

Prospecting possible EFL selves

Many recent investigations in second language (L2) motivation are based on *possible selves theory* and the related *L2 motivational self system*. Classroom applications of these theories imply encouraging students of English as a foreign language (EFL) to envision themselves using English in the future. Imagining how one might feel in a future situation is known as *prospection*, as opposed to directing thinking toward the past in *retrospection*. Following research from experimental social psychology, this paper first describes some of the brain's functions behind prospecting. Then it identifies four potential weaknesses of prospecting that may negatively influence motivation and learning related to the use of possible selves pedagogies. Implications are considered for avoiding these pitfalls in order to promote effective teaching methods based on possible selves theory by encouraging students to look deeply, honestly, and meaningfully into their future using English.

近年の第2言語 (L2) 学習の動機づけの研究の多くが、「可能自己理論 (possible selves theory)」及びそれに関連する「L2 動機づけ自己システム (L2 motivational self system)」に基づいている。これらの理論を教育現場で適用すると、外国語としての英語を学ぶ学生に、自身が将来英語を使用しているところを想像するように促すことになる。自分が未来のある状況でどのように感じるかを想像するのは「予測 (prospection)」という言葉で知られており、これは「回顧 (retrospection)」と対を成す概念である。本論はまず実験社会心理学の研究を概観し、続いて「予測」の背後にある脳の働きの解明を試みる。さらに「予測」の潜在的な4つの弱点を明らかにするが、これらは教育における可能自己の使用に関連する動機づけや学習にマイナスの影響を及ぼす可能性があるものである。学生が将来の英語使用に向けて深く、真摯で、意味深い眼差しを向けるように促すことによって、可能自己に基づいた効果的な指導法を促進するために、このような危険性を回避する可能性を考察する。

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Asking students to imagine themselves using English in the future is becoming a main theme in motivation research and application across the field of second language (L2) acquisition, including English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Japan. This paper describes some of the current theories from motivational psychology, practices in EFL classrooms, and pitfalls to avoid for promoting effective teaching methods, especially when prompting students to imagine what it might feel like using English in their future.

Learner motivation

Possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) explains that the ways people imagine themselves in the future can motivate them into action in the present. Inspired by this theory, Dörnyei (2009) constructed the theoretical framework of the *L2 motivational self system*. The first of its three components is the *Ideal L2 Self*, a vision students might have of themselves using English fluently in the future. The *Ought-to L2 Self* stems from avoiding a possible negative future outcome, like a student receiving a bad grade, and heading toward something that has been dictated as valuable by authority figures, like a student passing a school entrance exam. The third component is the *L2 Learning Experience*, which relates how students' pasts influence their motivational metacognitive development. This includes how students were taught and how they interacted with their peers. Students display different ways and abilities of imagining these L2 selves, and teachers can try to help them learn by fostering ways and abilities to visualize these future self guides (Dörnyei & Chan, in press).

Possible selves theory informs other frameworks of L2 motivation. For example, *present communities of imagining* (Murphey, Falout, Fukada, & Fukuda, 2012) explains the connectivity of past, present, and future self images related to using English. These three evolving motivational self-beliefs co-construct each other, as our self-identities of who we were in the past and who we will become in the future ever influence how we perceive ourselves in the present. They are also influenced by the people we interact with or think about, real or imagined, such as the students and teachers in classrooms or the authors we read, because the imagination is socially dynamic. Students can reimagine these motivational self-beliefs in a way that integrates them, which is adaptive for better learning.

Likewise, students can develop their motivations and learning behaviors as a reciprocal reaction when imagining how others might assist them in learning English. This process is termed *reciprocal idealizing*, in which students first imagine what *Ideal L2 Classmates* might do to help them, such as teaching vocabulary or listening without laughing at mistakes (Murphey, Falout, Fukada, & Fukuda, in progress). Then imagining what others might do for one spurs one into action. Simply put, reciprocal idealizing happens when students realize, *What I might hope from others for myself, I can do for them.*

Visualizing L2 use in a future or hypothetical situation is rapidly becoming adopted in L2 motivation theory and research, as illustrated by these few examples. But how does imagining a future self prepare students? What might be some of the pitfalls teachers can avoid with visualization techniques in the L2 classroom? Findings from social psychology studies based on *prospection* (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007) can provide some clues.

Prospection is a way of looking forward by simulating events for ourselves. Conversely, *retrospection* is looking back at what was experienced. Prospection happens when imagining what our future feelings will be in a certain event, a process also known as *prefeeling*, or *affective forecasting* (Wilson & Gilbert, 2003), deriving from our memories. Gilbert and Wilson (2007) elucidate:

Mental simulation is the means by which the brain discovers what it already knows. When faced with decisions about future events, the cortex generates simulation, briefly tricking subcortical systems into believing that these events are unfolding in the present and then taking note of the feelings these systems produce. The cortex is interested in feelings because they encode the wisdom that our species has acquired over millennia about the adaptive significance of the events we are perceiving. (p. 1354)

But prefeelings may not represent actual feelings when the event finally occurs. Gilbert and Wilson (2007) explain the limitations of prospection:

This method is ingenious but imperfect. The cortex attempts to trick the rest of the brain by impersonating a sensory system. It simulates future events to find out what subcortical structures know, but try as it might, the cortex cannot generate simulations that have

all the richness and reality of genuine perceptions . . . Compared to sensory perceptions, mental simulations are more cardboard cut-outs of reality. (p. 1354)

In other words, until actually living in specific situations, we cannot fully understand and appreciate how we will feel. So our imagined feelings can fall short of depicting our real feelings in the future, particularly in a way that can inhibit early preparation for and latter adaptation to challenging future situations. Gilbert and Wilson (2007) identify four types of potential inaccuracies when simulating the future: (1) Overestimating or underestimating, (2) omitting full details, (3) abbreviating, and (4) prospecting from immediate context and conditions. The following sections describe each of these four types of deficiencies in prospecting and suggest implications for EFL learning with visualizing possible selves.

Overestimating or underestimating

People tend to remember their most unusual or most recent experiences. So when prospecting, they often use unrepresentative memories to imagine what might happen to them in the next similar situation. For example, if asked to imagine missing a train, people usually recall their worst experience missing a train and use that as a basis for prefeeling the next time it happens, an affective forecast which is likely an overestimation of the actual pain that will be felt in the future when missing a train (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007).

One implication for the classroom might be preventing or mitigating worst-case experiences, such as embarrassment in front of the classroom due to public berating from the teacher, boredom with lessons due to lack of variety, and depersonalization from the teacher and other students due to isolating classroom management practices. These can become past experiences that trigger and prolong learner demotivation in the future (Falout, 2013). Another crucial demotivator in EFL learning is the loss of self-confidence (Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009; Sahragard & Alimorad, 2013). Teachers might prevent its incidence by using plenty of scaffolding that prepares students to complete tasks successfully.

Students can have different triggers for demotivation, so what might be fine with one student might not be fine with another. Since there may be no way to avoid the ups and downs of learning something as difficult as using a foreign

language, teachers might help students understand that learning struggles are natural and that they might even embrace ups and downs as the pathway toward improvement (Murphey, 2006). This forms a mindset called *incremental thinking* (Dweck, 2000). Incremental thinking creates openness to unknown possibilities as beneficial to personal growth, and with it students can anticipate and accept a wide range of both positive and negative experiences as they prefeel their future with English. Then they may be less likely to fall into the traps of overestimating or underestimating their actual future feelings.

Omitting full details

When prospecting a future event, people don't always imagine all the details but just focus on the defining features of the event, a process called *essentializing*. Focusing only on the wonderful aspects of a future event sets people up for a letdown when it finally occurs. Or oppositely, focusing only on the worst aspects before something happens can result in feeling better about it when it really happens. An example is imagining going to the theater next week by focusing on a brilliant performance of the actors on the stage, but neglecting to imagine parking the car, waiting outside in the ticket line, and trying to find the seat. Thus the evening becomes less pleasant than imagined (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007).

Depicting only ideal or vague futures cannot inform students enough about the myriad and complex situations waiting ahead. Across one semester, Sampson (2012) asked his students to individually visualize a plethora of possible selves, both successful and failed selves, and to draw a timeline from their present self to their best possible futures regarding English. Then collaboratively they brainstormed potential troubles along these timelines and courses of action they might take to get around these obstacles. At the end of the semester students realized these activities helped them to develop motivational metacognitive strategies. Moreover, they could start to envision a fuller picture of what they might feel using English in the future. This afforded a potentially more accurate prognostication of their future feelings than if they were left to essentialize only Ideal L2 Selves, giving students less chances of future letdowns and more chances of reacting adaptively to difficulties.

Abbreviating

Abbreviating a future situation involves incompletely playing out the full scenario in our minds. We thus tend to focus our imaginations on the initial parts and most emotional aspects of an experience, overlooking the more typical pleasures or pains when events run their course and we follow through on our adaptations to them. For example, when imagining winning the lottery or becoming a paraplegic, people focus on the earliest moments, neglecting to consider the potential highs and lows, the adaptations and frustrations, of the latter moments. Therefore they are not as prepared as they could be, which slows their adaptive abilities when the time comes (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007).

People who have already lived through something might describe their struggles and adaptations to others who might be anticipating something similar. For example, Kaneko (2013) provided symposia of role models, Japanese professionals speaking about their use of English in international work environments, for EFL university science and engineering students. Regardless of type and level of initial motivations, some of the students reformulated their L2 selves positively toward learning, while forming more realistic perspectives of their futures and a higher sense of purpose in their English studies.

Students may dread the day they will be expected to use English, and that day might even be now in the language classroom. They prefeel nothing further than the anxiety they associate with encountering English. Reticent students can be greatly encouraged to take chances and participate by watching *coping models*, which can be other students, the teacher, a classroom guest, or even someone in a video clip. Coping models at first show similar fears as reticent students, and then they gradually gain confidence and competence through learning strategies and persistence in an activity (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Watching models of adaptation might help students to find courage to imagine getting over their struggles and follow through toward their best possible futures regarding English.

Prospecting from immediate contexts and conditions

People tend to prefeel future events based on their immediate external contexts and internal conditions. For example, people who haven't yet eaten dinner expect that spaghetti for the next morning's breakfast would be more delicious

than expected by people who have just finished their dinner. We don't always realize that our present conditions have much influence on our simulations of the future (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007).

The culture of EFL learning in Japan seems to leave students with empty contexts and conditions: English is a paper-and-pencil, test-oriented school subject in which "the teacher's lectures, the students' note-taking, and the learning purpose severs English from its role as an interpersonal medium, and brings division, discontinuity, and detachment" (Falout, 2013, p. 145). Students are then disconnected from each other, their teacher, and their own L2 selves. When taken apart in this way, students often lack the experience and social base that inspires and enriches their prospecting of possible EFL selves. Therefore students' conditions hinge upon the *social crux*, which is "the sustained connections between people through mutual engagements of imagination that sparks communities into learning and action" (Falout, 2013, p. 133). Connecting meaningfully with each other helps students make purposeful simulations of their future for learning right here and now.

Motivating with prospecting

Possible selves theory and the related L2 motivational self system imply using a pedagogy of motivational self images. These images can prompt EFL students into working harder at their learning with a fuller appreciation and wider perspective of English and themselves through retrospection and prospecting. In this way, prospecting possible EFL selves opens students to more than simply learning language but also to life's lessons.

Prospecting involves thinking of how one would feel in a future situation. Because one is not really facing the situation, actually feeling it beforehand is not completely possible. Therefore prospecting can limit one's preparation for future events. Teachers might employ steps to avoid such limitations by encouraging their students to think incrementally, brainstorm potential obstacles toward their goals with contingencies to get around them, watch social models of adaptation, and engage themselves through the social crux. Prospecting possible EFL selves is a powerful means to encourage students to look deeply, honestly, and meaningfully into their future using English.

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Interlanguage: 40 years and later

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Interlanguage: 40 Years and Later, which was held from October 5 to 7, 2012 at the Cowin Center of Teachers College, Columbia University, was organized by the Roundtable in Second Language Studies to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the *Interlanguage Hypothesis*. Ten renowned researchers shared their thoughts on the hypothesis, explored the issues, and updated the ideas. They included Elaine Tarone, Terence Odlin, Zhao-Hong Han, Silvina Montrul, Lourdes Ortega, Kathleen Boadovi-Harlig, Susan Gass, Charlene Polio, Bill VanPatten, and Diane Larsen-Freeman. Speakers had 60 minutes to give their talks, which were followed by 30- to 45-minute question-and-answer sessions. At the end, Larry Selinker, who coined the term *interlanguage*, gave the concluding speech.

Some of the speakers have personal connections with Larry Selinker. They addressed him as Larry and shared personal anecdotes with the audience. For example, Elaine Tarone recounted how the idea that learner language is systematic was originally developed by Selinker and his students: Discussions and arguments were going on in classes, in hallways, in coffee shops, and even at parties. He scribbled notes on pieces of paper sometimes—with other pieces of paper taped to them! The article was like a collage. We can see how those talks and thoughts came into that one paper just by taking a look at the number of personal communications cited in the original paper. Diane Larsen-Freeman recalled her teacher, H. D. Brown, waving the journal and saying enthusiastically that this paper might change the field. She added that he was right.

All the speakers did their homework—that is, re-reading Selinker's 1972 article—and picked up key issues and discussed them in light of their own research interests. They agreed that some of the ideas presented in the paper were revolutionary back then and that they are still with us: