L2 motivation as *motivational effort*; *desire to learn the language* and *attitudes towards learning the language*. Since this theory also became insufficient to explain motivational factor in a global sense, new research and theories based on the concept of "self" have been set forth (eg., self (Dörnyei, 2005); self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987; 1998); possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Lastly, L2 motivational system which is based on learners' vision and future selves has been proposed (Dörnyei, 2009). Similarly, the theory has three components; *Ideal L2 self* that refers to how a language learner desires to be in the future as a language user, *Ought-to Self* that refers to how an L2 learner meets the expectations related to the language and *learning experience* that is associated with the factors promoting language learning motivation in the current environment. With regard to the third component of the model, various terms have been used by scholars (eg., "L2 learning experience" (Csizér & Kormos, 2009); attitudes to learning English" (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009); "English learning experience" (Papi, 2010))

The current model of motivation research; L2 motivational self-system has been investigated from various perspectives including different variables for years. To start with, the effect of components of the system on motivation has been compared in a number of studies (eg., Csizér and Kormos, 2009; Magid, 2013; Papi, 2010; Taguchi, et. al., 2009). For instance, in a study conducted by Taguchi et. al. (2009), it emerged that *ideal L2 self* and *learning experience* had a positive effect on the participants' motivation while *ought-to self* caused negative feelings. Similarly, in their study with 432 participants, Csizér and Kormos (2009) found out that the components of *ideal L2 self* and *learning experience* affected motivation positively. Furthermore, Magid (2013) investigated the effect of practical applications of the components of L2 self-system through workshops helping the participants visualize their future images and suggested

¹ Bu makale, 8-9-10 Eylül 2017 tarihlerinde düzenlenen SCOFOLA17 Uluslararası Konferansı'nda sunulmuştur.

² Okutman, Büient Ecevit Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, uustunbas@beun.edu.tr

that *ideal L2 self* could be a factor motivating language learning. On the contrary, in the study of Papi and Abdollahzadeh (2012), it emerged that there was no difference in the groups of high and low motivated learners considering their *ideal L2 self*.

One suggested variable related to difference in motivational levels is socio-economical factors since it has been suggested that province could affect L2 learning motivation (Islam, Lamb, & Chambers, 2013; Lamb, 2012). The study of Lamb (2012), which had a survey design, and which was carried out with 527 Indonesian high school students from three different settings; a crowded city, a town and a village revealed that motivational levels were high among the participants living in the city and town, but not in the village. Moreover, while participants reflected positively to *learning experience*, *ideal L2 self* was only significant for the participants from the city.

Another indication in motivational research is that gender could be a factor influencing the level of motivation (eg., Henry, 2010; Henry & Cliffordson, 2013, You et al, 2016). In this sense, Henry (2010) and Henry and Cliffordson (2013) revealed that females are more motivated language learners concerning the components of L2 motivational system.

Proficiency related to components of L2 motivational system has been an issue of research to date. With this respect, Kim and Kim (2011) put forward that *ideal L2 self* was highly related to learners' L2 motivation but there was no relationship between *ideal L2 self* and learners' proficiency. Additionally, in a study conducted with 175 Chinese learners in Hong Kong learning English and Mandarin, Dörnyei and Chan (2013) found that *ideal L2 self* and *learners' intended efforts* are connected concepts whereas *ought-to self* had no connection with proficiency of the learners. Considering the suggested relationship between proficiency level and L2 self-system, Moskovsky, Assulaimani, Racheva and Harkins (2016) concluded that "motivation does not always behavioral consequences." (p. 641) and they suggested that there are a limited number of studies including grades and proficiency levels in the research of L2 motivational self-system. Therefore, one of the focuses of the current study is to provide evidence for the mentioned gap. In addition to this concern, the research questions below were addressed within the scope of this study:

1. What are EFL learners' views about the source of their motivation regarding components of L2 self-system (*ideal L2 self*, *ought-to L2 self*, *learning experience*)?
2. Which component of L2 self-system has more impact on learners' motivation?
3. Is there any effect of different variables (gender, proficiency and learning experience) in the learning motivation of the learners?
4. Is there any difference among the groups of the study considering the components of L2 self-system?

2. The study

2.1. Setting and participants

The study was conducted at the language program of a state university in Turkey. The program provides English language teaching for the students in their first year at the university on the condition that their level of English proficiency lacks to pursue their education in their own departments which teach either 30% or 100% of the courses in English. Thus, at least B1 level of English proficiency is required for the programs of the university and prep school provides language education for the students who fail proficiency exam at the beginning of the academic year. That the required proficiency level of the students (30% or 100%) are different and language education is compulsory for the ones who do not have B1 level of English fit well with the research purpose of the study.

As for the participants, they were randomly selected among the students studying at the prep school of the university. Considering that the required level of English proficiency of their departments (30 % or 100%) might be a factor affecting their motivation for learning English, the participants were recruited from prep school students of departments of English Language Literature and English Translation whose language of instruction is 100% English and students of various departments whose language of instruction is 30% English. The students of the departments whose language of instruction is totally English need to study English for years before university education while the students of the departments

whose language of instruction is partially English either study English at the basic level or do not study English at all before university education. Therefore, that the participants have different English learning experiences and probably changing attitudes and motivation to learn English are the reasons for convenience of the sample for the research. Following being explained about data collection procedures and confidentiality principles, the students consented to participate in the study. See Table 1 for the description of the sample.

Table 1
Description of the participants

Gender		Department, instruction of English		Level			Learning experience (years)		
Female	Male	100%	30%	A2	B1	B2	0-1	2-5	6 and more
72	53	70	55	45	40	40	25	11	89

2.2. Material

In order to address research issues abovementioned, the questionnaire designed and used by You, Dörnyei and Csizér (2016) was employed in the study subsequent to obtaining permission of the authors to adapt and use the questionnaire which has sections of *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to self*, *attitudes to learning English* and *intended effort*. There are items such as “I can imagine myself in the future having a discussion with foreign friends in English.”, “Studying English is important to me in order to gain the approval of the society.”, “I always look forward to English classes” and “English would be still important to me in the future even if I failed in my English course.” Apart from these items, a number of items related to background issues such as gender and learning experience were added into the questionnaire by the researcher and the questionnaire was designed as 5 Likert-scale type questionnaire consisting of Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Maybe, Agree and Strongly Agree. Designing and adapting the items, the researcher launched the backward translation process followed by the evaluation of three experts in the field. After validity and reliability analyses and handling ethical issues by obtaining permission to conduct the research, the researcher collected data by administering the questionnaire.

2.3. Data analysis procedures

The research purposes of the study included searching the factors influencing the motivational L2 self of EFL learners concerning some associated variables and whether motivational L2 self differs as a result of the effect of these variables. To this end, a number of statistical analyses were performed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 20 so as to examine the relationship between the variables of the study. Initially, descriptive statistics were conducted to explore general tendency of the analyses. Subsequently, comparisons were carried out by performing nonparametric Kruskal Wallis and Mann Whitney U tests in order to trace the relationship among or between the variables. Consequently, the analyses were interpreted in light of theoretical bases of the findings and implications were set forth.

3. Findings and Discussion

The first research question addressed a general issue in that the participants' common preferences for the components of motivational L2 self-system were investigated. With this regard, descriptive statistics were performed for components of L2 self-system; *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to self*, *attitudes towards learning English* and *intended effort*. Considering the component of *ideal L2 self*, the participants mostly stated that in the future, they could imagine themselves as chatting with English friends in an informal setting ($M=3.87$, $SD= 1.1$). They also indicated that they imagine themselves discussing with their friends in English ($M=3.86$, $SD=1.03$). As for the component of *ought-to self*, it emerged that the participants felt that they ought to learn English as their family made them do so ($M=3.1$, $SD=1.3$). The findings also revealed that the participants had positive attitudes towards learning English and the difference between the mean scores of the items in the related section was not significant. For instance, it emerged that they found English interesting ($M=3.94$, $SD=1.08$) and so, they enjoyed learning English ($M=3.91$, $SD=1.17$). Last component of the L2 self-system in the study was related to how much effort the participants made in order to learn English. To this end, it emerged the participants did not want to give up learning English

even if they failed to learn it ($M=4.25$, $SD=1.03$). The second research question was connected to the first one because it aimed to examine whether *ideal L2 self* or *ought-to L2 self* affects L2 motivation more. The findings revealed that *ideal L2 self* ($N=83$) affected language learning more than *ought-to L2 self* ($N=43$). This finding is in line with previous research suggesting that language learners' future vision (*ideal L2 self*) plays a significant role in motivating them. In this sense, the researchers Csizér and Kormos (2009), Kim and Kim (2011), Papi (2010) indicated that *ideal L2 self* was regarded as the most important source of their motivation. Additionally, the fact that learning experience is considered as a significant component has been also revealed by a number of studies (eg., Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Taguchi et al., 2009).

Since the findings revealed that the participants were motivated; therefore, responded positively towards learning English, in-depth research was aimed for the third research question. Thus, particular variables were integrated into the study and the results were evaluated in association with the variables of gender, language proficiency level, department and learning experience. It was found out that learning experience was the most effective variable affecting L2 motivation followed by gender (See Tables 2 and 3)

Table 2

The predictors of L2 motivation

L2 self-system	Level			Department (instruction of English)			Learning experience		
	A2	B1	B2	30 %	100% Literature	100% Translation	0-1	2-5	6 and more
Ideal L2 self	56.22	52.59	81.04	47.11	81.04	68.08	66.06	54.95	63.13
Ought-to L2 self	65.10	65.99	57.65	63.27	57.65	59.63	72.42	68.64	59.63
Attitudes	61.44	44.53	83.23	41.88	83.23	74.75	72.76	56.95	61.01
Effort	66.83	41.04	80.65	44.36	80.65	73.63	71.84	55.82	61.40

Table 3

Gender as a predictor of motivation

Components of L2 self-system	Female	Male
Ideal L2 self	71.21	51.85
Ought-to L2 self	58.94	68.51
Attitudes to learning English	71.88	50.94
Effort	72.17	50.55

As seen in the tables, there seems to be a difference between the stated motivational levels of females and males. This finding is in accordance with previous research suggesting gender as a predictor of L2 motivational self-system (eg., Henry, 2010; Henry & Cliffordson, 2013, You et al, 2016). The findings of the current study support that females are more motivated to learn a language, which was also asserted by Henry (2010) and Henry and Cliffordson (2013). Yet, these findings contradict the existing research on proficiency level as an indicator of L2 motivation (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2011; Moskovsky et al., 2016) since it emerged in this study that B2 level learners had the highest motivational level, especially for *ideal L2 self*, compared to other proficiency groups. It seems clear in Table 2 that their *ought-to self* has the lowest level as they are likely to attach more importance to their vision as a language user in the future rather than they think they have to learn English for a number of reasons. The finding does not support "motivation does not always behavioral consequences." (Moskovsky et al., 2016, p. 641), so new findings are needed to support existing research.

Finally, within and between-group comparisons were performed in order to better understand the relationship among the components of L2 self-system and the potentially affecting variables. For this purpose, nonparametric Kruskal Wallis test and Mann Whitney U test were conducted as the variables had significant values (eg., *ideal L2 self* ($M=3.73$, $SE=.08$); with Skewness of $-.89$ ($SE=.21$) and Kurtosis of $.21$ ($SE=.43$); *ought-to L2 self* ($M=2.5$, $SE=.08$); with Skewness of $.23$ ($SE=.21$) and Kurtosis of $-.54$,

(SE=.43); *attitudes* (M=3.7 (SE=.08); with Skewness of -.66 (SE=.21) and Kurtosis of -.08 (SE=.43); *effort* (M=3.82 (SE=.08); with Skewness of -.77 (SE=.21) and Kurtosis of .01 (SE=.43). Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was also in line with these results. (See Tables 4, 5, 6 and 7)

Table 4

Comparison of groups in terms of departments

	ideal L2 self	ought-to self	attitudes	effort
Chi-Square	21.228	1.888	34.565	26.883
df	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.000	.389	.000	.000

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: department

Table 5

Comparison of groups in terms of level

	ideal L2 self	ought-to self	attitudes	effort
Chi-Square	14.893	1.301	23.122	24.930
df	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.001	.522	.000	.000

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: level

Table 6

Comparison of groups in terms of learning experience

	ideal L2 self	ought-to self	attitudes	effort
Chi-Square	727	2.774	2.408	2.113
df	2	2	2	2
Asymp. Sig.	.695	.250	.300	.348

a. Kruskal Wallis Test

b. Grouping Variable: learning experience

Table 7

Comparison of groups in terms of gender

	ideal L2 self	ought-to self	attitudes	effort
Mann-Whitney U	1317	1616	1269	1248
Z	-2.962	-1.462	-3.204	-3.313
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.003	.144	.001	.001

a. Grouping Variable: gender

As could be seen in the tables above, the differences between groups in terms of variables possibly affecting the state of L2 learning motivation are not statistically significant. These in-depth findings are in line with findings of the previous research question that focuses on the effect of different variables on motivation. As a result, it could be suggested that since studies on L2 motivational self-system are widened with gaining new perspectives, future research could provide new insight into understanding of possible factors of individuals' L2 learning motivation. These findings could benefit shaping the nature of L2 learning by integrating individual factors more in classroom practices.

4. Conclusion

The current study which is designed to explore EFL learners' motivation in a deeper sense with the promotion of *L2 motivational self* (Dörnyei, 2005) was carried out with 125 English language learners who have different background characteristics such as gender, department and learning experience. Thus, the dimension of motivational research has been broadened by integrating these characteristics into existing research. The data were collected by administering the questionnaire used in the study of You et al, (2016) after the researcher obtained permission to use it and conducted validity and reliability analyses. The questionnaire had sections of *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to L2 self*, *attitudes to learning English*, and *effort*. New items related to these sections were added into the questionnaire by the researcher. As a result of statistical analyses such as descriptive statistics and nonparametric tests, the findings were interpreted in light of theoretical background. In this sense, it emerged that the participants had responded differently for the components of motivational L2 self, but there was a consensus on the importance of their *ideal L2 self*. Their vision about the future is the primary source for their motivation to learn English. Furthermore, background factors had a significant effect on their motivation. For instance, there was a significant difference between the levels of *ideal L2 self* for the students who had a short term English learning experience and the students who had long term learning experience. With regard to these findings, suggestions could be that varied in-class activities and practices should be used in language classes. Similarly, imaginary or real situations that refer to learners' changing needs and motivational level should be used and discussions topics could be set on their stated L2 self. As for the suggestions for future research, other variables could be integrated into the research purpose and new studies could be conducted in various settings with participants who have different background characteristics since the current study was conducted in only one setting, which is a limitation of the study.

References

- Csizer, K., & Kormos, J., (2009). Learning experiences, selves and motivated learning behavior: a comparative analysis of structural models for Hungarian secondary and university learners of English. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda, (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 Self*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005). *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 9–42). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z. & Chan, L. (2013). Motivation and vision: An analysis of future L2 self images, sensory styles, and imagery capacity across two target languages, *Language Learning*, 63(3), 437-462.
- Gardner, R. C. & Lambert, W. E. (1959). Motivational variables in second language acquisition. *Canadian Journal of Psychology*, 13, 266-272.
- Gardner, R. C. (1985). *Social psychology and second language learning: The role of attitudes and motivation*. Edward Arnold: London.
- Henry, A. (2010). Gender differences in L2 motivation: A reassessment. In S. Davies (Ed.), *Gender gap: Causes, experiences and effects* (pp. 81–102). New York: Nova Science.
- Henry, A. & Cliffordson, C. (2013). Motivation, gender and possible selves. *Language Learning*, 63(2), 271-295.
- Higgins, E.T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, 94, 319–340.
- Higgins, E. T. (1998). Promotion and prevention: Regulatory focus as a motivational principle. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 30, 1-46.
- Islam, M., Lamb, M. & Chambers, G. (2013). The L2 motivational self-system and national interest: A Pakistani perspective. *System*, 41(2), 231-244.
- Kim, Y.-K. & Kim, T.-Y. (2011). The effect of Korean secondary school students' perceptual learning styles and ideal L2 self on motivated L2 behavior and English proficiency. *Korean Journal of English Language and Linguistics*, 11, 21-42.
- Lamb, M. (2012). A self-system perspective on young adolescents' motivation to learn English in urban and rural settings. *Language Learning*, 62(4), 997-1023.
- Magid, M. (2013). An application of the L2 Motivational Self System to motivate elementary school English learners in Singapore. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 2(1), 228-237.
- Markus, H. & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, 41, 954–969.
- Moskovsky, C., Assulaimani, T., Racheva, S. & Harkins, J. (2016). The L2 motivational self-system and L2 achievement: A study of Saudi EFL learners. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100(3), 641-654.

- Papi, M. (2010). The L2 motivational self-system, L2 anxiety, and motivated behavior: A structural equation modeling approach. *System*, 38(3), 467-479.
- Papi, M. & Abdollahzadeh, E. (2012). Teacher motivational practice, student motivation, and possible L2 selves: An examination in the Iranian EFL context. *Language Learning*, 62(2), 571-594.
- Taguchi, T., Magid, M. & Papi, M. (2009). The L2 motivational self-system among Japanese, Chinese and Iranian learners of English: A comparative study. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 66-97). Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- You, C. J., Dörnyei, Z., & Csizér, K. (2016). Motivation, vision, and gender: A survey of learners of English in China. *Language Learning*, 66(1), 94-123.