

THE UNDERTHEORIZED CONCEPT OF DREAM IN THE MOTIVATIONAL DYNAMIC OF L2 LEARNERS

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Abstract: *The connection between dreams or imagination and motivation has been a central focus of theoretical and applied research, extending across disciplines such as psychology, sports, medicine, and education. In language learning, the integration of imagination into motivational strategies offers new possibilities for enhancing learner engagement. This paper explores the relationship between mental imagery and motivation, drawing from Markus and Nurius's concept of possible selves and Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System. The Ideal L2 Self, when anchored in vivid, realistic, and culturally aligned images, serves as a powerful motivator for language learners. Techniques such as guided imagery and mental simulation can promote this self-concept, aligning personal aspirations with actionable strategies and fostering resilience against challenges. By grounding motivational approaches in the learners' social context and personal potential, educators can empower students to envision and achieve their language goals, making learning more meaningful and transformative.*

Key Words: *imagination, motivation, l2 motivational self system, language learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

The link between dreams (imagination, imagery, mental pictures) and motivation has been recognised since antiquity. Aristotle described imagination as "sensation without matter," asserting that "there's no desiring without imagination [1]. He believed mental images in the soul motivate human action as powerfully as the physical presence of desired or feared objects. This understanding resonates with modern definitions of mental imagery. Kosslyn et al. [2] define it as the ability to represent perceptual states without sensory input, noting that mental images activate approximately two-thirds of the same brain areas as visual perception. Such findings provide a neurological foundation for Markus and Ruvolo's [3] argument that imagining actions through elaborated possible selves facilitates the transition of goals into intentions and actions.

Wenger [4] also emphasised imagination's transformative nature, describing it as expanding beyond current realities to create new visions of self and the world. He likened it to seeing a tree in an apple seed or envisioning a concert hall while practising scales. This capacity for visualization is crucial in various domains, particularly sports psychology, where research, inspired by Paivio's [5] model, consistently shows that mental imagery improves performance.

Markus and Nurius's [6] concept of possible selves underscores imagination's motivational power. Markus [7] highlighted how imagining one's future self energizes actions and buffers against daily challenges. This imaginative work, she argued, aligns with cultural narratives such as the American Dream, where envisioning and striving for better futures are celebrated. She noted that "if you dream it, you can become it" is a guiding principle in many cultural contexts, emphasising imagination's universal role:

"In the U.S., it is both a birthright and a moral imperative to tailor one's personal version of the American Dream. The notion that one should "dream on", keep the dream alive," and that "if you dream it, you can become it" is a critical element in the world's cultural imagination about the U.S. People across a wide array of contexts are capable and willing to generate possible selves" [7].

Boyatzis and Akrivou [8] extended this idea, stating that humanity's progress has been driven by the ability to imagine desired futures. They observed that shared images inspire individuals and societies toward growth and intentional change, impacting social organization beyond the individual level. As the following quote reveals, they consider that imagery has played a significant role in the entire history of the human race:

"Throughout the history of mankind, humans are driven by their imagination and their ability to see images of the desired future. Leaders, poets, writers, composers, artists, dreamers, and athletes have been able to be inspired, stay inspired and inspire others through such images. These images, once shared, have the power to become a force, and in that sense an inspiration for social development and growth, for intentional change at many levels of social organization, not just for the individual" [8].

Thus, integrating imagination into theories of motivation, such as Markus and Nurius's [6] work on possible selves, highlights its central role in fostering both personal and collective development.

2. PART ONE

Language learning is a long-term, often challenging process characterized by fluctuations in progress. It seems that successful learners possess a superordinate vision that helps them stay focused and motivated. This parallels the experiences of professional athletes, whose achievements are frequently driven by imagery and visualization. Gould et al. [9] describe how imagery training for athletes aims to improve the vividness and controllability of their mental imagery. Exercises range from simple tasks, such as imagining the details of one's bedroom, to complex scenarios involving the manipulation of detailed image sequences. However, the authors emphasize that imagery is a skill requiring consistent practice to achieve proficiency [9].

Imagery is also a valuable tool in psychotherapy. Techniques vary from the “positive imagery approach,” which uses pleasant, relaxing images to alleviate anxiety, to systematic desensitization by behaviourists, or guided imagery for treating issues such as anorexia and childhood phobias [10], [11]. In medicine, guided imagery has been identified as one of the top 10 most recommended complementary therapies for cancer [12], and it has even been successfully used for conditions like acne [13].

In education, imagery shows significant potential. Taylor et al. [14] found that mental simulation helped university students prepare for exams, while Berkovits [15] highlighted its benefits for children. According to Berkovits, using imagery to address challenges helps children develop autonomy and confidence, improving their relationships, problem-solving skills, and even verbal abilities. Clear and vivid images translate into clearer and more precise expressions, making imagery a powerful educational tool [15].

This extensive body of research demonstrates the effectiveness of imagery across diverse fields. In applied linguistics, however, a systematic review of these techniques is needed to explore their potential in fostering L2 motivation and helping learners envision mastering a foreign language. Arnold et al. [16] have made an important initial step toward incorporating mental imagery into the L2 classroom. While the specifics of a comprehensive “language vision program” remain to be developed, the potential is clear. As Singer [11] asserts, “Our capacity for imagery and fantasy can indeed give us a kind of control over possible futures.”

Reinterpreting L2 motivation through the L2 Motivational Self System introduces innovative strategies to inspire language learners, particularly by fostering the Ideal L2 Self through the cultivation of a language learning vision and enhancing imagery. Unlike the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self—rooted in external expectations from friends, family, and other authorities—does not readily lend itself to motivational practices. Similarly, while the third component, the L2 Learning Experience, offers various techniques to boost motivation, these strategies are yet to be elaborated. The motivational approaches associated with the Ideal L2 Self serves to complement these established techniques.

The Ideal L2 Self becomes a strong motivator when certain conditions are met: (1) the learner has a clear and desired future self-image, (2) this image is vivid and well-developed, (3) it feels achievable and aligns with the expectations of the learner's social environment, (4) it is consistently activated in the learner's self-concept, (5) it is supported by actionable and effective strategies for achieving the goal, and (6) it includes a detailed awareness of the negative outcomes of failing to realize the desired future. Points (1–4) are unique to the self-based approach, while the last two reflect broader motivational and instructional principles that align with traditional teaching practices. Specifically, point (5) focuses on creating realistic action plans, and point (6) emphasizes the importance of coordinating both positive aspirations and aversion to negative consequences to drive motivation effectively.

To ignite this vision, educators must help students recognize the importance of ideal selves, guide them in exploring their past possible selves, and present influential role models. Oyserman et al. [17]. highlight the value of helping students integrate hypothetical self-images with their existing traits, abilities, and past experiences to build on their strengths while addressing their weaknesses. Alternatively, Sheldon and Lyubomirsky's [18]. “Best Possible Selves” writing exercise asked students to describe their ideal future lives in vivid detail, offering another way to engage learners with their desired selves.

Possible selves are effective motivators only when individuals perceive them as achievable within their specific circumstances. According to expectancy-value theories of motivation, the stronger the belief in the likelihood of attaining a goal, the greater the individual's motivation to pursue it. Conversely, if people believe success is unattainable regardless of effort, they are unlikely to invest energy in the task [19]). This principle also applies to ideal self-images: for these images to sustain motivation, they must be grounded in realistic expectations. Effective self-images blend imagination with a sense of reality, creating a unique mix of aspiration and plausibility. As Pizzolato [20] explains, “The relation between what students want to become and what students actually become may be mediated by what students feel they are able to become (i.e., expected possible selves).”

In Oyserman et al.'s [21] self-oriented training program, the reality component was integrated into desired self-images by asking students to draw role models and identify negative forces. This exercise conveyed the underlying message that obstacles and challenges are part of everyone's journey, but they do not diminish the authenticity of possible selves. In subsequent sessions, students created timelines with future milestones, obstacles, and critical decision points, reinforcing this idea. Similarly, the “Possible Selves Tree” program developed by Hock et al. [22] incorporated a reflective element called “Reflecting,” which encouraged students to assess the state of their Possible Selves Tree and recognize the importance of nurturing it. The authors noted that this process helped students believe they could succeed in school and life. By viewing learning as a pathway to achieving their hopes and avoiding feared

outcomes, students found education more relevant and were more willing to invest effort and commit to their goals [22].

The effectiveness of possible selves depends on whether individuals perceive them as achievable within their unique circumstances. According to expectancy-value theories of motivation, the stronger the belief in the likelihood of attaining a goal, the greater the individual's motivation to pursue it. Conversely, when people believe success is unattainable despite their efforts, they are unlikely to dedicate energy to the task [19]. This concept also applies to ideal self-images; to sustain motivation, these images must be grounded in realistic expectations. They require a balance between imagination and plausibility, blending aspiration with a sense of feasibility. As Dörnyei explains [19], the connection between a learner's aspirations and their actual achievements may hinge on their perception of what they realistically believe they can accomplish, also known as expected possible selves. This interplay between desire and belief is crucial for motivating sustained effort.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Imagination is an integral component of motivation, offering a bridge between abstract goals and tangible actions. Across various fields, from sports to psychotherapy, the conscious use of imagery has proven effective in fostering performance, resilience, and growth. This principle is equally applicable to language learning, where motivation is critical for navigating the often long and challenging path to proficiency.

The L2 Motivational Self System provides a robust framework for integrating imagination into language learning. Its focus on the Ideal L2 Self underscores the motivational power of vivid and realistic self-images. These images not only inspire learners to strive for their goals but also provide a sense of purpose and direction. The success of such imagery-driven approaches hinges on their alignment with learners' social environments, their integration into daily self-concepts, and the development of actionable plans to bring these images to fruition.

Practical strategies such as guided imagery exercises, reflective activities, and role model presentations offer promising pathways for fostering the Ideal L2 Self. Programs like [21] self-oriented training and Hock et al.'s [22] "Possible Selves Tree" demonstrate how structured interventions can help learners connect aspirations with achievable steps. By incorporating similar methods into language education, educators can create a more engaging and effective learning environment.

In conclusion, imagination is not merely a cognitive tool but a transformative force capable of inspiring sustained effort and growth. By leveraging the power of imagery and fostering the Ideal L2 Self, language educators can empower learners to overcome challenges, visualize success, and translate their dreams into actionable outcomes. Such approaches not only enhance individual learning experiences but also contribute to a broader understanding of motivation as a dynamic and imaginative process.

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