A Review of L2 Ideal Self: Retrospect and Prospect

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Abstract
L2 Ideal Self plays an important role in second language learning. The L2 motivation self system (L2MSS) enables studies on L2 motivation to increase greatly in recent years. Drawing on the theoretical framework of L2MSS, many studies that explore the interplay between motivation and foreign language learning outcomes and behaviors has been conducted by researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). The ideal L2 self, the central construct of L2MSS, has been studied with other variables in the past. Most of studies that examined the ideal L2 self which is one of the components of L2MSS, offer insights to practitioners. This paper first states the theoretical background of the L2 ideal self and then reviews the empirical studies of the L2 ideal self over the past decade. In the end, the author gives some suggestions for future study.

Keywords
L2 Ideal Self, Motivation, L2 Motivational Self System

1. Introduction
As one of the individual differences, motivation plays an important role in second language learning. It is one of the most important factors in achieving second or foreign language learning success (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). It has been a hot topic in the field of SLA since L2MSS, the dominant theoretical framework of motivation at present, was proposed by Dörnyei (2005; 2009). It includes three constructs. There are L2 ideal self, L2 ought self, and L2 learning experience. L2 ideal self is a central component of L2MSS (Csizér, 2020).

Previous review articles mostly focused on motivation in general. Many studies have investigated the relationship between motivation and other variables. In this article, the ideal L2 self only has been reviewed. As one of the L2MSS components, the ideal L2 self garnered a lot of attention. In recent years, some researchers in the field of SLA begin to pay attention to the L2 ideal self individually without considering the L2 ought self and L2 learning experience. It motivates the individual’s conscious behavior or action (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It reflects the self-image of the L2 language learners hope to become in the future. The ideal L2 self is mainly related to personal goals and visions. One’s ideal self is related to one’s vision of the end-states of their future. It motivates the individual’s conscious behavior or action (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It
is believed that learners’ L2 motivation comes from their desire to narrow the gap between the real self and the ideal self (Dörnyei, 2009). When learners try to narrow the gap between the real self and the ideal self, the ideal self becomes an important driving force for second language learning.

Gardner’s (1985) socio-educational model played a dominant role in the field of motivation in the past. Since 2005, L2MSS introduced by Dörnyei (2005) has replaced it and become the main theoretical framework of L2 motivation. L2MSS is one of the most influential theories of second language motivation. It is based on the theories of self-discrepancy and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Higgins, 1987). It makes up for the deficiency of integrativeness of L2 motivation and provides a new theoretical framework for explaining L2 learners’ motivation.

3. Empirical Studies

Empirical studies can be classified into these four types:

3.1 The Mediating Role of L2 Ideal Self

L2 ideal self plays a mediating role in the relationship between some variables. For instance, Kim and Kim (2014) found that ideal L2 self and motivated behavior played an mediating role in the relationship between visual style and successful English proficiency. It is worthy to mention that students with different school levels displayed different levels of L2 ideal self in their study. Ideal L2 self of students in elementary school contributed to better English proficiency without the intervention of motivated behavior.

Additionally, Ebn-Abbasi et al. (2024) found that the ideal L2 self and growth language mindset fully mediated the relationship between L2 grit and WTC. Xu and Wang (2022) found that the ideal L2 writing self played a mediating role in the relationship between growth mindsets and three self-regulated language (SRL) writing strategies. Feng and Papi (2020) found that the relationship between perseverance of effort and motivational intensity was mediated by the two selves. Ideal L2 self/own mediated the relationship between perseverance of effort and persistence. Further studies can be carried out to explore the mediating role of the L2 ideal self.

3.2 Relationship with Learning Behaviors and Foreign Language Achievement

There are some studies that explored its relationship with learning behaviors such as motivated L2 learning behavior (Papi & Teimouri, 2014), intended effort (Gu & Cheung, 2016; Al-Hoorie, 2018; Papi et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2020), engagement (Sun et al., 2023), satisfaction (Sun & Mu, 2023), strategy use (Papi et al., 2019) and foreign language achievement (Fathi & Hejazi, 2024).

Under the theoretical framework of L2MSS, the L2 ideal self is related to L2 learners’ intended effort. Some researchers examined its relationship with intended effort. For instance, Papi and Cheung (2016) investigated 390 secondary students in Hong Kong. They found that the L2 ideal self had a direct effect on the intended effort. Papi et al. (2019) discovered that ideal L2 self/own, ought L2 self/other, and ideal L2 self/other predicted intended effort. Al-Hoorie (2018) conducted a meta-analysis of L2MSS. He meta-analyzed a total of 32 research reports which involved 32,078 language learners. And he found that the L2 ideal self significantly predicted subjective intended effort. Smith et al. (2020) conducted a partial replication study and found that current and ideal selves significantly predicted effort. From the above mentioned, there is no inconsistency about the positive correlation between L2 ideal self and L2 learners’ intended effort.

Sun and Mu (2023) conducted a study to explore the influence of motivational factors on online learning satisfaction among intermediate-level English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in mainland China. They found that there existed significant and positive relationships between ideal L2 self and online learning satisfaction. Sun et al. (2023) investigated the association between the ideal L2 self and engagement among EFL learners. They found that the ideal L2 self did not directly predict engagement.

Some studies found that the L2 ideal self positively predicted motivated learning behavior. For instance, Teimouri (2014) conducted a study involving 1,278 secondary school students learning English in Iran. They found that ideal L2 self promoted motivated L2 learning behavior. Papi et al. (2019) discovered that ideal L2 self/own and ideal L2 self/other predicted motivated behavior. Besides, they also discovered that the ideal L2 self/own predicted the use of strategic behavior.

There are studies that confirmed the positive influence of the ideal L2 self on foreign language achievement. For instance, Fathi and Hejazi (2024) examined the association between ideal L2 self and foreign language achievement.
in Mashhad Azad University, Iran. They found that language learners’ ideal L2 self was directly and positively associated with their foreign language achievement.

3.3 The Association between L2 Ideal Self and Other Variables

One of the most researched variables that is relevant to the ideal L2 self is willingness to communicate (WTC). There has been many studies that investigated the relationship between the ideal L2 self and WTC. WTC is defined as an individual’s volitional inclination towards actively engaging in the act of communication in a specific situation (Kang, 2005). Individual differences such as motivation has an effect on the WTC in second language learning. So perhaps there is a correlation between the ideal L2 self and WTC. Lan et al. (2021) proposed that the ideal L2 self would be positively related to L2 WTC in their study. The findings of their study confirmed the hypothesis. Fathi et al. (2023) investigated whether ideal L2 self, foreign language enjoyment (FLE), and intercultural communicative competence (ICC) positively predict WTC. And they found that ideal L2 self, ICC, and FLE directly predicted L2 WTC.

Some studies mentioned that the participants who is situated at various educational levels may have different L2 selves. For example, Kim and Kim (2014) found that the ideal L2 self had a significant influence on English proficiency for primary school students. Compared with secondary school students, primary school students are less influenced by the pressure of college entrance exams. Similarly, Lee and Lee (2020) conducted a study involving two groups of students. They are high school students and university students respectively. They found that high school students who displayed a high level of ideal L2 self and ought to self tended to have a higher level of L2 WTC inside and outside the classroom. However, university students who displayed a higher level of ideal L2 self have a higher level of L2 WTC in both communicative settings. So it can be seen that L2 learners’ L2 selves are influenced by their education levels. Therefore, in order to investigate the relationship between L2 ideal self and WTC, further studies that choose participants from oral training institutions can be conducted. Participant from institutions are less influenced by the pressure from exams of schools and external factors such as the expectancy of their parents. The aim of them is to improve their English for work or other reasons.

Additionally, there are studies that explored the relationship between L2 ideal self and FLE. Papi and Khajavy (2021) found that the ideal self was positively related to enjoyment and negatively related to anxiety. However, there are few studies that examined the relationship between the ideal L2 self and FLE. It is necessary to conduct further studies in the future.

3.4 The Relationship between L2 Ideal Self and Specific English Skills

In recent years, researchers in the field of SLA have begun to pay attention to L2 ideal self and specific language skills of language learners, especially L2 writing and speaking. There are some studies that attempted to explore the impact of motivational factors on the L2 writing processes and outcomes. Researchers conducted some studies that focused on the effect of motivational components, especially L2 ideal self, on L2 writing strategy use (Xu & Wang, 2022), writing performance (Zhao et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2024). For example, Xu and Wang (2022) found that the ideal L2 writing self, rather than the ought-to L2 writing self, positively predicted the use of three SRL writing strategies. Zhao et al. (2023) found no direct effects of ideal L2 writing self and enjoyment on L2 integrated writing performance. Yao et al. (2024) took 679 high school students as respondents and conducted research to explore the impacts of growth mindsets, the ideal L2 writing self, and L2 writing enjoyment on English writing performance. They found that Ideal L2 writing self predicted mentalities’ influence on writing performance, but only for females. This study is from the gender perspective. To date, there have been few studies that take a gender perspective and explore the impact of gender on L2 learners’ L2 ideal self. It is necessary to give more research on this aspect in order to attain more pedagogical implications.

Under the influence of complex dynamic system theory, more and more researchers have adopted a dynamic perspective. Some of them began to examine the longitudinal development of individual differences among second language learners (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Li et al., 2022). In terms of complex dynamic system theory, the development of individual learners is dynamic (Lowie, 2017). There are studies that took a longitudinal approach and attempted to explore the changes in the ideal L2 self in the writing context. Guan et al. (2023) conducted a study that investigated the changes in the ideal L2 writing self from a longitudinal perspective. They found that there was no significant change in the ideal L2 writing self among three groups of students with different English levels. However, in Kim and Kim’s (2014) study, students with different school levels displayed different levels of L2 ideal self. The ideal L2 self of students in elementary school contributes to better English proficiency. Because they were not intervened by
motivated behavior.

There are some studies that examined the association between ideal L2 self and L2 learning outcomes in the context of L2 speech. Researchers examined the effects of the L2 ideal self on speech comprehensibility and speech accentedness (Zhou & Papi, 2023). Specifically, Zhou and Papi (2023) investigated the role of English-speaking instruction and motivation in learners’ development of L2 speech comprehensibility and accentedness. They found that ideal L2 self/own positively predicted speech comprehensibility and ideal L2 self/other negatively predicted L2 speech accentedness. It is worthy to mention that their study is a longitudinal study, which lasts over the course of an academic semester. More studies that take a longitudinal perspective can be carried out in the context of L2 speech.

From the above mentioned, it can be seen that there has been little research on the relationship between L2 ideal self and other specific skills of English other than writing and speaking. More researches will be needed to explore the relationship between the L2 Ideal Self and other specific English skills such as reading, and listening in the future.

4. Future Suggestions

It is worth mentioning that L2MSS constructs are dynamic. However, many researchers in this regard predominantly adopted a cross-sectional approach in their study. It is necessary to conduct longitudinal research in order to know about the dynamics of the ideal L2 self (Guan et al., 2023). In terms of research methods design, most of the studies used quantitative self-report to measure respondents’ level of ideal L2 self. Further studies can be carried out using qualitative data collection methods.

What more, many studies that investigated L2 writing self contribute to the L2 writing field. However, there are few studies that explore the ideal L2 self in the context of L2 listening and reading. What’s more, researchers need to include samples with different educational backgrounds in their study in order to get the dynamic characteristics of the ideal L2 self. So further studies can be conducted in this respect. And, it is recommended to conduct more studies to explore the ideal L2 self and take demographic variables into consideration, such as age and gender. To date, there have been few studies that take a gender perspective and explore the impact of gender on L2 learners’ L2 ideal self.

References


