Lots of Selves, some rebellious: Developing the Self Discrepancy Model for Language Learners

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This article extends the currently dominant model for motivation in second language learning (L2 motivation), namely Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). It does so in a three-phase analysis, first returning to the origin of the L2MSS, namely Higgins’ (1987) Self Discrepancy Theory (SDT), secondly reviewing evidence from L2 empirical studies focusing on Anglophones learning a L2. Thirdly, novel data is applied to the proposed extended model. Analyses of L2 motivational studies suggest that some learner groups such as Anglophone L2 learners – a learner group operating under considerable challenges in the context of Global English (Di Bianco 2014, Lanvers 2014) – do not offer good fit to the L2MSS, prompting researchers to seek alternatives to the L2MSS. A return to Higgins’ (1987) original SDT reveals more complexity than adopted in the L2MSS, the re-introduction of which might accommodate apparently incompatible learner profiles. Therefore, evidence of ‘non-fit’ is incorporated into a new model named Self Discrepancy Model for Language Learners, and then applied to new data (focus groups and interviews) from two different Anglophone learner groups: mature university and adolescent school students. The Self Discrepancy Model for Language Learners contributes to solutions of several problems raised in current discussion of L2 motivation: it provides a better fit of data seemingly incompatible with the L2MSS, accommodates a learner type labelled ‘rebellious’, offers a better account of wider contextual influences on motivation, and promises developmental insights on L2 motivation. The empirical data delivers on the first three goals, and offers provisional insights regarding the last.

Keywords: rebellious learner, Self Determination Theory, L2 motivation.