

Retrospective case studies of successful Chinese learners of English: Continuity and change in self-identities over time and across contexts

This study investigates possible second language (L2) self-identities of 20 Chinese PhD students learning English in China (i.e., English as a Foreign Language—EFL) and in overseas (i.e., English as a Second Language—ESL) contexts. A retrospective case study approach is used to examine self-identity histories. The study reveals that both the ‘ideal L2 self’ and the ‘dreaded L2 self’ were important sources of motivation in learning English in Chinese schooling and overseas education as well as in the lives of these students. Moreover, this study shows both continuity and change in students’ possible self-identities. Specifically, continuity of the ideal L2 self was present over time and across the two contexts for the majority of the students, whereas change from ideal L2 self to dreaded L2 self (or vice versa) was seen in all stages of English learning for a notable minority. These results indicate that successful language learners’ self-identities are multifaceted and that the formation of self-identities is a dynamic process and contingent upon levels of schooling or learning contexts.

1. Introduction

Learning a language involves multiple goals and motives that sustain engagement in the learning process (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Qin, 2007). Simultaneously, foreign language learning success depends, in part, upon the personal identity the learner has about himself or herself in relation to the target language and community (Gardner, 2001). The range of possible selves or identities was first outlined by Markus and Nurius (1986). These selves have been labelled as the likely self, ideal self, and dreaded self (Carver, Reynolds, & Scheier, 1994). One further self was proposed by Markus and Nurius: “the ought self” (1986, p. 958). Dörnyei (2005, 2009) popularised the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self as important

facets of the second language (L2) motivational self system. Although some studies have found positive correlations between these two selves and intended learning effort (Jiang, 2011; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009), the present investigation revisits the dreaded self as a possible valuable factor in understanding the motivation and identity of L2 learners of English.

The dreaded L2 self refers to a future-oriented imagined person with lower L2 competence whom learners might fear or dread becoming (e.g., a person who fails in a study programme). Hence, the dreaded self is derived from negative external consequences (e.g., school failure) that can be internalised because of its relation to personal future development. This is partly coincident with Şimşek and Dörnyei's (2017) suggestion that "anxious self or the anxious me" (p. 63) was a useful concept in making sense of Turkish undergraduates who had symptoms of debilitating language anxiety. While dreaded self seems little different to the "feared self" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 21), Dörnyei argues that the feared self is the opposite of the ideal L2 self in the same domain, whereas the Markus and Nurius's (1986) framework suggests, in contrast, that the dreaded L2 self is an independent self rather than simply a contradiction of the ideal self. Unfortunately, Dörnyei (2009) has not provided an elaborate explanation for the non-existence of dreaded L2 self in his L2 motivational self framework. The potential value of including the "dreaded self" in the conceptualisation and measurement of possible selves related to L2 learning seems particularly strong in a collectivistic context such as China, where shame of failure and guilt are used to motivate people (Wong & Tsai, 2007). Shame and guilt are more positively valenced in collectivist cultures because they can

lead to more adaptive and positive consequences (such as self-improvement) when compared with their effect in individualistic contexts (Wong & Tsai, 2007).

Furthermore, success in the high-pressure Chinese examination-oriented education system (Huang & Pan, 2011) requires higher competence in English as a foreign language (EFL), and thus there is likely to be a strong sense of dread (e.g., shame brought on family by performing poorly on examinations) in relation to English language study. Since success in English is of great importance within the National College Entrance Examination, it has a significant possible impact on students' imagination of their future self. Without L2 English success, opportunities to be an overseas student or have a high-standing job are limited. Hence, fear of becoming a failed L2 learner is a potentially powerful motivating identity for Chinese students.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) was proposed based on a longitudinal, national survey of middle school students in Hungary studying five target languages (Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006). Recently, more longitudinal studies on L2 motivational selves have been conducted from the perspective of dynamic systems theory (e.g., self and the specific situations interact over time; Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015). However, these studies are predominantly in an EFL learning context and seem to capture the learners' motivational possible selves at a specific study stage (e.g., high school) and the timelines reported cover at most one semester or one academic year. Accordingly, the present investigation uses a retrospective case study design to examine learners' motivational possible selves across the full length of time in which they have been L2 learners (i.e.,

different study stages and language learning contexts). Theoretically, this study aims to contribute to the literature on L2 motivational possible selves through the inclusion of Markus and Nurius's (1986) "dreaded self" alongside Dörnyei's (2005) L2MSS. In doing so, it is hoped to broaden prevailing conceptions of possible selves in L2 by examining the development of motivational possible selves among a sample of successful language learners from China.

2. Motivational selves and context in language learning

2.1. L2 motivational self system

Motivation plays an important role in L2 learning because it helps learners maintain effort (Dörnyei et al., 2006). Motivation increases success in English learning (Gardner, 2001) and promotes the autonomy of language learners (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). More recently, self theory has been integrated into the L2 motivational field, and language learning researchers interested in self as a motivational construct have relied heavily on the L2 Motivational Self System developed by Dörnyei (2005). L2MSS includes three components: "Ideal L2 Self", "Ought-to L2 Self", and "L2 Learning Experience" (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). Specifically, the "Ideal L2 Self" is the desired self in acquiring a second language (e.g., fluent and competent in using this language), and it includes integrative motives (e.g., to learn the second language to come closer to the L2 community) and internalised instrumental motives (e.g., learning English for professional development). The "Ought-to L2 Self" focuses on the instrumental qualities that the individual believes he/she should possess in order to fulfil obligations to significant others (e.g., learning English to meet parents' expectations) and to

avoid bad consequences (e.g., failing in exams). Importantly, the ought-to L2 self does not distinguish between the sense of fulfilling an obligation, an especially prominent construct in Chinese philosophy (Schwartz, 1985; Wong, 2006), and desire to avoid a dreaded possible self which focuses on preventing feared negative consequences. Finally, the “L2 Learning Experience” is the specific situation in which learners’ motives link with the immediate English study surroundings and experiences.

Higgins and his colleagues (1985, 1987) suggested that the ideal self (i.e., desired attributes that a person hopes or wants to possess) and ought-to self (i.e., attributes that the person ought to possess in order to meet obligations) function in order to guide behaviour towards attaining the possible self. Building on these ideas, Dörnyei (2009) further suggested that the likely or expected self (e.g., a person whom he/she might become) in “possible selves” theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) would not guide behaviour since it was already presumed to be likely.

Although Dörnyei’s theorisation relied on “possible selves” theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the dreaded self seems to have been overlooked as an independent facet of motivational possible self. This is surprising given the fact that anxiety in English learning has been found in numerous empirical studies across different countries (Aida, 1994; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; Liu, 2006; Tóth, 2008). Indeed, Tóth’s (2008) survey of Hungarian undergraduates identified three forms of dread-like feelings associated with English learning: communication apprehension (e.g., dread of communicating with others in English), fear of

negative evaluation (e.g., dread of being evaluated by peers and parents and teachers), and test anxiety (e.g., worry about an English test).

2.2. The role of context in identity and motivation

According to poststructuralism, people have multiple identities which are firmly related to social contexts (Oxford, 2016). Thus, identity is a complex system in which every individual has multiple and often contradictory identities in relation to those contexts (Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Context also plays an explicit role in shaping language learners' motivation. The implicit incorporation of context into L2 motivation stemmed from Gardner and Lambert's (1972) social-psychological model which focused on individual motivation and contextual factors (e.g., cultural beliefs and values). Subsequently, within a cognitive-situated approach, the characteristics of the micro-level context (e.g., language classroom and language teacher) within which the language learning is situated influence language learning learners' motivation (Williams & Burden, 1997). However, Dörnyei (2005, pp. 74-83) argued that motivation in L2 learning demonstrates continuous fluctuation over time and thus is dynamic. That is, motivation is expected to be a variable over time, even if the language learning context is stable in a classroom context (Dörnyei, 2005).

2.2.1. Culture as context

Culture, as a contextual dimension, has drawn researchers' attention, with arguments being made that motivational models and constructs situated in the Western cultural contexts might be unsuitable for the Asian cultural contexts (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

Indeed, large-scale differences have been noted between collectivist and individualistic societies in terms of attitudes toward authority, gender, and identity (Hofstede, 2007).

In Confucian heritage cultures, learning requires personal responsibility and, at the same time, importance is placed on the fulfilment of family obligations and the needs of others over the needs of the self (Koh, Shao, & Wang, 2009). The importance of obligation as a motivator among members of East Asian societies does not just refer to going along with expectations, but also contains a great sense of agency and positive self-regard while doing their duty (Buchtel, 2009).

The tendency within L2MSS to overlook negative emotions may have arisen from general trends within individualistic cultures to view positive emotions as desirable (Eid & Diener, 2001), while within collectivist cultures the negative emotions that learners experienced (e.g., shame and guilt) can lead to self-improvement (Wong & Tsai, 2007). Thus, among Chinese learners of L2 English, it is probable that both the ought-to and dreaded self would be motivating forces. Additionally, it is possible that Dörnyei's survey data, which was derived from middle school students, might not have been sufficient to capture additional possible selves, simply because it is likely that younger children do not have multiple possible selves (Zentner & Renaud, 2007).

Although Dörnyei (2009) pointed out that perceiving bad consequences may have energising potential, he maintains that people are more likely to channel their energy into positive goals rather than avoiding failure. This again may be a reflection of a Western bias in theorising about autonomy and emotion (Buchtel, 2009). Within Chinese society, avoiding

failure is an important element, as failure denies access to important social and economic benefits (e.g., access to better education and employment offers; China Civilisation Centre, 2007). Further, failure in English study would be much worse for Chinese students due to the increasingly important role that English plays in China's education system (e.g., passing the College English Test is a prerequisite for finding a good job in China). The high-pressure examination-oriented education system in China, which gives English learning an important place (Huang & Pan, 2011), as well as the general significance of English for overseas education and future career success (Bolton & Botha, 2015) potentially generates a dreaded self in English learning among Chinese learners.

Empirical work has supported these insights. Taguchi, Magid, and Papi's (2009) survey of 1328 participants in China found that the ought-to self, consistent with Confucian philosophy, focused on meeting others' expectations rather than avoiding bad consequences. They found only a weak correlation between ought-to self and instrumentality prevention (e.g., I have to learn English because I do not want to fail the English course), indicating that it might be inappropriate to list avoiding bad consequences as part of the ought-to L2 self in L2MSS. Another survey of 158 English major undergraduate students in China (Jiang, 2011) reported that the ought-to L2 self subsumed parental encouragement, requirement, and social responsibility (e.g., I learn English in order to let the world know more about China), a facet consistent with the Chinese sense of parental or filial obligation. Jiang (2011) also reported that the English anxiety scale (e.g., I am worried that other speakers of English would find

my English strange) was reasonably strongly endorsed, indicating the presence of anxiety among Chinese learners of English.

Therefore, Dörnyei's L2MSS framework, as it currently is derived from Western studies and theories, may not be sufficient for L2 learners, particularly Chinese learners of English.

2.2.2. Foreign or second? The impact of exposure as a context

According to Dörnyei (1990), a foreign language context is a setting in which the use of the target language is not prevalent in society (e.g., English is a foreign language in China). In contrast, a second language context is a setting in which the use of the target language is common to everyday life (e.g., English would be a second language in New Zealand for citizens of China). The impact of foreign and second language contexts has been invoked to understand contradictory results concerning learners' motivations (e.g., Au, 1988; Chihara & Oller, 1978; Clément & Kruidenier, 1983; Oller, 1981). Clément and Kruidenier (1983) proposed that motivations are determined by "who learns what in what milieu" (p. 288). Cultural differences in the relative importance of instrumental compared with integrative motivation have been reported. For example, Yashima (2000) argued that among Japanese university students, instrumental rather than integrative motivation was important. Chen, Warden, and Chang (2005) found that integrative motivation did not contribute to more English learning effort for Chinese English learners. Taiwanese English learners had no integrative motivation (Warden & Lin, 2000). However, these studies did not compare both

foreign and second language contexts with the same participants, and thus the evidence for culture by context effects is not robust.

Li (2011) found that Chinese English learners' motivations differed across foreign ($n=132$) and second language ($n=122$) contexts. The ideal L2 self was stronger and motivation was more related to fulfilling obligations among learners in a foreign language context than the second language context. However, the participants in these two contexts were different samples and thus the observed differences may be attributable to individual differences rather than contextual factors. Therefore, the present study investigates the change in motivational possible selves for the same participants across the two contexts and attempts to discover possible reasons for this change.

2.2.3. Level of schooling context impact

Since 2001(MOE, 2001), in China's cities and towns, English learning has become a compulsory course, normally from Year 3 through secondary education to higher education. The aim of English at this stage is to stimulate students' interest in learning English and in using this language for interpersonal communication (MOE, 2001). However, in middle school (Years 7-9) and high school (Years 10-12) English learning is more exam-oriented so that students can pass High School Entrance Examination and National College Entrance Examination (*zhong kao* and *gao kao*, respectively; Zhang, 2017). The latter examination generates great fear or pressure among students (Yu & Suen, 2005). In undergraduate study and onward, English learning is more related to passing the College English Test, which is a prerequisite for prestigious jobs in China (Gao, Zhao, Chen, & Zhou, 2003). Therefore, it is

possible that Chinese English learners at different levels would exhibit different self-related motivations and identities, consistent with Dörnyei's (2005) proposition that motivation changes over time.

Lastly, because successful adult learners are likely to have awareness of their language learning possible selves; it is expected that they can inform us richly about their motivations and selves (Ushioda, 2008). While an experimental design could prove the assertion that language learning context makes a difference, this study contributes to the literature by exploring directly with successful learners about what their own perceptions are of their possibly changing motivations and identities as they progressed in their English learning in EFL and ESL contexts, as well as through different levels of educational contexts (e.g., primary school). It is expected that these different learning environments and settings (e.g., schooling contexts) will play an important role in students' motives (Dörnyei, 2009) and that L2 learners will exhibit strongly rational motives and identities (Rieskamp & Reimer, 2007) within the ecology of the schooling process.

3. The study

3.1. Research questions

Due to the great difficulty of tracking participants in a true longitudinal study (e.g., from primary school to the overseas doctoral study), a retrospective case study design was used. This method is a type of longitudinal study design where data is collected after the fact (i.e., retrospectively; Street & Ward, 2012). Naturally, this method is prone to memory error and subjectivity in the selection of episodic memories to create the narrative. Such biases

may contribute to the reconstruction of a narrative that the participant uses to make sense of their experience and any deviance from the objective fact is both unverifiable and unquantifiable. Nonetheless, the technique was employed on the assumption that the participant's narrative is the best possible representation of what happened to individuals whose life courses have not been fully documented.

In the present study, this technique allowed for the investigation of the types of motivational possible selves among a group of successful Chinese learners of English. Three research questions were posed:

1. What are the types of possible selves in relation to English learning among academically successful Chinese learners of English?
2. How, and to what extent, do participants' possible selves change across language learning contexts (i.e., from an EFL to an ESL context)?
3. What types of possible selves act as dominant motivators at different educational levels in which English was studied (e.g., K-12, Undergraduate, and Postgraduate)?

3.2. Participants

Participants were 20 doctoral students of Chinese citizenship studying at the same university in New Zealand. They are successful English learners in that they all had to demonstrate a high standard in English proficiency to qualify for a PhD program in New Zealand (i.e., IELTS score average ≥ 6.5 , with no score below 6.0 or iBT overall ≥ 90 plus written score ≥ 21). The sample included nine women and eleven men drawn from multiple faculties: eight in natural science fields (e.g., engineering, science, medical and health

sciences), ten in social sciences (e.g., education and business), and two in arts and humanities.

Twelve participants began to learn English at primary school (nominally aged 6-12), while the remaining eight began studying English in middle school (nominally aged 13-14).

3.3. Procedure

Participants were recruited using two techniques. First, the majority ($n=16$) were recruited through advertisement on the online bulletin board of the university's Chinese postgraduate student association. The remaining four participants were recruited via snowball sampling (i.e., they were invited by a participant to take part). All participants provided written consent to participate in the study after being informed that the study would involve the completion of an individual interview (20-30 minutes in duration); that they would be asked questions about themselves as English language learners; and that their participation would be both voluntary and anonymous.

The interviews were recorded by the first author. At the request of the participants, eighteen interviews were conducted in Chinese and two in English. All participants were interviewed by the first author, who also transcribed and translated (Chinese to English) all interviews. Thereafter, each participant was offered a copy of the transcript, written in English, for approval and correction before data analysis.

3.4. Measures

A semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix A) was used to elicit descriptions of participants' motivations and identities across the stages of schooling (i.e., primary, middle, high, undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral study), from the time they began learning

English through to their current enrolment as a doctoral student. Each participant described his/her self in relation to English across the various stages of schooling and was asked to indicate which self was their dominant motivator for studying English at each schooling stage.

3.5. Analysis

Both thematic analysis and quantification of categories were used to code and classify the interview data. In order to increase the interpretative power of thematic analysis, this study identified the patterns in two ways, as recommended by Joffe (2012): first, with deductive analysis to search for responses coherent with the motivation and self-identity categories described in the literature, and, subsequently, inductively to identify possible new constructs and relationships embedded in the interview data. Boyatzis (1998) suggests that quantification can be used in thematic analysis if conceptual units appear sufficiently frequently. Namey, Guest, Thairu, and Johnson (2008) stated that, compared with word counts, assessing the frequency themes takes context into account and thus is a useful analytic technique. Also, Hayashi (1951) believed that quantifying qualitative data can increase the validity, reliability, objectivity, reproducibility, consistency, and accuracy of the data. Therefore, quantification was employed in this study to explore the possibility of identifying changes in motivational possible selves across different learning contexts.

Bryman's (2015) data analysis steps were followed: (1) label or code relevant original sentence, (2) group similar codes into a category, and (3) look for patterns among or between categories. Motivations and identities in learning English were categorised as belonging to one of fourteen different codes and three possible selves (i.e., ideal, dreaded, or ought-to).

Only codes with at least two participant statements were reported. A data dictionary of definitions and example statements (Appendix B) was developed and used on two randomly selected interview transcripts by two independent judges in order to replicate the coding process. A kappa coefficient of similarity of ratings was determined using the proportion of interviews that were mutually classified to the same motivational self code. Kappa coefficients between the first author and Coder 1 and Coder 2 were good ($\kappa=.82$ and $\kappa=.76$, respectively).

Then, differences in the frequency of each self category between language learning contexts (i.e., EFL compared with ESL) and across schooling contexts (i.e., K-12 compared with university) were evaluated. Rather than relying on inferential statistics which may have been applicable to large sample sizes (i.e., $N > 30$), descriptive analysis of the difference in mean scores by condition was evaluated with a standardised effect size using ordinal polychotomous proportions assigned to each category (Lipsey & Wilson, 2001). Where possible, illustrative comments from participants were used to exemplify their possible selves.

4. Results

Aggregate results across all schooling stages are reported first. The frequency of participants who described multiple or single possible selves is then reported before the intra-individual trajectory of the ideal and dreaded selves is examined across EFL and ESL contexts. Finally, the patterns of change in the self which acted as the dominant motivator across different learning contexts are presented.

4.1. Types of motivational possible selves in relation to English learning

Fourteen different motivational codes (Table 1) were aggregated into three selves: seven into dreaded, six into ideal, and one into ought-to. Thirteen codes were reported in the Chinese EFL context (the 14th code—“Fear of bad impact on PhD research”—was not applicable, NA), while eight were reported in the overseas ESL context (with four of the remaining six NA). Overall, across schooling context, participants expressed more ideal L2 self motivations ($f = 58$) than dreaded L2 self motivations ($f = 37$) or ought-to L2 self motivations ($f = 4$). Specifically, the most dominant ideal L2 self motivations in the EFL context were finding a decent job ($f = 17$) and studying abroad ($f = 8$), and professional/academic development ($f = 11$) and communicating with others fluently ($f = 6$) in the ESL context. The most dominant dreaded L2 self motivations in the EFL context were not finding a decent job ($f = 8$) and fear of failing exams ($f = 5$), and fear of not communicating with others fluently ($f = 6$) and fear of failing in study programme ($f = 5$) in the ESL context.

There were notable differences in the distribution of the codes by language contexts. Ideal L2 self occurred more in EFL than ESL ($d=.94$), and dreaded L2 self also occurred more ($d=.33$) in EFL than ESL context. These differences mean that the two contexts stimulated participants to recall quite different motivational possible selves.

Table 1. *The Frequency of Motivational Possible Selves across Two Learning Contexts*

Code by motivational self	Schooling		Total ^a (f)
	Chinese EFL (f)	Overseas ESL (f)	
I. Ideal L2 self			
1. Find a decent job	17	6	23
2. Professional/academic development	3	11	14
3. Study abroad	8	NA	8
4. Communicate with others fluently	1	6	7

Code by motivational self	Schooling		Total ^a (f)
	Chinese EFL (f)	Overseas ESL (f)	
5. Enrol in a good university	3	NA	3
6. Make more foreign friends	1	2	3
II. Ought-to L2 self			
7. Requirement of school or subject	4	0	4
III. Dreaded L2 self			
8. Fear of not finding a decent job	8	0	8
9. Fear of not communicating fluently	1	6	7
10. Fear of failing in study program	1	5	6
11. Fear of failing in exams	5	1	6
12. Fear of not enrolling in a good university	4	NA	4
13. Fear of not studying abroad for degree	4	NA	4
14. Fear of bad impact on PhD research	NA	2	2

Note. ^aTotal (f) refers to the frequency of code, not participants; EFL = English as a Foreign Language; ESL = English as a Second Language; NCEE=National College Entrance Examination; CET = College English Test; TEM=Test for English Major; CET and TEM are standardised national English proficiency tests for universities students in the People's Republic of China; NA= Not applicable in that context. Bold-face numbers indicate over-representations, given marginal frequencies.

As detailed in Table 2, four different codes were associated with both ideal and dreaded self-identities. The relationship of these identical codes that appeared as motivation for both the ideal self and the dreaded self was investigated. For example, in the EFL Chinese schooling context, finding a decent job acted primarily as an ideal goal to be achieved and less so as a dreaded consequence to be avoided, while it was totally ideal in the overseas schooling context. Likewise, studying abroad was more prominent as a desired ideal goal, with a few instances reflecting a dreaded fear of not being achieved. Communicating fluently with others seemed to be equally split between being an ideal goal and a dreaded fear of not being able to do so in both contexts. In both contexts, the 'dreaded' percentage of these codes ranged from as low as 12.5% (i.e., finding a decent job in the EFL context) to as much as

50% (i.e., communicating with others in the EFL context). Hence, multiple motivations can idiosyncratically function as either ideal or dreaded L2 self-identities.

Table 2. *Participants' Motivational Possible Selves Configuration by Context*

Code	Chinese schooling (EFL)			Overseas schooling (ESL)		
	Ideal	Dreaded	Dual	Ideal	Dreaded	Dual
Find a decent job	8	2	6	6	0	0
Study abroad	6	2	2	NA	NA	NA
Communicate fluently	1	1	0	4	4	2
Enrol in a good university	0	1	3	NA	NA	NA

Note. All numeric values are number of participants. EFL = English as a Foreign Language; ESL = English as a Second Language; Dual = Both Ideal and Dreaded self. NA= Not applicable in that context.

4.2. *Change in possible selves across different learning contexts*

Only two participants reported four comments (i.e., 4%) for the ought-to L2 self in relation to English study. For example, Case 12 had only ought-to L2 self in relation to English study (e.g., “As an English major student in the university, I should learn it well to meet the requirement of this subject”). This person had no ideal L2 self or dreaded identity comments across the two contexts.

The percentages of the ideal and dreaded L2 self statements in each case across different language learning contexts are presented in Table 3. Five participants (25%) did not report any percentage change in terms of the ideal or dreaded L2 self statements in the two contexts. Among them, two participants did not have the dreaded L2 self across the two contexts because they had no fear in English study. For example,

During the whole process of my English study, I have had no fear and it is the good situation that pushes me to improve my English. My focus is on the improvement, not getting rid of fear. [Case 4]

Another two participants had more ideal than dreaded L2 self statements consistently across EFL and ESL contexts. For example, Case 11 had four ideal self statements in relation to personal future success, that is:

- Undergraduate study, “If I could study English well, it would bring me success, since English is my major, such as career success”,
- Postgraduate study in a Chinese university, “It could be very helpful for my research, or research achievement”, and
- Overseas doctoral study, “I could get my PhD degree” and “become a successful bilingual learner”.

By contrast, this person had two dreaded self statements related to the impact of lower English competence on a future job or fear of failure in the PhD program. This person reported:

- Undergraduate study, “I also feared that my pronunciation and listening were not good enough, which would impact my future job”, and
- Overseas doctoral study, “I fear that if I could not study English well, you could not write an acceptable English dissertation to meet PhD graduation requirement”.

In contrast, 10 participants (50%) indicated the change in their motivational selves across different contexts. One participant (Case 3) with both the ideal and dreaded L2 self in the Chinese EFL context had only the ideal L2 self in the ESL context, whereas one participant (Case 13) with only the dreaded L2 self changed to having both the ideal and

dreaded. Two participants (Case 6 and Case 19) with previous co-existence of the ideal and dreaded L2 self did not have any self in relation to English study (e.g., “I am focused on doing my PhD research, not any thought of studying English”; Case 6), but one (Case 14) began to have that self while studying abroad. Five participants (Case 5, 7, 10, 16, 17) with only the ideal L2 self began to have both the ideal and dreaded L2 self upon going abroad to study. Their dreaded L2 self was focused on the fear that their English proficiency would impact on their PhD study—a legitimate concern given the high stakes and high linguistic proficiency associated with a doctoral degree. This change in the nature of causation in dreaded L2 self can be seen in Case 7, who indicated about undergraduate university study: “If I could study English well, I could go abroad and could have some advantages in finding a job. No fear of not studying it well”.

However, about overseas doctoral study, this same participant reported:

If I could study English well, it would be very helpful for my career success; if we could not do that, our PhD research work could not be presented to others due to the bad language ability.

Thus, the change in possible self across language contexts was large ($d=0.61$; i.e., 50% of participants had change versus 25% without change).

Table 3. *The Number and Distribution of Ideal and Dreaded Possible Selves for Each*

Participant across Two Learning Contexts

Case	Chinese schooling (EFL)			Overseas schooling (ESL)		
	Total (<i>n</i>)	Ideal (%)	Dreaded (%)	Total (<i>n</i>)	Ideal (%)	Dreaded (%)
1	7	14.3	85.7	3	33.3	66.7
2	11	45.5	54.5	2	50.0	50.0
3	7	57.1	42.9	1	100.0	0.0
4	1	100.0	0.0	2	100.0	0.0
5	4	100.0	0.0	5	40.0	60.0
6	5	60.0	40.0	0	0.0	0.0

Case	Chinese schooling (EFL)			Overseas schooling (ESL)		
	Total (n)	Ideal (%)	Dreaded (%)	Total (n)	Ideal (%)	Dreaded (%)
7	2	100.0	0.0	5	20.0	80.0
8	5	80.0	20.0	4	75.0	25.0
9	4	75.0	25.0	4	75.0	25.0
10	3	100.0	0.0	2	50.0	50.0
11	3	66.7	33.3	3	66.7	33.3
12	0	0.0	0.0	0	0.0	0.0
13	2	0.0	100.0	4	50.0	50.0
14	0	0.0	0.0	3	66.7	33.3
15	4	50.0	50.0	3	33.3	66.7
16	4	100.0	0.0	3	66.7	33.3
17	2	100.0	0.0	2	50.0	50.0
18	3	66.7	33.3	5	40.0	60.0
19	2	50.0	50.0	0	0.0	0.0
20	2	100.0	0.0	2	100.0	0.0
Sum	71	1265.3	534.7	53	1016.7	683.3

Note. EFL = English as a Foreign Language; ESL = English as a Second Language.

4.3. Self as a dominant motivator across study stages

Seven participants (i.e., Case 1, 2, 8, 9, 11, 15, 18) had both ideal and dreaded L2 self, as shown in Table 3. Thus, it is interesting to examine factors and contexts that might influence which identity was dominant. Patterns of change in the dominant self associated with learning in an EFL versus an ESL context are shown in Figure 1, which shows that half of the students were completely stable in their dominant self motivator, with nine consistently the ideal and one stable as dreaded.

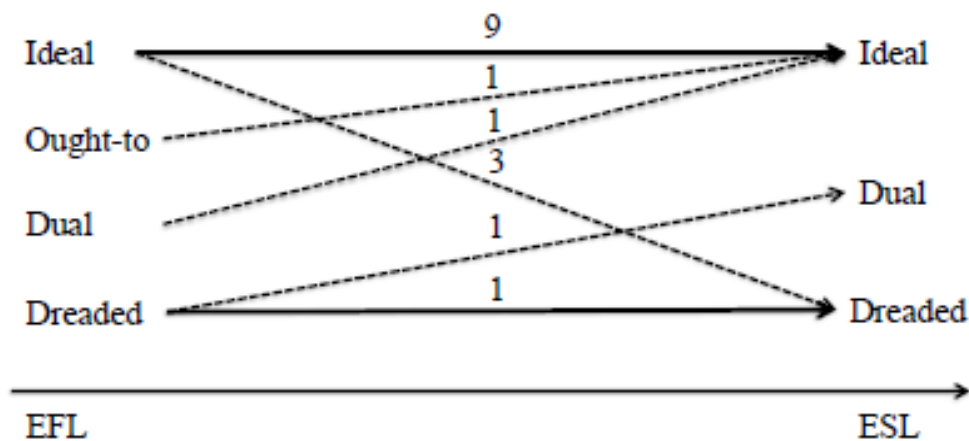


Figure 1. Patterns of changes in dominant self while moving from an EFL to an ESL context.

Case 20 provides an example of perceiving the stable ideal L2 self as the dominant motivator. She reported that “All of the three stages of her study had no fear. It was always the good situation that pushed me to study English well”. She indicated specifically the following for each stage:

- Undergraduate study, “If I could study English well, I could become a university English teacher after my graduation”,
- Postgraduate study, “If I could study English well, I could get higher scores in my courses and could apply for the PhD study programme”, and
- Overseas doctoral study, “if I could study English well, I could write a good thesis and could have good spoken English”.

In sharp contrast, Case 1 provides an example of a stable dreaded L2 self as the dominant motivator. He reported that “Overall, it was the fear that pushed me to study English harder in the past Chinese schoolings”, and that “Now in my overseas doctoral study, it was still the fear that pushed me to study English harder” in that “I fear that if my English were poor, while going back to China others would laugh at me”. Specifically, he noted:

- Middle school, “It was full of fear of not studying English well”, because “If I could not study English well, English scores could affect my overall scores of High School Entrance Examination seriously”, and as a result, “I would not be enrolled in a good high school”,

- Undergraduate study, “I would have lost my face if I had not passed my College English Test Band 4 (CET4) but other students had passed.” and “When I was looking for a job, I found that whether I had passed CET 4 or not was still important, so fear still existed”, and
- Postgraduate study that he wanted to study abroad, “IELTS fee is very expensive so I studied English very hard, fearing failing in the test and wasting too much money on taking many times of IELTS test”.

Among those who changed their dominant self motivator, two gained an ideal self, three became characterised by dreaded self, and one became dual (i.e., both ideal and dreaded). The change patterns of four participants (Case 6, 12, 14, 19) were treated as missing for the following reasons. Case 12 only reported the ought-to L2 self. Case 14 began to think of the L2 self only in the ESL context due to the pressures of her PhD study:

Now, in the overseas doctoral study, I began to imagine that if I could not learn English well, I could not write a qualified PhD dissertation to graduation. If I could study English well, I could have more confidence in my study and be willing to communicate with others.

For the remaining two participants, their L2 self disappeared once they were in their doctoral study. As Case 19 put it, “My focus is on my subject, so I do not have too much thought of what would happen if I study English well or not”.

In addition, Case 7 provides a good example of gaining the ideal L2 self as the dominant motivator:

- Before undergraduate study, she had only an ought-to L2 self, “I just think that I should study English well, as it was a compulsory course, no thought of studying English well or not”,
- Undergraduate study and onward, she gained the ideal L2 self, “if I could study English well, I could get the opportunity to go abroad as an exchange student funded by Chinese government”,
- Postgraduate study, “If I could learn English well, I could publish some English papers in international professional periodicals”, and
- Overseas doctoral study, she has dreaded L2 self and this fear seems to be more related to her PhD study programme:

Now in my doctoral study, I fear that if I could not learn English well, I could fail in the four courses of my provisional year, my supervisors could not be satisfied with my writing assignment, I could not publish good papers, and I could not write a good PhD thesis. Also, I am worried about my oral communicative competence.

Despite these variations in motivation and identity, it would seem that the ideal L2 self was still her dominant motivator:

Now these two imagined situations (good side and bad side) exist simultaneously, but it is still the good situation that pushes me to study harder. If I could study English well, my overseas life could run smoothly.

The reason for the change in participants toward a dreaded L2 self as the dominant motivator was related to others’ higher expectations of their English proficiency. For example,

Case 10 commented that his dreaded L2 self started with his overseas doctoral study:

Now in my overseas doctoral study, it is also more job opportunities, but now I have some fear of not studying English well because people in China will have higher expectations on your English proficiency, since you are an overseas PhD student. They will expect me to be very fluent in my English while coming back to China, as I am an overseas PhD. It is the fear that pushes me to study harder.

Participants' dominant L2 motivational possible selves by schooling context are shown in Table 4. After excluding one participant with only an ought-to L2 self, two comparisons of the distribution of ideal and dreaded L2 self were conducted. Within Chinese K-12 schooling (i.e., primary school, middle school, and high school) and across university-level study regardless of location (i.e., undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral study), there was a notable difference in favour of ideal L2 self-identity ($d=1.41$ and $d=12.64$, respectively). This suggests, in light of the small data set, that for those who successfully entered a doctoral study in an English-speaking country, their motivation for ideal L2 self was consistently greater.

Table 4. *Dominant L2 Motivational Possible Self by Schooling Context*

Self type	Chinese schooling (EFL)						Overseas (ESL)
	Total ^a (<i>n</i>)	Primary (<i>n</i> =12)	Middle (<i>n</i> =20)	High (<i>n</i> =20)	Undergrad. (<i>n</i> =19)	Postgrad. (<i>n</i> =17)	(<i>n</i> =20)
Ideal	16	1	3	5	13	12	12
Dreaded	6	1	1	2	2	1	4
Ought-To	2	1	1	1	1	0	0
Dual	3				2		1
Non-existent	0	9	15	12	1	4	3

Note. ^aTotal (*n*) refers to the number of participants who perceived this self type as their dominant motivator; EFL = English as a Foreign Language; ESL = English as a Second Language; Dual = Both Ideal and Dreaded. Non-existent means that participants did not have L2 self at that study stage.

5. Discussion

Participants' motivational possible selves for learning English across EFL and ESL contexts reduced primarily to either or both dreaded self and ideal self. Based on the analyses of these retrospective interviews, the ideal L2 self was the dominant motivator among

successful L2 Chinese English learners currently enrolled in PhD degree in New Zealand.

However, the dreaded L2 self was present in all stages of learning among a notable minority of Chinese students (i.e., range from 8% to 33%). While half of the cases had a stable dominant self across levels and contexts of schooling, one third experienced changes regarding their dominant self across these different learning contexts. Importantly, the present study did not find the ought-to self to be a common or frequent source of motivation—only two participants noted it in the EFL context and none in the ESL context.

5.1. The ideal L2 self

The ideal L2 self was the most consistently reported dominant motivation. Sixteen participants (80%) considered the ideal L2 self as the dominant motivation in at least one specific study stage and nine participants (45%) had the ideal L2 self as a stable dominant motivation across both language contexts. Not surprisingly, successful L2 learners tended to view the new language learning as part of an ideal L2 self. This identity predicts higher levels of motivated behaviour (Kim & Kim, 2014) and language proficiency (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013; Kim, 2012). Likewise, success in L2 learning is likely to strengthen this ideal L2 self since success is positively related to self-confidence (Feather, 1969). In addition, the ideal L2 self is what teachers of the L2 learner normally encourage and expect learners to become. The ideal L2 self is related to personal aspirations, satisfying an individual's inner needs and enhancing growth. This leads to an increase in an individual's psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

5.2. *The dreaded L2 self*

The dreaded L2 self was a dominant motivation in all stages of learning for a notable minority of participants. Six participants considered dreaded L2 self as their dominant motivator in their schooling experience. This supports the argument that the dreaded L2 self could function as an emotional spur to action (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). Hence, it is concluded that dreaded L2 self can be an important motivator for L2 learners. Moreover, the dreaded L2 self was seen in both ESL and Chinese EFL contexts indicating that participants can experience dread at all points in their schooling careers.

Moreover, this study revealed that the dreaded L2 self is an independent self, not necessarily the negative side of the ideal L2 self. Specifically, the seven codes in the dreaded self involved three aspects: (1) fear of impeding personal opportunities (e.g., not finding a decent job, enrolling in a good university, and studying abroad to pursue a degree), (2) fear of communication, and (3) fear of failure in a study programme and/or test (e.g., failing in a study programme and exams/tests, and bad impact on PhD research). It seems that the first aspect of fear is potentially facilitating. The other two aspects are consistent with numerous study results showing that L2 learners have communication fear and academic anxiety (Aida, 1994; Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu, 2006). Indeed, extensive research around achievement emotions indicates that the emotion anxiety, despite being a negative feeling, is an activating force leading to greater achievement (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002)

5.3. *The ought-to L2 self*

Although the ought-to L2 self is an important motivational self, especially among Chinese and East Asian students (Colleagues & Author, 2013; Higgins, 1987), the influence of obligations to a family was relatively low in a survey of Chinese university students (Author & Colleague, 2016). The authors suggested that this result arose because “having successfully entered universities, these students had already fulfilled familial obligations and so no great negative effect would be incurred as long as the students completed their studies successfully” (p. 167). Thus, perhaps because of the relative success in learning English seen in this sample of Chinese PhD students in an English-medium university, the ideal and dreaded L2 self appeared most often throughout their career. Successful L2 learners could be motivated more by intrinsic rather than extrinsic factors (e.g., an obligation to important others). It might be that successful L2 learners need more powerful motivational possible selves (e.g., ideal L2 self and dreaded L2 self) to be high achievers, rather than just meeting others’ expectations (i.e., ought-to L2 self). It may also be that having successfully gained entry into an English-speaking, high-status university, the students have fulfilled their obligations to important others (i.e., families and parents) and thus are free from such pressure. A study with a range of learners of different proficiency prior to major examinations (e.g., *gao kao*) may reveal a much greater sense of obligation.

5.4. *Change in L2 selves across contexts*

There were changes in both the frequency of selves and the percentage of the comments on selves that these participants reported across Chinese EFL and overseas ESL

contexts. These findings support the following arguments: (1) motivations of L2 learning should be associated with the social macro-context (Lamb, 2013), (2) different language learning environments or contexts impact L2 motivation (e.g., Coleman, 1996; Dörnyei et al., 2006; Dörnyei & Csizér, 2002), and (3) motivation is a dynamic process (Ellis, 2004). Thus, the formation of motivational possible selves in relation to L2 learning is a dynamic process and contingent upon the learning context or environment.

In addition, a need in relation to oral communication appears to have been overlooked in the Chinese EFL context, as only two participants reported the code of communicating with others fluently as part of either ideal or dreaded L2 self (Table 2). By contrast, that need stands out more in the overseas ESL context, as ten participants provided that communication code in either ideal L2 self or dreaded L2 self. This supports the idea that in the Chinese EFL context, language learners are ‘learners’ of a subject, whereas, in the overseas ESL context, language learners are ‘users’ of a language to communicate with others (Wei, 2016). This may also lead to a change of selves across different language learning contexts, attaching more importance to oral communicative competence in an ESL context.

Lastly, although participants began English study at different ages (i.e., twelve participants at primary school compared with eight at middle school), few (five participants) gave any indication that they were aware of possible selves as related to English learning before entering high school. Previous studies have not been able to track change and thus have not made clear whether language learners can gain an awareness of their self-identity. Nonetheless, this small-scale study of a population skewed relative to the full population of

Chinese English learners cannot properly account for different ages or even cohorts; this is a matter for future research.

5.5. Future research

Although these 20 retrospective case studies delineated the motivational possible profiles of successful Chinese learners of English across different study stages and learning contexts, other research designs are needed to test these conclusions. Among other methods, a large-scale survey study of Chinese English learners is currently being analysed to explore the structure and relationship of possible selves among Chinese English learners. Although a true experiment would be required to test the robustness of claims that EFL and ESL contexts are influential, the demands of such a design (i.e., random assignment of second language learners to either a second or foreign language context) make such a study expensive and ethically suspect. Longitudinal tracking of learners as they migrate between contexts and detailed examination of less successful learners over the course of their academic trajectories would more legitimately shed light on this problem.

6. Conclusion

Building on Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005, 2009), the present study found that there were two main motivational possible selves among this sample of successful Chinese learners of English in both the Chinese EFL and the overseas ESL contexts; that is, the ideal and dreaded L2 self. The most frequent motivation was the ideal L2 self, suggesting that positive self is more strongly associated with competence for entry into doctoral studies, consistent with academic achievement being related to positive self (Leondari, Syngollitou, &

Kiosseoglou, 2006). Hence, teachers should help L2 learners gain competence so that this positive self in the English language classroom has an opportunity to grow. This possible self is helpful for maintaining L2 learners' learning effort when learning is difficult (Kim, 2011).

The dreaded L2 self (more than the ought-to L2 self) can be found within this sample of students, suggesting that some dread in L2 learning related to personal future development might have been facilitating (Scovel, 1978) or activating (Pekrun et al., 2002). Thus, the L2 motivational self framework would do well to extend its scope to allow for dreaded L2 self as a separate entity, no matter how distasteful it might be as a form of motivation. There is no doubt that fear or anxiety are negative emotions and there is the possibility that an overdose of these feelings will hurt learning; nonetheless, a modicum of anxiety is associated with better outcomes. The current study cannot tease apart the chicken-and-egg relationship of emotion and competence, but the reported histories of these successful learners do support the notion that dreaded L2 self is not a completely negative identity.

Language learning context plays an important role in the development of L2 learners' motivational possible selves. That is, as the language learning context changes, changes in possible self are to be expected. Therefore, research on L2 motivational self should take into account the changing characteristics of language context and levels of schooling. Regarding methodology, the current retrospective case study is helpful in capturing the changes in L2 motivational possible selves across different language learning contexts (Ushioda, 2001), although large-scale longitudinal studies will be needed to confirm the claims made here.

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Appendix A. Interview Protocol

1. Your possible selves in relation to English learning

Did you have any imagination or thought of what would happen, if you study English well or not well, or anything else while studying English?

(If participant response was Yes, he/she was given the graph below to describe the imagination or thoughts from the beginning of having self thought in relation to English study through to current doctoral study in an ESL context in the sequence of study stage.)

Primary	Middle	High	University	Postgraduate study	Doctoral study

2. Which imagination, such as learning English well or not well or anything else, would push you to study English harder?

(Participants were given prompts to answer this question at each study stage in which they described their motivational possible selves)

Appendix B. Coding Dictionary

Code	Meaning	Two examples of coding quotes
<i>Ideal L2 self</i>	<i>I would like to become a good English learner.</i>	
Communicate with others fluently	Learning English well can communicate with others fluently in English.	<p>Now if I could study English well, I could communicate with my supervisors freely. (03)</p> <p>If I could study English well, I am willing to communicate with others freely. (14)</p>
Enrol in a good university	Learning English well is helpful to enrol in a good university.	<p>If I would study English well, I could be enrolled in a good university in China, as English was one of the subjects of NCEE. (02)</p> <p>If I could study English well, it would increase my overall scores in NCEE and be admitted to a good university. (03)</p>
Find a decent job	Learning English well is helpful to find a decent job.	<p>If I could study English well, I could be a simultaneous interpreter in the future. (16)</p> <p>If my oral English could be fluent, I would get a teaching job in the university, because good oral English is one of the requirements for some universities to recruit the academics who can teach this subject in English. (02)</p>

Code	Meaning	Two examples of coding quotes
Make more foreign friends	Learning English well can make more foreign friends.	<p>If I could study English well, I could make a lot of foreign friends. (09)</p> <p>I got the feeling that if I could study English well, I would make more foreign friends. (08)</p>
Professional and academic development	Learning English well is helpful to promote professional and academic development.	<p>I could imagine that if I could study English well, it could be very helpful for my future job promotion. (05)</p> <p>I imagined that if I could study English well, I could have good performance in a conference and become an active member in the academic community. (16)</p>
Study abroad	Learning English well can study abroad.	<p>I imagined that if I could study English well, I could go abroad to pursue my doctoral study. (06)</p> <p>I imagined that if I could study English well, I could get the opportunity to study abroad as an exchange student funded by Chinese government. (07)</p>
<i>Ought-to L2 self</i>	<i>I should become a good English learner to meet requirement or others' expectations.</i>	

Code	Meaning	Two examples of coding quotes
Requirement of school or subject	I should study English well to meet the requirement of school or study subject.	From primary school, through middle school, to high school, I just think that I should study English well to get higher scores or full marks in English tests, as it was a compulsory course. (07) In my undergraduate study, I realised that English is my subject so I should learn it well; I have never thought about what would happen if I could not study it well, or I study it well. (11)
<i>Dreaded L2 self</i>	<i>I am afraid of becoming a bad English learner.</i>	
Fear of bad impact on PhD research	I fear of bad impact on my PhD research because of low English proficiency.	If I could not learn English well, the biggest fear is my PhD research would not go very well. (16) Our PhD research work could not be presented to others due to bad language competence. (17)
Fear of failing in exams (e.g., NCEE) or English proficiency tests (e.g., CET and TEM)	I fear of failing in exams or proficiency tests because of low English proficiency.	I feared that if I had not studied English well, I would have failed in my NCEE, which would have changed my life trajectory. (01) I feared that if I could not study English well, I could not pass TEM 8. (13)

Code	Meaning	Two examples of coding quotes
Fear of failing in study programme	I fear of failing in study programme because of low English proficiency.	<p>I imagined that if I could not study English well, I could fail in CET4. If I failed in CET4, I would not graduate from the university, getting bachelor's degree. (06)</p> <p>In my overseas doctoral study, I imagined that if I could not learn English well, I could not write out a qualified PhD dissertation for graduation. (14)</p>
Fear of not communicating with others fluently	I fear of not communicating with others frequently because of low English proficiency.	<p>If I could not study English well, I could not communicate with others freely. (18)</p> <p>But now if I could not study English well, I could not communicate with others freely, expressing my ideas properly. (09)</p>
Fear of not enrolling in a good university	I fear of not enrolling in a good university because of low English proficiency.	<p>If I could not learn English well, it could be more likely that I could not be enrolled in a good university in China. (02)</p> <p>If I could not learn English well, I would not be admitted to a good university. (03)</p>

Code	Meaning	Two examples of coding quotes
Fear of not finding a good job	I fear of not finding a good job because of low English proficiency.	<p>If I could not study English well, not passing CET 4 & 6, there would be some limitations on my job hunting. (02)</p> <p>If I could not study English well without CET 4 & 6 certificate, I would be eliminated from the job hunting. (03)</p>
Fear of not studying abroad	I fear of not studying abroad because of low English proficiency.	<p>A little fear that if I could not study English well, I could not study abroad to pursue a doctoral degree. (02)</p> <p>I got the fear feeling that if I could not study English well, I could not pass TOEFL and apply for the PhD programme abroad. (08)</p>

Note. NCEE = National College Entrance Examination; CET = College English Test; TEM = Test for English Major; CET and TEM are standardised national English proficiency tests for university students in the People's Republic of China.