Exploring the connection between L2 learning motivation and past learning narratives

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Abstract

Japanese secondary school students (N=524) were surveyed to assess the correlational relationship between present English learning motivation and past learning narratives. An additional aim of the study was to determine whether past narratives should be operationalized into research questionnaires that utilize Zoltan Dornyei’s (2005) future oriented L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). The results revealed a positive correlational relationship (r=.66) between past learning narratives and the motivational criterion measure, but the recommendation that past learning narrative question items should be incorporated into the present formulation of the L2MSS could not be corroborated with the data.

Introduction

An aspect of conducting research that is as essential as choosing a suitable population, pursuing appropriate data analysis, or even choosing a suitable theory, is the questions that the participants are asked. This is especially true for Likert scale questionnaires, where there is no room for elaboration. In such questionnaires, a number of questions are typically chosen to work in conjunction to capture the breadth of a concept or psychological state that is not directly measurable; this is referred to as the operationalization of the concept. While researching English learning motivation in Japanese secondary schools using Zoltan Dornyei’s (2005; 2009) L2 Motivational Self System (hereafter referred to as L2MSS), which focuses on imagined future possible selves and learners’ present learning experiences, I noticed what I perceived to be a gap between the theory and its operationalization with regards to learners’ past narratives (Cacali, 2014). Although it was not vital to the main thrust of the L2MSS research, five additional questions were inserted into my research instrument in order to explore the relationship between motivation and past learning narratives. The following
article considers this exploratory aspect while specifically addressing the questions 1) is there correlational evidence to suggest a considerable connection between motivation and past narratives; and 2) should past narrative questionnaire items be operationalized into the L2MSS?

Background

The L2 Motivational Self System

The interest in second language (L2) learning motivation originated with the foundational work of Robert Gardner and his Canadian associates. Gardner and Lambert (1959) judged motivational intensity by a combination of two motivational orientations: ‘instrumental’ and ‘integrative’. Instrumental orientation referred to utilitarian reasons for learning a language, such as passing a test, while the more influential integrative orientation involved positive affective attitudes held towards target language speakers and ‘a willingness to be like valued members of the language community’ (Gardner & Lambert, 1959: 271). The robust results connecting integrativeness to motivation led to over three decades of the theory’s well-defined dominance in the field. Beginning in the early 1990s, however, some researchers (e.g. Crooks & Schmidt, 1991; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Skehan, 1991) called for a reexamination of motivational research theories. Some of the perceived limitations include a failure to accommodate evolving theories from general motivational psychology (Oxford & Shearin, 1994), the apparent irrelevance of integrative orientation for the youngest of language learners (Nikolov, 1999), and the weak integrative motivations identified in some Asian contexts (e.g. Warden & Lin, 2000; Yashima, 2002). A final, significant critique leveled against integrativeness suggested that with English as the global lingua franca, the aspiration to integrate into a particular English-speaking community has become increasingly irrelevant (e.g. Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002).

These criticisms led to new theorizing that incorporated contemporary concepts from general motivational psychology involving self-concept. Self-concept is an individual’s self-knowledge derived from dynamic and affective images of the self, which is significant to motivation because it determines whether a learner thinks he is the type of person who is capable of or even wants to learn a language (Higgins, 1987). Self-conceptions are also socially sensitive since an individual’s self-concept and associated self-images organize and motivate behavior ‘in response to challenges from the social environment’ (Markus & Wurf, 1987: 300). The new motivational research directions to emerge included Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002), Attribution Theory (Ushioda, 2001; Weiner, 1992), and most significantly to this study, the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS)(Dörnyei, 2005; 2009). Each of these theories has added to the
multidimensional understanding of motivation as a psychological, self-concept regulated, and socially swayed notion; but as the L2MSS is related to the current study, the following paragraphs will provide a closer look at this theory’s formulation and empirical application.

The inspiration for the L2MSS began with Markus and Nurius’ (1986) theory of possible selves. Possible selves are the imagined projections of hoped for or dreaded future selves that are more or less likely to occur depending on present actions. As Markus & Nurius (1986: 954) suggested, positive possible selves ‘might include the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self’, while negative possible selves ‘could be the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self’. The myriad of possible selves serve as influential guides when considering present actions. Although these possible selves are future imaginings, Markus & Nurius make it clear that they ‘are constructed creatively and selectively from a person’s past experiences’ (1986: 955, 957).

Higgins’ (1987) added self-discrepancy theory to the idea of possible selves. Self-discrepancy theory made a distinction between internalized ideal selves from externally regulated ought selves, which are derived from the individual’s sense of ‘duty, obligations, or responsibilities’ arising from significant others and the larger milieu (p.321). Higgins suggested that individuals are driven by a sense of discomfort to diminish the discrepancy between their current selves and their ideal and ought self-guides. In this way, possible selves influence an individual’s self-regulatory capacity by presenting personalized future self-images to aspire to and by providing a personalized evaluative measure for the individual’s present self-concept.

In the American educational context, researchers, most prominently Daphna Oyserman and associates (e.g. Oyserman et al., 2004; Oyserman, Brickman, & Rhodes, 2007), have performed intervention research based on promoting certain possible future selves as academic self-guides with delinquent or low-income youth. This research has noted the significant effects of future-self guides, especially when fostered and elaborated during interventions. Intervention effects were strongest when possible selves were considered sufficiently plausible, based on realistic role models, past self-conceptions, and social expectations (Oyserman & Fryberg, 2006), accompanied by manageable strategies (Oyserman et al., 2004), and ‘balanced’ by plausible feared selves (Oyserman et al., 2002). Research in the educational realm has consistently demonstrated that, given the right conditions, possible selves become associated with motivated academic self-regulation.

Drawing on the theory of possible selves and self-discrepancy theory, Zoltan Dörnyei (2005) introduced the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), a future
oriented self-concept theory specific to language learning. This theory comprised three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to self, and the L2 learning experience.

- The ideal L2 self is ‘the L2-specific facet of one’s “ideal self”: if the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the “ideal L2 self” is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves’ (Dörnyei, 2009: 29).

- The ought-to L2 self, refers to ‘the attributes one believes one ought to possess (i.e. various duties, obligations, or responsibilities) in order to avoid possible negative outcomes’ (Dörnyei, 2005: 106, emphasis in original).

- The L2 learning experience is concerned with the immediate learning environment and recognizes the impact of the classroom atmosphere, teaching style, and curriculum on motivation (Dörnyei, 2005).

Dörnyei’s belief was that these three aspects form distinct influences within the language learner’s self-concept, and in combination the theory can be a tool used to assess motivational profiles more accurately than Gardner’s concept of integrativeness.

Since the L2MSS was introduced, a number of studies have sought to both utilize it to assess motivation and to empirically validate the framework itself in various contexts. Dörnyei’s doctoral student, Tatsuya Taguchi, headed one of the first examples of a large-scale quantitative study using the L2MSS. Taguchi, Magid, and Papi (2009) administered a questionnaire to 4943 participants in the contexts of Japan, China, and Iran to test the validity of the L2MSS. The researchers found that the ideal L2 self had higher correlations than integrativeness with regard to motivation in each context. Furthermore, the ideal L2 self explained more overall motivational variance at 34% compared to 29% for integrativeness (Taguchi et al., 2009: 78). Finally, the researchers utilized structural equation modeling (SEM) to examine the overall L2MSS construct. Based on the directional correlations and goodness of fit indexes presented in the SEMs, the researchers could confidently ‘confirm the validity of the entire tripartite L2 Motivational Self System’ (Taguchi et al., 2009: 88).

Similar validations have also been borne out in the findings of other L2MSS studies. For example, discussing a meta-analysis involving four L2MSS studies, i.e. Al-Shehri, 2009; Csizér & Kormos, 2009; Ryan, 2009: and Taguchi et al., 2009, involving over 6000 participants in five countries, Dörnyei (2009: 31) noted that the ideal L2 self consistently explained more of the motivational variance than integrativeness (42% compared to 32%). These outcomes, along with the SEM results, confirm that there are compelling reasons to investigate motivational behavior with the L2MSS theoretical mode.
**Past Learning Narrative**

One aspect of motivation that has not been explored in any of the quantitative L2MSS research mentioned above, possibly because of the theory’s clear future orientation, is the perception of the participants’ past learning experiences. This seems like an oversight for at least three key reasons. First, even a cursory review of self-concept based theories reveals that self-concept cannot be divorced from past experience. After all, the past is the formative well from which our current identities are drawn. Second, in addition to the self-concept aspects of the L2MSS, the operationalization of the *L2 learning experience* should arguably also contain questions concerning the past: Dörnyei (2005: 105) himself stated that his conception of *L2 learning experience* originated from Ushioda’s (2001) *actual learning process*, which included *personal satisfaction, language-related enjoyment/liking*, and *positive learning history*. Even though *positive learning history* is on this list, such a history has never been operationalized in any L2MSS research questionnaire. Third, and most significantly, past selves are more than objective moment-by-moment constructions of one’s history; rather, just like future selves, they are partially imagined narratives that are dynamically constructed by present selves. The term ‘past learning narrative’ was chosen for this article precisely because there is a degree of imaginative fiction projected backwards into our own ever-changing life stories and therefore the objective sounding ‘past learning’ did not effectively capture the whole picture. To summarize, since future and present self-concepts are built on unfixed past learning narratives, such narratives should have a measurable influence on present motivation.

Tan Bee Tin (2013) conducted qualitative, interview research with participants (n=11) to explore how past learning narratives influenced students’ interest in English. She found that her subjects each had a story that they identified as being an origin of their interest in English learning. These origin stories became motivational resources to be drawn upon during further learning efforts. Tin suggested that learning narratives effectively personalized the study of English for her participants, thus transforming it ‘from an object of general significance imposed by society into an object of personal satisfaction’ (Tin, 2013: 143). She shifts the focus from future oriented imaginings seen in the L2MSS to post-hoc understanding in her participants by stating, ‘interest in learning English is not the predictability or the presence of a clear vision of their future English self but the postdictability ... of the value of English and their past English self with reference to their present self’ (Tin, 2013: 143). Tin’s research convincingly demonstrated that SLA motivational research should not underestimate the significance of the past on learners’ narratives and their influence on educational self-concepts.
Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study were 524 rural public secondary school pupils from arguably the two most significant years of public Japanese secondary education: the third year of JHS (n=185, ages 14 to 15) and the third year of SHS (n=339, ages 17 to 18). During these years, students take high-stakes entrance examinations that determine SHS and post-secondary educational paths. With the collective understanding that these tests significantly affect the trajectory of an individual’s future social identity, these participants were suitable examples of learners who should have been actively considering possible future selves (Aspinall, 2013). Within the participants, 206 (39.3%) were male and 311 (59.7%) were female, with 5 missing gender information. Females were over-represented because (a) one SHS had recently combined with an all-female school and (b) female participants were more active in submitting parental consent signatures. The participants were selected from the largely rural prefecture of Akita in northern Japan based on criterion sampling, to address the research questions, and on opportunity sampling, leading from the researcher’s connections in the area.

The Instrument

The study was based on a questionnaire comprised of 53 items covering both personal information (4 items) and twelve multi-scale variables related to the L2MSS, past learning narrative, and associated motivational factors (49 items). While some items were borrowed verbatim from previous instruments (e.g., Lamb, 2012; Ryan, 2008; Taguchi et al., 2009; Ueki & Taguchi, 2013), most were either adapted for the context or designed specifically for the instrument. Following a precedent set by Ryan (2008: 137-139), attitudes were measured by six-point Likert scale items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The item order was primarily randomly generated, but a few items were rearranged to ensure that items from the same multi-item scale were not adjacently positioned.

The main questionnaire gathered data on twelve multi-scale constructs, but teacher, parent, and peer influence, along with anxiety were not germane to the current discussion so they have been excluded. As the L2MSS was explained above, a reiteration of the concepts will not be repeated below. The remaining relevant constructs include the following:

- **Ideal L2 self**: Example: ‘I can imagine myself writing English emails and texts fluently in the future’.
- **Ought-to self**: Example: ‘If I fail to learn English, I will be letting others down’.
- **L2 learning experience**: Example: ‘I find learning English to be really interesting’.
• *Past learning narrative*: These items measured the degree to which participants have formed a positive storyline connected with English learning. They were developed specifically for this study. In order to assess present projections into past narratives, the items focused on past experiences that were vague enough that they could be true for most students. Example: ‘I remember many enjoyable times studying English with games and music during elementary school’.

• *Motivated learning behavior* (criterion measure): This variable served as the criterion measure for English learning motivation. The items measured the amount of ‘perceived effort’ expended for the purpose of English acquisition (Ryan, 2008: 147). Example: ‘I can honestly say that I am really doing my best to learn English’.

• *Instrumental promotion*: This variable focused on gaining positive results for pragmatic ends. Example: ‘Studying English will help me get a good job’.

• *Instrumental prevention*: This variable focused on avoiding negative results for pragmatic ends. Example: ‘I study English because I do not want to get bad grades’.

• *Foreign cultural interest*: This variable assessed interest in events and cultural products from outside of Japan. Example: ‘I am interested in what happens outside of Japan’.

The questionnaire was translated into Japanese and then several items were back-translated and compared with the originals. These were deemed similar enough to proceed with a pilot study. The pilot study (n=52) involved two classes of JHS students from one of the participating schools. Using SPSS (version 21), Cronbach’s alpha reliability coefficients were checked to assess the validity of the multi-item scales. Although the Cronbach levels were generally satisfactory, any scale with an α < .70 was reexamined using inter-item correlations, and the language was softened or otherwise reconsidered for the main study.

In order to protect all participants involved in this study, parental information sheets and opt-in parental consent forms were distributed prior to the questionnaire. A teacher informed the participants about the purpose of the study, and ensured complete anonymity and data confidentiality. With these ethical safeguards in place, parental information and consent forms were collected and the questionnaire was administered in early June 2014. The gathered data were entered into SPSS for analysis and following the conventions of psychometrics (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994), individual Likert items were regarded as ordinal data, but when pooled, multi-item scales were regarded as interval scales for descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.
Results and Discussion
In order to establish the reliability of the final instrument, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were computed for the multi-item scales (See Table 1).

Table 1:
Cronbach’s alpha (α) reliability values in the main questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Multi-item scale name</th>
<th>Number of items</th>
<th>α</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideal L2 self</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought-to self</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 learning experience</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past learning narrative</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated learning behavior (criterion)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental promotion</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental prevention</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign cultural interest</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cronbach values determine how well the multiple items in a scale assess the same underlying phenomenon and are ideally recommended to be greater than .70 (Pallant, 2005). Since each multi-item variable exceeded this number, reliability could be assumed. The variables were then assessed for normality using skewness and kurtosis levels and for homogeneity using the Levine test of equality of variance. All scales were deemed to be reliable and suitable for further descriptive and parametric analysis.
### Table 2:
**Descriptive statistics & variable correlations with motivation criterion measure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Descriptive statistics</th>
<th>Correlations with motivated learning behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideal L2 self</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ought-to self</td>
<td>3.22</td>
<td>1.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L2 learning experience</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>1.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past learning narrative</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated learning</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental promotion</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental prevention</td>
<td>4.36</td>
<td>.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign cultural interest</td>
<td>3.79</td>
<td>1.06</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Descriptive statistics for the eight variables were calculated to provide a general sense of how likely the participants were to disagree or agree with each variable. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were also calculated to assess the relationship between the variables and the criterion measure, motivated learning behavior. The results of both of these computations are presented in Table 2.

The descriptive section of Table 2 provides figures related to the student’s general motivation. As would be expected from students with looming high-stakes examinations, the participants strongly identified English learning with instrumental promotional and instrumental prevention. On the opposite end of the agreement range stands the ideal L2 self, revealing that few students could imagine themselves as future English users. Finally, the mean score for maintaining a positive past learning narrative (M=3.97) suggested that many students associated some positive memories with L2 learning.

The more interesting results are displayed on the right side of Table 2, as these correlations get to the heart of the research questions regarding past learning narrative’s interaction with motivation and whether past narrative items should be incorporated into L2MSS research. The most striking results here were the relatively high correlations for the three aspects of the L2MSS and past learning narrative compared to the instrumental and cultural variables. The past learning narrative’s correlation with the motivation criterion measure (r=.66,
p < .001) suggested a strong positive relationship with present motivation that rivaled that of the *ideal L2 self* and the *ought-to self* for rural Japanese secondary school learners. Although correlation is not causation, these results add support to qualitative research (e.g. Tin, 2013) that has suggested that learning narratives play a role in motivation.

Although past narratives may correlate with motivation, it does not necessarily follow that the concept should be incorporated into the operationalization of the L2MSS. In the theory’s current state, *L2 learning experience* is the only component within the tripartite L2MSS framework that could accommodate the past narrative items, since the other two focus on future imaginings and social expectations. That said, *L2 learning experience*, already produced the highest correlations of the variables tested ($r = .74$). To determine whether incorporating *past learning narrative* items would be beneficial, the two variables were combined. This new variable produced a surprisingly high Cronbach value ($\alpha = .89$), suggesting a remarkably close relationship between the two concepts, which is also evidenced by their inter-variable correlation ($r = .76$). When a correlation was performed between this new variable and *motivated learning behavior*, the result was the exact same as the *L2 learning experience* alone ($r = .74$), which implies that, although past narratives may be connected to motivation, there is no convincing reason to combine the items when operationalizing the L2MSS. That is not to say that past learning narrative items cannot serve as a complimentary variable within questionnaires, especially as an assessment of change over time; simply that the variable does not seem to fit into the current formulation of the L2MSS.

**Conclusions and Future Research**

The short answers to the two research questions presented above are that there is considerable positive correlational interaction between motivation and learning narratives but because of an intimate relationship between *past learning narrative* and *L2 learning experiences*, the data did not support incorporating past narratives into the operationalization of the L2MSS. The data suggested that the motivational force of past narratives might be somehow subsumed within the variable measuring present learning experience. If so, the question that results is one of causation: whether learners’ feelings about their present learning environment are being projected into their past learning narratives or whether past learning narratives are especially instrumental in shaping how learners interpret their present learning experience? Of course, it may be that the past and present share a mutually formative effect on each other. Whatever the case may be, considering that *past learning narratives* were as highly correlated with
motivation as *ideal L2 selves* and *ought-to selves*, even in situations where students were acutely aware of looming tests that would affect their futures, there are sufficient reasons to further explore the subject.

As is the case with most research, this study has produced more questions than solid answers. Unfortunately, the greatest shortcoming of this exploratory research design is its inability to pry deeper into such questions. Future researchers might consider a mixed methods or interview-style qualitative approach to assess the degree and directionality of past/present influences. Researchers could also explore interventional approaches similar to Daphna Oyserman’s work with fostering possible selves, but using past learning narratives instead. Pursuing a research design with control groups that aims at nurturing positive past narratives, like those that emerged in Tin’s (2013) work, might produce revealing data. Whatever the methods utilized, the data in this study suggested that L2 motivational researchers, even those whose emphasis is on the future, should not hastily disregard the motivational potential of past learning narratives while designing their research.

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**References**


