

**The dynamics of the L3 selves: A longitudinal study of five university L3 learners'  
motivational trajectories in China**

**Abstract**

Given the significance of multilingualism in modern society, the motivation to learn a third language (L3) has received increasing attention in research, especially with regard to how it evolves dynamically during the learning process. Underpinned by the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei 2005), this paper presents a longitudinal case study which explored learners' L3 motivational dynamics. It specifically focused on the developmental trajectories of these learners' ideal/ought-to L3 selves and the formation of such trajectories in relation to their actual language experiences. Three rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted with five L3 learners at one Chinese university over two academic years. The data revealed that learners' L3 motivation fluctuated during the learning process. Whereas learners' ideal L3 selves displayed a clear upward trajectory in the first year but showed an observable decline at the later stage, their ought-to L3 selves became gradually weaker over the course of two years of learning. Additionally, learners' L3-related learning experiences were found to be the main factors that contributed to the dynamics of their future L3 selves. Implications are discussed which point to how language educators can assist learners to construct their

ideal/ought-to selves and increase their L3 motivation in the long run.

**Keyword:** Language learning motivation, L3 motivational dynamics, the L2 Motivational Self System, longitudinal case study

## **Introduction**

While the benefits of multilingual education in promoting linguistic and intercultural competence have been widely recognised (Schjerve and Vetter 2012; Ushioda 2006), learners' enthusiasm for learning foreign languages is still quite problematic (Chambers 1999; Macaro 2008). Enquiries into learners' 'L3 motivation', a construct closely related to learning attitudes and behaviours (Gardner 1985), are thus of significant pedagogical value. Meanwhile, theoretical breakthroughs in language motivation research offer new angles to reconceptualise motivation. Researchers (see e.g. Dörnyei 2005; Norton 2000; Ushioda 2009) have recently shifted their attention from conceptualising motivation as a static construct to theorising it as a dynamic concept that is formed temporally and contextually. The L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei 2005) is representative of this trend, which theorises motivation in relation to learners' ideal language selves (their aspirational imaginations of using the language in the future), ought-to language selves (their obligations as language learners) and language learning experience. By underscoring the interplay between language learners and their actual learning experiences (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2009), this theoretical model provides a promising

framework for the investigation of the dynamics of language motivation. Based on the L2 Motivational Self System, this paper reports on a longitudinal qualitative inquiry into the L3 motivational trajectories of five Chinese learners who were learning German as their L3. The research focused on the L3 motivational dynamics by looking into the development of learners' ideal/ought-to L3 selves during the learning process and the formation of such dynamics in relation to their L3 learning experiences.

## **Literature review**

### ***The dynamics of the L3 motivation***

A review of the literature reveals that the trend to conceptualise motivation as dynamic and situated originates from researchers' deepened understanding of the interplay between language learners and social contexts. Unlike previous models in which learners' situated contexts have been studied as separate background variables, researchers (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011; Ushioda 2009) who follow the new paradigm argue that contexts and learners are inherently integrated. According to Ushioda (2009), the learning context does not exert a unitary influence on all learners. Rather, it is the individuals' constant seeking of 'personal meaning-making' (Ushioda 2009, 217) in their immediate environments that reformulates their understanding of the contexts and modifies their motivation towards language learning. It should also be noted that, when discussing contexts, researchers refer not only to language learners' immediate instructional environments, but also to the broader social surroundings. Empirical studies

(McKay and Wong 1996; Norton 2000) have revealed that language learners are not one-dimensional subjects who focus only on language learning. Rather, they are ‘real persons’ (Ushioda 2009, 216) who engage in multiple activities in particular social contexts. Mercer’s (2011) empirical study also supports the view that learners’ motivation to learn a particular language is closely linked to their engagement in other activities, such as the learning of other languages. As she rightly points out, how learners prioritise their language-learning and other tasks in different contexts adds to the dynamics of language motivation, which requires further research.

Although the dynamic nature of language motivation has been recognised in a number of related empirical studies, most of them focus on L2 English motivation (Yashima and Arano 2014; You and Chan, 2014). Given the unique status of English as a *lingua franca*, learners’ motivation to learn other foreign languages can, nevertheless, be significantly different from their motivation to learn English (Henry 2010, 2011). This view has been substantiated by Gabrys-Barker’s (2010) empirical study which has revealed that the instrumentality of the L3 is not as apparent as that of English, and the L3 motivation is more susceptible to change as a result of learners’ evaluations of their actual learning experiences and contexts. Other research has further pointed out that it is the existence of global English that significantly influences learners’ motivation to acquire other foreign languages, mainly in a negative way (Csizér and Lukács 2010; Henry 2010). Despite these distinctive features of L3 motivational dynamics, relevant research is still very limited, especially longitudinal empirical studies. Hence, an in-depth

longitudinal inquiry into L3 motivational trajectories is significant and worthwhile.

### ***The L3 Motivational Self System***

Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (2005) was adopted as the theoretical framework to research the L3 motivation in this study, as it provides a conceptual basis for re-theorising language motivation in a dynamic way. This model features two future-oriented motivational constructs (Dörnyei 2005). The ideal language self refers to learners' aspirational imaginations of using the language in the future, and the ought-to language self represents their desire to fulfil others' expectations or to avoid negative outcomes. Notably, learners' ideal and ought-to language selves differ from fixed learning goals in that they represent imagined mental images of using the language in the future and 'involve tangible images and senses' that approximate to what individuals experience in reality (Dörnyei 2009, 12). As learners experience different situations in the learning process, their ideal and ought-to language selves are constantly reformulated. Moreover, due to the dynamic nature of ideal and ought-to selves, their roles in triggering learners' behavioural consequences are also subject to change. According to Dörnyei (2009), when the ideal language selves become increasingly elaborate, plausible, feasible and counterbalanced by ought-to L3 selves during the learning process, their motivating effect can be significantly enhanced. In short, the ideal and ought-to language selves are, by nature, dynamic motivational constructs which are constantly reformulated across time and space, as suggested by Henry (2014).

In addition to future-oriented motivations, Dörnyei (2005) also introduces a construct that focuses on the present, the language learning experience, which represents the self-related motivations emerging from learners' situated learning processes (e.g. the impact of teachers). Notably, since learners' language learning is not restricted to what takes place within the class, language learning experience comprises more than purely classroom-based motivations (Ryan 2008; Ushioda 2011). As Ryan's (2008) study has demonstrated, learners' English learning experiences not only reflect their attitudes towards English courses, but also their 'cosmopolitan outlook' (Ryan 2008, 202), which represents their appreciative attitudes towards the diversity of cultures in a globalised context. The language learning experience therefore should be viewed as a more comprehensive representation of a set of ongoing contextual affordances or attitudes that impact on learners' language motivation, either in the classroom or in the broader social context.

It is notable that although this theoretical framework comprises both future-oriented motivations, namely, the ideal and ought-to language selves, and those that are present-oriented, the language learning experience, these two dimensions do not exist in isolation but are closely related. In fact, it is this integration that makes this system distinctive when researching language motivational dynamics (Ryan 2008; Ushioda 2011). As Ryan (2008) emphasises, whereas learners' imaginations of using the language in the future take them beyond their day-to-day learning, these imaginations embody personalised experiences that are shaped by learners' situated learning process. By

looking at the interplay between learners' future aspirations or obligations and their appraisals of current learning, this model uses its unique lenses to investigate the formation of long-term motivational trajectories (Ushioda 2011). A few empirical studies (see e.g. Ryan 2008) have explored the relationship between learners' future language selves and language learning experience, but their main research aim is to confirm the existence of the correlation between these two dimensions. The question regarding how learners' ideal and ought-to selves are shaped by their actual learning still remains under-researched. More in-depth qualitative studies are therefore needed to fill this research gap, as Hessel (2015) suggests. To this end, this study, based on a longitudinal qualitative design, focused on the developmental trajectories of learners' ideal/ ought-to L3 selves and examined how such dynamics were formed in relation to their actual L3 learning experiences. Two specific research questions were addressed accordingly:

1. How did learners' ideal and ought-to L3 selves fluctuate during the L3 learning process?
2. How did learners' actual L3 learning experiences mediate the developmental trajectories of their ideal and ought-to L3 selves?

## **Methodology**

### ***A longitudinal multiple-case study***

This research was based on a longitudinal (approximately two academic years)

multiple-case study, which focused specifically on learners' L3 motivational dynamics. It looked at 'real persons' in real contexts (Ushioda 2009, 216) which aimed to capture the temporal and context-sensitive aspects of learners' L3 motivation. The research was conducted in the Department of English at a Chinese university where both compulsory and optional L3 courses were offered. Specifically, all of the students in the department were required to learn an L3 for one year, after which optional courses were provided and learners could choose whether to continue. The optional courses lasted for another two years and learners could drop out at any time. It should be noted that the drop-out rate was very high, as only approximately half of the students in the class chose to attend the optional L3 courses. Given the differences between learners' L3 motivation in compulsory and optional courses, such teaching arrangements allowed us to obtain richer data and deeper insights.

Maximum variation sampling (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) was adopted which aimed to include a wide-spectrum of motivational profiles in the research and to capture the core aspects of L3 motivation. Eight first-year students (three highly-motivated, three moderately-motivated and two lowly-motivated) from the L3 German course were chosen at the beginning of the fieldwork. The selection of participants was based on cross-referencing between learners' self-evaluations of and the teacher's comments on their L3 motivation. More specifically, all the learners in class were invited to evaluate their German motivation through a closed-ended questionnaire which was adapted from previous studies (Papi 2010). The criterion to measure their L3 motivation was the



intensity of their motivated behaviour, a significant indicator of learners' motivation (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011). The teacher was interviewed and asked to nominate typical students of each motivational type to participate in this study. During the fieldwork, three participants (one moderately-motivated and two lowly-motivated learners) gave up learning German and ceased their participation in this study, so only the data from the other five students was used. The individual profiles are listed below:

Table 1 near here

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Interviews were used as the primary research method, which enabled us to capture the dynamic nature of learners' L3 motivation (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011) and to generate in-depth and contextualised explanations of language motivation. Unlike quantitative questionnaires, which conceptualise language learners as static and generalisable subjects (Ushioda 2009), interviewing allows researchers to focus on learners' individuality and thereby obtain deeper insights into the dynamic interactions between individual learners and their surroundings (Dörnyei 2007). Three rounds of interviews with the participants were conducted over a period of two academic years. The first round of interviews took place when the learners began to learn German, the second round when the course became optional and the last round after one year's study on these optional courses. The interviews were semi-structured and each lasted for approximately 40-60 minutes.

During the interviews, participants were firstly asked to describe their main motivations towards their L3 learning, and if they mentioned anything concerning their ideal or ought-to L3 selves, they were encouraged to elaborate on these topics. Moreover, the participants were also interviewed about their L3 learning experiences so that we could explore the interplay between learners' motivation and their actual learning experiences.

The data was transcribed and subsequently coded in an iterative way. Firstly, in order to identify learners' main motivations towards L3 learning at different stages, their responses to the question 'What motivates you to learn the L3' were coded in a grounded manner. The analysis revealed that those responses mainly fell into two categories, namely, their future aspirations that were associated with the L3 (e.g. obtaining extra linguistic advantages) and their obligations to meet other people's expectations (e.g. passing examinations), which were conceptually linked with the ideal L3 selves and ought-to L3 selves. Secondly, to explore how learners' ideal and ought-to L3 selves were reformulated during the actual learning process, the theme 'L3 learning experience' was established. Three sub-categories were used with respect to this theme, namely, the L3-using opportunities, the influence of teachers and the impact of learners' perceptions of English. It is worth mentioning that even though the way in which learners perceived English did not seem to be directly L3-related, it turned out to be a crucial macro contextual factor that modified learners' attitudes towards their L3 learning and was therefore included. The relationships between different themes were subsequently cross-examined and observations of these relationships were recorded. To avoid skewed

interpretations of the interview data (Marshall and Rossman 2011), the data was modified in consultation with the interviewees.

## **Findings**

The overall analysis of the data showed that the participants' ideal and ought-to selves evolved dynamically across the two-year learning process. These motivational dynamics were formed in close relation to learners' actual L3 learning experiences, namely, the influence of their teacher, the opportunities to use the L3, and the impact of learners' perceptions of global English. In the following, we will first present the trajectories of motivation. This is followed by detailed discussion of the factors that mediate these dynamics.

### ***The dynamics of learners' L3 motivation***

#### ***The trajectories of learners' ideal L3 selves***

A major finding of the research was that learners' ideal L3 selves fluctuated throughout the two-year German courses. As Table 2 illustrates, they strengthened in terms of elaborateness and plausibility during the one-year compulsory courses but gradually weakened when the course became optional, leading to corresponding changes in their role in motivating L3 learners:

Table 2 near here

At the beginning of their L3 learning, the participants began to think about how to use the L3 in the future, but their ideal L3 selves were vague. Carrie's comment illustrates this situation:

Probably I can use German to watch German-dubbed movies or read novels written by German writers. I can also use German to chat with others, as long as I can meet German people or have a chance to visit Germany.

This excerpt reveals that learners could only illustrate very general usages of German but could not give any personalised descriptions at this time, which suggested that they had not fully recognised the importance of the L3 for their personal development.

After one year of learning German, however, development in learners' ideal L3 selves was evident. Firstly, learners' descriptions of their ideal selves became more vivid and more clearly related to their career plans, which indicated the enhanced significance of German in their future lives. For example, Rita hoped to learn German to 'work in a German company'; Julie intended to 'immigrate to Germany' and Carrie planned to 'complete postgraduate education in Germany'. Two interviewees were even able to describe the very specific way in which they would use German in the future, implying the strengthening of their ideal L3-using selves. For example, Aloha commented:

If I can find a job in a German company after graduation, I would use English in most cases but speak German with my German directors so that they may have a better impression of me and give me more opportunities.

In addition, participants also designed specific plans to realise their ideal L3 selves. For instance, Rita intended to find a German-related internship as the preparation for working in German companies and Carrie signed up for a German language test, a prerequisite for applying for postgraduate programmes in Germany. The formation of these short-term plans reflected that learners' ideal selves were becoming more realistic and attainable.

These well-developed ideal L3 selves, however, did not last in the long term. After studying optional German courses for one year, all of the interviewees, except Carrie, lowered the status of German in their ideal future lives. Julie, for example, did not think that 'German would be useful in the future any more'. Even for those who still hoped to use German in the future, their ideal L3 selves also had become less obvious and plausible. Lily's experience provides a revealing example:

I am not sure whether I could really use German in the future. Maybe it can be an interesting hobby for me. Anyway, if I see anything written in German, such as advertisements, I may have the impulse to read them out.

The fluctuations in learners' ideal L3 selves gave rise to changes in their role in motivating learners. Initially, due to the vagueness of learners' ideal L3 selves, their effect on motivating learners was limited, as participants admitted that the imagination of speaking German in the future was not their primary motivation to learn German. In fact, they could even hardly think of these ideal L3 selves which were 'too far away' (Rita).

The ideal L3 selves gradually became a stronger motivator during the first year, as learners significantly enriched their imaginations of using the L3 in the future. All the interviewees reported that it was such imaginations that drove them to select the optional German courses. Moreover, learners' ideal L3 selves also functioned as a guide when learners chose the focus of their learning. For instance, Julie's hope to immigrate to Germany and Rita's aspiration to use German for work encouraged them to 'spend more time on practising listening and speaking'.

Such prominent motivating effect of learners' ideal L3 selves began to decrease, however, when learners' aspirational imaginations of using the L3 in the future became less elaborate and plausible. Ultimately, Lily, Julie and Aloha all dropped out of the German courses. Even though they still thought that the L3 might be of use in the future, their weak ideal L3 selves failed to motivate them to put further effort into the L3 learning, as stated by Lily:

Of course German might be useful for me in the future. A new language

always adds new possibilities to life. But that future is too uncertain to become a reason for me to continue my German learning at this time.

*The trajectories of learners' ought-to L3 selves*

In comparison with the ideal selves, learners' ought-to L3 selves did not seem to occupy a crucial position in motivating learners. As Table 3 reveals, as well as their role in motivating learners, these ought-to L3 selves weakened consistently over the whole learning process:

Table 3 near here

As shown in Table 3, from the very beginning participants' ought-to L3 selves were relatively weak. Most interviewees admitted that although they hoped to integrate German into their future lives, they were not particularly worried about not being unable to speak German fluently in the future. For them, being able to speak German proficiently was desirable but not necessary, as Julie commented:

It would be excellent if I could speak German. But even if I could not use German in the future, I still have other opportunities to make a living. So I do not feel so obliged to learn German well.

It was only when the interviewees prepared for examinations did they start to worry about not learning German well. As Aloha commented, she only felt ‘stressed’ before examinations because it was ‘a student’s responsibility to pass the examination’.

Yet, such ought-to L3 selves became even weaker when German became an optional course in the second year. Most participants mentioned that they felt far less nervous in comparison with compulsory courses. For example, Rita suggested that she ‘did not feel stressful at all when it comes to learning the L3, even before examinations’. Consequently, learners’ ought-to L3 selves were on the verge of disappearing by the end of the fieldwork.

Given the weakness of learners’ ought-to L3 selves, it is not surprising that their role in motivating learners was marginal. According to the participants, their main source of motivation did not come from ‘the need to meet others’ expectations’ (Aloha). Yet, an interesting finding was that while learners felt that their ought-to L3 selves were not their primary reason to learn German, they nevertheless admitted that their sense of obligation to meet the course requirements did have some short-term effect on their L3 learning. For instance, Rita’s fear of failing her examinations prompted her to ‘listen to German texts for 20 times’ and the teacher’s assignments gave Aloha ‘immediate pressure to recite the vocabulary’. Notably, instead of resisting such pressure, both interviewees regarded it as necessary to help them to sustain their German learning. For example, Rita suggested:



Some pressure is indeed necessary. You know, the process of learning languages is not always interesting and I need to be pushed from time to time. Otherwise, it will be hard for me to sustain my effort for learning German.

It is therefore understandable that when their ought-to L3 selves became weaker in optional courses, learners were less likely to invest time in German. According to Lily, due to the lack of external pressure, she could ‘easily give up’ when the L3 learning became difficult. It seemed to suggest that learners’ ought-to L3 selves could be significant during the actual learning process, especially when it came to sustaining everyday language learning.

***How did learners’ actual L3 experiences mediate the dynamics of their future L3 selves?***

A closer look at the data revealed that the trajectories of learners’ ideal and ought-to selves were not formed in isolation but in close relation to their actual L3 learning experiences. On the one hand, learners’ ideal L3 selves were constantly reformulated in response to the help provided by teachers, their changing perceptions of global English and the lack of the opportunities to use the L3. On the other hand, the lower academic requirements for learning the L3 and their belief in the dominant role of English in their future career prospects both contributed to the weakening of their ought-to L3 selves.

*Factors that mediated learners' ideal L3 selves*

As the data analysis illustrated, learners' ideal L3 selves were constantly reformulated in response to their actual L3 learning experiences in the instructional and social context. The L3 teacher's influence was a main factor that was identified to have contributed to the strengthening of learners' ideal L3 selves. According to the participants, the teacher frequently explained to them the advantages of being multilingual, which increased their awareness of the importance of learning an L3. Lily's comment provides an example:

At first, I learned German because it was compulsory; however, after the teacher's introduction, I found that German can be more meaningful. For example, our teacher mentioned that we could use German in international companies, when we met German customers.

As this excerpt illustrates, with the help of the teacher, learners began to think about the future opportunities that could arise from learning the L3. The status of German was therefore enhanced from a course in the curriculum to something useful in the future. Additionally, the teacher also shared her personal experiences of Germany in class, which significantly consolidated learners' ideal L3 selves. For instance, Rita commented:

Going to Germany was unimaginable for me at first. But the teacher shared with us her fantastic experiences in Germany, such as communicating with world-renowned professors in German. Those stories were so real and it seemed that Germany was not so far away.

As shown in this excerpt, the teacher's stories enriched learners' imaginations about an ideal future in which German played an important role, which made the original 'far away' ideal L3 selves more real.

In addition to the impact of teachers, learners' perceptions of English also influenced their ideal L3 selves. Since learners' perceptions fluctuated during the learning process, the influence of this factor on learners' ideal L3 selves was also subject to change. Specifically, at the beginning, all the interviewees believed that English was so widely acquired that it did not offer them a competitive advantage in the job market. An L3 thus became an important form of linguistic capital (Bourdieu 1977) to enable them to have a promising future. Julie's comment portrays this situation:

Everyone can speak English and it does not offer a competitive edge. So I hope to acquire another foreign language. If I am multilingual, I can beat other job hunters and may also get more opportunities in my future work.

Such perceptions changed, however, when learners became aware that English was

so widely used that the chances that they could use German in the future were much less than they previously expected. For instance, Aloha, who had perceived German as a type of linguistic capital she might draw upon in the future, gradually realised that she could use English to communicate, even when meeting German people. Consequently, her initial determination to integrate the L3 into her planned future began to wane. As she suggested in the last interview, ‘when English could be used everywhere, the need to acquire German did not seem to be so urgent’. Therefore, the dominant position of English increased learners’ uncertainty about the instrumentality of acquiring other foreign languages, which led to them attaching less importance to the L3 in their future lives.

The lack of opportunities to use the L3 was another factor that accounted for the observable weakening of learners’ ideal L3 selves. Three out of five interviewees complained that the insufficient opportunities to use German lowered their confidence in their capacity to speak this language in the future. For example, Aloha explained:

There are too few chances to speak. But the real communication is very different from what we have learnt in books. Even though I know lots of grammatical rules, I am still not sure whether I could communicate in German.

This excerpt implies that the lack of opportunities to use the L3 resulted in learners

being unable to apply what they had learned in class to real-life communication, which increased their difficulty in evaluating their actual ability to use German to communicate. Such uncertainty about their L3 proficiency added to learners' doubts about the plausibility of speaking German in the future and consequently undermined the further development of their ideal L3 selves.

*Factors that mediated learners' ought-to L3 selves*

Like the fluctuations in their ideal L3 selves, the weakness of learners' ought-to L3 selves was also related to their actual language experiences inside and outside the classroom. Specifically, the ease of meeting the course requirements was the first factor that was found to have weakened learners' ought-to L3 selves. According to the participants, their L3 teacher seldom assigned them homework and the examinations were comparatively easy, which made them less worried about not passing the examinations. Lily's comment displays this situation:

At first, I was worried that German would be very difficult to learn and I must work hard to pass the examinations. But the examinations turned out to be quite easy and it only took me a little effort to achieve satisfactory scores.

The interview with the teacher also supported the students' claims, as she indicated that

she did not set high academic standards for the learners so as to create a relaxed learning atmosphere. Consequently, the pressure for learners to learn German was low and so they were less likely to put effort into it.

Learners' perceptions about the dominant role of English in the future career prospects also rendered less importance for learning German. Rita's example typically reflects this situation:

It would be wonderful if I could learn both German and English well and find a highly-paid job. But if I cannot, I can still find an acceptable job using my English, such as an English teacher or a translator.

As indicated in this excerpt, even when learners were aware of better opportunities provided by acquiring an L3, they did not regard the L3 learning as necessary. This situation could be attributed to learners' belief that they could always find 'acceptable' career opportunities which only required them to speak English but not other foreign languages. Notably, of all the interviewees, Carrie was the only one who still had an ought-to L3 self by the end of the fieldwork. One possible reason for this was that she could not foresee her ideal future without acquiring German. For financial reasons, Carrie could not afford the high tuition fees of postgraduate programmes in the UK and could only choose Germany as the destination to achieve her ambition to study overseas, where higher education was free. She apparently felt much more obliged to become

‘proficient in German’ than her peers.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

Based on the interviews with five L3 learners, this study revealed that L3 motivation were not fixed but remained dynamic throughout the L3-learning process. More specifically, the analysis showed that learners’ ideal and ought-to L3 selves were constantly revised in response to their actual L3 learning experiences in both the classroom environment and the broader social context.

Firstly, as the findings of this study illustrated, learners’ ideal L3 selves were in a constant state of transformation throughout the learning process and their role in motivating L3 learners changed accordingly. At the initial stage, participants had rather vague ideal language-using selves, which, as Lamb (2013, 23) suggests, were more of a type of ‘fantasy’ than of a ‘concrete ambition’. Yet, as their learning deepened, learners’ ideal selves strengthened in terms of specificity, accessibility and feasibility. Specifically, learners developed more personalised imaginations of how the L3 would be used in the future and designed plans to realise those aspirations, which, according to Dörnyei (2009), indicated significant development in learners’ ideal language selves. The strengthening of learners’ ideal L3 selves also enhanced learners’ motivation to learn the L3. In particular, these ideal selves functioned as the main motivation that stimulated learners to select the optional L3 courses and to focus on their L3 learning. This positive development in learners’ ideal L3 selves, however, was not sustained and a weakening

trajectory was observed at the later stage. It is interesting to note that this result forms a contrast to the evolution of ideal English selves which continued to develop as shown in previous studies (You and Chan 2014). This seems to support Mercer's (2011) observations that learners' motivation to learn the L3 was more likely to change in comparison with their motivation to learn English.

In comparison with the fluctuations in learners' ideal L3 selves, their ought-to L3 selves were seen to be steadily weakening. According to the participants, although they planned to use the L3 in the future, they were not put off even if their plans could not be realised. An L3 for them, therefore, was a dispensable rather than a necessary skill. It was only when examinations approached did learners begin to feel obliged to pay more attention to learning it. Given the weakness of such ought-to L3 selves, it is understandable that their role in motivating learners was not prominent in this study. Nevertheless, unlike previous studies (Busse and Williams 2010) in which no correlations were identified between ought-to language selves and motivated behaviour, this study discovered that learners' ought-to L3 selves did lead to some behavioural changes. As the participants mentioned, it was their sense of obligation to meet course requirements that placed external pressure on them to learn German. When this kind of ought-to L3 selves was less influential in the optional courses, participants became less willing to put effort into L3 learning, implying that the ought-to selves could be crucial in helping learners to sustain their learning effort (Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee 2006).

Such changeable trajectories of learners' ideal and ought-to L3 selves could be



partly attributed to their reformulated appraisals of their L3 learning based on their accumulated L3 experiences inside and outside the classroom. In the case of the ideal L3 selves, for example, after listening to their teacher's personal L3-using experiences, the majority of the learners significantly enriched their imaginations about using the L3 in the future. As suggested by Yashima (2009), the teacher here functioned as an accessible representation of a successful language user who helped the learners to link their 'far away' idealised L3 future with what they observed in real classroom situations. Nevertheless, despite the positive influence of the teacher, the further development of learners' ideal L3 selves was restricted by learners' limited experiences of using the L3 for genuine communication. Without sufficient opportunities for real-life social interaction, learners' idealised language selves remained in their imaginations with little chance of being 'actualised' (Papi and Abdollahzadeh 2012, 588) and therefore could not be sustained in the long run. Apart from their L3 experiences in the instructional environment, learners' perceptions of English also influenced how they evaluated the importance of the L3 in their ideal future. After embracing the idea that English was a global language and German would not be frequently used, most participants lowered the significance of German in their future lives. The underlying reason for this may be the differing status of German and English in China. While English is emphasised as important in the workplace (Chen, Warden, and Chang 2005), German does not occupy such a prominent position, which makes learners' ideal L3 selves less firmly aligned to their future plans (Gabrys-Barker 2010). Yet, unlike previous studies (Csizér and Lukács

2010; Henry 2010) in which English was mainly found to negatively influence L3 learning, in this study learners' anxiety over the reduced competitiveness of only being able to speak English gave them impetus to integrate German into their future plans. Although such influences ultimately diminished, the findings suggested that learners' attitudes toward English could have complex impacts on with the formation of their ideal L3 selves.

Similarly, the students' ought-to L3 selves were revised in response to their actual L3 experiences. Specifically, one important contributory factor was the negative influence of global English. Even though learners recognised the value of being multilingual, the influence was not strong enough to convince them to put greater effort into learning German. In addition, the low academic requirements set by the teachers resulted in a lack of external pressure for learners and accelerated the weakening of their ought-to L3 selves. While the effect of extrinsic pressure on sustaining motivation are still debatable (Lepper and Greene 1978), this study seemed to suggest that some pressure coming from teachers might benefit the long-term development of learners' L3 learning.

In summary, this study aimed to advance the field through researching and theorising the dynamics of L3 motivation with a particular focus on how learners' motivational trajectories were constructed temporally and contextually. Conceptualising L3 motivation with reference to ideal and ought-to L3 selves, this study lent more support to the proposition (Dörnyei and Ushioda 2011; Ushioda 2009) that language motivation

should be theorised as a dynamic construct which fluctuates over time. In addition, it also revealed that such dynamics can be partly explained by the interplay between language learners' future L3 selves and their actual language learning experiences. Therefore, this study may be valuable in shedding new light on understanding L3 motivational dynamics by taking the temporal and contextual aspects of language motivation into consideration.

Based on these findings, it can be inferred that, though the unequal status of a particular L3 and English cannot easily be changed by individual educators or learners, the actual learning environment and teachers do exert a crucial influence on learners' L3 motivation. Some pedagogical implications can therefore be drawn from this study. Firstly, it is suggested that educators should help learners to specify their imagined usages of the L3 and increase their confidence about realising those ideal L3 selves. In particular, it would be helpful if educators could assist learners in understanding the importance of being multilingual and provide more opportunities for them to use the L3. Moreover, it may also be essential for L3 educators to set targets for learners so as to provide more motivation for them to sustain their L3 learning.

## **Reference**

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Table 1. Profiles of the five participants.

Table 2. The trajectories of learners' ideal L3 selves.

Table 3. The trajectories of learners' ought-to L3 selves.