

Junior High School Students' L2 Motivational Self System: Any Gender Differences?

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Abstract: Motivation as one of the most important considerations in language learning has been extensively investigated based on various models and theories. In this study, to enrich our understanding of the attitudinal/motivational basis of foreign language learning with regard to possible gender differences, Dörnyei's theory of L2 Motivational Self System was applied. A total of 1462 junior high school students, 708 females and 754 males participated in the study. Independent samples t-test, correlation and regression analyses were applied to investigate students' motivational status. The results indicated that there was no significant difference between the two groups' attitudes toward learning English; females gained a higher mean on Ideal L2 Self and intended effort while males had a higher mean on Ought-to L2 Self. Moreover, for both groups, the highest correlation belonged to attitudes toward learning English and intended effort. Similarly, the best and strongest predictor of students' intended effort was their attitude toward learning English.

Key words: Motivation • L2 Motivational Self System • Ideal L2 Self • Ought-to L2 Self • Attitudes toward L2 learning • Gender

INTRODUCTION

The investigation of motivational basis of language learning has been the concern of much research for many years [1]. It has also received special attention unrivaled to any other individual difference factor in the field of second language learning [2]. Research on L2 motivation has strongly been influenced by Gardner's motivation theory with integrativeness as its main construct. In many studies, this construct turned to a key factor in predicting motivated behavior and success in language learning [e.g., 3, 4] and central in most models of L2 motivation [e.g., 5, 6].

Despite the centrality of integrativeness in L2 motivation research for several decades, Gardner's theory met a number of criticisms following the cognitive-situated phase in L2 motivation research [7]. This happened in spite of the interrelationship of factors such as the social and cultural milieu, individual learner differences, the setting and learning outcomes in Gardner's model. Although integrative motivation, language aptitude and some other factors influence

language achievement in this model [7], issues such as applicability in the immediate learning situation [8], incorporating cognitive theories of learning motivation [5, 9] investment [10, 11], world English identity [7], international posture [12] distinguishing instrumentality from integrativeness at the age of globalization [13, 14] and ownership of Global English [15] has brought Gardner's theory of L2 motivation into question.

To respond to the challenges raised, Dörnyei [7, 16] developed the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) based on his large scale research on motivation in Hungary [13, 17], the application of integrativeness in contexts different from those studied by Gardner and a whole-person perspective toward motivation. This new conceptualization is a major reformation with its roots firmly set in L2 motivation research [18, 19] and significant theoretical developments in psychology including possible selves [20] and discrepancy theory [21].

The L2MSS has three main dimensions: the Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self and English learning experience. The Ideal L2 Self is "the representation of the attributes that someone would ideally like to possess" [15, p.257]; in

fact, it is the ideal image of the L2 user one wishes to be in the future. The vision of being a fluent L2 user interacting with L2 speakers is an example of a powerful motivator which helps reduce the discrepancy between the person's actual self and ideal image. As some studies have proved [e.g., 16, 22], Ideal L2 Self and integrativeness "tap into the same underlying construct domain" [15, p.80].

The Ought-to L2 Self refers to "the attributes that one believes one *ought to* possess" [7, p.105]. This less internalized and more extrinsic aspect of the L2 self, which corresponds to Higgins' [21] ought self and the extrinsic constituents in Noels [18] and Ushioda's [19] taxonomies [see 7, 16] includes attributes such as various duties, obligations, or expectations one ought to fulfill to avoid possible negative outcomes. For instance, in the case of learning an L2 to fulfill one's family or teacher's expectations, the Ought-to L2 Self can act as the major motivator. Family influence and the prevention-focused aspects of instrumentality were found to have influences on this variable, but the effect on learners motivated behavior was far less than that of the ideal L2 self [23].

The third aspect of L2MSS, the L2 learning experience, "concerns situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience" [7, p.106]. This dimension is related to the actional phase of Dörnyei's process oriented model [24] and Noels [18] and Ushioda's [19] intrinsic categories [see 7, 16]. In some studies [23, 25], this dimension illustrated the strongest influence on motivated behavior. A 'situated' approach and contextual factors, such as, classroom environment, cultural setting, curriculum, teacher, peer group, teaching materials and task design, are influential in motivating students since initial motivation to learn is not always drawn from "internally or externally generated self images but rather from successful engagement with the actual language learning process" [16, p. 29].

English Language Learning and Motivational Research in Iran: In the Iranian educational system, English encompasses a pivotal role; henceforth, an increasing demand for teaching and learning English is witnessed in the society. In the country's school system, teaching English formally starts from the first grade of junior high school and proceeds to the last year of high school and includes the pre-university level. Accordingly, Iranian students study English for 7 school years.

Generally, teaching English in Iran seems to be based on future needs of students to read and sometimes to

translate English books and journals [26]. Nevertheless, what gives impetus to students to learn English varies from passing their English exam at school to entering prestigious universities, proceeding to the highest social and education levels, studying and living abroad and accessing the latest information. With regard to these factors and youth extended interests in the growing technology, science and international communication which are far beyond reading and translation, learning English is taken to be much more important than ever before. Consequently, families who are not satisfied with the results of language learning at schools or those who have high ambitions find private language schools as further opportunities for their children to pursue their language education.

With regard to L2 motivational studies, research on language attitudes and motivation in Iran mainly rests on the Gardnerian concepts of instrumentality and integrativeness [e.g., 27-, 29]. In these studies, essentially the relationship between motivation and some other aspects such as various types of strategies [30], proficiency level [31], language learning preferences [32] and attitudes toward learning English [33, 34] are explored. On the other hand, L2MSS has been relatively less explored. Few studies [23, 35, 36] have explored the relationship between the constituents of L2MSS and various motivational/emotional factors.

Gender Differences and Motivation: Many studies have investigated gender differences in language achievement and education and have documented inequalities in learners' language behavior [37]. Females have been found to possess higher self-perception for English and attach greater value to it than males [38]. Dörnyei and his colleagues [39] express that a large number of studies have investigated "boys' and girls' attributes or achievement" which have found evidence of "salient differences". They express that in case of foreign language learning apparently "boys and girls behave in a strikingly different way" (p.55).

In second language motivational research, gender differences have been investigated in many studies following the general motivational trend and mainly Gardnerian concepts of instrumentality and integrativeness in addition to other motivational aspects. In general, the findings show that female learners display greater motivation and more positive attitudes toward studying a foreign language than males do [e.g., 40-43].

In the longitudinal investigation of Hungarian secondary school pupils' motivation to learn five different languages, Dörnyei *et al.* [39] found that girls were different from boys and scored higher in integrativeness, instrumentality, attitudes to L2 speakers, communities and culture and the effort they put in learning the languages. However, perception of the vitality of the respective foreign language communities was the only dimension which revealed no significance gender differences.

Dörnyei and Clement [44] also reported possible gender differences in motivation. In their study in which seven motivational dimensions were investigated, female school students scored significantly higher than male students in direct contact with L2 speakers, instrumentality, integrativeness, vitality of L2 community and cultural interest. However, in another study [45], among other constructs, integrativeness was the only one for which a significant difference between university students was found. The study revealed females' greater interest in L2 people and cultures, greater desire to make friends with L2 people and to travel and/or study abroad.

Gender-related differences were also identified in students' choice of an L2 language as well as the intended effort in learning the L2 [13]. Accordingly, girls' scores were higher than boys' scores indicating girls' more commitment to learning an L2. Moreover, integrative orientation was found to be the most significant predictor of language choice for school students.

Considering motivational self system, Henry [46] examined gender-specific trends in school students' attitudes to L2 learning over a three-year period and studied gender differences in students' linguistic self-concepts. The findings indicated students' high levels of motivation which was present in grade 6 and maintained over the three-year period; in addition, their attitudes to the learning situation and integrative motivation increased. However, these increases were due to the significant increase in girls' scores in both cases. Moreover, the stability of students' ideal selves across this period was accounted for by the significant increase in girls' scores and the likely decrease in boys' scores. However, in case of students' instrumental motivation, the overall stability was due to the significant decrease in boys' scores over time.

Ideal L2 self, integrativeness and intended effort of secondary and tertiary students were also considered by Ryan [47]. Similar to other studies, females outperformed males on these scales. In addition, ideal L2 self and integrativeness performed very similarly displaying no specific gender bias for ideal L2 and its consistency with

other concepts in the field. Moreover, it verified the common properties of the two variables which tap into the same construct.

Although many studies have investigated the impact of gender on L2 motivation, relative to its importance "the amount of systematic sex-specific research has been meagre" [13, p. 427]. Gender as a key variable being central to learners' self-concept needs to be further studied within the motivational self system [46]. In addition, research into the L2MSS is still in its early years and studies based on this theory are specifically rare in Iran, thus the present study, considering possible gender differences, sought to picture the motivational status of junior high school students' L2MSS. Moreover, it examines the relationship between L2MSS variables; and also, it investigates the possibility of predicting students' intended effort from the motivational factors.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants: In this study, the participants were selected based on quota sampling method [48]. The sampling frame consisted of junior high school students; the main proportions of the subgroups defined by parameters were gender and residential status. A total of 1462 Iranian junior high school students participated in the study; 708 females and 754 males. In order to minimize any school bias the sample was selected from schools all over Semnan province, Iran. Participants were selected from cities, towns and rural areas of the province. Table 1 provides the descriptive statistics of the participants.

Instrument: For the data collection, the Persian version of Taguchi *et al.* [23] questionnaire was used which is originally based on Dörnyei's Hungarian studies [39], the L2MSS and other established questionnaires [see 23]. It was piloted with 104 students who filled out the questionnaire and some of the participants who joined the follow up interviews to ensure the comprehensibility of all the items. The questionnaire contained two main parts: one part measured the learners' attitudes and motivation toward learning English and the other questioned the learners' background. The items were of statement and question types; a six-point Likert scale was used to measure the former type while a six-point rating scale was used for the latter with "not at all" anchoring at one end and "very much" anchoring at the other end. The total reliability coefficient was 0.924; and Table 2 displays the coefficients for individual scales considered in this study.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the two junior high school groups

Category	Sub-category	Total N =1462		Females N=708		males N=754	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Age	12	198	13.5	125	17.7	73	9.7
	13	338	23.1	146	20.6	192	25.5
	14	503	34.4	265	37.4	238	31.6
	15	385	26.3	161	22.7	224	29.7
	16	38	2.6	11	1.6	27	3.6
Year of study	First	344	23.5	157	22.2	187	24.8
	Second	327	22.4	157	22.2	170	22.5
	Third	791	54.1	394	55.6	397	52.7
Self-reported proficiency level	Beginner	633	43.3	268	37.9	365	48.4
	Post-beginner	437	29.9	244	34.5	193	25.6
	Lower-intermediate	165	11.3	92	13.0	73	9.7
	Intermediate	139	9.5	71	10.0	68	9.0
	Upper-intermediate	49	3.4	29	4.1	20	2.7
	Missing	39	2.7	4	.6	35	4.6
	Number of terms studied at private language schools	0	843	57.7	386	54.5	457
1-6		355	24.3	172	24.3	183	24.3
7-12		142	9.7	79	11.2	63	8.4
13-18		75	5.1	49	6.9	26	3.4
19 and above		47	3.2	22	3.1	25	3.3
Residency	Urban	1185	81	572	80.7	613	81.3
	rural	277	19	136	19.3	141	18.7

Table 2: Cronbach Alpha coefficients of the scales for junior high school students

Scales	Definition and number of items	α
Ideal L2 Self	The L2-specific facet of one's ideal self. (6 items)	.865
Ought-to L2 Self	The attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e. duties, obligations, or responsibilities) to avoid possible negative outcomes. (6 items)	.674
Intended effort	The learners' intended effort toward learning English. (6 items)	.895
Attitudes to learning English	Situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience. (6 items)	.876

Procedure: To collect the data, the schools were chosen and personally approached by official letters from the Education Organization of the whole province, each city and district. Then information about the survey and details of administration were provided first for school principals and after their permission for teachers. With the cooperation of teachers and after a brief explanation about the study, the subjects filled in the questionnaires during their regular class time which took almost 15 minutes on average.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For data analysis, all the information was submitted to SPSS 16. First of all, an independent-samples t-test was run to determine the difference between male and female junior high school students on the three aspects of L2MSS and their

intended effort. Considering the probability associated with the Levene F for each factor ($p > .05$), the two groups enjoyed homogeneity for Ideal L2 Self and intended effort.

The results of the t-test (Table 3) reveals that there is a significant difference between the mean scores of girls and boys on Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 self and intended effort but not their attitudes to learning English. In other words, all junior high school students have the same attitude to learning English but girls enjoy a higher level of Ideal L2 Self and intended effort while boys display a higher level of Ought-to L2 self. In addition to statistical significance, the effect sizes of 0.01 for all three factors indicate a small level of meaningfulness according to Cohen's guidelines [49]. Since all scales have mean values above 3, it can be concluded that junior high school students hold positive attitudinal and motivational dispositions.

Table 3: Results of independent samples t-test

Scales	Gender	Mean	Sd	T	df	Sig. level	Effect size ^a
Ideal L2 self	female	4.54	1.20	4.65	1410	.000	.015
	male	4.24	1.18				
Ought-to L2 self	female	3.57	1.13	-3.51	1385	.000	.01
	male	3.78	1.05				
Attitudes to learning English	female	4.08	1.36	1.144	1356	.253	---
	male	4	1.23				
Intended effort	female	4.36	1.20	3.603	1412	.000	.01
	male	4.13	1.15				

a. Eta squared

Table 4: Correlations among the components of L2MSS and intended effort for both groups

	1	2	3	4
Females				
1. Ideal L2 self	----			
2. Ought-to L2 self	.44	----		
3. Attitudes to learning English	.61	.34	----	
4. intended effort	.65	.37	.81	----
Males				
1. Ideal L2 self	----			
2. Ought-to L2 self	.59	----		
3. Attitudes to learning English	.64	.46	----	
4. Intended effort	.66	.51	.75	----

All the correlations are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level

Table 5: The final models of regression analyses predicting learners' intended effort

Groups	Predictors	R ²	F	B	SEM	Beta(B)
Females		.70	483.58**			
	Attitudes to learning English			.57	.02	.65**
	Ideal L2 Self			.23	.03	.23**
	Ought-to L2 Self			.06	.03	.06**
Males		.64	382.90**			
	Attitudes to learning English			.51	.03	.55**
	Ideal L2 Self			.24	.03	.24**
	Ought-to L2 Self			.12	.03	.11**

** $p < .01$

In the second step, in order to identify the relationship among the three constituents of L2MSS and students' intended effort, the researchers conducted correlational analyses. For both groups, attitudes to learning English and intended effort have the strongest association (Table 4) and the two factors share 56% variance for boys and 66% for girls. The next strong correlation belongs to Ideal L2 Self and intended effort, while Ought-to L2 Self has the weakest relationship among the three constituents of L2MSS.

Finally, to specify the scales that act as predictors of students' intended effort, the researchers ran multiple regression analyses with a stepwise approach. As Table 5 displays, out of the 3 constituents of L2MSS, the best predictor for both groups is attitudes to learning English which is assumed to belong to the component of

L2 learning experience in Dörnyei's model [7]. For both groups, Ideal L2 Self is the next predictor with rather the same predictive power. And Ought-to L2 Self is the last predictor in both groups but with more predictive power for the boys intended effort.

This study examined the status, relationship and predictive power of the main components of Dörnyei's L2MSS for boy and girl junior high school students. In general, the results showed that both groups enjoyed positive motivational dispositions and the main predictor of students' intended effort was their attitude toward learning English irrespective of their gender which also had the highest correlation for both girls and boys. This is similar to the results of studies [e.g., 25] which denote the importance of immediate learning environment in shaping learners' attitudes [16]. The source of motivation

for many students does not originate from within the self nor from outside, but from the successful involvement in the actual language learning process [16] which is not always provided in school environments. Since younger learners are more influenced by their language learning experiences [50], classroom factors such as the learning context, teacher, materials and activities have a leading impact on students' attitude and learning experiences and affect the extent to which learners are ready to invest in language learning [25].

Considering Ideal L2 Self in this study, girls outperformed boys; this is in line with previous findings [e.g., 46, 47]. It also accords well with other studies such as [13, 39, 44, 45] in which integrativeness was the main construct under investigation. The reason is that integrativeness and ideal L2 self tap into the same construct and the replacement of integrativeness with the Ideal L2 Self is justifiable [7, 16]. This is a claim supported and validated in many studies [e.g., 22, 23, 47].

The findings with regard to the boys' higher Ought-to L2 Self is interpretable in the socio-educational context of Iran and can be explained with reference to parental influence and expectations of each gender. Being young, junior high school students seem to be more dependent on and influenced by others. According to the policy families pursue towards learning English [51], parental influence in its various forms may include situations where parents set personal examples or demonstrate high expectations and provide support and encouragement [52]. In fact, "Asian children are socialized to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of their family and community" [52, p.188] and the encouragement and pressure from culture at large, peers and significant others within one's social circle partly lead to the growth and change of one's identity and motivational dispositions [53]. Moreover, "parents' gender-based stereotypes" have direct impact on how they perceive their children's ability and how it influences "the children's performance and self-perceptions of their abilities" [54, p.288]. In Iranian families, many responsibilities are put on the shoulders of boys. Many families affect students' choice of future major and career which may include learning English as a requirement to find a good and secure job with a stable income. This is in turn an advantage in marriage which brings respect and honor to the family, thus reinforcing the Ought-to L2 Self [23].

In conclusion, the results of the present study complies with the body of research in the field supporting gender differences in motivation to learn English in a foreign language context. Junior high school boys and

girls enjoyed positive attitudinal and motivational dispositions; in addition, attitude toward learning English was the main predictor of their motivated learning behavior. While Ideal L2 Self was more prominent for girls, Ought-to L2 Self appeared to be more motivating for boys. These findings are interpretable in light of the current status of the country, specifically the impacts of age, family, significant others and society at large which develop junior high school students' visualization of their future L2 self and lead to their motivated L2 learning. However, further studies, including other motivational dimensions, employing motivational strategies in teaching, applying other instruments and designs may depict the actual efforts and motivational state of junior high school students in learning English.

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