

# A Study on the Relationship Between English Learning Anxiety and L2 Motivational Self-system Among Chinese College Students

Zhuojie Yuan

Ningbo Dahongying University  
Ningbo, China

**Abstract**—This paper aims to study the relationship between English Learning Anxiety and internal components of L2 Motivational Self System, Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and Second Language Learning Experience, and their contribution to motivational behavior within the theoretical framework of L2 Motivational Self System. On operative level, this paper adopted quantitative research method. 102 participants from one university in China were tested by two questionnaires. The data collected from questionnaires were submitted to SPSS 22.0 for correlation analysis and regression analysis. The results of study showed that Ought-to L2 Self has significantly positive correlation with English Learning Anxiety while Ideal L2 Self, Second Language Learning Experience or Motivational Behavior has no significant correlations with English Learning Anxiety; Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and Second Language Learning Experience, three components of L2 Motivational Self System, all make significant contribution to their L2 learning motivational behavior whereas English Learning Anxiety makes no contribution to L2 learning motivational behavior.

**Keywords**—L2 Motivational Self System; ideal-l2-self; ought-to-l2-self; second language learning experience; English learning anxiety; motivational behavior

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the field of second language acquisition motivation research, Dörnyei (2005) put forward a new conceptualization of L2 motivation --L2 Motivational Self System (hereafter abbreviated as L2MSS). There are four dimensions in this motivational system: 1) Ideal L2 Self (hereafter abbreviated as IL2S); 2) Ought-to L2 Self (hereafter abbreviated as OL2S); 3) Second Language Learning Experience (hereafter abbreviated as SLLE) and 4) Motivational Behavior (hereafter abbreviated as MB). According to Dörnyei (2005, 2009b), the IL2S is the L2-specific facet of one's "ideal self", based on the individual's aspirations and goals as a language learner. The OL2S is a product of the individual's perceived obligations and responsibilities as a language learner, referring to the attributes and goals that one believes one ought to possess as a language learner. SLLE derives from the learning environment and experience (e.g. the impact of the classrooms). MB refers to the effort expended to achieve a goal or the desire to learn the language.

Anxiety is the subjective feeling of tension, apprehension, nervousness, and worry associated with an arousal of the autonomic nervous system (Spielberger, 1983). As one of the affective factors, anxiety is "a major obstacle to be overcome in learning another language" (Horwitz et al., 1986: 125).

### A. Research Background

Motivation has long been considered as one of the fundamental determinants of second language acquisition, and naturally it has been substantially researched. However as motivation is an internally complex concept, we are still far from understanding all the details of motivation (Dörnyei, 2009b). During the first decades of the 21st century, more and more dissatisfaction with the concept of integrativeness or integrative motivation began to emerge. Some empirical findings were not consistent with Gardner's notion, which provoked more arguments within the field. The first "insider challenge" to the integrative concept was Clement & Kruidenier's seminal paper published in *Language Learning* (1983), followed by other scholars. Noels et al (2000: 60) found that the integrative motivation only worked in some specific contexts. After investigating language learning in Japan, McClelland (2000) and Yashima (2000) suggested endowing Gardner's concept of integrativeness with new conception in order to fit for a perception of English as an international language. Also, in an article focusing on the existence of integrative motivation in Taiwan, Warden & Lin (2000) found that the motive that could be labeled as "integrative motivation" in Gardner's original sense was not confirmed in their context. Therefore, motivation should be studied from various perspectives. The most recent approach, initiated by Zoltan Dörnyei, has been the proposal of a reconfiguration of L2 motivation as part of the individual's self-system--L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009a, 2009b). L2 Motivational Self System (hereafter abbreviated as L2MSS) draws on a lot of psychological research (for example, "possible selves," "future self-guides" and "self-discrepancy theory" in psychology) as its theoretical basis. Being commented as a synthesis of many influential approaches, the L2MSS broadens the scope of L2 learning motivation theory and makes itself applicable in different language learning contexts (Dörnyei, 2009: 212).

Concerning English Learning Anxiety (hereafter abbreviated as EA), take the author's personal experience as an example. Based on observing the English class, from last semester to this semester, the author has found that students are particularly anxious before any examination and they constantly feel stressed to answer questions from teacher or interact with classmates in English. What's more, students are apt to keep silent in the classroom. They are unwilling to speak in English in front of the whole class. They are fearful of making mistakes and being laughed by classmates while speaking English. The most terrible thing is that the teacher becomes the center of the class, dominating the whole process of teaching and learning. Consequently, "Dumb English" class comes into being.

### *B. Outline of the Thesis*

Part One is introduction of the research background and outline of the present paper. Part Two is literature review. This part reviews studies on the L2MSS and EA both at home and abroad, then followed by the comments on the limitations of previous research. Part Three introduces the research method of the survey, including research purpose, research questions, research hypotheses, research design, research instruments, and research participants and data collection. Totally, two research questions will be examined: 1) what is the correlation between IL2S, OL2S, SLLE, MB and EA? 2) What contributions of EA and three internal components of L2MSS make to motivational behavior? Part Four addresses the research questions and hypotheses combined with quantitative data. Part Five is conclusion of the above parts, divided into four parts, major findings, pedagogical implications, limitations and suggestions.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In this part, some previous theoretical and empirical studies related to L2MSS and EA will be reviewed.

Many scholars have made contributions to the continual improvement on L2MSS theory ever since Dörnyei (2005) put forward this concept. Taguchi et al (2009) provided an evidence that the IL2S could reframe Gardner's integrative motivation; instrumental motivation can be split into two types: "promotional instrumentality motivation" and "preventive instrumentality motivation". Tae-Yong Kim (2009) conducted a qualitative study of the dynamics of second language self and learning motivation. He concluded that OL2S has already internalized in the course of the learning. Moreover, OL2S can be transformed into IL2S to optimize the learner's motivation. After two years, he confirmed again that the positive learning style takes a dominant position in creating learner's IL2S and keeping their motivation even if it cannot be predicted (Yang & Kim, 2011). In 2013, Kim developed a new perspective to explore whether or not there are other factors working, then concluding that factors of social culture would also have impact on learner's IL2S and OL2S (Kim, 2013). Magid (2014) enhanced vision of Ideal L2 Self and achieved prominent by employing three more precise questionnaires and analyzed data of questionnaires and data of interviews, based on intervention program---School-to-Jobs Program.

Likewise, Cho (2015) used a structural equation modeling to test the validity of L2MSS in Korea since very few studies paid attention to this country. Apart from confirming the effectiveness of L2MSS in Korea, he also concluded that L2 experience affects high school student's intended efforts, compared with college students who are affected by IL2S. Alshahrani (2016) discussed the relationship between L2MSS and mastery of students under the context of Saudi Arabia, where the intended learning efforts also was taken into consideration as an important factor. The results reflect that L2MSS devotes greatly to the intended learning efforts but do not necessarily concur with good achievements, which means self-motivation does not yield excellent students every time. Roshandel, Ghonsooly, and Ghanizadeh (2018) explored English as a foreign language students' motivation and self-efficacy by incorporating the ten sub-factors of L2 motivational self-system---criterion measures, Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, family influence, instrumentality promotion, instrumentality prevention, attitudes towards learning English, attitudes towards L2 community and cultural interest. Correlation and regression analysis reveal that there is a significant relationship between L2 motivation and L2 self-efficacy.

As to EA, Chia-Pei & Huey-Ju (2016) examined the relationship between learning strategies and English writing anxiety with Oxford Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (OSILL) and English Writing Anxiety Survey (EWAS). They pointed out that larger populations and different ethnic groups are needed in further study. Jiang (2016) did an empirical study on the effect of cooperative learning on English writing anxiety in light of Social Interdependence Theory. Bhatti (2016) identified causes of foreign language anxiety. Sadiq (2017) investigated the level of foreign language anxiety among English language learners. They both adopted Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety (FLCAS) as their research instruments.

In China, some theoretical and empirical studies of L2MSS and EA were also conducted in recent years.

Liu (2010) carried out two studies among Chinese learners of English. One was testing the validity of L2MSS among Chinese learners of English. The other was conducting a quasi-experimental research focusing on the self-based interventional treatment. The study of Sun (2015) aimed to examine the L2MSS among Chinese learners of English by comparing the English learning motivation of the Chinese students at home and abroad, which suggests Chinese learners studying abroad who have stronger motivation are easier to imagine themselves speaking English with high proficiency in future than learners studying at home country. Wang (2014) also carried out a comparative study from the perspective of the L2MSS among junior high school and senior high school students. Her study is similar to Duan (2012) who analyzed the difference of self-related (IL2S and OL2S) motivation between non-normal and normal school students, science students and arts students. Their findings all suggest that self-dimensions (Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self) did not play a prominent role as supposed, especially Ideal L2 Self which is the most important component of L2MSS.

The research above all has made certain significant contributions to the field of L2MSS. When it comes to EA, there are a significantly great number of specific studies in 20 years. Here are some representative studies.

Zhao (2005) investigated four beliefs about language learning and foreign language anxiety of Chinese university students learning English. As a consequence, four belief factors are significantly correlated with foreign language anxiety: self-efficacy and expectation about learning English, beliefs in formal structural studies, learning and communication strategies, and beliefs about foreign language aptitude. And the most powerful predictors of students' foreign language anxiety is the belief factor, self-efficacy and expectation about learning English. These beliefs can be categorized into five dimensions, i.e. classroom anxiety, writing anxiety, reading anxiety, speaking anxiety and listening anxiety. Guo & Yan (2014) explored subjects' anxiety levels of these five dimensions of the foreign language anxiety respectively. It was found that the subjects experienced a medium level of anxiety in each dimension on the whole and classroom anxiety was the highest, significantly higher than that of reading anxiety and writing anxiety. In order to seek an effective strategy to reduce EA, Liang (2017) made an experimental investigation into the effectiveness of Cooperative Learning (CL) in promoting language learning motivation and reducing EA and the results indicates that CL teaching method can reduce students' EA but cannot promote motivation while comparing with the traditional teaching method. Liu, Yao & Hu (2012) probed into the relations among the L2 Motivational Self System, EA and motivational behavior to learn English in the socio-educational context in China through a questionnaire survey. It was found that all the variables in the proposed model significantly contributed to motivational behavior; the IL2S and OL2S, these two possible L2 selves, significantly interacted with each other and made students more anxious; the positive SLLE contributed to the decrease of students' English anxiety.

Overall, based on the most relevant studies on L2MSS and EA that have been reviewed above, it can be seen that only a few EA empirical studies at home have been carried out from the perspective of L2MSS. Since L2 motivation is a multifaceted and complicated concept deserving being studied from various perspectives and being examined in a larger context in which it is studied together with other important variables like English Learning Anxiety, this study seeks to explore the correlation of EA with the three components of L2MSS guided by the theoretical framework of Dörnyei's L2MSS, in an attempt to make a contribution to studies in these two fields.

### III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This part will cover research methodology of the study, including research purpose, research questions, research hypotheses, research design, research instruments, research participants and data collection.

#### A. Research Purpose

The purpose in this survey study is to explore the relationship between English Anxiety and L2 Motivational Self System. Although scholars at home have done some empirical studies, we need more empirical evidence in even greater diverse samples to ensure the validity of this new motivation research model among learners of English in China. Meanwhile, EA also is a significant factor in English learning and there are a few studies carried out, focusing on the relations between L2MSS and EA and their contributions to motivational behavior. Thus, the author aims to conduct an empirical study of the relationship between English Anxiety and L2 Motivational Self System, covering English majors and non-English majors in a university in China.

#### B. Research Questions

Based on the research purpose and the literature review in this paper, two research questions are raised as follows:

- What are the correlation between EA, IL2S, OL2S, SLLE and MB?
- What contributions of EA and three internal components of L2MSS make to motivational behavior?

#### C. Hypotheses

The following hypotheses are raised accordingly and are going to be examined empirically by statistical evidence.

- There are the significant correlations between IL2S, OL2S, SLLE, MB and EA.
- IL2S, OL2S, SLLE and EA make significant contribution to motivational behavior.

#### D. Research Design

In order to answer the research questions and test the hypotheses, first of all, instruments (two questionnaires) were developed. After questionnaire data were collected, they were analyzed by statistical packages of SPSS 22.0 with correlation and regression analysis. Finally, all the statistical results will be analyzed and discussed along with suggested pedagogical implications.

#### E. Research Instruments

There are two questionnaires in this study. One is L2 Motivational Self Questionnaire, adopted from Dörnyei (2009a, 2009b), made up of 24 items, involving four dimensions: IL2S, OL2S, SLLE and motivational behavior; the other is Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), comprising of 33 items, adopted from Horwitz, E. K., Horwitz, M. B., & Cope, J. (1986).

#### F. Research Participants

Two questionnaires were administered to 180 participants among Chinese undergraduates, but due to various reasons, 102 participants were finally involved in the statistical analysis of this study.

**G. Data Collection**

The questionnaires were administered from 21 May 2018 and ending on 22 May 2018. The directions and items of the instruments are in Chinese and it was promised that that the participants' responses would not be given out to anyone except the researcher, who carried out the survey just for academic purposes. Totally 180 questionnaires were sent out and 112 collected. But some were deleted from the final analysis for various reasons: some participants chose one particular choice for all the items and some data were missing. Though the missing data could be replaced by the mean values of the variables, it has limited consequences.

Finally 102 questionnaires were taken into the statistical procedure.

**IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

This part will present the results of relationship analysis of IL2S, OL2S, SLLE, MB and EA. Then research questions and hypotheses will be addressed one by one.

**A. Correlation of Ideal L2Self, Ought-to L2Self, Second Language Learning Experience, Motivational Behavior and English Learning Anxiety**

**TABLE I. CORRELATION OF IL2S, OL2S, SLLE, MB AND EA**

		<b>IL2S</b>	<b>OL2S</b>	<b>SLLE</b>	<b>MB</b>	<b>EA</b>
<b>IL2S</b>	PearsonCorrelation	1	.534**	.616**	.603**	.117
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.244
	N	102	102	102	102	102
<b>OL2S</b>	PearsonCorrelation	.534**	1	.503**	.659**	.308**
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.002
	N	102	102	102	102	102
<b>SLLE</b>	PearsonCorrelation	.616**	.503**	1	.640**	-.048
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.631
	N	102	102	102	102	102
<b>MB</b>	PearsonCorrelation	.603**	.659**	.640**	1	.038
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.701
	N	102	102	102	102	102
<b>EA</b>	PearsonCorrelation	.117	.308**	-.048	.038	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.244	.002	.631	.701	
	N	102	102	102	102	102

<sup>a</sup> Note: IL2S=Ideal L2 Self; OL2S=Ought-to L2 Self; SLLE=Second Language Learning experience; MB=Motivational Behavior; EA=English Learning Anxiety; \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As shown in "Table I", OL2S has significantly positive correlation with EA ( $P < .05$ ) while IL2S, SLLE or MB has no significant correlations with EA ( $P > .05$ ). As IL2S is the L2-specific facet of one's "ideal self", based on the individual's aspirations and goals as a language learner and OL2S is a product of the individual's perceived obligations and responsibilities as a language learner, this result could be interpreted by the Chinese cultural feature of collectivism and educational atmosphere in parents-dominated family. In the social environment where collectivism culture and parents-dominated atmosphere are prevalent, students have rare chances to develop and understand themselves. Taking these two reasons into consideration, a student might have internalized demands and expectations coming from society or exterior and internalized compliments of English images from others, which attributed to the result that the higher learning motivation inspired by self-guide, the stronger one would feel anxious. To be specific, a student who develops OL2S focus more of cognition about the second language learning performance given by others in English class, the result of which is the student is far likely to take the strategies of avoidance due to the purpose of shunning the undesirable evaluation from teachers or embarrassment in front of classmates. This also approved of the view of Gregersen, Horwitz (2002) who propounded that anxiety is stemmed from being overwhelmed by concerns about the results of self-impression from others and apprehension of negative evaluation. Thus, part of Hypothesis One was testified and

the other part can be rejected. That is to say, OL2S has significant correlation with EA while IL2S, SLLE or MB has no significant correlations with EA.

**B. Contribution of English Learning Anxiety and Three Components of L2MSS to Motivational Behavior**

From the analyzed result of regression coefficients in the "Table II" it can be seen that T value of the OL2S is 5.162 and the P value is .000, much lower than .05, which means that OL2S makes very highly significant contribution to learner's L2 learning motivational behavior. It also can be explained that Chinese educational atmosphere: parents-dominated family is responsible for this result. From birth, everything has been arranged by their parents, including what they are going to learn and what they should learn instead of considering innermost thoughts. Gradually, they will be accustomed to accepting others' arrangements and deprived of certain independence and personal ideas. As a consequence, OL2S-guided motivation is the strongest predictor of motivational behavior. Specifically, they just do what others demand and expect. In order to live up to expectations of figures who they respect and value, they will take steps to fulfill, namely, counterpart learning strategies and learning methods, such as finishing tasks timely, being well-prepared before examinations and so on.



**TABLE II. REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS OF IL2S, OL2S, SLLE, EA AND MOTIVATIONAL BEHAVIOR**

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	.721	.347		2.075	.041
IL2S	.185	.079	.204	2.341	.021
OL2S	.494	.096	.438	5.162	.000
SLLE	.238	.073	.288	3.276	.001
EA	-.145	.096	-.106	-1.510	.134

<sup>a</sup>. Dependent Variable: MB

SLLE, as the third component of L2MSS, ranks the second in making contribution to motivational behavior ( $T=3.276$ ,  $P<.05$ ), similarly highly significant but lower than OL2S. Next is IL2S, the third contributor in motivational behavior. The T value and P value are 3.276 and .001 respectively. When students enjoy the atmosphere of their second language learning class, feeling genuine joy in class, they will devote themselves to language learning more autonomously. As mentioned before, students carrying strong IL2S have a positive experience in class, which give impetus to the students working harder in second language learning.

As one of the most crucial components of L2MSS, IL2S ( $T=2.341$ ,  $P<.05$ ) made significant contribution to motivational behavior as well but weaker than OL2S and SLLE, which reflects that IL2S bring an active and deep impact on motivational behavior. The outcome is coincided with the research findings proposed by Csizer and Kormos (2009), Taguchi (2009) and Papi (2010) et al.. It demonstrates that a student who bears an ideal self in mind has a very heavy longing for learning a second language and an extremely fierce desire to eliminate the distances between real L2 self and ideal L2 self (items in the questionnaire like: I often imagine myself speaking English as if I were a native speaker of English.). This type of aspiration generates a powerful driving force in making motivational behavior of Chinese undergraduates and depicts a prospect that students make more efforts in language learning on their own rights, then producing a lasting persistence for learning combining with the positive influence of OL2S and SLLE.

In terms of the contribution of EA to motivational behavior, it can be seen from the table that EA made no significant contribution to motivational behavior. This result was also testified findings at home by Hao & Hao (2001) and Zou (2006). We can interpret it from the perspective of relationship between anxiety and performance, not a liner relationship. They are independent factors but in some conditions they have certain correlations. That is, only when we have proper anxiety, can we have the best performance. If we are overly anxious or not anxious at all, we usually won't have that kind of strongly motivated performance. And their manifestations are having inadequate confidence, initiative, independence or self-discipline. They are apt to keep silent in English classes as possible as they can avoid answering questions. Even if they respond to questions of teachers, they would blush and feel nervous. And this will cause losing confidence, interests and activeness of students,

eventually appearance of undesirable academic performance. Therefore, part of Hypothesis Two was testified and the other part can be rejected given that OL2S makes highly significant contribution to their L2 learning motivation; SLLE ranks the second; IL2S also has positive contribution to motivational behavior while EA does make no significant contribution to L2 learning motivational behavior.

## V. CONCLUSION

This part is divided into four parts: major findings, pedagogical implications, limitations and suggestions for the future research.

### A. Major Findings

Based on the data collected in the survey among the participants and L2MSS theory, the major findings in the study are as follows:

The first finding is that OL2S has significantly positive correlations with EA ( $P<.05$ ) while IL2S, SLLE or MB has no significant correlations with EA ( $P>.05$ ).

The second finding is that OL2S, SLLE and IL2S, three components of L2MSS, all make significant contribution to L2 learning motivational behavior ( $P<.05$ ) whereas EA makes no significant contribution to L2 learning motivational behavior ( $P>.05$ ).

### B. Pedagogical Implications

The present study investigated the relationship between English Learning Anxiety and L2 Motivational Self System among Chinese college students. Based on the findings and results of this study, several implications could be drawn for the college English practice in China. Briefly speaking, Chinese college English teachers may promote their students' motivation by helping them build positive and powerful possible L2 selves, providing them with pleasant experiences of English learning to release their level of English learning anxiety. Both teachers and students should pay attention to desirable learning experience. For teachers, they are recommended to design ample and diverse teaching activities. For students, they are suggested to engage in teaching activities as possible as they can to obtain knowledge physically and mentally to reduce learning anxiety.

In the second place, given that the "self-dimension" (IL2S and OL2S) is closely correlated with and also a good predictor of learners' L2 motivational behavior, naturally,

the enlightenment of L2MSS for practical L2 teaching is that it is possible to enhance L2 Motivation by intervening students' "self" dimension (IL2S and OL2S). Teachers could strengthen the IL2S images of their students by asking them to frequently envisage themselves and the roles of English in their work and life in ten or more years. Furthermore, teachers could cultivate the students' IL2S through introducing foreign culture while teaching them language. Teachers may share their students with anecdotes of their own overseas experiences in western countries to initiate their interests in foreign culture and help them realize that it is necessary to learn English if they want to experience that culture themselves.

### C. Limitations

There are two limitations in the process of conducting this survey in the following points. The first limitation is that the sample of questionnaires could have been expanded. The second limitation is that EA was merely explored from class dimension.

### D. Suggestions for Future Research

First of all, in order to increase the generalizability of the present research, more participants should be involved and satisfied sampling method should be suggested.

Second, qualitative analysis should be done to make better informed decisions about the generalizability of the results and the major findings in the study.

Third, the investigation of EA should be conducted from multi-dimensions, that is, in class and out of class or examined in the actual listening, speaking, reading and writing of the English practice.

Last but not least, it will be more academically significant if the future research pays more attention to comparative studies between different academic levels of colleges.

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