

# Investigating Ideal L2 Selves of University Non-English Majors in an EFL Context

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**Abstract:** This study examines ideal second language (L2) selves (Dörnyei, 2009) as reported by university non-English majors in rural Japan. Ideal self is one's idealized mental self-representations that one hopes to attain in the future. Ideal L2 self is the L2-related component of one's ideal self, such as becoming a proficient speaker of English in the future, and is one of the tripartite constructs in the L2 motivational self system. While there has been a surge of studies within the framework of the L2 motivational self system in Japan, little has been discussed as to the lack of ideal L2 self and the socio-contextual factors that might play an important role in whether or not students form ideal L2 selves. In order to explore university non-English majors' ideal L2 selves, a questionnaire was administered to 114 university students in a rural area. In order to deal with the possible lack of ideal L2 self, the questionnaire included both positively and negatively worded Likert scale items as well as an open-ended item. The results indicated that while the majority of participants reported on the lack of ideal L2 self, some described unique ideal L2 selves, such as becoming an anchor and interviewing foreigners in English. Furthermore, a two-dimensional structure within the construct of ideal L2 self was suggested by factor analysis. Theoretical as well as pedagogical implications for future research are discussed.

## 1. Introduction

The field of second language (L2) motivation studies in recent years has seen much discussion on the role of English as the primary international language in the globalized world and how the new conceptualization of L2 motivation, namely the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009), might better explain L2 learners' motivation compared to the construct of integrative motivation in the socio-educational model (Gardner, 1985). As described below, these changes have led to a surge of studies within the L2 motivational self system. Important findings in these studies show that ideal L2 self—one's idealized self-image regarding an L2 that one hopes to achieve in the future—has consistently correlated highly with intended learning effort, and that ideal L2 self can be enhanced by certain educational interventions.

Japan is a typical English as a foreign language (EFL) context where “the Japanese language prevails virtually in all domains of life” (Miyahara, 2014, p.222). Accordingly, some Japanese learners of English have “no identifiable need to use English in interpersonal communications” and “do not concern themselves with such possibilities and find their formal knowledge of English useless” (Hayashi, 2013, p.90). If such is the case there might be Japanese learners of English who do not see any relationships between their future and English, and therefore lack an ideal L2 self.

Despite the richness of research focusing on ideal L2 self, not enough has been discussed as to the learners who consider competence in English unnecessary for their future, both in terms of near future while they are still students and in the more distant future after graduating from university, and totally lack an ideal L2 self. The present study is an attempt to first review recent L2 motivation studies focusing on ideal L2 self in Japan, then examine the existence and types of ideal L2 selves held by university English learners in rural Japan who might not be motivated to study English.

### (1) L2 Motivational Self System

The L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2009) is a newly developed motivation theory in L2 studies. The model grew from the dissatisfaction with the socio-educational model, the core of which held the attitudinal construct of integrativeness. Integrativeness emphasized a favorable attitude and in some cases a complete identification with members of the target language community, and it was postulated to exert a strong motivational power (Gardner, 1985). In contrast, the L2 motivational self system emphasizes one's identity related to an L2. The system is based on the self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) and the theory of possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1987). According to these theories, human beings are motivated to close the gap between the actual self state and the ideal self, which consists of the attributes that we hope to attain in the future. The L2 motivational self system is made up of three constituents: (a) ideal L2 self (one's idealized L2 self-image that one wishes to achieve in the future); (b) ought-to L2 self (the person one feels one should become because of others' expectations and responsibilities regarding an L2);

and (c) L2 learning experience (the more “situated” motives immediately related to the learning environment).

## **(2) Recent Studies in Japan Within the L2 Motivational Self System**

In recent years there have been a number of studies within the framework of the L2 motivational self system, both inside and outside Japan (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2014; Miyahara, 2014; Sampson, 2012). As the system might have more explanatory power than the socio-educational model in terms of L2 learners’ motivation to learn English in the globalized world, it might be understandable that the system has widely been applied at various educational levels. The studies in Japan can be broadly categorized into the following four types: (a) examination of the structural relationships between and among the constituents of the L2 motivational self system as well as criterion measures; (b) investigation of the relationships between the constituents in the L2 motivational self system and variables in other theories; (c) intervention studies with the aim of enhancing students’ ideal L2 selves; and (d) examination of detailed contents of ideal L2 self.

The first type of study is concerned with the validation of the system and examination of the predictive power of the constituents, mainly using structural equation modeling (e.g., Apple, Falout, & Hill, 2013; Ueki & Takeuchi, 2012). One of the consistent findings from this type of studies is the close relationship between ideal L2 self and the intended learning effort. Thus, one might argue that ideal L2 self exerts a strong motivational power for learning an L2.

Second, some studies have examined the relationships between the constituents of the L2 motivational self system on the one hand and variables of other motivational theories on the other hand (e.g., Johnson, 2013; Konno, 2011; Nishida, 2013; Ryan, 2009; Yashima, 2009). These studies have demonstrated the statistical similarities between ideal L2 self and, for example, integrativeness (Gardner, 1985), international posture (Yashima, 2002), and identified regulation, an internalized type of extrinsic motivation within the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Of particular importance is the high correlations (e.g.,  $r = .47$  in Yashima, 2009) between ideal L2 self and identified regulation. This might be understandable given that identified regulation is a type of motivation that happens when someone sees the personal importance of learning, and that ideal L2 self is one’s idealized image in the future, both concerning themselves with important future goals.

The third type of studies has been done particularly with the aim of enhancing students’ ideal L2 selves (e.g., Kaneko, 2012; Munezane, 2013; Sampson, 2012). Typically in these studies the interventions included giving learners opportunities for elaborating on their ideal L2 self, such as participation in a series of lectures by competent Japanese speakers of English. The results indicated that the learners’ ideal L2 selves could be indeed enhanced by these interventions. These might be valuable for practicing teachers in terms of obtaining suggestions for motivating their students. However, the participants in these studies seemed to be generally motivated to study English in the first place, and these

studies do not discuss much about students who lack ideal L2 self.

Lastly, some studies have employed the interview method and investigated L2 learners' future selves in detail, in some cases done longitudinally (e.g., Hayashi, 2013; Irie & Brewster, 2013, 2014; Miyahara, 2014; Taguchi, 2013). These studies shed light on varying degrees of learners' ideal L2 selves in terms of vividness and elaboration, and demonstrated that the relationship between L2 motivation and L2 achievement is not a simple linear cause-and-effect relationship.

### **(3) The Present Study**

Taken together, the past studies focusing on ideal L2 self within the Japanese context demonstrated that ideal L2 self might exert a strong motivational power when it is vivid and elaborate, and that it can be enhanced by educational interventions. On the other hand what needs to be investigated more is whether some L2 learners lack ideal L2 selves and what kind of ideal L2 selves could be imagined by them. Thus, the purpose of the present study is to examine whether L2 learners lack ideal L2 self, and the types of ideal L2 selves that are actually held by Japanese learners of English who live in an environment where opportunities for communication in English are limited. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Do Japanese university non-English majors living in an environment without many opportunities to communicate in English have any ideal L2 self?
2. If these learners have ideal L2 selves what types of ideal L2 self are imagined by them?

## **2. Method**

### **(1) Participants**

Participants in this study were 114 first-year Japanese university students living in a rural, western area of Japan. They were all non-English majors, and their majors included business administration, economics, and social sciences. They lived in an area that is similar to how Hayashi (2013) described where daily contact with English native speakers was quite limited (p.78).

### **(2) Instrument**

The questionnaire, which was conducted in the participants' first language, Japanese, included both Likert scale questions as well as an open-ended question. As a continuation from the last study (Takahashi & Im, submitted), the Likert scale items focused on both the general importance of English in the future and specific situations in which to use English. As suggested in the last study, the following revisions were made: (a) items that included the phrase "if my dreams come true" were deleted because the phrase might soften the tone of statements in an unexpected way; (b) items that showed poor psychometric properties were

deleted; (c) the number of options was changed from five to six in order to avoid confusion regarding the middle option; and (d) both positively and negatively worded items were included in order to capture the possible lack of ideal L2 self (see Appendix for the Likert scale items, which are categorized into the four types of general/specific and positively/negatively-worded ideal L2 selves, and are in the order in which they were asked). In addition, an open-ended question was included, asking the participants to freely describe their ideal L2 selves. Participants were given examples of ideal L2 selves such as oneself using English for business, teaching English, and traveling abroad and communicating effectively in English; they were also directed to write “none” if they did not have any ideal L2 self.

### **(3) Procedures**

The questionnaire was administered during regular class time. First, the anonymity, voluntary nature, and the questionnaire’s non-relationship to the students’ grades were explained. Then the notion of ideal L2 self was explained in Japanese. It was also explained that the items were either positively or negatively worded and that therefore participants should be careful when answering them. It took approximately 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

### **(4) Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the data, eight participants who had a missing answer were deleted. Thus, for analyses on the Likert scale items, this study used only the complete data ( $n = 106$ ). The Likert scale questions were analyzed in terms of an exploratory factor analysis and descriptive statistics. Then the answers to the open-ended question were categorized according to the keywords they included, such as communicating in English for travel or business purposes. In order to enhance the reliability of categorization, another rater repeated the same procedures. Inter-rater reliability was 91.67% and when discrepancies occurred, categorization was discussed until a consensus was reached. These categorizations were then put into the broader categories of general or specific.

## **3. Results**

### **(1) Reliability Analysis**

For the entire scale of ideal L2 self, the Cronbach alpha coefficient was .92. For items focusing on the general importance of English the coefficient was .91; for those focusing on specific situations the coefficient was .92. It was suggested that the coefficients would be higher if the three items (Q3, Q19, and Q25) were deleted. Thus, these items were excluded from further analyses.

### **(2) Exploratory Factor Analysis**

In order to examine the dimensionality of the data, an exploratory factor analysis with

Promax rotation was performed. After deleting both univariate and multivariate outliers the data included answers from 102 participants ( $n = 102$ ). The data showed good factorability, with a Keiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sample adequacy of .90. After screening both the eigenvalues and the scree plot, a two-factor solution was selected.

Table 1 shows the results of a factor analysis with two factors after Promax rotation. Factor 1 seems to be focusing on specific situations in which to use English, and thus can be named Specific Ideal L2 Self. Factor 2 seems to be tapping into the general importance of English competence, and thus can be named General Ideal L2 Self.

**Table 1**  
Factor loadings for exploratory factor analysis with a Promax rotation

	Factor	
	1	2
Q23 SP	<b>.91</b>	-.05
Q14 SP	<b>.89</b>	.00
Q13 SP	<b>.86</b>	-.10
Q16 SP	<b>.84</b>	-.05
Q10 SP	<b>.82</b>	.00
Q4 SP	<b>.81</b>	.03
Q17 SP	<b>.76</b>	-.04
Q1 SNR	<b>.63</b>	.10
Q21 SP	<b>.60</b>	.02
Q8 SP	<b>.60</b>	.07
Q20 SP	<b>.55</b>	.09
Q2 SP	<b>.53</b>	.01
Q9 SNR	<b>.50</b>	-.05
Q26 SNR	<b>.44</b>	.08
Q22 GNR	-.14	<b>.88</b>
Q24 GNR	-.17	<b>.87</b>
Q12 GNR	.03	<b>.81</b>
Q6 GNR	.00	<b>.80</b>
Q7 GNR	.13	<b>.76</b>
Q15 GP	.16	<b>.73</b>
Q5 GP	.04	<b>.72</b>
Q11 GP	-.08	<b>.70</b>
Q18 GP	.19	<b>.64</b>
Proportion of variance	.34	.21

*Note.* Factor loadings  $> .40$  are in boldface. SP = specific ideal L2 self (positively worded); SNR = specific ideal L2 self (negatively worded, reverse-coded); GP = general ideal L2 self (positively worded); GNR = general ideal L2 self (negatively worded, reverse-coded).

### (3) Descriptive Statistics

Table 2 shows descriptive statistics of the Likert scale items. As demonstrated, items focusing on General Ideal L2 Self were easy to endorse, with high means. For example, the item with the highest mean was Q11GP, which is framed as “Communication competence in English will be important in the future.” On the other hand, the item with the lowest mean was Q17SP, or “I can imagine myself speaking English as if I were a native speaker of English.” This might have suggested a very specific situation to the participants, one

that they did not think would occur now or in the future. One interesting finding is that when the scores on negatively worded items focusing on Specific Ideal L2 Self were reverse-coded, some of the items had higher means than positively worded items with similar meanings on Specific Ideal L2 Self. For example, Q9SNR (“I cannot imagine myself being asked a question and answering well in English”), when it was reverse-coded, had a mean of 2.86, which is higher than Q23SP (“I can imagine myself being asked a question and answering well in English”), with a mean of 2.57. Another example with the same trend is Q4SP (“I can imagine myself traveling overseas and communicating effectively in English”) and Q26SNR (“I cannot imagine myself traveling overseas and communicating effectively in English”).

**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics of Likert Scale Items*

	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Q1SNR	5	1	6	2.48	1.24
Q2SP	5	1	6	2.56	1.26
Q4SP	5	1	6	2.78	1.32
Q5GP	5	1	6	4.36	1.25
Q6GNR	5	1	6	4.65	1.11
Q7GNR	5	1	6	4.26	1.13
Q8SP	5	1	6	2.75	1.23
Q9SNR	5	1	6	2.86	1.20
Q10SP	5	1	6	2.70	1.19
Q11GP	4	2	6	4.79	.95
Q12GNR	4	2	6	4.51	1.11
Q13SP	5	1	6	2.69	1.27
Q14SP	5	1	6	2.84	1.24
Q15GP	5	1	6	3.98	1.24
Q16SP	5	1	6	2.40	1.08
Q17SP	5	1	6	2.33	1.09
Q18GP	5	1	6	3.73	1.37
Q20SP	5	1	6	2.55	1.24
Q21SP	5	1	6	2.61	1.13
G22GNR	5	1	6	4.30	1.15
Q23SP	5	1	6	2.57	1.10
Q24GNR	4	2	6	4.41	1.20
Q26SNR	5	1	6	2.86	1.32

*Note.* SP = specific ideal L2 self (positively worded); SNR = specific ideal L2 self (negatively worded, reverse-coded); GP = general ideal L2 self (positively worded); GNR = general ideal L2 self (negatively worded, reverse-coded).

#### (4) Analysis of the Answers to the Open-Ended Question

Table 3 presents an analysis of the answers to the open-ended question, which asked participants to freely describe their ideal L2 selves. A high number of participants (55.26%) answered that they did not have any ideal L2 self, providing answers such as “none” and “none in particular.” This might not be surprising given the environment, without opportunities for the participants to communicate in English. A more interesting result

is that although not many, some participants reported unique ideal L2 selves, some of which are very specific. These include, for example, becoming an anchor and interviewing foreigners in English. Another specific ideal L2 self is to become a businessperson and have negotiations in English. These unique ideal L2 selves are categorized as “others” in Table 3 because only one participant mentioned each of these ideal L2 selves, but these might be the ones that are worth investigating in more detail.

**Table 3**  
*Answers to the Open-Ended Question*

Ideal L2 Self	Specificity	Domestic/Abroad	Number
Using English for business purposes	Specific	Can be both	11
Using English when traveling overseas	Specific	Abroad	3
Directing a foreigner when asked for directions	Specific	Domestic	3
Using English for daily conversation	Not specific	Can be both	3
Communicating in English with a foreign friend	Specific	Can be both	3
Speaking/listening in English (in general)	Not specific	Can be both	2
Communicating (in general) in English with a foreigner	Not specific	Can be both	2
Do not have ideal L2 self	N/A	N/A	63
Others	N/A	N/A	9
No answer	N/A	N/A	21

*Note.* Participants' ideal L2 selves could include more than one purpose. Therefore the total number does not match the total number of participants (i.e., 114). N/A = not applicable.

#### 4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the existence of ideal L2 self among Japanese non-English majors who might not be particularly motivated to learn English, and the types of ideal L2 selves held by them, if any. The data were analyzed through an exploratory factor analysis, descriptive statistics, and an analysis of the answers to the open-ended question.

The analysis of the open-ended question revealed that indeed many participants reported that they did not have any ideal L2 self. This might be natural because, as described above, Japan is a typical EFL context where visualizing an active self communicating in English does not come easily. This is also captured by a low means of Likert scale items describing specific situations in which to use English.

Regarding the Likert scale items, in accordance with some past studies (e.g., Ueki & Takeuchi, 2012), ideal L2 selves seemed to be differentiated into two distinct types, those focusing on the general importance of English and others focusing on specific situations



in which to use English. Furthermore, the Likert scale items with high means were those focusing on general ideal L2 selves. This coincides with the finding of a past study that their “personally agreeable ideal L2 self,” such as “becoming fluent speakers of English and communicating with foreigners in English,” was high despite the low commitment to study English (Taguchi, 2013, p.182). These general ideal L2 selves might not be the ideal L2 selves that have the capacity “to activate the desired self and also for the future self to serve as an impetus for learning” (Miyahara, 2014, p.215). In other words, these types of ideal L2 selves might not have enough motivational power. This might suggest that while many participants acknowledged the vague importance of English competence for their future, this did not turn into an ideal L2 self that is elaborate enough to elicit specific study behaviors.

Interestingly, some although not many described rather specific ideal L2 selves. These include becoming an anchor and interviewing foreigners in English. This might suggest that ideal L2 selves become clearer and more elaborate when one has a clear ideal self in general terms. That is, when an L2 learner has an image of oneself pursuing a certain career, if that career has an English-related component their ideal L2 self also becomes clearer. Thus, participants’ ideal L2 selves might develop and become more elaborate as they become more mature and have more vivid images of themselves pursuing a certain career.

On a methodological note, negatively worded items seemed to capture participants’ ideal L2 selves in a slightly different way from the positively worded items. That is, items on specific ideal L2 selves became slightly more difficult to endorse when they were negatively worded. Thus, in order to capture participants’ varying ideal L2 selves it might be useful to include both positively and negatively worded items in future studies.

## 5. Conclusion

At this point it is important to mention some of the limitations of this study. First, the present study only focused on ideal L2 self, without investigating the actual effort made by the participants or their L2 proficiency. Thus, it has remained unclear as to how these various types of ideal L2 self are actually related to L2 learning. Furthermore, this study only captured a snapshot of participants’ ideal L2 selves. In future studies it will be necessary to examine how the elaborate ideal L2 selves are developed over time.

Limitations aside, this study demonstrated that some university non-English majors might lack ideal L2 selves but that some participants seem to have developed elaborate ideal L2 selves. This suggests that even in similar circumstances without daily contact with non-Japanese speakers, L2 learners develop different types of ideal L2 selves, which might exert different motivational powers. These individual differences are in accordance with past research that demonstrated variations in the vividness and elaboration of ideal L2 self (e.g., Taguchi, 2013). Furthermore, the overall lack of ideal L2 self was not acknowledged in some of the past studies only emphasizing the important role of English in the globalized

world (e.g., Munezane, 2013), but the lack of ideal L2 self might be another reality among Japanese learners of English.

On the more practical side, one implication is the possibility of stimulating L2 learners' ideal selves in general and asking how that ideal self can have an English-related component. When learners have specific career goals and if they have an English-related aspect, this might turn into an elaborate ideal L2 self. Learners and teachers alike can learn from those with elaborate ideal L2 selves.

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## Appendix: Likert-Scale Questionnaire Items

### General Ideal L2 Self (Positively-Worded)

- Q3. I often imagine myself as someone who is able to speak English.
- Q5. When I think about my future, it is important that I use English.
- Q11. Communication competence in English will be important in the future.
- Q15. The things I want to do in the future require me to speak English.
- Q18. I can imagine myself needing the competence in English in the future.

### General Ideal L2 Self (Negatively-Worded)

- Q6. I don't think English is important to me.
- Q7. The things I want to do in the future do not require me to speak English.
- Q12. I don't think English has much to do with me for now or for the future.
- Q22. When I think about my future it is not important that I use English.
- Q24. I don't think English is necessary for my future.

### Specific Ideal L2 Self (Positively-Worded)

- Q2. I can imagine myself writing English e-mails fluently.
- Q4. I can imagine myself traveling overseas and communicating effectively in English.
- Q8. I can imagine myself watching a film in English without subtitles.
- Q10. I can imagine speaking English with international friends.
- Q13. I can imagine myself living abroad and using English effectively for communicating with locals.
- Q14. I can imagine a situation where I am speaking English with foreigners.
- Q16. I can imagine myself being a person known as a fluent speaker of English.
- Q17. I can imagine myself speaking English as if I were a native speaker of English.
- Q20. I can imagine myself being transferred overseas and doing business in English in the future.
- Q21. I can imagine myself gaining a high score on the TOEIC.
- Q23. I can imagine myself being asked some question by a foreigner and answering well in English.

### Specific Ideal L2 Self (Negatively-Worded)

- Q1. I cannot imagine speaking English with international friends.
- Q9. I cannot imagine myself being asked some questions by a foreigner and answering well in English.
- Q19. I cannot imagine myself living abroad and doing business in English in the future.
- Q25. I cannot imagine myself going to a university overseas and taking classes in English.
- Q26. I cannot imagine myself traveling overseas and communicating effectively in English.