

Exploring the Dilemmas Between Motivations and Identity Faced by English Teachers in the Context of Chinese Educational Reform

Liangyue Wang

Xiamen Huatian International Vocation College, 361102

ABSTRACT

Motivations are essential contributing factors in teachers' identity formation. Meanwhile, teachers' identity formation is closely associated with specific educational circumstances. With the procession of the double-reduction educational reform in China last year, many English language teachers are trapped in pessimistic motivations because of the disproportionate attention to students and stricter requirements for effective teaching. Therefore, the main objective of the proposed research is to investigate the interplay between optimistic motivations and identity formation for teachers who teach English as a foreign language (EFL) in the context of the latest educational reform in China, helping English teachers attain high lesson quality and arresting authorities and educators' concerns for protecting teachers' right.

KEYWORDS

Motivation; Identity; Dilemmas; English Teachers; Educational Reform

1 Introduction

Since the free nine-year compulsory education reform was first established in 1986, China has become the country with the most extensive English language learners globally (You & Dörnyei, 2016). High school students are the primary group because English is one of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) compulsory subjects. However, with the official announcement that English will be tested twice a year, and the highest score will be included in the final test results, and students can also substitute other foreign languages like Japanese, and French for English grades in NCEE, released by the Ministry of Education in 2019, more and more students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) complained that current system changes are draining their positive motivations and bringing them more pressure because such measure urges them to put more attention and achieve a perfect score earlier than before, while others expressed their concurrence due to the more impartial examination approaches. Whatever, they did not deny that a significant and mixed transformation in their EFL learning motivation emerged after the latest educational reform. Thus, the assignment aims to explore Chinese high school students' motivational dilemmas, trying to provide insights for more effective motivation in EFL learning in this context.

2 Theories Associated with Motivation in Second Language (L2) Learning

2.1 The Conceptual Framework of Motivation in L2 Learning

As one of the most dynamic and complex factors in EFL learning, motivation has drawn language

educators' attention for a long time. Until now, a variety of opinions pertaining to the concepts, components, and influence factors of L2 motivation have been accumulated, and their values have been immeasurable. The initial work based on integrative and instrumental motivation was put forward by social psychologist Gardner (1985), focusing on probing into the motives behind this socially originated phenomenon and analyzing the factors influencing the formation of students' motivation based on a more refined and universal motivation measurement model. However, a closer look at Gardner's motivation theory revealed a limitation that his theory ignored the influence of the classroom learning environment and learners' self-cognitive factors on L2 motivation (Khorsheed, 2021).

Afterward, many researchers proposed improvements to the concept. They endowed integrative motivation with a more comprehensive definition by combining cultural and personal backgrounds (Clément et al., 1994). From the macro perspective, L2 learners' learning effect can be determined by their desire to integrate into the target language "cultural group," while from the micro perspective, integrative motivation equals a personal cheerful affective disposition toward the L2 identification. In 2000, cognitive psychologists Deci and Ryan (2000) raised the concept of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation is a type of motivation that originated from external stimuli like monetary rewards, which is similar to instrumental motivation raised by Gardner (1985). Intrinsic motivation was defined as "the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions rather than some separable consequence." Although the above studies have been conducted reasonably, compared with the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) framework, they did not present enough details to approach a more explicit cognition of L2 motivation. The L2MSS, consisting of three essential components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience has been generally regarded as an integrative synthesis of previous L2 motivation research (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013). Therefore, employing the L2MSS framework is more comprehensive in providing a convincing reference value for L2 learning success.

2.2 An Overview of English Learning Motivation Research in China

China, as the largest market for EFL learners worldwide, has embarked on its L2 motivation research since the 1980s under the impact of Gardner's (1985) motive framework (You & Dörnyei, 2016). Much empirical research emerged to examine the application of L2 motivation by integrating the motivational characteristics of Chinese EFL learners, particularly after the deepening of educational reform and opening-up in the era of economic globalization.

Chinese government included English as a compulsory subject in the nine-year compulsory education system. On this basis, more language educators diverted their research focuses to L2 motivation. Nevertheless, nowadays, domestic educational policy instability fails to inspire positive motives for EFL learners all the time, especially for Chinese high school students, because more educators and authorities realize the negative effect brought by the government's strong support for EFL learning.

They appealed to disqualify English as the compulsory subject in NCEE. Such cry has involved a wide range of uncertainty for EFL learners' plans, indirectly affecting their L2 motivation. Given the present circumstance, current EFL motivation studies presented mixed results due to such inconsistent attitudes generated in China (Jiang & Dewaele, 2015).

Most studies did not adopt the latest theoretical framework and adequate samples by contrasting with other countries' relevant research. Furthermore, most scholars overlooked the regional variation of L2 motivation and blindly followed other researchers' proposed research methods, indicating that more empirical studies concerning EFL motivation are waiting to be observed, collected, and published in China.

3 Current Empirical Research

Motivation plays a significant role in successful EFL learning, especially in English learning classrooms. However, with the release of the NCEE system's change in China several years ago, the school motivational climate is quietly changing. An increasing number of EFL students are suffering from mental problems like motive bias, negative emotion, psychological saturation, etc. Until now, many studies have been carried out to investigate L2 learners' motivation in China, but few of them took the latest educational reform context into account, leading to the lack of empirical research pertaining to the topic. Therefore, the three articles involved in this part will only contain the two elements: L2 motivation and English language learning context, trying to provide implications for effective EFL teaching.

3.1 Study 1: Language Learning Motivation in China: Results of a Large-Scale Stratified Survey(You & Dörnyei, 2016)

This article has concluded the most salient motivational aspects based on the L2MSS framework for Chinese EFL students from secondary school to college, offering a valuable indicative price for EFL learning in the Chinese social context (You & Dörnyei, 2016). The research result in this article showed no difference from those developed in Western cultural contexts, eliminating the hypothesis of context-specificity and culture- specificity for motivational models raised by other countries. Additionally, the author affirmed the research findings that L2 learning motivation came from the mutual interaction among the three components of L2MSS (You & Dörnyei, 2016). Positive attitudes presented the most significant influence on students' high levels of Intended Effort they planned to invest in English learning, followed by the Ideal L2 Self, while the Ought-to L2 Self had the most negligible influence on students' motivational formation, which was contrary to the common belief that the majority of Chinese EFL learners are motivated instrumentally on account of the social expectations generated from their parents, teachers or peers. It was also noteworthy that the author found that in the Chinese educational context, secondary school students' attitudes, equaling to the ideal L2 self, have a far more impact than college students toward L2 learning (You & Dörnyei, 2016). However, when tracing back to the influence factors of secondary pupils' ideal self, it was closely associated with an advanced or specialized educational system. A possible explanation for such a correlation was that students in secondary school have fewer opportunities to approach the out-to-school society. Thus the most direct affecting factor is the educational circumstances they are exposed to at school.

3.2 Study 2: Language Learning Motivation in China: An Exploration of the L2MSS and Psychological Reactance (Liu, & Thompson, 2018)

Compared to the above research, the leading innovative point in this article was that the author was not limited to the motivational construct of the L2MSS to explore Chinese students' EFL motivation but broadened the scope by incorporating the notion of the "anti-ought-to self," corresponding to the motivational profile based on psychological reactance which was proposed by Thompson & Vásquez (2015). The new integrative framework, including the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the anti-ought-to self, has been proven valid and effective in predicting Chinese EFL learners' motivation. First, in terms of the Ideal L2 Self, this study yielded the same result as previous research that the ideal self can be viewed as a significant predictor of L2 proficiency (Liu & Thompson, 2018). Students with the mid-high L2 proficiency had a stronger ideal self than the low-mid (Liu & Thompson, 2018). However, there was an opposite result concerning the Ought-to L2 Self.

Compared to the low-mid students, more advanced students showed a weaker out-to self, indicating there may be adverse effects hidden behind the out-to self (Liu & Thompson, 2018). The point can also give implications for EFL learners, teachers, and government officials that solid stress and anxiety originating from not meeting external expectations may contribute to unsatisfactory learning results for L2 learners. Turning to the last case of the anti-ought- to self, the author negated the culture-specific viewpoint that the psychological concept was more appropriately applied in Western culture (Laurin et al., 2013), it could also be adaptive to the Chinese context and other cultural contexts. Students embracing higher L2 capacity levels had higher anti-ought-to selves than those assigned to the lower proficiency group (Liu & Thompson, 2018). Overall, this research provided a new standpoint for the Chinese EFL motive research framework. However, it would be perfect for articulating further pedagogical implications like class activities and teaching strategies in the current study.

3.3 Study 3: Youth Culture and EFL Students' Development of Integrative Motivation (Khorsheed, 2021)

Whether from the research framework or the scope, the third article presented extraordinary in contrast to the above two. This study stressed the significance of integrative motivation for international EFL learners, educators, and even policymakers. It verified that students' habitual use of English mediums, particularly for English T.V. programs, plays an essential part in learners' integrative motivation formation (Khorsheed, 2021). The author referred to the concept of integrative motivation that it is an affective psychological desire to interact and integrate into the target language group (Clément et al., 1994). According to the produced results on a personal level, the state of integration could be divided into positive and negative. Positive integration refers to "openness" and "respect" for the target language and culture. In contrast, negative integration meant immoderate affection and extreme reliability during the language learning process leading to non-objective attitudes towards the target language and "gradual withdrawal" from one's native language environment and cultural atmosphere (Clément et al., 1994). Furthermore, with the prosperity of social media, English T.V. programs as the representative have become an essential source for young people to approach their target language's youth culture (Khorsheed, 2021). The subtle influence on youth's L2 integrative motivation brought by multimedia provided a proper teaching method for language teachers. Nevertheless, it is worth noticing that for L2 learners, getting hold of a "degree" of reliance on it is another challenging task for them in the process of L2 learning.

4 Proposed Applications for Teaching

Regarding the first article, we learned that students with a higher level of positive attitudes, corresponding to the component of ideal self in L2MSS, would prefer to put more effort into their target language learning (You & Dörnyei, 2016). Therefore, no matter for EFL teachers or parents needs to realize that only stimulating students with material rewards through obtaining high scores in examinations would not facilitate students' learning desire (Guilloteaux & Dörnyei, 2008). It is a more effective way to help students establish their ideal self and guide them stage by stage to realize the discrepancy between their actual and ideal self-image, inspiring their inherent impulse to learn the target language.

Concerning the second article, the research implications seem roughly the same as above, but indeed take a further step compared to it. The study result of Ought-to L2 Self implies that high

requirements and expectations on students will produce the outcome in EFL learning because the tremendous pressure and anxiety will discourage students from positive motivation, let alone the satisfactory learning results (Liu & Thompson, 2018). Therefore, easing the intense competitive learning atmosphere in L2 classrooms and canceling the ranking of examination results would be a good way to alleviate educational matters confronted in China now.

The last article offers inspiration and motivation for EFL classroom activity design. It stresses the close connection between students' habitual use of English mediums and learners' integrative motivation formation and specifies the proportional relation between integrative motivation and L2 learning outcome (Khorsheed, 2021). Accordingly, EFL teachers can include interesting English videos into classroom teaching material and recommend meaningful English TV programs for students as extracurricular activities. Such practice will activate the previous dull classroom atmospheres, foster students' integrative motivation in L2 learning, and obtain a high level of cultural integration for the target country (Khorsheed, 2021).

Overall, the three current empirical research findings bear certain reference significance on dragging Chinese high school EFL students out of the motivational dilemmas in English Language Classrooms in the context of the latest Chinese educational reform. In my opinion, I also agree that developing students' Ideal L2 Self is far more important than their Ought-to L2 Self because the ideal self portrays a desirable image that L2 learners are keen to become soon. However, in the meantime, it is also the most challenging step for L2 learners to find out. Based on this point, I hope L2 teachers can bear the responsibility of steering students in the right direction during the formation process. Instead of setting up teachers' status and dignity by using regulations, they can define themselves as "warm supporters" in teaching to provide more care and assistance like friends and encourage students to obtain higher learning satisfaction and stronger self-efficacy (Tsang & Kwong, 2017). Using attractive authentic texts like videos and TV shows in the class or over the class can also be meaningful for EFL learning. However, teachers also need to remind students of the frequency of multimedia to avoid the harmful effects of addiction.

5 Benefits of the Teaching Practice

Before entering college, few students are intended to be confused by work-life issues like job salary, which are closely associated with instrumental motivation, because before their adulthood, parents will take care of their lives. It can be referred that the high-school student group has fewer influencing factors on the Ought-to L2 Self than adult EFL learners, and thus the Ideal L2 Self plays a more important role in their EFL motivation (You & Dörnyei, 2016). Additionally, under the influence of the unstable educational system in China, no one can affirm that English will always be a compulsory subject in NCEE (Tsang & Kwong, 2017). Nevertheless, from Liu and Thompson's (2018) research findings, if someone can successfully establish their ideal self, they will be intrinsically motivated to put forth maximum effort with strengthened involvement and willpower, more fantastic meta-cognitive tactics, and deeper information processing. Therefore, obtaining high scores in NCEE, which belongs to the influence of Ought-to L2 Self, will have a marginal effect on the long-time EFL. Finally, watching exciting videos like TV programs is an efficient way to expose the target language culture (Khorsheed, 2021). The vivid and dramatic speech presented in videos can more easily stimulate students to build their integrative motivation.

6 Research Method for Evaluating Effectiveness of the Teaching Practice

A qualitative research method with a one-semester period will be employed to assess the

effectiveness of the above teaching practice in light of the long process of cultivating students' ideal self-image. The qualitative data will be collected from the following two primary sources: real-class observation and regular interviews. Considering the long observation period, only six students with different English levels in the same Chinese high school class and one EFL teacher will be invited to participate in the research to ensure the high quality of the recorded data. The English level will be classified into proficiency, medium, and poor. In order to avoid the influence of individual differences, there are two students at each level, serving as a contrast.

A regular once-a-month interview will be applied to collect students' cognition of their ideal self-image. Through observing students' authentic responses to the teacher's teaching practice in class, the emphasis will be laid on analyzing the change in students' ideal image. From the perspective of advancement and articulation, whether the teaching practice promotes the construction of an ideal self-image will be examined. The same assessment method combining interview and real-class observation is also used to examine the effectiveness of video materials about target language and cancellation of test scores ranking.

7 Conclusion

The assignment concentrated on raising Chinese high school students' motivation in EFL learning after the latest Chinese educational reform. Relative theories linked with motivation in L2 learning have been reviewed. A detailed analysis of three current empirical research has been conducted to tap into potentially favorable EFL teaching practices. Finally, it has been concluded that constructing an ideal self-image plays the most important role in EFL learning, while a high level of ought-to self could be a disincentive, and multimedia has been the most influential approach for students' EFL motivation formation among youth culture.

Before doing this assignment, my subjective opinion told me that China's current educational system change must exert a negative effect on high school students' EFL motivation. However, after finishing the assignment, I realized subjective judgment is inclined to make errors. Therefore, we need to read a large amount of literature and do our research to test our hypothesis. It is also part of the study's value and charm.

About the Author

Liangyue Wang, Assistant Lecturer, Master of Tesol, English teaching.

References

- [1] Clément R., Dörnyei Z., & Noels K. A. (1994). Motivation, self-confidence, and group cohesion in the foreign language classroom. *Language learning*, 44(3), 417-448.
- [2] 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.
- [3] Gardner R. C. (1985). The attitude/motivation test battery: Technical report. University of Western Ontario.
- [4] Guilloteaux M. J., & Dörnyei Z. (2008). Motivating language learners: A classroom-oriented investigation of the effects of motivational strategies on student motivation. *TESOL quarterly*, 42(1), 55-77.
- [5] Jiang Y., & Dewaele J.-M. (2015). What lies bubbling beneath the surface? A longitudinal perspective on fluctuations of ideal and Ought-to L2 self among Chinese learners of English. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 53(3), 331-354.
- [6] Khorsheed R. (2021). Youth culture and EFL students' development of integrative motivation. *Theory and practice in language Studies*, 11(4), 377-389.
- [7] Laurin K., Kay A. C., Proudfoot D., & Fitzsimons G. J. (2013). Response to restrictive policies: Reconciling system

- justification and psychological reactance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 122(2), 152-162.
- [8] Liu Y., & Thompson A. S. (2018). Language learning motivation in China: An exploration of the L2MSS and psychological reactance. *System*, 72, 37-48.
- [9] Ryan R. M., & Deci E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American psychologist*, 55(1), 68.
- [10] Thompson A. S., & Vásquez C. (2015). Exploring motivational profiles through language learning narratives. *The Modern Language Journal*, 99(1), 158- 174.
- [11] Tsang K. K., & Kwong T. L. (2017). Teachers' emotions in the context of education reform: labor process theory and social constructionism. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 38(6), 841-855.
- [12] You C. J., & Dörnyei Z. (2016). Language learning motivation in China: Results of a large-scale stratified survey. *Applied Linguistics*, 37(4), 495-519.