

Ideal L2 self and university English learners: An interview study

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Although much research has focused on university students' ideal second language (L2) selves (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), many studies have employed a questionnaire method and have not captured the full range of participants' ideal L2 selves. In order to gain a rich understanding of the development of ideal L2 selves, in this study six non-English major university students were interviewed. The results indicated that the interviewees' ideal L2 selves varied in terms of their contents and specificity, and revealed some types of ideal L2 selves which were not included in many questionnaire studies. Although opportunities to communicate in English were not frequent among the interviewees, some had unique occasions in which they used English. These opportunities then had influences on the development of their ideal L2 selves. Finally, the study discusses the possible role of teachers as role models serving to help students develop their ideal L2 selves.

大学生の目標言語を駆使する理想的な自分像 (ideal L2 self) についてはさまざまな研究 (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) が行われてきたが、多くはアンケート調査であり、対象者の ideal L2 self 全体を捉えていたとは言い難い。本論では、6名の大学生 (英語以外の専攻者) にインタビューを行い、ideal L2 self を検証した。研究の結果からは、インタビュー対象者の ideal L2 self について、その内容や具体性において幅があること、また、アンケート調査の多くには含まれていない ideal L2 self もあることが明らかになった。インタビュー対象者にとって、英語でコミュニケーションする機会はあまり多くなかったが、何人かは英語を使うユニークな機会があり、そのような機会が、ideal L2 self を作り上げる際にも影響していた。最後に本論では、学生が ideal L2 self を作り上げる際に役立つような、ロールモデルとしての教師の役割を論ずる。

Research on motivation to learn a second/foreign language (hereafter L2) has been active for over 30 years. In the early days researchers' interest focused on what constitutes this construct, but lately there have been more discussions on how to motivate L2 learners. Teachers are also more eager to know how to motivate their students so that they put more effort into studying and hopefully achieving more in an L2.

Recently, a new L2 motivation model called the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) has been proposed and investigated in various contexts, including Japan (e.g., Ryan, 2009; Ueki & Takeuchi, 2012). The L2 motivational self system consists of the following three tenets: (a) ideal L2 self, which is the L2-specific facet of one's ideal self, (b) ought-to ideal L2 self, which is related to what one perceives others want them to be regarding an L2, and which functions to meet expectations and to avoid negative outcomes, and (c) L2 learning experience, which consists of more situated, 'executive' motives related to the immediate learning environment (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 29). The model was developed on the basis of the psychological theory of self-discrepancy (Higgins, 1987), which postulates that human beings are motivated to reduce the gap between their actual self and ideal self. Thus if an L2 learner has an elaborate and vivid self-image of being a proficient speaker of the L2, this ideal L2 self works as a strong motivator to study the L2 because the learner wants to reduce the gap between his/her ideal L2 self and his/her actual L2 self (i.e., a non-proficient L2 learner). Ideal L2 self has repeatedly been correlated with the variable of intended learning effort (Ryan, 2009; Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009).

When we look at situations in Japan, it may be the case that many university students, especially non-English majors, do not have frequent opportunities to use English and therefore may not possess elaborate ideal L2 selves. Many studies within the framework of the L2 motivational self system employed a

questionnaire method, particularly using Likert-scale questions (e.g., Ryan, 2009, Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009). However, we need a richer understanding of L2 learners' (non-) development of ideal L2 self. The present study aims to examine university non-English majors' ideal L2 selves by employing an interview method and focusing on (a) the relevance of English and English studies to them, (b) the (non-)development of ideal L2 self, and (c) the potential future development of ideal L2 self, particularly the role of teachers in the development.

Method

Interviewees

The interviewees for this study were six non-English majors coming from various departments at a university in rural western Japan (see Table 1 for the composition of the interviewees).

Table 1. Composition of interviewees

Inter-viewee #	Gender	Year	Major
1	Female	4th	Social Studies
2	Female	2nd	Law
3	Male	4th	Law
4	Male	3rd	Business Administration
5	Female	2nd	Business Administration
6	Male	2nd	Business Administration

Interviews

Each interview was semi-structured in the sense that the researcher had a list of specific questions and asked them in the same order, but asked other related questions when necessary. The questions considered (a) the relevance of English and English studies to each interviewee, (b) the development of ideal L2 self they already possess, and (c) possible future development of ideal L2 self (see the Appendix for the interview prompts).

Procedure

During regular class time at a non-compulsory English class for non-English majors, I asked students if they would be willing to participate in the interview sessions. I explained that the

interviews would take place outside the classroom, their purpose, their non-relationship to their grades, their anonymity, and the freedom to drop out of the session at any time they wished.

Seven students showed initial interest, and among them six agreed to be individually interviewed. The interview sessions took place in a quiet, vacant room on campus. Each interviewee signed a written consent. Each interview lasted for 15 to 20 minutes, and after each interview I thanked the participant and gave him or her a 1,000-yen gift certificate. The interviews were conducted in the interviewees' first language, Japanese. In order to analyze and interpret the data I followed Creswell's (2009) generic guide for the analysis and interpretation of qualitative data.

Results and discussion

The following summarizes the results of the interviews. In general, although many of the interviewees did not have frequent opportunities to communicate in English, some had innovative ways of using English outside the classroom. They varied in their accounts of ideal L2 self, in terms of its vividness and elaboration.

Relevance of English and English studies

The interviewees' experiences learning English are summarized in Table 2. Many of them stated that they were not good at grammar and disliked learning English during the period in which they had to learn it for the entrance examinations to university. They emphasized that what they wanted to learn was not grammar but L2 communication. It is interesting to note that all of the interviewees considered grammar and L2 communication as something dichotomous, and did not seem to think that grammar could be something necessary and useful for L2 communication. Teachers could try to help them understand that their grammatical knowledge is not something dichotomous to their L2 communication ability but something that can enhance communication if taught pragmatically.

Opportunities to communicate in English were not frequent among the interviewees, but some had unique occasions in which they used English. This includes Interviewee 6, who had opportunities for L2 communication when he got together with his friends who studied at another university in his area and one of their friends, an English Language Teacher (ELT), who resided in

Table 2. Interviewees' basic experiences with English and English studies

Inter- viewee #	When started learning English?	Like English studies?	Have been abroad?
1	7th grade	Not good at it, but like listening and speaking	Yes (to Guam in 2012)
2	Kindergarten	Good at it in junior high school	No
3	Elementary school	Became bad at it in high school	No
4	7th grade	Good at in junior high school but became bad at it as it was difficult to understand grammar	No
5	1st grade	Liked it	Yes (Stayed with a host family in the U.S. in junior high school)
6	Kindergarten	Like listening, but when did not understand grammar disliked it	No

the area. Also, Interviewees 3 and 4 downloaded applications in English and played online games in English.

An important difference regarding participants' opportunities to communicate in English is that in addition to having different English communication opportunities, participants also had different perceptions of those opportunities. Whereas some stated that there were no opportunities to communicate in English and seemed to take it for granted, others seemed to even try to create such opportunities and look for them. Interviewee 2, who seemed to take it for granted that there were no opportunities to use English outside the classroom made the following account.

Opportunities to have exposure in English dramatically declined after becoming a university student. I studied it until high school partly because of entrance examinations, though. Now I have no opportunities to speak in English. (Interviewee 2)

In contrast, Interviewee 5 seemed to take advantage of every opportunity to communicate in English, such as "communicating with native-speaker teachers on campus and exchanging emails and letter [sic] with my host family." Taking an elective course in English was also "to do something to create opportunities regarding English."

When asked whether they thought they would need the ability to use English in the future, participants' answers varied. Some answered that they did not know what they wanted to pursue as their careers, and did not particularly

think that they wanted to use their English ability for their future jobs. In contrast, Interviewee 1 was graduating in a few months at the time of the interview and had a job offer at a bookstore, in which she hoped she could serve foreign customers in English. Thus, English-related components of participants' careers may become clearer as they develop more specific ideas of what they want to do after graduating from the university.

Interviewees' ideal L2 selves

When asked if they had any ideal self related to English, participants' answers varied, both in terms of content and specificity. Table 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3. Interviewees' ideal L2 selves

Inter- viewee #	Ideal L2 self
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating in English fluently when traveling abroad • Obtaining a high score on the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) • Serving a foreign customer well in English for her job
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating well in English with a foreigner
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating in English fluently with an opponent when playing online games • Understanding English well when listening

Inter-viewee #	Ideal L2 self
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening to and understanding lyrics in English, and singing well in English
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating in English fluently when traveling abroad • Communicating in English well with her host family and acquaintances
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating well in English with an ELT he knows • Communicating in English fluently when traveling abroad

First, there seems to be an interesting relationship between whether participants believed they had opportunities to communicate in English and the formation of their ideal L2 selves. For example, Interviewee 1, who seemed motivated to study English, had specific ideal L2 selves, as depicted in Table 3. Although she did not perceive opportunities to communicate in English frequent, she had in her mind specific occasions in which she thought she could use English, including when traveling abroad and when working at a bookstore after graduation. In contrast, the ideal L2 self explained by Interviewee 2, who did not think she had any opportunities to communicate in English, seemed to lack vividness or elaboration. Regardless of how frequently the participants actually had opportunities for L2 communication, how they *perceived* these opportunities (e.g., whether those opportunities were available in their area, how relevant they considered English to be to their life, etc.) seemed to influence their development of ideal L2 selves. That is, if they considered that English was something distant and that they had no connection to it, it seemed extremely difficult for them to vividly imagine any ideal L2 self. In contrast, if participants thought these opportunities were available to them in their area or could imagine a situation using English, even infrequently, the development of an ideal L2 self seemed to be easier, such as the case of Interviewee 1. Thus, in order to help students develop an elaborate ideal L2 self it is first necessary to introduce situations in which they can use English.

Second, participants also mentioned some unique types of ideal L2 self which are not typically included in Likert-scale questionnaires. For example, Interviewee 4 belongs to

a band and sometimes sings in English and he envisioned himself as someone who could sing well in English. Another example is Interviewee 3, who played online games and wanted to become someone who could communicate well in English with his opponents. Individuals may therefore have unique types of ideal L2 self which they have the potential to further develop, but which teachers are not necessarily aware of.

Third, it seemed difficult for some of the interviewees to imagine themselves as *someone* using English. Rather, they simply stated the goals and purposes for which they wanted to use English in the future. In the L2 motivational self system a clear distinction is made between having an ideal L2 self and a goal of L2 learning, in that unlike a goal in L2 learning ideal L2 self involves “tangible *images* and *senses*” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 12, original emphasis). Furthermore, ideal L2 selves with “insufficient specificity and detail” are not considered to exert a strong motivational power (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 19). In this sense some of the interviewees’ ideal L2 selves might have lacked elaboration and vividness, which Dörnyei considers to be crucial. If this is the case, these ideal L2 selves might not have had a strong motivational power either.

Role of teachers

When I asked the participants what teachers could do in order to help them with their English studies and shape their ideal L2 selves for their future, they gave some interesting suggestions in two major areas. One is related to English learning in general but might have indirect implications for the formation of ideal L2 selves. For example, Interviewee 2 thought that Japanese teachers in particular could be good people to practice L2 communication with so that she could feel comfortable and confident when communicating with a foreigner. This role of Japanese teachers might have an important part to play in the formation of ideal L2 self as well. That is, by helping students practice L2 communication without making them feel much pressure, students may start viewing themselves to be actual L2 users, which might then help them imagine themselves as future competent L2 users.

The second role of teachers was directly related to the formation of ideal L2 self and how teachers could be role models and encourage learners. The following demonstrates these roles of teachers.

My English teacher was a role model which I longed to be. (Interviewee 1)

A teacher in my freshman year told us his (her) experiences, and explained why we should try to go abroad, the advantages of it and such. (S)he taught us that by telling his (her) experiences, which made me want to go abroad. Listening to him (her) made me interested and want to learn (English). (Interviewee 6)

These statements show what Japanese teachers could potentially do in order to stimulate their students' ideal L2 selves. Teachers should have their own stories of how much they struggled to learn English, how much effort they made, for what purposes, and what experiences they have had regarding English. They may not necessarily tell these stories in their classes because of limited class time. However, considering the benefits that teachers as role models can offer, these stories may play an important part in their students' English learning.

Conclusion

Limitations of the study

One of the limitations of this study is that the interviewees were self-selected and might have been those who were relatively motivated among the students. Future studies should try to tap into what learners who absolutely dislike English consider in terms of their ideal L2 self and English studies. Another limitation is that this study did not focus on the changing nature of interviewees' ideal L2 selves. Given that L2 motivation is changeable, future studies should employ a longitudinal method and focus on how L2 learners' ideal L2 selves are developed and enhanced, possibly with intervention by their teachers.

Implications

Limitations aside, this study has demonstrated various ideal L2 selves possessed by non-English majors in a typical English as a foreign language context, and the relevancy of English and English studies to them in such a context. Some types of ideal L2 self which were described by Likert-scale questions in many questionnaire studies were also mentioned by the interviewees in this study, but others were quite unique. Furthermore, the specificity and vividness of ideal L2 selves described by the interviewees

varied, pointing to the need to help learners further develop their ideal L2 selves so that they are more motivated to learn the L2. Comments by some interviewees elaborated a possible role which their teachers, particularly Japanese ones, could play in order to help them develop ideal L2 self.

Some of the interviewees' ideal L2 selves seemed to focus more on various goals than on identity, such as "to do something" rather than "to become someone." Perhaps some interviewees did not vividly imagine themselves as being English users, thus not elaborating on their identity which has an English-related component. Furthermore, one thing to note is that when learners were undecided on their future career it seemed rather difficult for them to imagine themselves using English for their future jobs. Thus, occasions such as seminars, in which students are not only introduced to various types of jobs but also how these jobs could have L2-related components, might be helpful. We can introduce people who actually use English for their jobs as role models so that learners can more vividly imagine what it would be like to use English for job purposes.

In terms of teachers' roles, two major points can be concluded. One is that by helping students understand the role of their grammatical knowledge in L2 communication and by practicing L2 communication with their teachers, students can start to realize themselves as L2 users, which may also help them develop their ideal L2 selves. The other role teachers could play is that of being role models, telling students their own stories related to English. This seems where Japanese teachers are particularly relevant, and they could tell students how they struggled and gained the L2 competence which they now have and how they became users of English. They have the potential to work as motivators for learners of English.

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Appendix: Interview prompts

Background questions

- What year are you in?
- What is your major?
- When did you start learning English?
- Have you been to a foreign country? When and for how long?

Relevance of English and English studies

- Have you liked studying English? Why/Why not?
- Do you have opportunities to communicate in English outside class? How about reading and/or listening in English?
- Did you have any opportunities to communicate in English outside class in the past?
- Do you think you will need English competence in the future? For what purposes?

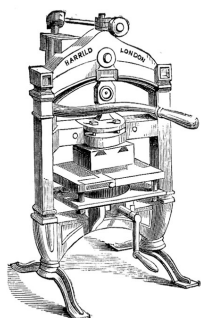
Development of ideal L2 self

- Do you have any ideal L2 self?
- When do you think you developed it?
- Who influenced you in developing it? How?

Future development of ideal L2 self

- What kind of information would you need in order to further develop ideal L2 self?
- How do you think teachers can help students develop ideal L2 self?

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