

# The Relationship Between Chinese EFL Learners' L2 Motivational Self System and Willingness to Communicate

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**Abstract**—This study explores the relationships between the L2 motivational self system (L2MSS)—Ideal self, Ought-to self, and Learning experience—and the willingness to communicate (WTC) based on the results of a questionnaire survey of 120 freshmen from English majors (English, Business English, Translation). The results demonstrate that: (1) in the L2MSS, the ideal self has the greatest mean of 3.83, and the WTC has a mean of 3.74. Overall, each value is in the upper-middle range. (2) The ideal self, the ought-to self, and the learning experience are positively correlated with the WTC in a significant way, among which the correlation coefficient of the learning experience is the largest one, being 0.593. (3) In the L2MSS, the ideal self and the learning experience can significantly predict the learners' WTC. The study suggests that it may be more effective in motivating students' WTC if teachers can guide students to establish a positive ideal self and build a good teacher-student relationship in the teaching process.

**Index Terms**—L2 motivational self system, willingness to communicate, students of English majors

## I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the continuous reform of foreign language teaching, foreign language teaching has changed from the traditional teaching mode of a single knowledge-transfer process in which teachers teach and students learn to a process in which students take the initiative to construct knowledge, process it in depth, and reflect on it, and give full play to their learning autonomy and initiative in specific learning contexts. Against this backdrop, researchers in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) are paying more and more attention to individual differences in learners' cognition, psychology, emotions, learning behaviors and the like, among which, motivation and willingness to communicate have received much attention. It should be noted that SLA in this article refers to its extensive meaning that second language acquisition and foreign language acquisition are included and the author does not distinguish the differences between them. Motivation is an important factor that affects the success of L2 learning and it is not only the source power of L2 learning but also a continuous driving force in the process of L2 learning (Ge & Jin, 2016). Willingness to communicate is a continuous driving force in L2 communication. Based on the two concepts, it should be paid heed that they both are important factors at play in L2 learning. Therefore, a better reform of foreign language teaching in China will be promoted if the relationships between the two are figured out. To this end, the author launches a relevant study to explore the close relationships between the two.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Theoretical Framework

#### (a). L2 Motivational Self System

The 1950s ushered in the study of motivation in the field of SLA and many motivation theories of great significance have emerged during these decades. As summarized by Dörnyei (2005), they can be mainly classified into four stages, respectively the stage from the perspective of social psychology (1959-1990), the stage from the cognitive-situated perspective (during the 1990s), the stage from the process-oriented perspective (2000-2004), and the stage from the perspective of L2MSS (2005-). The motivation theory covered in this paper is a theory of the stage from the perspective of L2MSS. It is called L2 motivational self system (L2MSS), a brand new theory put forward by Dörnyei as part of the process of critically inheriting established motivation research paradigms in the context of globalization (Chen, 2019). The possible self and self-discrepancy theory are linked at the core of this theory, which places the self at the center of motivational and behavioral research; its main features are the emphasis on individual initiative, the interaction between the individual and society, and the dynamics of psychological structure (Wei, 2020).

Dörnyei (2005) falls the L2MSS into three components, comprising the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and the learning experience. The ideal L2 self refers to the individual's expectation of a perfect future self, which embodies the learners' ideals and wishes. If the person the learner wishes to be speaks the language he/she takes as a second language, the ideal L2 self will become a powerful driving force to promote the learners to learn the language so as to reduce the

discrepancy between their actual selves and ideal selves. Traditional integrative motivation and intrinsic instrumental motivation to a large extent belong to the ideal L2 self (Wei, 2020). The ought-to L2 self refers to the attributes that a learner believes he/she should have in order to achieve certain expectations of others and avoid possible negative results in the process of L2 learning, which reflects the learner's responsibilities and obligations. It mainly involves external instrumental motivation and can be gradually internalized into the part of the ideal L2 self. The L2 learning experience refers to the learners' past learning experiences, which covers a series of factors like teachers they meet, textbooks they use in the learning process, learning environment and so on. The ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self are termed "possible self", while the learning experience is termed "past self". The author briefly describes three components in the L2MSS as ideal self (IS), ought-to self (OS) and learning experience (LE) in the later sections.

(b). *Willingness to Communicate*

The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) was originally introduced by McCroskey and Baer (1985) to describe learners' tendency to communicate with others by using their native languages and it is considered to be a trait of learners. The trait-like facet of the WTC allows itself to be seen that it is a stable personality that is constant over time and across different situations and contexts. McCroskey and Richmond (1990) maintain that two key prerequisites of the WTC are learners' self-perceived communicative competence and low degree of anxiety. To put it another way, learners are willing to throw themselves in communicative activities when they deem themselves competent to communicate and are at a low level of communication uneasiness.

In the 1990s, MacIntyre et al. (1998) introduced the WTC to the field of SLA and defined it as "a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using an L2" (p. 547). They correspondingly brought forward a six-level pyramid model of L2 WTC to explain learners' communicative behaviors (see Figure 1). The top layer is communication behavior, and the following five layers are respectively behavioral intention, situated antecedents, motivational propensities, affective-cognitive context, and social and individual context. The variables in each layer are influenced by the variables in lower layers, at the same time, the variables in each layer have the most direct impacts on its upper one. In other words, the WTC has the most direct impacts on L2 use, and it is the decisive factor to determine whether learners will eventually participate in L2 communication or not. For this reason, targets to drive EFL learners to communicate more in English and get rid of dumb English could be reached by stimulating their WTC.

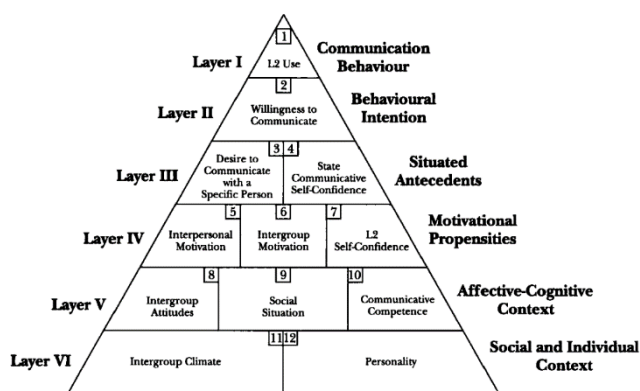


Figure 1. Pyramid Model of L2 WTC (p. 547)

B. *Related Research on L2MSS and WTC*

According to Figure 1, it can be seen that motivational propensities play critical roles in the pyramid model of L2 WTC. Not only do they contain variables in affective-cognitive context layer, and social and individual context layer, but also make up antecedents of the WTC with these variables, thus finally completing the communicative behavior. Hence it is of vital importance to study the influence of learners' motivation on WTC (short for L2 WTC in later descriptions).

At present, a sea of researches on L2MSS and WTC are mainly conducted in an empirical way. It is consistently confirmed that there is a significant positive correlation between ideal self and WTC (Lee & Lee, 2020; Noraini, 2020; Lee & Lu, 2021; Li & Liu, 2021). However, different researchers have different results towards relationships among ought-to self, learning experience and WTC. Lee and Lu (2021) found that ought-to self of college students is negatively correlated with WTC in a significant way, while it has significant positive correlation with WTC in high school students. Noraini (2020) proved no significant correlation between teachers' ought-to self and WTC. Moreover, in recent years, many researchers have only taken into consideration the correlation between the possible self and WTC to the exclusion of the past self of learners. Furthermore, different studies have not reached a consensus on the predictive roles of L2MSS in WTC. Wei (2020) conducted an investigation on 365 non-English major college students, and the results showed that ought-to self has a significant negative predictive effect on WTC, while learning experience

has a significant positive predictive effect. Other studies have shown that ought-to self has no predictive effect on WTC, and learning experience is not counted as a factor affecting WTC (Noraini, 2020; Lee & Lee, 2020; Li & Liu, 2021). Finally, the participants mentioned above are almost non-English major college students and high school students. That means those researches ignore students of English majors (short for students who major in English, business English, and translation).

To sum up, the relationships among learners' ought-to self, learning experience and WTC need to be further investigated, and the informants should also include students of English majors. For this purpose, this study takes students of English majors as the participants to explore the relationship between the three elements of L2MSS and WTC.

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### A. Research Questions

- (1) What are the self-perceived levels of participants' L2MSS and WTC?
- (2) Is there any correlation between participants' L2MSS and WTC?
- (3) What is the predictive effect of participants' L2MSS on WTC?

#### B. Participants

The participants of this study are 120 freshmen of English majors (students matriculating at the year of 2021) from a university in Southwest China. They come from all over the country, speak Chinese as their mother tongue and have studied English for at least six years.

#### C. Instruments

The questionnaire used in this study consists of two parts. The first part is to investigate the personal information of the participants, including majors and genders. The second part investigates self-perceived levels of participants' L2MSS and WTC. Prior to the formal distribution of the questionnaire, the author conducted a pre-test of the questionnaire among sophomores (students matriculating at the year of 2020) in these majors. The results indicate that the reliability and validity of the questionnaire meet the statistical requirements (Cronbach's Alpha > 0.7, KMO > 0.6, Significance of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity = 0.000), so the questionnaire is suitable for the study.

##### (a). Questionnaire of L2MSS

The questionnaire of L2MSS adopted in this study is borrowed from the questionnaires designed by Qin (2007), Taguchi et al. (2009), Ryan (2009) and Yashima (2009). The author deletes and modifies some items to make them be more in line with the actual situation of Chinese students' foreign language learning. There are 18 items in the questionnaire and 5-point Likert scale is used here, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire is divided into three dimensions, namely ideal self, ought-to self and learning experience, which are mainly geared to investigate participants for their self-perceived levels of imagining a better future (for example, an item like "I can imagine myself speaking English as if I were a native speaker of English"), expectations of others for their learning English well (for example, an item like "I learn English because people surrounding me expect me to do so") and recognition for their past learning experiences (for example, an item like "I am fond of the way my English teacher conducts his/her teaching."). The overall reliability coefficient of the L2MSS questionnaire is 0.823 (value of Cronbach's Alpha based on standardized items is used in this study), and value of every item's Cronbach's Alpha is less than 0.823 after it is deleted. The reliability coefficient values of the three dimensions are respectively 0.714, 0.798 and 0.790. To sum up, the reliability coefficients of three dimensions and the overall questionnaire are all higher than 0.7, and values of Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted are less than the overall reliability coefficient value, indicating that the overall reliability of the questionnaire is good, and each item is indispensable. The KMO value of the L2MSS questionnaire is 0.721, and the significance of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is inclined to 0, indicating that the questionnaire has good validity.

##### (b). Questionnaire of WTC

The questionnaire of WTC adopted in this study is compiled with reference to the questionnaires designed by MacIntyre et al. (2001) and Peng (2012). The author also deletes and modifies some items to make them be more in line with the actual situation of Chinese students' foreign language learning. There are 11 items in the questionnaire and 5-point Likert scale is used here, ranging from 1 (strongly unwilling) to 5 (strongly willing), mainly tailored to explore participants' WTC in the classroom (for example, an item like "I participate in group discussion in class by using English.") and outside the classroom (for example, an item like "I use English to give a hand to international friends in need of help."). The overall reliability coefficient of the WTC questionnaire is 0.875, and value of every item's Cronbach's Alpha is less than 0.875 after it is deleted. To sum up, the reliability coefficient of the overall questionnaire is higher than 0.7, and values of Cronbach's Alpha if item deleted are less than the overall reliability coefficient value, indicating that the overall reliability of the questionnaire is good, and each item is indispensable. The KMO value of the WTC questionnaire is 0.864, and the significance of Bartlett's Test of Sphericity is inclined to 0, indicating that the

questionnaire has good validity.

#### D. Data Collection and Analysis

The author makes an integrated questionnaire out of the questionnaires of L2MSS and WTC with the help of Wenjuanxing (a platform used for designing questionnaires, collecting results and analyzing data), and then distributes the questionnaire to the participants in the form of links in the class. In order to ensure the quality of the results, the participants fill in the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously throughout the whole process. 126 questionnaires are collected, but there are only 120 valid questionnaires in total, including 17 male participants and 103 female participants, with a collection rate of 95.2%. A total of 6 invalid and incomplete questionnaires (accounting for 4.8%) are removed.

After these questionnaires are collected, the author imports all data into SPSS26.0 and assigns values to all variables before analysis. In order to solve the three research questions mentioned above, the author will first use SPSS26.0 to conduct descriptive statistics of 120 questionnaires. Secondly, Pearson's correlation analysis is used for correlation analysis. Finally, the author will use regression analysis to explore the predictive effects of three factors in L2MSS on WTC.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### A. Self-Perceived Levels of Participants' L2MSS and WTC

It can be seen from Table 1 that the mean value of the participants' ideal self is 3.83, which is the highest value in the L2MSS; value of ought-to self is the lowest one, only being 2.88. This result is consistent with most studies (Lee & Lee, 2020; Lee & Lu, 2021; Li & Liu, 2021), indicating that students' motivation to learn English mainly comes from their imagination of a better self in the future, such as imagining that they can speak English like native speakers of English, use English in their future career, write emails or articles fluently in English and the like. These imaginations will encourage learners to work hard to narrow the gap between their actual selves and possible selves, while pressure from parents, teachers and exams does not enhance learners' motivation to study hard. However, this result is out of line with the result of Noraini (2020). Noraini found that self-perceived level of the participants' ought-to self is higher than that of the ideal self. The author holds that the reason for the inconsistency may result from different research participants. Participants of Noraini's research are ESL teachers, who are high-level learners. High-level learners do definitely have higher English ability than that of middle-level or low-level learners. Similarly, high-level English learners have greater ambitions for their language learning. When goals that learners intend to achieve are too high, learners may be discouraged and get stuck in a bottleneck, resulting in the decline of self-perceived level of the ideal self. On the contrary, the pressure from work and society may urge learners to study harder and narrow the discrepancy. The mean value of WTC is 3.74, which is in the upper-middle range. The result is in harmony with most studies (Lee & Lee, 2020; Noraini, 2020; Lee & Lu, 2021; Li & Liu, 2021), and there is an indication that students are still willing to communicate with others in English when it is necessary.

TABLE 1  
DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF PARTICIPANTS' L2MSS AND WTC

Variables	Mean	Std. deviation	Minimum	Maximum
IS (N=120)	3.83	0.51	2.17	5.00
OS (N=120)	2.88	0.71	1.17	5.00
LE (N=120)	3.30	0.60	1.83	5.00
WTC (N=120)	3.74	0.49	2.64	5.00

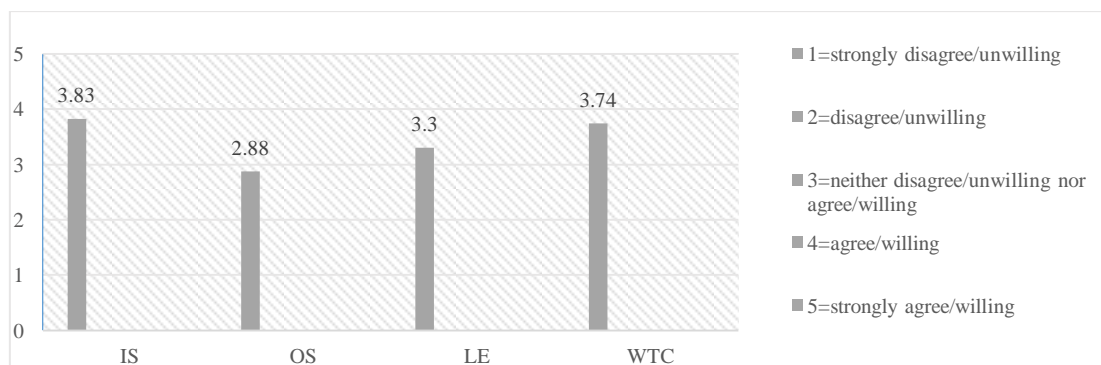


Figure 2 Histogram of Self-perceived Levels of Participants' L2MSS and WTC

However, as shown in Figure 2, students fail to have strong motivation to learn English and are unwilling to speak English with others (Mean<4). This result can be explained by the "scores first theory" (Scores of examinations are put before everything). English, as one of the main subjects in the college entrance examination, accounts for 150 points, which makes teachers and parents pay special attention to students' scores and put pressure on them. As time goes by, it

will trigger students' rebellious thoughts, make students tired of English and even lose interests in English, thus leading to a decline of self-perceived level of the ideal self. Besides, students will resent learning English as obligations and responsibilities imposed on them, and their mean value of ought-to self will naturally decrease. Excessive emphasis on grades in teaching may bring bad learning experience to students because some teachers get students' scores promoted by means of harsh punishments. In this way, the mean value of learning experience will also reduce. At the same time, the "scores first theory" has also formed unhealthy atmosphere in China that English learning only needs to get high marks in the exam and there is no need to improve oral English. In the long run, the WTC of students will be weakened, and the mean value of WTC will be also on the decrease.

#### B. Correlation Between Participants' L2MSS and WTC

TABLE 2  
CORRELATION ANALYSIS OF L2MSS AND WTC

Variables	IS	OS	LE	WTC
IS	1			
OS	.225*	1		
LE	.400**	.273**	1	
WTC	.498**	.247**	.593**	1

a. \*\*:  $P < .01$

b. \*:  $P < .05$

Table 2 demonstrates that there are significant positive correlations among the three factors in the L2MSS, among which, the correlation between learning experience and ideal self is the largest, with a coefficient value of 0.400. To be specific, the better the learning experience of participants is, the better students' future self-expectation will be, and vice versa. There is a significant positive correlation between ought-to self and ideal self, and the coefficient value is 0.225. It implies that light pressure is conducive to improve students' future self-expectation. However, results of Lee & Lu (2021) manifested a very significant negative correlation between college students' ought-to self and ideal self ( $P < .01$ ). This interpretation may be a result of the educational system of South Korea. Main drives of students to learn English in high school is to get a good score in college entrance examination. Coupling with too much emphasis on test scores from teachers and parents, students will get a sense of weariness in the learning process. As a result, students lose interest in learning English, try every means to get higher scores and lose vision for a better self. This kind of emotion has extended to their college years, the result mentioned above coming into being.

From Table 2, learning experience correlates to ought-to self positively in a significant way, with a coefficient of 0.273, indicating that the better students' learning experience in the process of language learning is, the weaker their resistance to teachers and parents' requirements is. It also turns out to be that there are significant positive correlations between L2MSS and WTC, among which, learning experience and WTC are most strongly correlated, with a correlation value of 0.593. If learners have good learning experience that they are appreciated and motivated by teachers in the learning process, they will gain more fun in English learning. In this way, students' self-perceived levels of the ideal self and the WTC will also be enhanced.

This study finds that learning experience has the strongest correlation with ideal self, ought-to self, as well as WTC. Good learning experience will enhance students' interest and give play to their subjective initiative in learning English, thus helping them narrow the discrepancy between their actual selves and ideal selves, and reducing their resistance to various learning tasks and requirements. It can be seen from the above results that the three factors in the L2MSS are significantly correlated with WTC, but it does not mean that the three factors in the L2MSS can significantly predict the intensity of WTC. This conclusion must be drawn through regression analysis.

#### C. Predictive Roles of Participants' L2MSS in WTC

Table 3 displays that the regression model is fantastic ( $R^2 = 0.421$ ), suggesting that the values can reflect the L2MSS's predictive effects on WTC in a real and reliable way, and there is no multicollinearity among the three variables ( $VIF < 5$ ). Table 3 also indicates that the regression equation is significant ( $F = 27.793$ ,  $P < 0.001$ ). In other words, there is at least one variable that can significantly affect the dependent variable, namely, WTC. Among three variables, ideal self significantly affects WTC ( $\beta = 0.293 > 0$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ); learning experience also significantly affect WTC ( $\beta = 0.370 > 0$ ,  $P < 0.05$ ). In short, this study finds that ideal self and learning experience both have positive predictive effects on WTC in a significant way, while ought-to self has no predictive effect. The predictive effect of learning experience is consistent with the result of previous study (Wei, 2020), but the predictive effects of ideal self and ought-to self are quite different. Wei revealed that students' ideal self cannot significantly predict WTC, while ought-to self has a significant negative predictive effect on WTC.

TABLE 3  
REGRESSION ANALYSIS FOR VARIABLES PREDICTING WTC

Model	Unstandardized coefficients $\beta$	Std. Error	Standardized coefficients Beta	t	Significance	VIF
(Constant)	1.288	0.283		4.549	.000	
IS	0.293	0.074	0.304	3.956	.000	1.211
OS	0.038	0.051	0.054	0.743	.459	1.100
LE	0.370	0.063	0.456	5.867	.000	1.242
R <sup>2</sup>					0.421	
F					27.793	
P					<0.001	

a. Dependent variable: WTC

There are three main reasons for the different results. First, involved participants have different independent initiative. Wong (2018) found that students' past L2 achievements would significantly affect their formation of current ideal selves and ought-to selves and regulate their behaviors. The participants of this study are freshmen in English majors. Most of them apply for these majors voluntarily, and their English in college entrance examination is fairly excellent. Therefore, their self-perceived level of the ideal self in this study may be higher than that of non-English majors in Wei's study. The results in Table 2 show that the ideal self is positively and significantly correlated with learning experience, so it can be inferred that their self-perceived level of learning experience in this study may be higher than that of non-English majors. The better learning experience is, the easier it is to accept the various learning tasks assigned by the teacher and the learning requirements put forward by the teacher. In the long term, the learners will regard them as daily habits, and the WTC of the learners will not be significantly affected, thus obtaining the results of this study. However, most students of non-English majors just take English as a common compulsory course and a task to complete. External motivation can be responsible for their foreign language learning. When the external pressure from teachers exceeds the maximum students can bear, it will cause a sense of weariness in the learning process, giving rise to the decrease of self-perceived level of ideal self. Although the ideal self can positively predict the WTC, the effect of the ideal self on the WTC is negligible when the level of ideal self is too low. For this reason, the students' WTC will not be significantly affected. Currently, college English teaching in China puts more emphasis on listening, writing and grammar, and plays down the importance of oral English (Wei, 2020). Therefore, ought-to self has a significant negative predictive effect on the WTC of non-English major students.

Second, there are different training objectives for students of English majors and non-English majors. For one thing, the training objective of non-English majors is to enable students to have a certain English ability to cope with some academic problems in their field or make daily conversations with others. External motivation makes more contributions to their English learning. For another, the training objective of English majors requires students to be able to think critically and dialectically in their English learning and spread Chinese culture across the world. In their learning process, students' ideal self construction will be emphasized by teachers. Third, gender differences can account for the different results. Most of the participants in this study are female students, who are highly sensitive to language. Their language learning depends more on internal motivation rather than external motivation driven by ought-to self. The research participants of Wei's study are mostly male students majoring in science majors, their language learning being driven by external motivation.

## V. CONCLUSION

This study investigates the relationships between the L2MSS and the WTC among students of English majors. The results show that students' self-perceived levels of L2MSS and WTC are above the middle range (Mean>2.5). All three factors in the L2MSS are positively correlated with the WTC, but only learning experience and ideal self can significantly predict the WTC. Therefore, in order to better strengthen students' WTC, teachers can help students establish a positive ideal self in the teaching process, so that it can become a strong driving force for students to learn English. In addition, teachers should show more solicitude for students in the teaching process and build a good teacher-student relationship, which may better enhance students' willingness to communicate in English.

Although the results of this study shed light on the relationships between the L2MSS and the WTC, there is still much room for improvements in this study, which needs to be further optimized in the follow-up studies. Firstly, learners' learning motivation and willingness to communicate are in a dynamic process of constant change, and the linear research methods adopted in this study cannot foreground this changing process. Secondly, the sample size of this study is too small to fully reflect the characteristics of learners.

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