Role of learning context in the L2 motivational orientation: A comparative study of Chinese learners of English in EFL and ESL contexts

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Whereas L2 motivation has become one of the most extensively researched topics in the field of SLA over the past decade (Boo, Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015), the L2 Motivational Self System has been proposed and applied to many English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) contexts (Dörnyei, 2005). However, few researchers have examined the L2 Motivational Self System in an English-as-a-second-language (ESL) context. The crucial question is to what degree and how it differentially affects L2 learners’ motivational orientation in EFL and ESL learning environments.

The present quantitative study compared the L2 motivation profiles of Chinese learners of English at universities in China (n = 82 EFL learners) and in the United Kingdom (n = 64 ESL learners). Their motivation was measured by a questionnaire based on Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System. Significant differences were found in L2 motivational orientation between EFL and ESL learners. The intended learning efforts of EFL learners were mainly determined by the image of their idealized selves as competent users of English (the Ideal L2 Self), although they could not imagine it as clearly as ESL learners did. This was probably due to the bigger gap between EFL learners’ actual and idealized selves. In contrast, ESL learners’ intended learning efforts were mainly determined by the enjoyment and success of their L2 learning (L2 Learning Experience) (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

Taken together, the findings suggest that learning context (EFL vs. ESL) plays a significant role in determining L2 motivational orientation. This has strong pedagogical implications, namely that different motivational techniques should be applied to EFL and ESL learners.

Keywords: context influence, the L2 Motivational Self System, L2 motivation.