Influence of learner beliefs and gender on the motivating power of future L2 selves

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L2 motivational self-system theory is a widely used framework in motivation research. While many studies have confirmed the link between both ideal and ought-to selves and motivational intensity to learn the L2, little research has validated the theory using an objective measure of L2 proficiency. This study fills the gap by investigating not only the influence of ideal and ought-to L2 selves on intended effort to learn the language but also this link’s potential for predicting L2 proficiency (RQ1). In addition, we investigate as possible antecedents beliefs about effective teaching and learning methods – namely a communicative orientation and a grammar-translation orientation – L2 learners come to acquire through their learning history as well as the influence these beliefs may have on future selves (RQ2). Further, following Henry (2009), we explore the part gender differences may play in the processes investigated in RQs 1 and 2. (RQ3). A total of 2,242 university freshmen responded to a questionnaire designed to assess the following constructs: ideal self, ought-to self, intended learning effort, communicative orientation to L2 learning, and grammar-translation orientation to L2 learning. Proficiency was measured as scores on the ITP TOEFL test. Structural equation modeling (SEM) confirmed that stronger visions of ideal and ought-to selves lead learners to make greater effort, which in turn results in higher proficiency. It was also found that while a communicative orientation influences ideal L2 self more strongly than a grammar-translation orientation, the latter influences ought-to L2 self more strongly. Regarding gender differences, female respondents scored higher on ideal self, intended effort, proficiency, and communicative orientation. The results of multiple-group SEM revealed that the influence of ideal self on intended effort was stronger among female students than among male students, while the reverse was true of ought-to self.

Keywords: gender, L2 motivational self system, learner belief.