Dynamics of selves and motivation: a cross-sectional study in the EFL context of Iran

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Within the framework of the L2 motivational self system, the present study investigates the temporal evolution of the motivational characteristics of Iranian learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) across three different populations: secondary school, high school, and university students. The data were collected from a number of 1,041 Iranian learners of English using a questionnaire survey specifically developed to be used in the context of Iran. The ANOVA results of the study showed that the promotion-focus variables (i.e. the ideal L2 self, L2 learning experience, instrumentality-promotion, attitudes towards L2 culture and community) generally improved with age up to entry into university; on the other hand, the variables with a preventional regulatory focus (i.e. the ought-to L2 Self, family influence, instrumentality-prevention) declined with age. In addition, the results of the multiple-regression analyses showed that only variables with a promotional orientation predicted motivated learning behavior and the factors predicting motivation and the ideal L2 self were different from the factors associated with the ought-to L2 self. The results are discussed based on the socio-educational context of Iran. The study provides strong evidence for a dynamic perspective towards L2 motivation and possible L2 selves.

Keywords: L2 motivation, ideal L2 Self, age

پـویـایـی خـودهـا و انـگـیـزه: پـژوهشی چـندمقطعی در
بـسـتر انـگـلـیـسـی بـه عنـوان زبـان خـارجی ایـران
چکیده

بـا وجود آنکـه مطـالـعـات مـتـعـددی (مـثـلاً، دورنـیـه و یـوشیـدا،
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(دورنـیـه، 2005، 2009) تـأیـیـد نـموده امـا پـویـایـی ایـن نظریـه و
بخش‌هـای سـازنـدۀ آن (یـعـنی، خود مطـلـوب زبـان دوم، خود بـایـستی
زبـان دوم، نـگـرش بـه یـادگیـری زبـان انـگـلـیـسی) مـورد کـاوش
قـرار نـگـرفـتـه است. پـژوهش حـاضـر، در چـهـارچوب سـامـانۀ انـگـیـزشی
خود زبـان دوم،   بـه بـررسی تـغـیـیـرات زمـانمنـدِ ویـژگـی‌هـای

انگیزشی زبان‌آموزان ایرانی زبان انگلیسی در سه جامعۀ
آماری دانش آموزان مقطع راهنمایی، دانش‌آموزان مقطع
دبیرستان و دانشجویان می‌پردازد. داده‌های این پژوهش، با
استفاده از پرسشنامه‌ای که تنها به‌منظور استفاده در
ایران تهیه گشته، از میان 1041 زبان‌آموز انگلیسی گردآوری
گردید. به‌طور کلی، نتایج این پژوهش نشان می‌دهد در حالی
که متغیرهای ترفیع‌محور (یعنی، خودمطلوب زبان دوم، تجربۀ
یادگیری زبان دوم، ابزاری ترفیعی و نگرش به فرهنگ و
جامعۀ زبان دوم) با افزایش سن و ورود به دانشگاه افزایش
یافته، متغیرهای پیشگیری‌محور (یعنی، خودبایستی زبان دوم،
تأثیر خانواده، ابزاری پیشگیری) با افزایش سن کاهش می‌-
یابند. علاوه بر این، با توجه به نتایج تحلیل چندپسگرایی،
با وجود آنکه تقریباً متغیرهای یکسانی نمای انگیزشی زبان-
آموزان را شکل‌می‌دهد، نقش عوامل انگیزشی بررسی‌شده بر حسب
سن تغییر می‌کند؛ بنابراین، در تمامی گروه‌ها، خودمطلوب
زبان دوم و تجربۀ یادگیری زبان دوم تنها عواملی هستند که
رفتار انگیزشی زبان‌آموزان را به‌طور معناداری پیش بینی
می‌کنند. نتایج این مطالعه بر اساس بافت اجتماعی-آموزشی
ایران مورد بحث قرار می‌گیرد. این پژوهش شواهد مستدلی را
مبنی بر پویایی انگیزه و خودهای زبان دوم ارائه می‌کند.

کلیدواژه‌ها: انگیزه, نگرش, زبان دوم, خود مطلوب, ایران

Introduction

One of the major characteristics of highly motivated language learners is maintaining their motivational strength to perform an action over long periods of time. Such students not only initiate but also sustain the necessary and sufficient motivation for doing the intended action through to its completion. In order to understand the dynamics of motivation, especially to accomplish long-term actions such as learning a second language (L2), the temporal dimension of motivation should be thoroughly examined. This time aspect of motivation is especially prominent within the context of institutionalized learning, wherein students usually do not have much impact on the why, how, and what of their learning process and everything is already imposed on them. The students frequently encounter numerous demotivating obstacles and "the common experience would seem to be motivational flux rather than stability" (Ushioda 1996: 240). In such situations, sustaining effort and motivation during and across various educational periods seems to have a pivotal role in the learners' success in mastering a second language.

Another new trend in L2 motivation research is the introduction of the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei 2005; 2009) as an innovative reformation of the previous L2 motivation theories, which reframes language learning

motivation within the individual's concept of one's self. Several studies have recently been conducted to specifically test and validate the L2 motivational self system (e.g. Al-Shehri 2009; Csizér and Kormos 2009; Ryan 2009; Taguchi, Magid and Papi 2009; Papi 2010), and all have strongly confirmed the validity of the proposed framework. However, with the exception of the study conducted by Kormos and Csizér (2008), we are not aware of any research on the variation of L2 motivation over time within this framework. The present study is a response to Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2009) call for research on the temporal variation of motivation through the lens of the L2 motivational self system.

Research background

Prior to the 'cognitive revolution' in L2 motivation research in 1990s (see Dörnyei 2003a), the dynamic aspect of L2 motivation had almost gone unnoticed and we are only aware of three studies by Jones (1949), Gardner and Smythe (1975), and Massey (1986) on this topic. These studies generally showed that learners' attitudes and motivation change as a function of their age. As a result of the cognitive movement, nonetheless, a more situated approach which examined the mutual influences of the immediate learning context and L2 motivation gained momentum in the area and several researchers (e.g. Crooks and Schmidt 1991; Dörnyei 1994; Oxford and Shearin 1994) argued for the significance of the motives related to the learning environment such as L2 course, L2 teacher and L2 learner group.

In the light of the situated approach to L2 motivation, a number of researchers recognized this shortcoming and developed models to explain the dynamic features of L2 motivation. Williams and Burden (1997) and Dörnyei and Otto (1998) were among those who grasped the significance of this facet of motivation and proposed new models to transcend this limitation. In the first case, Williams and Burden (1997) distinguished three stages of motivation: reasons for doing something → deciding to do something → sustaining the effort, or persisting. They argued that the two first stages are more concerned with *initiating motivation*, whereas the last stage refers to *sustaining motivation*. In a more sophisticated study, Dörnyei and Otto (1998) drew on and synthesized different conceptualizations of L2 motivation within Heckhausen and Kuhl's (1985) action control theory so as to propose the process-oriented model of L2 motivation. This framework divides action sequence into three main phases: *preactional phase*, *actional phase*, and *postactional phase* (cf. Williams and Burden 1997). According to Dörnyei (2000), the preactional phase is the starting point of motivated behavior, when goals are set, intention is formed, and initiation of action is enacted. The actional phase deals specifically with the actual implementation of action. In this stage, learning subtasks are generated and implemented, the person's progress towards the intended outcome of the action is continuously appraised, and

self-regulatory mechanisms are called into force to enhance, scaffold, or protect learning-specific action. The postactional phase begins after the attainment of the goal or the termination (or long interruption) of the action and entails the evaluation of the outcome of the accomplished action and the contemplation of possible inferences to be drawn for future actions.

With the introduction of this comprehensive model, the general expectation was that the dynamic dimension of L2 motivation would be the topic of numerous empirical studies. However, we are only aware of a few studies that have dealt with this aspect of L2 motivation since the introduction of the process-oriented model (even though not necessarily inspired by it). In two qualitative studies, Ushioda (2001) and Shoaib and Dörnyei (2005) found support for the general argument in the literature that motivation is not a stable but a dynamic process that fluctuates over time. Recasting motivation in the cognitive domain of learner experience, Ushioda (2001: 122) concluded that motivation is viewed "not simply as cause or product of particular learning experiences, but as process – in effect, the ongoing process of how the learner thinks about and interprets events in relevant L2-learning and L2-related experience and how such cognitions and beliefs then shape subsequent involvement in learning".

A number of studies with similar aims were also conducted within the quantitative research paradigm. Williams, Burden and Lanvers (2002) investigated differences in 228 British students' motivation for learning French and German in Years 7 and 9. In brief, they found that the participants' motivation diminished as they got older. In a meta-analysis of the studies conducted by Gardner and his associates, Masgoret and Gardner (2003) treated age as the moderating effect on the relationship of L2 achievement to a number of attitudinal and motivational factors including attitudes toward learning situation, integrativeness, and motivation. The results, nonetheless, did not show such an effect from age. MacIntyre, Baker, Clément and Donovan (2002) investigated the motivational characteristics of the students in a junior high French immersion program and found that the students' level of L2 motivation dropped between Grades 7 and 8.

In recent years, in addition to the process perspective towards the L2 motivation, another innovative line of research has also begun with the introduction of the L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei 2005; 2009), to which we turn now.

The L2 motivational self system

Up until the cognitive revolution, L2 motivation theories lived in the shadow of Gardner's model of *integrative motive* as a motivational model that was grounded in the complex inter-ethnic and inter-cultural dynamics of the Canadian context as a multicultural setting. This construct was initially assumed to be a general positive orientation or an "outlook, reflecting a sincere

and personal interest in the people and culture represented by other group" (Gardner and Lambert, 1972: 132); later on, nonetheless, it came to be known as an inclusive umbrella term that was supposed to contain all or most of the attitudinal, cognitive-situational, and motivational variables believed to predict success or failure in second language learning (Gardner 1985). However, this model failed to meet the growing concerns expressed by second language acquisition researchers and was consequently refuted. Inapplicability to the educational contexts (e.g. Crooks and Schmidt 1991), failure to integrate the cognitive theories of learning motivation (e.g. Dörnyei 1994; Oxford and Shearin 1994), illegibility at the current age of globalization (e.g. Dörnyei and Csizér 2002; Lamb 2004; McClelland 2000), and inability to capture the complexity of the new conceptualizations of social identity (e.g. Norton 1995; McNamara 1997) were among the major limitations that led to the refutation of this model. Given the drawbacks in this framework, the way appeared quite well-paved for the introduction of a novel and comprehensive model "without contradicting the large body of relevant empirical data accumulated during the past four decades" (Dörnyei and Csizér 2002: 456). To this purpose, Dörnyei (2005; 2009) drew on and synthesized well-known paradigms from L2 motivation research (e.g. Ushioda 2001; Noels 2003), and motivational psychology (e.g. Higgins' *self-discrepancy theory* 1987; Markus and Nurius' *theory of possible selves* 1986), and proposed the L2 motivational self system as a model that has three main dimensions, namely, the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and English learning experience (for a comprehensive review see Dörnyei 2009).

The ideal L2 self, according to Dörnyei (2005: 106), is "the L2 specific aspect of one's ideal self". It represents an ideal image of the kind of L2 user one aspires to be in the future. If one desires to be a fluent L2 user who studies at an international university, for instance, one's imaginary picture of *self* as a fluent L2 user might act as a powerful motivator to reduce the discrepancy between one's actual self and this ideal image. The ought-to L2 self is the L2 specific aspect of one's ought-to self. This less-internalized aspect of the L2 self refers to the attributes that one believes one *ought to* possess (i.e. various duties, obligations, or responsibilities) (Dörnyei 2005). For instance, if a person wants to learn an L2 just to live up to the expectations of his/her parents, the ought-to L2 self can act as a motivator to become the self that is expected of him/her to be. The English learning experience concerns learner's attitudes toward learning English and can be affected by several situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience (e.g. curriculum, teacher, peer group, materials). Language learners' attitudes towards learning English are important in that "for some language learners the initial motivation to learn a language does not come from internally or externally generated self images but rather from successful engagement with the actual language learning process" (Dörnyei 2009: 29).

In a study relevant to the present work, Kormos and Csizér (2008) investigated the age-related differences in the motivational characteristics of

secondary school, university, and adult learners of English in Hungary. In that study, the ideal L2 self and English learning attitudes, in the L2 motivational self system, were found to be the main variables predicting motivated behavior in all the groups. They also uncovered some age-related differences concerning the measured variables. The university students demonstrated higher scores in the ideal L2 self and international posture than the two other groups; the older the students, the more positive their language learning attitudes turned out to be; and the secondary students were found to be significantly less motivated than the two older groups.

Research objectives and questions

Based on the above discussion, the present study examines the motivational characteristics of Iranian learners of English from three cohorts (secondary school, high school, university students) in terms of their ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, L2 learning experience, and motivated behavior. Two research questions are stated as follows:

1. Are there any significant differences between the participating age groups in terms of their ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, L2 learning experience, and motivated behavior?
2. What are the sources of differences between the participating age groups in terms of their ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, L2 learning experience, and motivated behavior, if any?

Method

Participants

The present work is a cross-sectional study that investigates three different populations of English learners from five cities in Iran including Tehran and four other cities situated at the central, western and northern parts of Iran. Language learners from three educational levels (secondary, high school, university) were chosen as three different age groups in our sample. A convenience sampling method (Dörnyei 2007) was followed to include an acceptable number of participants from each cohort. In total, 1,041 secondary school, high school, and university students participated in the study. The students were selected from educational centers located at different parts of the cities. In the case of university students, the participants were selected from four universities in Tehran. Hence the students admitted into each university in Iran come from different cities across the country, this type of selection just from one city, the capital, does not seem to negatively influence the variety of our participants within the university subsample.

Table 1. A description of the sub-samples of English learner populations

	Secondary students	High school students	University students	Total
Number	298	418	325	1041
Gender (M/F)	138/160	176/242	177/148	491/550
Age (mean/SD)	14/.65	15.5/1.08	20/2.64	16.4/2.96
Age range	12–16	15–18	18–25	12–25
Overseas experience	1.3%	4.1%	4%	3.3%
Native teacher	2.7%	7.9%	22.2%	10.9%
Learning English at institutes	3.7%	54.3%	17.2%	28.3%
Approximate proficiency level	Post-beginner	Pre-intermediate	Pre-intermediate	. . .

The descriptive statistics of the sample and the composing subsamples are presented in Table 1. As seen, the average age for the youngest group, the secondary school students, is 14 (SD = 0.65), 15.5 (SD = 1.08) for the high school students, and 20 (SD = 2.64) for the university students. The participants are roughly half male and half female. In addition, the students' self-reported level of English proficiency (rated on a six-point scale), their overseas experience, and their chance of having a native English teacher are quite low, adequately representing an EFL context.

Instrument

Following the procedures and guideline suggested by Dörnyei (2003b), a questionnaire was developed and translated to be used in the context of Iran. It was comprised of two major parts: the first part consisted of items measuring the learners' attitudes and motivation concerning English learning, and the second part consisted of questions about the learners' background information (e.g. gender, age, native English teacher experience, overseas experience, self-rated English proficiency level).

The main variables were selected on the basis of Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh's (2006) Hungarian studies (e.g. intended effort) and from the L2 motivational self system (ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and attitudes to learning English). Most of the items of the questionnaire were developed based on the studies previously conducted in Japan and China (see Taguchi et al. 2009), and some were newly developed to be specifically used in the Iranian context. Prior to the main administration, the questionnaire was piloted among 100 secondary school students (who were in the same age range as the youngest participants of the main study) and met acceptable psychometric standards.

The questionnaire adopted statement-type and question-type items; they were measured by six-point Likert scales with 1 showing *not at all* and 6 showing *very much* anchoring each end of the scale. In addition to the components of the L2 motivational self system, the following five factors were measured in the present study (for the specific items of each scale, see Appendix):

1. *Motivated behavior* assesses the learners' intended efforts to learn English;
2. *Instrumentality-promotion* measures L2 learners' personal orientation to approach the positive pragmatic outcomes associated with L2 learning (e.g. entering a university or finding a better job);
3. *Instrumentality-prevention* measures L2 learners' personal orientation to avoid the negative pragmatic outcomes associated with L2 learning (e.g. failing in an important examination or missing a good job opportunity);
4. *Attitudes to L2 culture and community* examines the learner's attitudes towards the target community and its cultural products such as TV programs, music and movies; and
5. *Family influence* examines the extent to which L2 learning is motivated by family pressure and/or encouragement.

Procedure

In order to make the participating sample as representative as possible, the present researchers attempted to include participants with diverse socioeducational backgrounds. They used their contacts to find participants from the selected cohorts, namely secondary school, high school and university students. In the case of remote towns, our colleagues were asked to co-operate. After being informed of their willingness to participate, we e-mailed them an electronic copy of the questionnaire along with an administration manual. The completed questionnaires were mailed back to us. The participants were assured that their responses would remain confidential, and they have the right to withdraw from the program at any moment. Completing the questionnaire took the participants 15 minutes on average. Finally, they were thanked.

Data analysis

The collected data was submitted to SPSS version 16 (IBM New York), for running statistical analyses. The items of the questionnaire were regrouped into eight multi-item scales and Cronbach alpha reliability coefficients of the scales were computed for each population separately (see Table 2).

Table 2. Reliability coefficient in the three subsamples for all the measured scales

Scales	Secondary students	High school students	University students
Ideal L2 self	0.74	0.79	0.83
Ought-to L2 self	0.65	0.77	0.83
Attitudes to learning English	0.80	0.87	0.81
Criterion measure	0.81	0.80	0.82
Family influence	0.67	0.67	0.72
Attitudes to culture and L2 community	0.80	0.85	0.86
Instrumentality-promotion	0.65	0.67	0.72
Instrumentality-prevention	0.67	0.79	0.83

Descriptive statistics analyses for the three age groups were then computed to capture an overall picture of the sample's characteristics. Following these preliminary analyses and in order to achieve the main objectives of the study, the major analyses were run: a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with Tukey post hoc tests, and multiple regression analyses. The ANOVA was run to see the differences among the age groups in terms of the three components of the L2 motivational self system as well as the remaining variables including motivated behavior. In order to answer the second research question regarding the way the participants' ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, English learning experience and motivated behavior are predicted by each other as well as by the other variables measured in the current study (i.e. instrumentality-promotion, instrumentality-prevention, attitudes to L2 culture and community, and family influence), multiple regression analysis for each of the groups was executed separately.

Results

As presented in Table 2, all the scales measured for each of the three subsamples showed reliability coefficients higher than 0.65, assuring us that further analyses could be performed with sufficient certainty. In this section, the results of ANOVA and multiple regression analysis for each age group are reported one by one.

ANOVA results

Although the main objective of the present study was to see the differences between the participating groups in terms of the constituent constructs of the L2 motivational self system and their motivated behavior, to get a clearer

Table 3. Descriptive statistics concerning the results of the three subsamples and the comparison of the three groups' scores

Scale	Sample	Mean	SD	F	Sequence
Ideal L2 self	Secondary	4.31	1.03	11.92	1 < 2, 3
	High school	4.64	1.01		
	University	4.66	0.96		
Ought-to L2 self	Secondary	3.54	0.99	10.17	3 < 1, 2
	High school	3.50	1.13		
	University	3.19	1.09		
Attitudes to learning English	Secondary	4.20	1.19	3.71	1 < 2
	High school	4.44	1.20		
	University	4.34	0.96		
Criterion measure	Secondary	4.48	1.08	3.61	3 < 2
	High school	4.58	1.01		
	University	4.38	0.99		
Family influence	Secondary	3.67	0.98	27.43	3 < 1, 2
	High school	3.66	0.91		
	University	3.20	0.89		
Attitudes to L2 community and culture	Secondary	3.93	1.26	23.71	1 < 2, 3
	High school	4.52	1.16		
	University	4.34	1.01		
Instrumentality-promotion	Secondary	4.55	0.89	14.76	1 < 2, 3
	High school	4.82	0.82		
	University	4.89	0.79		
Instrumentality-prevention	Secondary	4.48	0.92	86.49	3 < 2 < 1
	High school	4.07	1.10		
	University	3.39	1.07		

Numbers refer to the subsamples: 1 = secondary school students; 2 = high school students; 3 = university students. "<" and ">" indicate significant difference and comma denotes no significant difference. In the Sequence column, where a number standing for one of the groups is not present in a crossed row (e.g. the number 1 in the criterion measure sequence box), it means that there is no significant difference between that group (here, secondary students) and the reported ones in terms of the respective variable.

picture of our findings, the results for the other measured variables are also reported here. The ANOVA results, presented along with the means and standard deviations of the variables in Table 3, showed significant differences between the participating subsamples in terms of the measured variables (i.e. ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, English learning experience, motivated behavior, instrumentality-promotion, instrumentality-prevention, and attitudes to L2 culture and community).

Concerning the age-related variations of the ideal L2 self, as shown in Table 3, whereas the ideal L2 self that the university students had developed

(M = 4.66, SD = 0.96) did not show any significant difference from that of the high school students, these two groups had significantly higher scores than the secondary school students. The connection between the ought-to L2 self and age, however, showed a different pattern with the direction of differences being almost reversed. The two younger groups of participants – the secondary and the high school students – had significantly higher scores than the university students. Regarding the more situation-specific variable of the study, English learning experience, the results were rather similar to those of the ideal L2 self. Whereas the university students did not show any significant difference from the two other groups, the high school students were found to have significantly more positive attitudes toward English learning than the secondary students.

In terms of instrumentality-promotion and attitudes toward the L2 culture and community, the students' scores consistently increased with age although in both cases the differences between the high school and secondary students were not significant. Instrumentality-prevention and family influence moved in the opposite direction and constantly declined with age although in the latter the difference between the secondary and the high school students was not statistically significant. Finally, while the amount of effort the secondary students intended to put into learning English was not different from that of the two other groups, the high school students were found to be significantly more ready than the university students to make such an investment.

Regression results

In the next phase of our data analysis, standard multiple regression analyses were run and each of the four main variables of the study – ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, English learning experience, and motivated behavior – was in turn chosen as the dependant variable in order to answer our second research question.

The results of the multiple regression analyses on the strength of the measured variables in predicting the ideal L2 selves of these age groups are presented in Table 4 for the secondary, high school, and university students. In all three groups, instrumentality-promotion, English learning attitudes, and attitudes toward the L2 culture and community emerged as the predictors of the ideal L2 self, with the strongest one being instrumentality promotion. Also instrumentality-prevention emerged as a significant but negative predictor of the ideal L2 self for the high school and university students; in other words, the preventional aspect of instrumentality showed a negative impact on the learners' ideal L2 self.

Likewise, all the participating groups showed a consistent pattern concerning the strength with which the predictor variables explained the variance in the ought-to L2 self. As presented in Table 5, family influence and

Table 4. Results of the regression analysis of the attitudinal and motivational scales with ideal L2 self as the criterion variable for secondary, high school, and university students

Variable	Secondary students			High school students			University students		
	B	**SE B**	**β**	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**B**	**SE B**	**β**
Instrumentality promotion	0.60	0.06	0.51***	0.61	0.04	0.50***	0.60	0.06	0.50***
Attitudes to learning English	0.18	0.04	0.21***	0.25	0.03	0.30***	0.18	0.05	0.18***
Attitudes toward L2 community and culture	0.14	0.04	0.16***	0.17	0.03	0.19***	0.21	0.05	0.22***
Instrumentality prevention	–	–	–	–0.13	0.03	–0.14***	–0.09	0.05	–0.11*
R Square			0.56			0.66			0.53

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 5. Results of the regression analysis of the attitudinal and motivational scales with ought-to L2 self as the criterion variable for secondary, high school, and university students

Variable	Secondary students			High school students			University students		
	B	**SE B**	**β**	**B**	**SE B**	**β**	**B**	**SE B**	**β**
Family influence Instrumentality prevention	0.48	0.05	0.48***	0.67	0.05	0.54***	0.70	0.05	0.57***
R Square	0.33	0.05	0.31***	0.35	0.04	0.34***	0.37	0.04	0.36***
			0.55			0.66			0.69

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

instrumentality-prevention were the only two variables that significantly contributed to the ought-to L2 self in all the groups, with the former being the stronger one.

As expected, the ideal L2 self and attitudes towards the L2 culture and community consistently explained significant variances in English learning experience in all the participating groups (see Table 6). Concerning the age-related differences in these results, instrumentality-promotion played a significant role only in the secondary students' English learning experience group and instrumentality-prevention turned out to be a significant but negative predictor of English learning experience for the university students In addition, although the ideal L2 self was the strongest predictor in the two younger groups, it did not play the same role for the university students. For the high school students the ideal L2 self was remarkably stronger in explaining the variance in English learning experience than in the two remaining groups.

Table 6. Results of the regression analysis of the attitudinal and motivational scales with attitudes to language learning as the criterion variable for secondary, high school, and university students

Variable	Secondary students			High school students			University students		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Idea L2 Self Attitudes toward L2 community and culture	0.38	0.08	0.32***	0.59	0.07	0.50***	0.26	0.07	0.26***
Instrumentality promotion	0.18	0.06	0.17**	0.21	0.05	0.19***	0.32	0.05	0.32***
Instrumentality prevention	0.27	0.10	0.20**	–	–	–	–	–	–
R Square	–	–	– 0.33	–	–	– 0.44	– 0.12	0.06	–0.13* 0.34

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 7. Results of the regression analysis of the attitudinal and motivational scales with motivated behavior as the criterion variable for secondary, high school, and university students

Variable	Secondary students			High school students			University students		
	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β	B	SE B	β
Attitudes to learning English	0.44	0.04	0.49***	0.41	0.03	0.50***	0.54	0.05	0.52***
Idea L2 Self	0.32	0.06	0.30***	0.30	0.05	0.30***	0.32	0.05	0.31***
Instrumentality promotion	0.17	0.07	0.14*	0.16	0.06	0.13**	–	–	–
Family influence	–	–	–	0.14	0.05	0.13**	–	–	–
R Square		0.64			0.62			0.58	

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Another multiple regression analysis was run in order to find the variables predicting motivated behavior. As presented in Table 7, the ideal L2 self and English learning experience emerged as the variables that most strongly predicted motivated behavior with the latter being the strongest one in all the age groups. Also, whereas instrumentality-promotion predicted a significant portion of the variance for the secondary and high school students, family influence emerged as a significant predictor of motivated behavior only for the high school group. The ideal L2 self and English learning experience, which are constituent variables in Dörnyei's (2005; 2009) tripartite model of motivation, together with instrumentality-promotion (for the two younger groups) and family influence (for the high school students) explained the remarkable amounts of 64%, 62%, and 58% of the variance, respectively, in the secondary, high school, and university students' intended effort to learn

English. Nonetheless, the ought-to L2 self group did not emerge as a significant predictor of motivated behavior in any of the groups.

Discussion

In this section, a diagnostic standpoint is first taken by looking closely into the age-related differences of the three participating groups in terms of all the measured variables one by one with special attention to the constituents of the L2 motivational self system and motivated behavior. The differences are explained based on the socioeducational context of Iran. In so doing, we will draw upon both the ANOVA and multiple regression results. An overall picture of the results is then given at the end of this section.

The ideal L2 self

According to the ANOVA results, the ideal L2 selves that the high school and university students tended to develop were not different from each other but were significantly stronger than that of the secondary school students. The ideal L2 self of the Iranian students seems to improve significantly when they are at the high school level. This rapid development can be explained based on the overall socioeducational situation wherein each learner group is located. For many Iranian students, studying at a prestigious university is in fact the main, if not the only, roadmap through which they might be able to reach their long-term goals and fulfill their hopes. They begin mapping out their futures at the second year of high school, when they select a field of study (e.g. sciences, humanities) which is supposed to be the basis of both their study and their future professional career. The high school period is thus a critical point of departure for the development of Iranian students' ideal images of their future selves. That is why high school students' ideal image is significantly stronger than that of the secondary school students.

The developmental rate of the ideal L2 self, however, falls dramatically as the students enter university. This sudden decline might be because of the product-oriented nature of the university program that the Iranian students are supposed to complete; this makes the students rather obsessed with meeting many demotivating academic demands and requirements of their chosen program than making headway towards their future goals in their own ways. Above all, the undesirable employment situation in the country may lead them to believe that even if they graduate from university quite successfully, they might fail to reach or even get close to the idyllic position they have long strived for. The students who live in a world of fantasy before entering university, thus, have to come down to earth and face the realities of being a university student with a vague future.

This finding seems more meaningful when we notice that almost the same patterns of differences are found in the results concerning instrumentality-

promotion, attitudes toward L2 culture and community, and English learning experience, constructs that not only have been found significantly associated with the ideal L2 self (e.g. Csizér and Kormos 2009; Taguchi et al. 2009), but have also consistently emerged as the only predictors of the construct (i.e. ideal L2 self) in the regression results of the present study (see Table 4). It seems that the lack of necessary and sufficient motivational conditions within the socioeducational context of Iran has negatively influenced the motivational propensities of the university students including but not limited to their future L2 selves (see Norman and Aron 2003; Dörnyei 2009).

In the regression results, instrumentality-promotion, English learning attitudes, and attitudes towards the L2 culture and community respectively emerged as the significant and positive predictors of the ideal L2 self. This might be because of the regulatory focus of all these variables; they have been found to have at least one thing in common with the ideal L2 self, which is their promotional regulatory focus motivating people to regulate their behaviors towards desired end-states (see Higgins 1997). In contrast, the preventional aspect of instrumentality showed a negative impact on the ideal L2 self for the two older groups.

The ought-to L2 self

As the ANOVA results showed, the ought-to L2 selves through which the Iranian secondary and high school students are supposed to become motivated to learn English were not significantly different from each other whereas the university students tended to have a significantly lower score in this variable. This finding appears to be related not only to the age but also to the higher social status of university students in Iran. University students in Iran constitute a highly respected social stratum and are generally seen as the largest group of public intellectuals in the society. In Iran, university is not only a place of education but also the most important public center from which social and political developments force their way through society. These students are hence granted much more independence than the high school and secondary students and are less inclined than the two younger groups to develop a strong level of ought-to self. This explanation seems realistic since parallel results have been obtained for family influence and instrumentality-prevention, which have been shown to be significantly associated with the ought-to L2 self (e.g. Csizér and Kormos 2009; Taguchi et al. 2009) and have consistently emerged as the predictors of the construct for all the groups in the present study (see Table 5).

As the multiple regression results in Table 5 show, family influence and instrumentality-prevention consistently emerged as the predictors of the ought-to L2 self. Considering the fact that family members can be subsumed under the more general term, significant others (whose expectations shape the students' ought-to self), and with regard to the preventional regulatory focus

of this type of instrumentality, which motivates people to regulate their behaviors to avoid undesired end-states (see Higgins 1997), this finding was quite expected.

English learning experience

Considering the traditional and out-dated approaches to English teaching in the state educational system of Iran, we expected English learning attitudes to decrease with age. However, the results ran contrary to our expectations and whereas university students demonstrated no difference with the other groups, high school students had significantly more positive attitudes than secondary students. Generally speaking, the more positive attitudes of the high school students can be related to the described critical period they are going through in their lives. In this period, students develop their ideal L2 selves as well as other attitudinal and motivational orientations (see Table 1) that can be quite related to the development of their positive attitudes towards learning English (see Taguchi et al. 2009; Papi 2010).

This major improvement in the high school students' learning attitudes can also be understood by considering the private English learning statistics for the three groups. As shown in Table 1, whereas only 3.7% of the secondary students and 17.2% of the university students went to private language institutes to learn English, the proportion among the high school students surprisingly exceeded 54%. This significantly higher rate can be the washback effect of upcoming national public university entrance examination. As the high school students get closer to the highly competitive exam, they notice the vital role of English in their success more evidently and try to resort to private institutes to meet the language standards of the exam. However, the positive attitudes adopted by this group of English learners can be both the cause and the effect of their presence in such institutes. While the positive English learning attitudes of the students might be the reason why they attend these private centers, the noticeable merits of the schools such as their relatively up-to-date and more communicative approaches toward teaching English, the smaller size of their classes, and the competent teachers they recruit can also have positive impacts on the learners' English learning attitudes (see Dörnyei 2009).

Having entered university, on the other hand, the students' learning attitudes not only did not improve further but also grew less positive. In addition to the explanations given for the similar change in the case of the ideal L2 self, this downward flux can be related to the radical decline in the students' private English learning from above 54% to only about 17%.

The regression results also confirmed our ANOVA findings and showed a similar pattern of difference among the predictors of English learning attitudes. While in all the three groups the ideal L2 self and attitudes towards L2 culture and community emerged as the predictors of the construct, the

ideal L2 self of the high school group was a much stronger predictor of the English learning attitudes than that of the other groups. This confirms similar findings in some previous studies (see; Kormos and Csizér 2008; Csizér and Kormos 2009; Taguchi et al. 2009; Papi 2010). Also, attitudes toward L2 culture and community emerged as stronger predictor of English learning attitudes among the oldest group of students. The university students seem to improve their attitudes towards the English cultures and communities as a result of establishing more contact with English people and cultural products and experiencing the intellectual atmosphere of such high-level academic environments. In the results related to the secondary group, instrumentality-promotion also emerged as a predictor. It appears that the pragmatic benefits of learning English have more influence on the secondary students' attitudes towards learning English than on those of the two older groups. Interestingly, instrumentality-prevention turned out to be a negative predictor of English learning attitudes for the university students. The avoidance approach thus does not seem to improve the motivational characteristics of university students any longer, but it likely has detrimental effects on their attitudes towards English learning.

Motivated behavior

Not surprisingly, high school students were found to have the highest level of motivated behavior (Table 3), although their difference from the secondary students was not statistically significant. Considering the strong ideal L2 self and English learning attitudes of the high school students, as strong predictors of motivation (e.g. Kormos and Csizér 2008; Csizér and Kormos 2009; Taguchi et al. 2009), and their considerably higher rate of engagement in private language learning, this finding was quite expected. Concerning the prediction of motivated behavior by the other measured variables, the regression results yielded the most consistent pattern in the present study with almost no between-group differences (Table 7). For all the groups, only English learning attitudes and the ideal L2 self emerged as the predictors of motivated behavior, with the former being the strongest. Contrary to our expectations, the ought-to L2 self did not predict a significant portion of the variance in motivated behavior. It is worth noting that in the study conducted by Kormos and Csizér (2008), the existence of such a construct was not ascertained either. (cf. Csizér and Kormos 2009; Taguchi et al. 2009). The instrumental benefits associated with English learning still play notable roles for the two younger groups and the importance of the public entrance exam may not escape the attention of the families of the high school students.

Summary of findings

Overall, the results of different analyses showed that the Iranian learners of English begin developing and internalizing their personal desires,

grow motivationally more independent of significant others, and become significantly more motivated to learn English as they enter high school. High school students can be considered the best motivated group of English learners in Iran. This learner group ranked first in English learning attitudes, attitudes towards L2 culture and community, and motivated behavior and their ideal L2 self was roughly equal to that of the university students, who had the strongest score in this variable. Generally speaking, while variables more associated with a promotional regulatory focus (i.e. the ideal L2 self, instrumentality-promotion, attitudes toward L2 culture and community, English learning experience) follow a rapid developmental rate across the high school period, as the students enter university this rate either dramatically drops (as in the ideal L2 self and instrumentality-promotion) or even takes the opposite direction (as in attitudes toward L2 culture and community and English learning experience). On the other hand, variables with a preventional regulatory focus (i.e. the ought-to L2 self, instrumentality-prevention, family influence) are stronger among the younger learners; that is, the older the Iranian students are, the less they are influenced by the prevention-focus motives.

Among the constituents of the L2 motivational self system, English learning experience and the ideal L2 self were validated as powerful motivational constructs explaining large portions of variance in motivated behavior of all the participating groups. However, our findings did not validate the ought-to L2 self as a direct predictor of motivated behavior. It seems that the ought-to L2 self should also be redefined in approach-avoidance terms, a redefinition that might lead to the introduction of new and clearly-defined L2 future self-guides.

Conclusion

The present work was an attempt to take a further step to broaden our understanding of the dynamic nature of L2 motivation by investigating the motivational characteristics of the Iranian learners of English within the framework of the L2 motivational self system. All in all, the findings of the study substantiated the important role of age in understanding the Iranians' English learning motivation and offered strong validity evidence to the ideal L2 self and English learning experience in Dörnyei's tripartite model. The findings can also have fruitful implications for the L2 motivational strategies research and practice; different motivational strategies should be employed so as to motivate language learners of various ages. In the current study we focused on the temporal variation of L2 motivation among language learners from three distinct age groups with different socioeducational backgrounds. Future research should focus on the longitudinal flux of motivation among a specific learner group over a certain period of time. Examining the

socioeducational variations of L2 motivation among language learners of the same age can also be an interesting research topic.

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Appendix

The English version of the administered questionnaire

Scales for statement-type items: 1 (Strongly disagree), 2 (Disagree), 3 (Slightly disagree), 4 (Slightly agree), 5 (Agree), and 6 (Strongly agree)
    Scales for question-type items:
    1 (not at all), 2 (not so much), 3 (so-so), 4 (a little), 5 (quite a lot), and 6 (very much)

Ideal L2 self items

- I can imagine myself speaking English as if I were a native speaker of English.
- I can imagine myself speaking English with international friends or colleagues.
- Whenever I think of my future career, I imagine myself using English.
- I can imagine myself studying in a university where all my courses are taught in English.
- I can imagine myself writing English e-mails/letters fluently.
- I can imagine myself living abroad and using English effectively for communicating with the locals.

Ought-to L2 self items

- I study English because close friends of mine think it is important.
- If I fail to learn English, I'll be letting other people down.
- I consider learning English important because the people I respect think that I should do it.

- Studying English is important to me in order to gain the approval of my peers/teachers/family/boss.
- Learning English is necessary because people surrounding me expect me to do so.
- Studying English is important to me because other people will respect me more if I have the knowledge of English.

English learning experience items

- Do you like the atmosphere of your English classes?
- Do you find learning English really interesting?
- Do you think time passes faster while studying English?
- Do you always look forward to English classes?
- Would you like to have more English lessons at school?
- Do you really enjoy learning English?

Intended effort items

- I would like to spend lots of time studying English.
- I would like to study English even if I were not required.
- I would like to concentrate on studying English more than any other topic.
- If an English course was offered in the future, I would like to take it.
- If my teacher would give the class an optional assignment, I would certainly volunteer to do it.
- I am prepared to expend a lot of effort in learning English.

Instrumentality-prevention items

- I have to study English because I don't want to get bad marks in it.
- I have to learn English because without passing the English course I cannot get my degree.
- I have to study English; otherwise, I think I cannot be successful in my future career.
- Studying English is important to me because, if I don't have knowledge of English, I'll be considered a weak learner.
- Studying English is necessary for me because I don't want to get a poor score or a fail mark in English proficiency tests (TOEFL, IELTS)
- I have to learn English because I don't want to fail the English course.
- Studying English is important to me, because I would feel ashamed if I got bad grades in English.
- Studying English is important to me because I don't like to be considered a poorly educated person.

Instrumentality-promotion items

- Studying English can be important to me because I think it will someday be useful in getting a good job and/or making money.
- Studying English is important to me because English proficiency is necessary for promotion in the future.
- Studying English can be important to me because I think I'll need it for further studies.
- Studying English is important to me in order to achieve a special goal (e.g. to get a degree or scholarship)
- I study English in order to keep updated and informed of recent news of the world.
- Studying English is important to me because I am planning to study abroad.

Attitudes to L2 culture and community items

- Do you like the music of English-speaking countries (e.g. pop music)?
- Do you like English films?
- Do you like TV programs made in English-speaking countries?
- Do you like English magazines, newspapers, or books?
- Do you like the people who live in English-speaking countries?
- Do you like meeting people from English-speaking countries?
- Do you like to travel to English-speaking countries?
- Would you like to know more about people from English-speaking countries?

Family influence items

- My family/parents believe that I must study English to be an educated person.
- Studying English is important to me in order to bring honor to my family.
- Being successful in English is important to me so that I can please my parents/relatives.
- My family put a lot of pressure on me to study English.
- My parents encourage me to practice my English as much as possible.
- I have to study English, because, if I don't do it, my parents will be disappointed with me.