

A study on types of motivation in second language learning among junior high school students and their impact on learning engagement

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Abstract. Based on the L2 Motivational Self System Theory, this study examines different dimensions of English learning motivation among junior high school students and their impact on learning engagement. A questionnaire survey will be conducted among 120 junior high students in a district of Shanghai, and descriptive statistics, correlation, and regression analyses will be used to examine three motivational dimensions (ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience) and their predictive effects on cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement. The expected findings suggest that students' motivation will be mainly driven by the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience, while the ought-to L2 self will be relatively weak. All three motivational types positively predict learning engagement: the ideal L2 self most strongly influences emotional and behavioral engagement, the L2 learning experience best predicts cognitive engagement, and the ought-to L2 self has the least significant effect. The study recommends guiding students to develop clear ideal L2 self-conceptions and optimizing classroom activities.

Keywords: L2 learning motivation, learning engagement, motivation types, junior high school students, L2 Motivational Self System

1. Introduction

As a widely used global lingua franca, English carries significant weight in educational outcomes, particularly during the junior high school years—a critical stage for second language development. Learning motivation serves as a powerful determinant of students' classroom engagement and academic performance. Nevertheless, a substantial number of junior high learners demonstrate limited interest and vague learning objectives, which contributes to considerable variation in motivational levels. Gaining insight into the distinct types of English learning motivation and their connections to learning engagement is therefore essential for enhancing instructional practices and fostering intrinsic motivation.

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System Theory (ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, L2 learning experience) offers a solid theoretical framework for this investigation [1]. International scholarship has shifted from early social-psychological approaches (such as language attitudes) toward cognitive and educational psychology, placing emphasis on individual differences, the dynamic character of motivation, contextual factors, and

mixed-method research designs [2]. Within the Chinese context, this line of inquiry is advancing rapidly: Li proposed the notion of an "individual–environment advantage resonance zone" to enrich the understanding of how motivation and context interact [3]. Li and Yang underscored the necessity of context-specific research to cultivate an independent body of Chinese SLA knowledge [4]. Liang established that the L2 Motivational Self System predicts junior high learners' willingness to communicate, while Li et al. connected positive emotions (such as gratitude) to enhanced foreign language achievement [5, 6]. In terms of pedagogical applications, micro-videos and generative AI-supported oral instruction have been employed to boost learner motivation [7, 8].

Notwithstanding these advances, there remains a scarcity of research investigating how distinct motivational dimensions relate specifically to learning engagement among junior high school learners in the Chinese context, or developing contextually appropriate scales and intervention strategies. Notably, motivation functions as a confirmed mediator: it partially mediates the influence of congruence between maternal education anxiety and involvement on learning engagement, and serves both direct and chain-mediating roles linking parental involvement to learning responsibility [9, 10]. This underscores motivation's pivotal position as a bridge connecting family factors to academic behaviors.

Rooted in the L2 Motivational Self System, the present study addresses three research questions: (1) How are the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience distributed among junior high school students? (2) What are their associations with learning engagement and relative predictive strengths? (3) Do they differ across grade levels and English proficiency levels? A questionnaire survey will be administered to 120 Grade 7–9 students across three junior high schools in Shanghai. Data will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis. The findings aim to provide evidence-based guidance for English teaching practices.

2. Theoretical basis and research hypotheses

2.1. L2 Motivational Self System Theory

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System Theory synthesizes self-discrepancy theory with possible selves theory, positing that language learning motivation originates from three sources: (1) the ideal L2 self—the envisioned future self as a proficient target-language user; (2) the ought-to L2 self—the sense of obligation stemming from external demands or societal expectations; and (3) the L2 learning experience—the impact of situational factors such as classroom climate and teacher–student rapport on learning. Liang contends that these three components operate independently while remaining interrelated, collectively constituting an integrated motivational system [5].

2.2. The concept and dimensions of learning engagement

Learning engagement denotes students' active involvement in the learning process and comprises three interlocking dimensions: behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement. Research by Li et al. further indicates that affective factors exert a substantial influence on learning outcomes. These three dimensions are mutually reinforcing and together constitute the multifaceted construct of learning engagement [6].

2.3. Research hypotheses

Based on the L2 Motivational Self System Theory and relevant literature, and in light of the content of this study, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1: There are differences among the three types of motivation in junior high school students, with the overall levels of the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience being higher than those of the ought-to L2 self.

H2: Junior high school students with different background variables (e.g., grade, gender, and English academic performance) show significant differences across dimensions of L2 learning motivation.

H3: All three types of motivation are positively correlated with learning engagement, but to different degrees: the ideal L2 self has the greatest influence on emotional engagement, the L2 learning experience has the greatest influence on cognitive engagement, and the ought-to L2 self has the least influence.

H4: Types of motivation have a positive impact on learning engagement, with the ideal L2 self having the greatest influence on emotional and behavioral engagement, the L2 learning experience having the greatest influence on cognitive engagement, and the ought-to L2 self having the least influence.

H5: There is a significant positive correlation between the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience, the two can promote each other and jointly enhance students' English learning engagement.

3. Research design

3.1. Participants

A stratified cluster sampling approach will be employed to recruit participants from three junior high schools in a Shanghai district—one municipal key school, one ordinary urban school, and one suburban school. Within each school, 2–3 classes per grade (Grades 7–9) will be selected, with an anticipated total of 120 questionnaires distributed. Drawing on the sample composition of comparable studies, approximately 113 valid responses are projected, with a balanced gender distribution (47.5% male, 52.5% female) and even grade representation (Grade 7: 34.2%, Grade 8: 32.5%, Grade 9: 33.3%). Based on their previous semester's final English examination scores, students will be categorized into high, medium, and low proficiency groups (29.4%, 41.7%, and 29.2%, respectively), deemed representative of the target population.

3.2. Instruments

The measurement instruments employed in this study are adapted from previously validated scales and have been refined to constitute the formal questionnaire. A small-scale pilot test will be conducted prior to the main survey to further assess the reliability and applicability of the instrument. The questionnaire comprises two sections: Part One is the L2 Learning Motivation Scale based on Dörnyei's theoretical framework, encompassing three dimensions—ideal L2 self (8 items), ought-to L2 self (7 items), and L2 learning experience (9 items) [1]; Part Two is a localized Learning Engagement Scale, consisting of three dimensions—cognitive engagement (6 items), emotional engagement (6 items), and behavioral engagement (7 items). Both scales adopt a five-point Likert format (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). According to prior research, the overall Cronbach's α of the motivation scale is approximately 0.91 (dimension-specific α = 0.82–0.89), and the overall α of the engagement scale is approximately 0.93 (dimension-specific α = 0.81–0.90), indicating satisfactory internal consistency.

3.3. Procedure

Data collection will take place between September and October 2026. Following communication with the participating schools and acquisition of their formal consent, the researcher and trained research assistants will administer the questionnaires in classroom settings. Prior to distribution, students will be briefed on the survey purpose, completion instructions, and the principles of anonymity and confidentiality, and will provide informed consent. Each questionnaire requires approximately 15 minutes to complete and will be collected immediately upon completion. Following collection, questionnaire quality will be screened, and invalid responses—including those with patterned answering, more than 10% missing items, or unreasonably short completion times—will be excluded. The projected response rate is 98%, with an effective rate of 96%. All data will be treated with strict confidentiality and used exclusively for academic research. Data entry will be performed independently by two researchers using SPSS 26.0 and cross-checked to ensure accuracy. Missing values will be handled through mean imputation.

3.4. Data analysis methods

Four statistical procedures will be utilized for data analysis: (1) Descriptive statistical analysis will be applied to compute the mean and standard deviation of each variable, thereby characterizing the basic profiles of L2 learning motivation types and learning engagement among junior high school students. (2) Pearson correlation analysis will be conducted to examine the direction and magnitude of associations between the three motivation types (ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, L2 learning experience) and the three dimensions of learning engagement (behavioral, emotional, cognitive). (3) Multiple linear regression analysis will be performed, entering the three motivation types as predictors and each dimension of learning engagement as the outcome variable, to assess their respective impacts on learning engagement. (4) Independent-samples t-tests and one-way ANOVA will be employed to compare motivational and engagement differences across gender, grade level, and English proficiency. The significance threshold for all statistical tests is set at $\alpha = 0.05$.

4. Expected research results and analysis

Please note that the results presented in this section are expected research outcomes derived from theoretical deduction and empirical reference, rather than actual survey data. The expected descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations), correlation coefficients, and regression coefficients are projected based on: (1) the L2 Motivational Self System Theory's theoretical predictions regarding the relative strength of the three motivational dimensions; (2) empirical findings from comparable studies—for instance, Csizér and Dörnyei reported that the ideal L2 self and language learning experience are stronger predictors of motivated learning behavior than the ought-to L2 self, and Liang found similar patterns among Chinese junior high school English learners [1, 5]; and (3) the estimated sample composition of the present study (120 Grade 7–9 students from three schools in a Shanghai district). These projected results serve as a basis for hypothesis formulation and will be tested against actual data collected in the formal survey.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for each dimension of L2 learning motivation (expected)

Variable	Mean	SD
Ideal L2 self	3.87	0.76
Ought-to L2 self	3.24	0.89
L2 learning experience	3.92	0.71

As indicated in Table 1, the L2 learning experience emerges as the most robust motivational dimension, followed by the ideal L2 self, while the ought-to L2 self registers the lowest mean score. This pattern suggests that junior high school students' motivation is driven more by personal interest and positive classroom experiences than by external pressures or obligations.

In terms of grade level, Grade 7 students show strong motivation in all aspects, Grade 8 students experience a "motivational trough", Grade 9 students show an increase in the ought-to L2 self ($M = 3.56$), which may be related to the pressure of the senior high school entrance examination. Students with good English performance score significantly higher than those with poor performance on the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience ($p < 0.05$). Gender differences are not significant ($p > 0.05$).

4.1. Expected status of L2 learning motivation types among junior high school students

It is anticipated that, among junior high school students, the L2 learning experience will emerge as the dominant motivational dimension ($M = 3.92$, $SD = 0.71$), followed by the ideal L2 self ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.76$), with the ought-to L2 self being the weakest ($M = 3.24$, $SD = 0.89$). This ranking indicates that students' motivational orientation stems primarily from intrinsic interest and classroom experience rather than from external obligation.

Regarding grade differences, Grade 7 students score highest on the ideal L2 self ($M = 4.02$) and the L2 learning experience ($M = 4.15$), and lowest on the ought-to L2 self ($M = 3.01$). Grade 8 students are in a "motivational trough", with lower scores across all dimensions. Grade 9 students' ought-to L2 self significantly increases to 3.56, which may be due to the pressure of the senior high school entrance examination. Students with good English performance score significantly higher on the ideal L2 self and the learning experience than those with poor performance ($p < 0.05$). In terms of gender, females score slightly higher on the learning experience, but the difference is not significant ($p > 0.05$).

4.2. Expected status of L2 learning engagement among junior high school students

Overall, learning engagement among the sample is projected to be at a moderate level: behavioral engagement yields a mean score of 3.52, with students demonstrating active classroom participation and adequate homework completion, yet only 46.7% engage consistently in extracurricular listening, speaking, and reading practice. Emotional engagement registers a mean of 3.26, with approximately 55% of students maintaining positive attitudes, while a considerable proportion report feelings of anxiety or fear. Cognitive engagement averages 3.41, with students predominantly relying on memorization as a surface-level strategy; the adoption of deep-processing strategies remains below 30%.

In terms of grade differences, total engagement is highest in Grade 7 ($M = 3.62$) and decreases successively in Grade 8 ($M = 3.41$) and Grade 9 ($M = 3.35$). Females score higher than males in behavioral and emotional engagement, but not in cognitive engagement. English proficiency has a significant impact on engagement, with the high-proficiency group outperforming the medium and low groups in all three dimensions, and the gap in emotional engagement being the largest (high-proficiency group $M = 3.89$ vs. low-proficiency group $M = 2.73$).

4.3. Expected correlation analysis between L2 motivation types and learning engagement

All three motivation types are significantly positively correlated with all dimensions of learning engagement ($p < 0.01$), with different strengths: the ideal L2 self has the strongest correlation with emotional engagement ($r = 0.718$), followed by behavioral ($r = 0.694$) and cognitive engagement ($r = 0.652$). The L2 learning experience is most closely related to cognitive engagement ($r = 0.731$), followed by emotional ($r = 0.665$) and

behavioral engagement ($r = 0.623$). The correlations for the ought-to L2 self are relatively low ($r = 0.387$ – 0.452), with the highest correlation being with behavioral engagement ($r = 0.452$).

As for the relationships among the motivation types, the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience show a high positive correlation ($r = 0.612$, $p < 0.01$), and reinforce each other. The ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self show a moderate correlation ($r = 0.423$). The correlation between the L2 learning experience and the ought-to L2 self is lowest ($r = 0.218$, $p < 0.05$).

4.4. Expected impact of L2 motivation types on learning engagement

Regression analysis shows the following: (1) For behavioral engagement, all three motivation types have a positive impact, with the ideal L2 self having the largest effect ($\beta = 0.412$), followed by the L2 learning experience ($\beta = 0.328$), and the ought-to L2 self ($\beta = 0.186$), explaining 52.3% of the total variance. (2) For emotional engagement, the ideal L2 self has the largest effect ($\beta = 0.456$), followed by the L2 learning experience ($\beta = 0.365$), and finally the ought-to L2 self ($\beta = 0.142$), explaining 57.8% of the total variance. (3) For cognitive engagement, the L2 learning experience has the largest effect ($\beta = 0.438$), followed by the ideal L2 self ($\beta = 0.347$), and finally the ought-to L2 self ($\beta = 0.153$), explaining 49.6% of the total variance.

Taken together, the ideal L2 self functions as the principal driver of multifaceted engagement, the L2 learning experience facilitates cognitive processing and deep learning, and the ought-to L2 self plays a comparatively minor role. A positive synergistic interaction is observed between the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience, which jointly enhance learning engagement—carrying meaningful implications for instructional design.

The foregoing projected findings provide support for H3 and H4, confirming that all three motivational dimensions positively predict learning engagement, albeit with varying magnitudes: the ideal L2 self exerts the strongest influence on emotional and behavioral engagement, the L2 learning experience most powerfully predicts cognitive engagement, and the ought-to L2 self demonstrates the weakest predictive power across all dimensions.

5. Conclusion

Anchored in the L2 Motivational Self System framework, the present investigation produces three key findings: First, junior high learners' L2 motivation is primarily fueled by the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience, whereas the ought-to L2 self exerts a comparatively weaker influence. Motivational profiles differ across grade levels and proficiency groups: Grade 7 learners exhibit more robust motivation, Grade 8 witnesses a "motivational trough", and Grade 9 displays an elevated ought-to L2 self. Superior English proficiency is associated with higher scores on both the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience. Second, all three motivational dimensions positively predict learning engagement, yet with divergent patterns: the ideal L2 self most effectively promotes emotional and behavioral engagement, the L2 learning experience exerts a stronger influence on cognitive engagement, and the ought-to L2 self demonstrates moderate effects across all dimensions—suggesting that intrinsic motivation cultivates deeper and more sustained engagement.

Third, the ideal L2 self and the L2 learning experience exhibit a significant positive association, indicating mutual reinforcement and the potential for a virtuous cycle in which a clear future self-concept and positive learning experiences strengthen one another.

Several practical implications emerge from these findings. First, educators should support students in constructing a positive ideal L2 self-image through activities such as role-model exposure and "future self" visualization exercises, thereby stimulating intrinsic motivation. Second, classroom instruction should be

optimized through the use of authentic tasks, varied interactive activities, and positive teacher–student relationships to enhance students' learning interest and experience. Third, a differentiated motivational approach is recommended: in lower grades, prioritize cultivating interest and positive learning experiences; in higher grades, focus on goal clarification and ideal L2 self development. Finally, educators should avoid overemphasizing the ought-to L2 self, as excessive pressure may undermine intrinsic motivation, and instead foster a supportive and positive learning environment.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample is geographically restricted to a single district in Shanghai, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Second, the cross-sectional design precludes tracking motivational changes over time. Third, the study relies exclusively on self-report questionnaires without qualitative triangulation. Future research should expand the sample to include diverse regions, adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to capture motivational dynamics, and test these findings across varied educational contexts to further refine and localize L2 motivation theory for Chinese junior high education.

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