2 Future Self-Guides and Vision

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Introduction

Recent theorising on second language (L2) motivation has introduced two new terms, ‘future self-guides’ and ‘vision’. They refer to interrelated concepts that have partly emerged from a continuous line of research on L2 motivation that goes back to Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert’s pioneering study in 1959, but which also added new twists to the traditional conceptualisations: future self-guides drew attention to the importance of one’s self-concept in understanding motivational dispositions, while vision highlighted the potential significance of mental imagery – and especially future self-images – in energising goal-specific behaviour. This chapter describes the two concepts and discusses how they are related to each other.

Future Self-Guides

A person’s self-concept has traditionally been seen as the summary of the individual’s self-knowledge related to how the person views him/herself (Dörnyei, 2009). One specific aspect of this complex notion has been identified as particularly relevant to motivation researchers: the future dimension of the self-concept, that is, not so much how people view themselves in the present as how they imagine themselves in the future. In a seminal paper, Markus and Nurius (1986) labelled the mental representations associated with this future dimension as ‘possible selves’ and distinguished three main types depending on the overall quality of the imagined future selves: they can represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become and what they are afraid of becoming.

Projected future self-states have a strong motivational impact (cf. Markus & Nurius, 1987), and this motivational function was made explicit by Higgins’s (1987, 1998) self-discrepancy theory. Higgins focused
only on two types of possible selves, the *ideal self*, referring to the characteristics that someone would ideally like to possess, subsuming hopes, aspirations and wishes, and the *ought self*, referring to the attributes that one believes one ought to possess, subsuming someone’s sense of personal or social duties, obligations or responsibilities. Higgins then argued that people have a feeling of unease when there is a discrepancy between their actual real-life self and their aspirered future self. This psychological tension, in turn, spurs the desire for action towards reducing the gap, and it thus becomes a potent source of motivation. In this sense, possible selves act as ‘future self-guides’, reflecting a dynamic, forward-pointing conception that can explain how someone is moved from the present towards the future.

The L2 Motivational Self System

I have described elsewhere how L2 motivation research reached a stage when past traditions could be meaningfully fused with lessons learnt about future self-guides in social psychology (e.g. Dörnyei, 2009, 2010; see also Csízér & Dörnyei, 2005), resulting in a tripartite construct, the L2 Motivational Self System. This is partly an application of possible selves theory to second language acquisition contexts, proposing the L2 equivalents of the ideal and ought selves:

- **Ideal L2 self**: if the person we would like to become speaks an L2 (e.g. the person we would like to become is associated with travelling or doing business internationally), the ideal L2 self is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because we would like to reduce the gap between our actual and ideal selves.

- **Ought-to L2 self**, which concerns L2-related 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.

However, besides these two sources of L2 motivation – that is, the learner’s internal desire to become an effective L2 user and social pressures coming from the learner’s environment to master the L2 – the L2 Motivational Self System also includes a third main component to reflect the main findings of motivation research in the 1990s, which highlighted the motivational significance of the immediate learning situation in which the mastery of the L2 occurred:

- **L2 learning experience**, which concerns situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g. the positive impact of success, the rapport between teachers and students or the enjoyable quality of a language course).

Thus, the new approach concerned two future self-guides associated with imagined experience and a third constituent rooted in actual experience. Over the past five years, several studies have validated this broad tripartite construct (e.g. the papers in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, as well as Busse, 2013; Csízér & Lukács, 2010; Henry, 2009, 2010, 2011; Hiver, 2013; Islam et al., 2013; Kormos et al., 2011; Lamb, 2012; Magid, 2009; Papi, 2010; Papi & Teimouri, 2012), confirming the overall explanatory power of the model, with the ideal L2 self, in particular, playing a substantive role as a future self-guide in determining motivated behaviour.

Conditions for the Motivating Capacity of Future Self-Guides

A key aspect of the L2 Motivational Self System is the recognition that although future self-guides have the capacity to motivate action, this does not always happen automatically: in many cases, the desire to learn the L2 that has been generated by constructive future self-images fails to be realised in actual action. Therefore, Dörnyei (2005) has proposed a number of key conditions that need to be in place for future self-guides to be able to exert their motivational impact. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) offer the following list of the main prerequisites:

- The learner *has* a desired future self-image. People differ in how easily they can generate a successful possible self, and therefore, not everyone is expected to possess a developed ideal or ought-to self-guide.

- The future self is sufficiently different from the current self. If there is no observable gap between current and future selves, no increased effort is felt necessary and no motivation emerges.

- The future self-image is elaborate and vivid. People vary in the vividness of their mental imagery, and a possible self with insufficient specificity and detail may not be able to evoke the necessary motivational response.

- The future self-image is perceived as plausible. Possible selves are effective only insofar as the individual does indeed perceive them as possible, that is, realistic within the person’s individual circumstances. Thus, a sense of controllability (i.e. the belief that one’s action is conceivable and can make a difference) is an essential prerequisite.

- The future self-image is not perceived as comfortably certain to reach, that is, within one’s grasp. The learner must not believe that the
possible self will happen automatically, without a marked increase in expended effort.

- The future self-image is in harmony – or at least does not clash – with other parts of the individual’s self-concept (e.g., a conflict between the ideal and the ought-to selves), particularly with expectations of the learner’s family, peers or other elements of the social environment.

- The future self-image is accompanied by relevant and effective procedural strategies that act as a roadmap towards the goal. Once our vision generates energy, we need productive tasks into which to channel this energy or it will ebb away.

- The future self-image is regularly activated in the learner’s working self-concept. Possible selves can be squeezed out of someone’s working self-concept by other contenders for attention and will therefore become relevant for behaviour only if they are primed by frequent and varied reminders.

- The desired future self-image is offset by a counteracting feared possible self in the same domain. Maximal motivational effectiveness is achieved if the learner also has a vivid image about the negative consequences of failing to achieve the desired end state.

It has become clear over the past few years that these conditions are not just additional corollaries of the new conceptualisation of L2 motivation but also form an integral part of it because without them the three primary motivational dimensions lose their motivational capacity (for a discussion, see Dörnyei, 2009). Furthermore, it has also been realised that the summary of the necessary conditions carries considerable practical significance: the conditions outline in effect a principled novel approach for teachers to motivate their students by ensuring that the conditions are met, a point I will come back to in the concluding section of this chapter.

Vision

A key aspect of future self-guides – one that has also been emphasized with regard to the L2 Motivational Self System – is that they involve images and senses; as Markus and Nurius (1986) stated, possible selves are represented in the same imaginary and semantic way as the here-and-now self, that is, they are a reality for the individual: people can 'see' and 'hear' their possible future self (see also Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). This means that, in many ways, possible selves are similar to dreams and visions about oneself. Indeed, Markus and Nurius (1987: 59) confirm, ‘Possible selves encompass within their scope visions of desired and undesired end states’ – thus, possible selves can be seen as the ‘vision of what might be’. The use of the term ‘vision’ has not been restricted to possible selves theory in the social sciences but has been applied widely to refer to a variety of diverse contexts and areas, including the popular media, so much so that van der Helm (2009: 96) actually talks about ‘the vision phenomenon’ to cover ‘the ensemble of claims and products which are called “visions” or could be called as such’. In his insightful analysis, he distinguishes between seven different types of vision: religious, political, humanistic, business/organisational, community, public policy and personal visions. Within these contexts, he argues, the actual meaning of vision is fairly homogeneous, capturing three defining aspects: (1) the future, (2) the ideal and (3) the desire for deliberate change.

In agreement with the significance attached to vision in the social sciences, in our book-length overview of the theory and practice of language vision, we have expressed their belief that ‘vision is one of the single most important factors within the domain of language learning: where there is a vision, there is a way’ (Dörnyei & Kubanyiov, 2014). This, however, begs the question: if vision is such an important motivator of human behaviour, how does it relate to the notion of motivation in general? In fact, we could ask, should a vision-based approach replace previous motivational frameworks? The answer is no. We must realize that the plurality of motivational constructs in the psychological literature has to do with the multi-faceted nature of human behaviour and with the various levels of abstraction that we can approach human behaviour from. Motivation by definition subsumes every factor that impacts on human behaviour, and the range of potential motives that can initiate or modify our actions is vast: people might decide to do something for reasons as diverse as physical needs, financial benefits, moral or faith convictions, cognitive curiosity or because they like someone who already does it – the list is virtually endless. Various motivation theories in the past have highlighted different clusters of the vast array of potential motives in order to explain certain specific behavioural domains under focus, such as voting, mating, learning or working behaviours. In my summary of motivational techniques – Motivational Strategies in the Language Classroom (Dörnyei, 2001) – I surveyed a wide selection of diverse motives that are relevant to sustained learning behaviours in foreign language classes, and a focus on vision does not replace or invalidate the principles and procedures presented there.

The attraction of using ‘vision’ in our thinking of motivation is that it represents one of the highest-order motivational forces, one that is particularly fitting to explain the long-term, and often lifelong, process of mastering a second language. While the day-to-day realities of one’s L2 learning experience are the function of multiple factors related to diverse
aspects of the learning environment or the learner's personal life, the concept of vision offers a useful, broad lens to focus on the bigger picture, the overall persistence that is necessary to lead one to ultimate language attainment. In other words, while individuals pursue languages for a variety of purposes and an equally wide array of reasons keep their motivation alive, the vision of who they would like to become as second language users seems to be one of the most reliable predictors of their long-term intended effort.

Vision and Goals

A key question we need to address in order to understand the exact nature of vision is in what way it is dissimilar to a 'goal' – after all, goals also represent directional intentions to reach future states. Dörnyei and Kubanyiová (2014) argue that there is a qualitative difference between the two concepts: unlike an abstract, cognitive goal, a vision includes a strong sensory element – it involves tangible images related to achieving the goal. Thus, for example, the vision of becoming a doctor exceeds the abstract goal of earning a medical degree in that the vision involves the individual actually seeing him/herself receiving the degree certificate or practising as a qualified doctor. That is, the vision to become a doctor also involves the sensory experience of being a doctor. More generally, the main feature of a vision is that it subsumes both a desired goal and a representation of how the individual approaches or realises that goal. In this sense, a vision can be understood as a personalised goal (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989) that the learner has made his/her own by adding to it the imagined reality of the actual goal experience. Talking about the vision of an organisation, Levin (2000: 95) articulates this sensory element when she says that effective visions 'should outline a rich and textual picture of what success looks like and feels like'. She goes on to say that a vision 'should be so vivid as to enable the listener or reader to transport himself or herself to the future, so to speak, to witness it and experience it'.

Vision and Imagery

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a vision is 'a vivid mental image, especially a fanciful one of the future'. Mental imagery, which is the technical term for the phenomenon used in psychology, is a relatively unknown concept in L2 studies, even though it has been highlighted in various areas of L2 learning in past few decades, for example in grammar teaching (Gerngross et al., 2006), vocabulary learning (Cohen, 1987; Ellis & Beaton, 1995; Shen, 2010; Stevick, 1986), reading (Arnold, 1999; Green & Donahue, 2009; Krasny & Sadoski, 2008), writing (Wright & Hill, 2008) and listening comprehension (Center et al., 1999). The concept refers to generating mental representations of perceptual or emotional experiences and situations in the mind in multiple sensory modalities (visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory and gustatory) – in other words, it involves generating an imagined reality that we can see, hear, feel and taste. This quasi-perceptual experience is often described in everyday parlance as 'visualising' or 'seeing in the mind's eye' (a term originally coined by Shakespeare in Hamlet) or 'hearing in the head' or 'imagining the feel of'.

From a neurobiological perspective, all imagery falls under the broad category of 'mental simulation', because the mental processes involved in it emulate the neural processes that would actually operate if the person were in the simulated scenario (Mouton & Kosslyn, 2009). Interestingly, neurobiological research has confirmed that mental imagery relies to a large extent on the same neural mechanisms and pathways as actual perception, and studies of brain damage have also shown that such injuries often produce parallel deficits in imagery and in perception (Reisberg & Heuer, 2008). That is, to put it broadly, the brain cannot tell the difference between an actual physical event and the vivid imagery of the same event (Cox, 2012). For this reason, the principled manipulation of mental imagery lends itself to versatile applications in a range of diverse areas and can be used for the purpose of preparation, repetition, elaboration, intensification or modification of behaviours. For example, virtually all world-class athletes use guided imagery as an integral part of their training programme, because it is a well-documented fact in sports psychology that imagery can be used for mentally practising specific performance skills, improving confidence, controlling anxiety, preparing for competitive situations and enhancing actual performance (cf. Morris et al., 2005). Similarly, imagery is a basic tool in psychoanalysis and other forms of psychotherapy (e.g. Katz, 2000; Singer, 2006), and successful applications of imagery techniques have also been reported in various educational contexts (e.g. Berkovits, 2005; Clark & Pajaro, 1991; Murphy, 1987).

The stimulatory nature of mental imagery is at the heart of its potency. Learners with a vivid and detailed ideal self-image that has a substantial L2 component are more likely to be motivated to take action in pursuing language studies than their peers who have not articulated a desired future goal state for themselves. Until recently, there has been rather limited research in this area within the L2 literature. Some validation of the imagery-motivation link has been offered by recent intervention studies in which various possible selves enhancement activities were employed to facilitate future identity formation and to strengthen students' future self-images (Fukada et al., 2011; Jones, 2012; Magid & Chan, 2012; Sampson, 2012; see also Chapters 18, 19 and 20 of this volume). These have consistently reported that most participants have found
visualisation tasks focusing on their future self-guides motivating, and they tended to invest more effort in language learning as a result of the programme, thereby attesting to the impact of the treatment.

**Imagery Capacity and Sensory Preferences**

Besides the intervention studies mentioned above, the connection between imagery skills and future self-guides has been examined by another line of inquiry over the past five years that investigated the motivational relevance of imagination and sensory preferences (e.g. visual style). First, a pilot study by Al-Shehri (2009) examined the relationship of L2 learners' visual learning style preferences and self-reported imaginative capacities with their motivation to test the hypothesis that learners who exhibit a visual learning style preference are more likely to possess a stronger capacity for visual imagery and imagination, and are therefore more likely to develop a stronger ideal L2 self than their visually less capable peers. In accordance with this hypothesis, the obtained results revealed strong positive associations between students' visual styles, imagination, ideal L2 selves and motivated L2 behaviour.

In subsequent large-scale studies in Korea, Kim (2009) and Kim and Kim (2011) confirmed the positive association between motivation, imagery capacity and sensory styles - both visual and auditory - suggesting that these are key components in the formation of a vivid ideal L2 self. Most recently, in a study of Hong Kong secondary school pupils studying two target languages, English and Mandarin, Dörnyei and Chan (2013: 494) have also found future self-guides to be associated with salient imagery/visualisation components, which, in their view, 'justifies the use of the term “vision” when referring to them'. They showed that vision is multisensory in nature, involving all the senses and not just visualisation. An important characteristic of the imagery skills involved was their language-independent nature, pointing to the conclusion that L2-related mental imagery is part of the more generic mechanisms underlying human vision rather than a function of specific target languages.

An additional result of the Dörnyei and Chan (2013) study was the finding that the two different target languages they studied were associated with distinct ideal language selves, thus forming distinct L2-specific visions. This added to the growing consensus in the field of L2 motivation research that coexisting ideal L2 self-images constitute fairly distinct L2-specific visions, which can then interfere with each other both in a positive way (e.g. transferable linguistic confidence from one language experience to the other) or in a negative, demotivating manner (e.g. competition for space in the working self-concept).

**Practical Implications and Future Directions**

Perceiving L2 motivation in terms of future self-guides and vision has considerable practical implications, because mental imagery is an important internal resource that can be intentionally harnessed (Sheikh et al., 2002; Taylor et al., 1998). We saw earlier that the motivational capacity of future self-guides is dependent on a number of key conditions, and therefore, the essence of any motivational practice in this vein is to create or enhance these conditions. Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) provide ample evidence that it is possible to devise varied classroom activities to train imagery skills, thereby helping students to generate personal visions supported by vivid and lively images and then to sustain this vision during the often challenging everyday reality of the language-learning process. As mentioned above, there have already been promising attempts to develop visionary training programmes (e.g. Fukada et al., 2011; Magid & Chan, 2012; Sampson, 2012) and teachers can also consult two available practical resource books for vision-enhancing classroom activities (Arnold et al., 2007; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013).

Regarding the future of self-guides and vision within the understanding of language learning motivation, I believe that there is considerable mileage in pursuing these lines of inquiry. Given that vision is one of the highest-order motivational constructs and that it transfers from one domain to another relatively freely (i.e. the vision to become a successful language learner is not that different in its underlying mechanisms from the vision to become, for example, an applied linguist), it seems a useful concept for addressing some of the ultimate Wh- questions of human behaviour. One particularly fruitful research direction is to investigate what kind of behavioural pathways are needed to be able to channel the energy generated by vision into human action. We know from sports psychology that successful athletes manage to match their highly developed imagery skills with corresponding training plans to good effect, and therefore, there is a strong likelihood that certain fitting combinations of visionary goals (i.e. future self-guides powered by mental imagery) and well-designed action sequences (i.e. learning plans) can generate powerful motivational currents that can be utilised to combat apathy and demotivation in diverse educational settings.

**References**


