

New ways of motivating foreign language learners: Generating vision

Zoltán Dörnyei

University of Nottingham

Introduction

In 2005, I proposed a new approach to the understanding of second language (L2) learning motivation (Dörnyei 2005; for more detail, see Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009, and especially Dörnyei 2009), conceived within a 'L2 Motivational Self System', which attempts to integrate a number of influential L2 motivation theories with findings of self research in psychology. Within contemporary psychological research on the self, one of the most powerful, and at the same time the most versatile, approach of linking the human self with human action is the notion of 'possible selves', which represent the individuals' ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius 1986). Thus, possible selves involve a person's specific image of oneself in future states, and they are therefore similar in many ways to dreams and visions about oneself. It is this aspect of possible selves that I have found highly relevant to the concept of language learning motivation, and this article outlines the practical potential of the new approach.

The L2 Motivational Self System

From the point of view of education, one type of possible self, the ideal self, appears to be a particularly useful concept, referring to the representation of the characteristics that someone would ideally like to possess (i.e. representation of hopes, aspirations or wishes) (see Higgins 1987, 1998). A complementary self-guide that also has considerable educational relevance is the ought self, referring to the attributes that one believes one ought to possess (i.e. representation of someone's sense of personal or social duties,

obligations or responsibilities). The tripartite construct of the L2 Motivational Self System adapts these two dimensions to the study of a L2 and adds a third component that is related to the specific learning environment:

- * Ideal L2 Self, which concerns the L2-specific facet of one's ideal self: If the person we would like to become speaks a L2, the ideal L2 self is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because we would like to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves.
- * Ought-to L2 Self, which concerns the attributes that one believes one ought to possess to avoid possible negative outcomes, and which therefore may bear little resemblance to the person's own desires or wishes.
- * L2 Learning Experience, which concerns situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g. the positive impact of success or the enjoyable quality of a language course).

Thus, the L2 Motivational Self System covers the internal desires of the learner, the social pressures exercised by significant or authoritative people in the learner's environment and the actual experience of being engaged in the learning process.

Generating and enhancing a vision for language learning

Motivational strategies have been described in detail before (e.g. Dörnyei 2001), but the new motivation theory outlined above opens up a novel avenue for motivating learners by focusing on the creation of an attractive vision of the learners' ideal language self. This motivational programme consists of six components:

1. *Construction of the Ideal L2 Self:* Creating the vision. The (obvious)

prerequisite for the motivational capacity of future self-guides is that they need to exist. Therefore, the first step in a motivational intervention that follows the self approach is to help learners to construct their Ideal L2 Self – that is, to create a L2-related vision. The term 'constructing' the Ideal L2 Self is, in fact, not entirely accurate because it is highly unlikely that any motivational intervention will lead a student to generate an ideal self out of nothing – the realistic process is more likely to involve awareness raising about and guided selection from the multiple aspirations, dreams, desires, etc. that the student has already entertained in the past. Thus, igniting the vision involves increasing the students' mindfulness about the significance of the ideal self in general and guiding them through a number of possible selves that they have entertained in their minds in the past, while also presenting some powerful role models to illustrate potential future selves.

2. *Imagery enhancement:* Strengthening the vision. Even if a desired self image exists, it may not have a sufficient degree of elaborateness and vividness to be an effective motivator. Methods of imagery enhancement have been explored in several areas of psychological, educational and sport research in the past, and the techniques of creative or guided imagery can be utilised to promote ideal L2 self images and thus to strengthen the students' vision. (For reviews and resources, see for example, Berkovits, 2005; Fezler, 1989; Gould et al., 2002; Hall et al., 2006; Horowitz, 1983; Leuner et al., 1983; Singer, 2006; Taylor et al., 1998). Undoubtedly, further research is needed in applied linguistics to review the imagery enhancement techniques

utilised in other fields with regard to their potential applicability to promoting L2 motivation and the vision to master a foreign language. The details of an effective 'language imagery programme' are still to be worked out, but let there be no doubt about it: 'Our capacity for imagery and fantasy can indeed give us a kind of control over possible futures!' (Singer, 2006, p.128)

3. *Making the Ideal L2 Self plausible:*

Substantiating the vision. Possible selves are only effective insofar as the learner perceives them as possible, that is, conceivable within the person's particular circumstances. Thus, in order for ideal self images to energise sustained behaviour, they must be anchored in a sense of realistic expectations – they need to be substantiated, resulting in the curious mixed aura of imagination and reality that effective images share. This process requires honest and down-to-earth reality checks as well as considering any potential obstacles and difficulties that might stand in the way of realising the ideal self. Inviting successful role models to class can send the powerful message to the students that although everybody faces certain hurdles in reaching their ideal selves, it can be, and has been, done.

4. *Developing an action plan:*

Operationalising the vision. Future self-guides are only effective if they are accompanied by a set of concrete action plans. Therefore, the ideal self needs to come as part of a 'package' consisting of an imagery component and a repertoire of appropriate plans, scripts and self-regulatory strategies. Even the most galvanising self image might fall flat without ways of operationalising the vision, that is, without any concrete learning pathways to channel the individual's energy into. This is clearly an area where L2 motivation research and language teaching methodology overlap: An effective action plan will contain

a goal-setting component (which is a motivational issue) as well as individualised study plans and instructional avenues (which are methodological in nature).

5. *Activating the Ideal L2 Self:*

Keeping the vision alive. Very little is said in the literature about activating and re-activating the ideal self, but this is an area where language teachers have, perhaps unknowingly, a great deal of experience. Classroom activities such as warmers and icebreakers as well as various communicative tasks can all be turned into effective ways of keeping the vision alive, and playing films and music, or engaging in cultural activities such as French cheese parties or 'Cook Your Wicked Western Burger' evenings can all serve as potent ideal self reminders. Indeed, good teachers in any subject matter seem to have an instinctive talent to provide an engaging framework that keeps the enthusiasts going and the less-than-enthusiasts thinking.

6. *Considering failure:*

Counterbalancing the vision. For maximum effectiveness, the desired self should be offset by the feared self: We do something because we want to do it and also because not doing it would lead to undesired results. In language teaching terms this process of counterbalancing the vision would involve regular reminders of the limitations of not knowing foreign languages as well as regularly priming the learners' Ought-to L2 Self to highlight the duties and obligations they have committed themselves to.

Conclusion

The L2 Motivational Self System suggests that there are three primary sources of the motivation to learn a foreign/second language: (a) the learner's vision of oneself as an effective L2 speaker, (b) the social pressure coming from the learner's environment and (c) positive learning experiences. This paper elaborated on the practical implications of the first of these

sources. I firmly believe that it is possible for teachers to consciously generate L2-learning vision in the learners and I would like to encourage colleagues to develop a repertoire of techniques to ignite and enhance this vision. The six main areas of relevant motivational strategies presented in this talk are intended to offer a framework for future language teaching methodological developments along this line.

References

- Berkovits, S. (2005) *Guided imagery: Successful techniques to improve school performance and self-esteem*. Duluth, MN: Whole Person Associates.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001) *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2005) *The psychology of the language learner: Individual differences in second language acquisition*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Dörnyei, Z. (2009) *The L2 Motivational Self System*. In Z. Dörnyei and E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp.9-42). Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Dörnyei, Z. and Ushioda, E. (Eds.). (2009). *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fezler, W. (1989) *Creative imagery: How to visualise in all five senses*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Gould, D., Damarjian, N. and Greenleaf, C. (2002) *Imagery training for peak performance*. In J.L. Van Raalte and B.W. Brewer (Eds.), *Exploring sport and exercise psychology* (2nd ed., pp.49-74). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Hall, E., Hall, C., Stradling, P and Young, D. (2006) *Guided imagery: Creative interventions in Counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage.
- Higgins, E.T. (1987) *Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect*. *Psychological Review* 94, 319-340.
- Higgins, E.T. (1998) *Promotion and prevention: Regulatory focus as a motivational principle*. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 30, 1-46.
- Horowitz, M.J. (1983) *Image formation and psychotherapy*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Leuner, H., Horn, G. and Klessmann, E. (1983) *Guided affective imagery with children and adolescents*. New York: Plenum.
- Markus, H. and Nurius, P. (1986) *Possible selves*. *American Psychologist* 41, 954-969.
- Singer, J.L. (2006) *Imagery in psychotherapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Taylor, S.E., Pham, L.B., Rivkin, I.D. and Armor, D.A. (1998) *Harnessing the imagination: Mental simulation, self-regulation, and coping*. *American Psychologist* 53 (4), 429-439.