



A Quantitative Study of English Learning Motivation among Chinese College Students Based on Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System

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Abstract-

Background and Aim: Second language motivation is central to learners' English learning attitudes, effort, and persistence. Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System offers a useful framework for examining how the Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and English Learning Experience shape learners' motivation. This study aims to assess English learning motivation among Chinese college students by identifying the relative strength of motivational dimensions and examining differences and relationships among key motivational variables.

Methods: This quantitative study used questionnaire data collected from 63 undergraduate students at a public university in northern China. The questionnaire was administered online through Wen Juan Xing in June 2023 and included 39 six-point Likert-scale items and two background questions. The sample included 10 male and 53 female students, with 29 English majors and 34 non-English majors. Data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. Reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and correlation analysis were conducted.

Research Findings: (1) Students reported a relatively high level of English learning motivation and low English learning anxiety. (2) English Learning Experience was the most prominent motivational component. Major motivational scales showed significant positive correlations. (3) Female students and English majors showed stronger motivation than male students and non-English majors.

Implications: The findings suggest that improving classroom learning experiences, strengthening positive attitudes toward English, and creating supportive learning environments may enhance Chinese college students' English learning motivation.

Keywords: L2 Motivational Self System; English learning motivation; Chinese college students; intended effort; English learning experience

I. Introduction

English plays a significant role in contemporary society because it is one of the most widely spoken languages and one of the most commonly used second languages (Ilyosovna, 2020). With the development of globalization, English as a lingua franca has entered many areas of social, academic, and professional life, and English competence is often regarded as a "passport" to future success (Lee, 2024). In China, English has occupied an important position in formal education since the reintroduction of the National University Entrance Qualifying Exam in 1978 and the introduction of the College English Test Band 4 in 1987. By 2020, approximately 400 million Chinese people were learning English, making China one of the largest English-learning contexts in the world (People's Daily Online, 2020). However, language learning is a complex process influenced not only by intellectual factors but also by motivation, attitude, interest, and other affective factors (Eragamreddy, 2024). Among these factors, motivation is directly related to learners' learning behavior, and it provides learners with the initial impetus to learn a second language and sustains the long learning process (Dörnyei, 2009). Therefore, understanding Chinese college students' English learning motivation is important for improving English teaching in a context where learners often lack a natural English-speaking environment.

This study is grounded in Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, which was developed from possible selves theory and self-discrepancy theory. The framework conceptualizes second language motivation through three main components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience. The Ideal L2 Self refers to the L2-related self-image that learners ideally wish to realize, such as becoming a fluent English speaker. The Ought-to L2 Self refers to the attributes learners believe they should possess because of responsibilities, obligations, or expectations from others. The L2 Learning Experience refers to learners' immediate learning environment and learning experiences, including teachers, curriculum, classmates, textbooks, and previous successful or unsuccessful learning experiences (Dörnyei, 2009). Compared with earlier motivation theories that focused mainly on integrative and instrumental motivation, the L2 Motivational Self System is more suitable for examining English learning in contemporary globalized contexts, where learners may study English for academic achievement, future careers, international communication, and personal



development rather than only for integration into a specific target-language community.

Previous L2 motivation research in China has contributed to understanding Chinese learners' English learning, but much of the earlier research was based on Gardner's (1985) social psychological theory. Early Chinese studies mainly introduced and analyzed foreign motivation theories, while later studies began to examine the internal structure of L2 motivation and the relationship between individual differences and motivation (Schmidt et al., 1996; Wang & Zhang, 2005; Zhang, 1986). However, fewer studies have applied more recent socio-dynamic perspectives, especially Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System, to examine Chinese college students' English learning motivation. In addition, because English has become increasingly connected with globalization, higher education, overseas study, and employment, Chinese college students' motivational patterns may not be fully explained by traditional integrative and instrumental models. There is therefore a need for further empirical research that describes Chinese college students' motivational profiles, compares differences across learner characteristics, and examines the relationships among motivational dimensions within the L2 Motivational Self System framework.

Based on this background, the present study investigates English learning motivation among Chinese college students at a public university in northern China. The scope of this article is limited to the quantitative part of the original study, with a focus on reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, independent-samples t-tests, and correlation analysis. It does not examine regression results or qualitative interview findings, which are reserved for a separate article. This article aims to identify the relative strength of different motivational dimensions, examine whether motivation differs by gender and major, and explore the correlations among key motivational variables. By doing so, the study contributes empirical evidence to L2 motivation research in the Chinese higher education context and demonstrates the usefulness of Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System for describing Chinese college students' English learning motivation. It also offers practical implications for English teaching by highlighting the importance of students' attitudes, future self-images, and learning environments in sustaining motivation.

1.1 Objective

To examine the motivational dimensions, group differences, and variable relationships in Chinese college students' English learning motivation based on Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Motivation and English Learning

Motivation is widely regarded as one of the most important factors in second language acquisition. Although motivation has been examined in many theoretical and empirical studies, scholars have not reached a single agreed definition because motivation is abstract, complex, and influenced by multiple personal and contextual factors, including parents, teachers, peers, and the wider learning environment (Wall, 1958; Schiller & Dorner, 2022). Gardner (1985) defines motivation as the extent to which individuals strive to learn a language because of their desire to learn and the satisfaction they experience during the learning process. From this perspective, motivation includes learners' effort to achieve a goal, willingness to learn the language, and positive attitudes toward language learning. Similarly, Ellis (1997) explains motivation as a set of attitudes and affective factors that influence the amount of effort learners invest in second language learning.

Later research has increasingly emphasized the dynamic nature of motivation. Dörnyei (2005) argues that motivation is not a fixed learner attribute but a changing psychological force that fluctuates throughout the language learning process. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) describe motivation as a dynamic internal drive that encourages learners to make choices, participate in learning activities, and continue working toward their goals. In this sense, motivation not only initiates language learning but also sustains learners' long-term engagement. Because second language learning usually requires continuous effort over an extended period, motivation is essential for explaining why learners begin learning, how much effort they invest, and how long they persist.

The development of second language motivation research also reflects changes in how scholars understand English learning. Gardner and Lambert's (1972) social psychological approach was influential in early L2 motivation research and emphasized learners' attitudes toward the target language community. Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model distinguished between integrative motivation, which refers to learners' desire to identify with the target language community, and instrumental motivation, which refers to practical goals such as academic success or employment. However, with the development of globalization, scholars have questioned whether traditional integrative motivation can fully explain contemporary English learning, especially in contexts where English functions as an international language rather than the language of a single target community (Au, 1988; Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Yashima, 2002; Lamb, 2016; Khan, Shaik-Abdullah, & Sani, 2023). This is particularly relevant in China, where English is mainly learned as a foreign language and many students have limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom.

2.2 The L2 Motivational Self System

To better explain language learning motivation in contemporary globalized contexts, Dörnyei (2009) proposed the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS). This framework belongs to the socio-dynamic period of L2 motivation research, which focuses on the relationships among motivation, self, identity, and sociocultural context (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Na Nongkhai, 2017). Unlike earlier approaches that emphasized learners' desire to integrate into a target language community, the L2MSS explains motivation through learners' future self-images and immediate learning experiences. This makes the framework especially relevant to English as a Foreign Language contexts, where learners may study English for academic, professional, and international purposes rather than for integration into a specific native-speaker community.

The L2MSS is grounded in possible selves theory and self-discrepancy theory. Possible selves theory explains how individuals imagine what they could become, would like to become, or fear becoming in the future (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These future-oriented self-images can influence current behavior by providing learners with goals and emotional energy. Self-discrepancy theory further explains motivation as the desire to reduce the gap between one's actual self and future self-guides, including the ideal self and the ought self (Higgins, 1987). Drawing on these self-related theories, Dörnyei (2009) reconceptualized second language motivation as a self-based system.

The L2MSS consists of three main components: the Ideal L2 Self, the Ought-to L2 Self, and the L2 Learning Experience (Dörnyei, 2009). The Ideal L2 Self refers to the learner's desired future image as a successful L2 user. For example, a student may imagine being able to speak English fluently, study abroad, or use English confidently in a future career. When this future self-image is clear and personally meaningful, learners are more likely to invest effort in order to reduce the gap between their current English ability and their imagined future self (Dörnyei, 2009; Lamb, 2016). The Ought-to L2 Self refers to the attributes learners believe they should possess because of duties, obligations, responsibilities, or expectations from others. This component is often associated with external pressures, such as passing examinations, meeting family expectations, or avoiding negative academic and career outcomes (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Some studies suggest that the Ought-to L2 Self may be particularly relevant in Asian educational contexts because family expectations, school requirements, and social pressures can strongly influence learners' motivation (Taguchi, Magid, & Papi, 2009; Jahan Khan et al., 2023).

The third component, L2 Learning Experience, concerns learners' immediate learning environment and previous learning experiences. It includes factors such as teachers' teaching methods, classroom atmosphere, textbooks, peer influence, and successful or unsuccessful learning experiences (Dörnyei, 2009). This component reflects the situated nature of motivation because learners' willingness to study English is often shaped by what happens in the classroom. In EFL contexts such as China, where students may have limited English exposure outside formal education, the L2 Learning Experience can be especially important. Therefore, the L2MSS provides a useful framework for examining Chinese college students' English learning motivation because it connects learners' future self-guides with their actual learning environment.

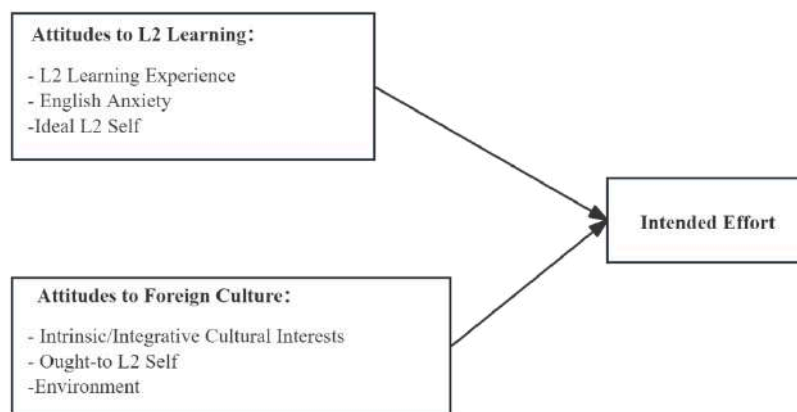


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

III. Methodology:

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative research design to examine Chinese college students' English learning motivation based on Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System. This study focuses on the quantitative component in order to describe students' motivational profiles, compare the relative strength of different motivational dimensions, and examine the relationships among major motivational variables. The research was guided by two questions: what types of English language learning motivation Chinese college students possess,



and which motivational dimensions appear most prominent in their English learning. The use of quantitative data also allowed the study to examine whether motivational patterns differed according to gender and major.

3.2 Data Collection

The participants were undergraduate students from a public university in northern China. College students were selected because they are mature enough to form future self-images, which is important for applying the L2 Motivational Self System. Dörnyei (2009) suggested that this framework may not be suitable for students before secondary education. In addition, Chinese college students generally have long-term English learning experience, often extending over at least 12 years, which makes them suitable participants for examining English learning motivation. A total of 63 valid questionnaires were collected.

A structured questionnaire was used as the main instrument for data collection. The questionnaire items were derived from Dörnyei's (2014) study on Chinese students and adapted from elements of Gardner's (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery. Some items and motivational variables were slightly modified to make the questionnaire more suitable for the Chinese context. After the English version was developed, it was translated into Chinese and proofread by two graduate students majoring in translation.

The Chinese version was then piloted with ten Chinese L2 learners, including five English majors and five non-English majors. Based on the pilot test, several items were revised to improve clarity and appropriateness. The final questionnaire contained 39 six-point Likert-scale items and two background questions. The motivational scales covered L2MSS-related factors, attitudinal factors, emotional factors, and the criterion measure. The questionnaire was designed to be easy to complete and required approximately five minutes.

The questionnaire was administered online in June 2023 through Wen Juan Xing (www.wjx.cn) and distributed anonymously through a school forum. To ensure voluntary participation, a participant information form was attached at the beginning of the questionnaire. This form briefly introduced the study, explained the purpose of data collection, and informed participants that their participation was voluntary. Instructions were also included to help participants complete the questionnaire efficiently.

3.3 Data Analysis

The collected questionnaire data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0. First, internal consistency analysis was conducted to examine the reliability of the questionnaire scales in the Chinese context. Second, descriptive statistics were used to calculate the mean values and standard deviations of the major motivational dimensions. Third, independent-samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether motivational dimensions differed according to gender and major. Finally, correlation analysis was used to explore the linear relationships among the main motivational variables, especially the associations between intended effort and other motivational scales.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

Several ethical issues were considered because the study involved student participants. First, the wording of the questionnaire was carefully designed to avoid causing embarrassment or negative emotions. Second, all participants joined the study voluntarily. Before data collection, participants were informed of the study purpose and the data collection process, and they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time. Third, confidentiality and anonymity were emphasized throughout the research process. The data collected were used only for academic research, and participants' personal identities were not disclosed. The original dissertation also noted that research data were stored securely in cloud space provided by the University of Leeds and would be deleted after completion of the dissertation to reduce the risk of data leakage. These procedures were intended to protect participants' privacy and ensure that the study followed basic ethical principles for educational research.

IV. Results

The results are organized into five sections: reliability analysis, descriptive statistics, gender-based differences, major-based differences, and correlation analysis among the motivational scales.

Table 1. Reliability

Variable	Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean Inter-item Correlation
Ideal L2 Self	8	0.87	0.44
Ought-to L2 Self	8	0.71	0.24
Environment	3	0.66	0.39



Attitudes to L2 Learning	5	0.86	0.55
Attitudes to Foreign Culture	5	0.85	0.53
English Anxiety	5	0.79	0.43
Intended Effort	5	0.8	0.45
All Scales	41	0.91	0.20

Table 1 shows that the questionnaire had strong overall reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.91 for all scales. Most individual variable also demonstrated acceptable to high internal consistency, ranging from 0.71 to 0.87. The Environment had the lowest alpha value (0.66), but it remained acceptable for exploratory social science research, especially given its small number of items. Overall, the results indicate that the questionnaire was reliable for measuring Chinese college students’ English learning motivation.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Motivational Scales

Variable	Mean	Std. Deviation	Rank	Interpretation
Attitudes to Foreign Culture	4.55	0.97	1	Highest mean; strongest descriptive motivational dimension.
Ideal L2 Self	4.48	0.98	2	Strong future-oriented motivational self-image.
Intended Effort	4.35	0.87	3	Students reported willingness to invest effort in English learning.
Attitudes to L2 Learning	4.29	1	4	Positive attitudes toward English learning.
Environment	4.24	0.97	5	Learning environment perceived as motivationally relevant.
Ought-to L2 Self	4.09	0.77	6	Obligations and expectations remain relevant but lower than ideal self.
English Anxiety	3.63	0.98	7	Lower than other scales; anxiety is not the dominant motivational factor.

Table 2 indicates that students generally reported a high level of English learning motivation, as most motivational variables had mean scores above 4.00. Attitudes to Foreign Culture recorded the highest mean (M = 4.55), followed by Ideal L2 Self (M = 4.48), suggesting that students’ motivation was strongly shaped by cultural interest and future self-images. Intended Effort also showed a relatively high mean (M = 4.35), indicating students’ willingness to invest effort in English learning. In contrast, English Anxiety had the lowest mean (M = 3.63), suggesting that anxiety was less dominant than positive motivational factors.

Table 3: Gender Differences in Motivational Scales

Variable	Male Mean (S.D.)	Female Mean (S.D.)	Mean Difference	t	p	Effect Size
Attitudes to Foreign Culture	4.24 (1.23)	4.67 (0.83)	-0.43	-1.335	0.195	0.039
English Anxiety	3.64 (0.96)	3.62 (0.99)	0.02	0.097	0.923	0.000
Ought-to L2 Self	3.77 (0.99)	4.22 (0.63)	-0.45	-1.776	0.089	0.07
Ideal L2 Self	3.89 (1.17)	4.72 (0.79)	-0.83	-2.783	.010*	0.149
Environment	4.15 (1.13)	4.28 (0.90)	-0.13	-0.492	0.624	0.004
Attitudes to L2 Learning	4.00 (1.04)	4.40 (0.97)	-0.4	-1.448	0.153	0.033
Intended Effort	3.78 (1.08)	4.58 (0.66)	-0.8	-2.939	.008**	0.176

Note. Values in parentheses are standard deviations. $p < .05$; $p < .01$.

Table 3 shows that female students generally reported higher motivational scores than male students. Significant gender differences were found in Ideal L2 Self ($p = .010$) and Intended Effort ($p = .008$), indicating that female



students had stronger future-oriented English self-images and greater willingness to invest effort in English learning. No significant gender differences were found in the other motivational variables.

Table 4: Major Differences in Motivational Scales

Variable	English Major Mean (S.D.)	Non-English Major Mean (S.D.)	Mean Difference	t	p	Effect Size
Attitudes to Foreign Culture	4.63 (0.80)	4.48 (1.11)	0.15	0.611	0.543	0.006
English Anxiety	3.83 (1.07)	3.44 (0.86)	0.39	1.586	0.118	0.04
Ought-to L2 Self	4.31 (0.66)	3.90 (0.82)	0.41	2.214	.031*	0.074
Ideal L2 Self	4.63 (0.73)	4.36 (1.15)	0.27	1.122	0.266	0.019
Environment	4.46 (0.82)	4.06 (1.05)	0.4	1.666	0.101	0.044
Attitudes to L2 Learning	4.45 (1.01)	4.15 (0.98)	0.3	1.197	0.236	0.023
Intended Effort	4.55 (0.64)	4.18 (1.01)	0.37	1.759	0.084	0.045

Note. Values in parentheses are standard deviations. $p < .05$; $p < .01$.

Table 4 shows that English majors reported higher mean scores than non-English majors across all motivational scales. However, only Ought-to L2 Self showed a statistically significant difference ($p = .031$), suggesting that English majors experienced stronger obligation-related motivation than non-English majors. No significant major-based differences were found for attitudes to foreign culture, English anxiety, ideal L2 self, environment, attitudes to L2 learning, or intended effort.

Table 5: Correlations among Motivational Scales

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Intended Effort	1						
2. Attitudes to Foreign Culture	0.585	1					
3. English Anxiety	0.029	-0.034	1				
4. Ought-to L2 Self	0.5	0.32	0.473	1			
5. Ideal L2 Self	0.758	0.665	0.044	0.626	1		
6. Environment	0.523	0.413	-0.073	0.39	0.472	1	
7. Attitudes to L2 Learning	0.698	0.526	-0.355	0.14	0.443	0.61	1

Table 5 shows strong positive correlations among several motivational scales. Ideal L2 Self had the strongest correlation with Intended Effort ($r = .758$), followed by Attitudes to L2 Learning ($r = .698$), Attitudes to Foreign Culture ($r = .585$), and Environment ($r = .523$). These results suggest that students with clearer future English self-images, more positive learning attitudes, stronger cultural interest, and better learning experiences were more willing to invest effort in English learning. In contrast, English Anxiety had almost no relationship with Intended Effort ($r = .029$), indicating that anxiety was not a major motivational factor in this sample.

V. Discussion

The findings show that Chinese college students generally reported high English learning motivation. Among the motivational dimensions, attitudes toward foreign culture and Ideal L2 Self showed the highest descriptive scores, suggesting that students' English learning motivation was closely related to both cultural interest and future-oriented self-images. This finding reflects the changing role of English in contemporary China. With the development of globalization and the increasing importance of English for academic and professional development, Chinese college students appear to recognize the practical value of English and its relevance to their future lives. Therefore, their motivation is not limited to examination requirements but is also connected with personal interest, future development, and international communication.

The strong relationship between Ideal L2 Self and Intended Effort indicates that future self-guides remain important in Chinese college students' English learning motivation. Students who have clearer visions of themselves as competent English users are more likely to report stronger willingness to invest effort in English



learning. This supports Dörnyei's (2009) view that a clear and meaningful future L2 self can motivate learners to reduce the gap between their current self and desired future self. The result also aligns with previous studies showing that the Ideal L2 Self plays an important role in learners' motivational behavior (Khan, Shaik-Abdullah, & Sani, 2023). In the Chinese higher education context, this suggests that students' future academic and career expectations may help sustain their English learning motivation.

The results also indicate that attitudes toward L2 learning and attitudes toward foreign culture are closely associated with students' intended effort. This suggests that learners' emotional and cultural orientation toward English is an important part of their motivation. Students may be motivated not only by practical reasons but also by curiosity about foreign cultures, interest in English-language media, and positive feelings toward English learning. This supports Norton's (2000) view that learners' investment in a target language is also an investment in themselves. It also reflects Kramsch's (2009) argument that language learning is connected with learners' social identity and communicative possibilities. Therefore, positive attitudes toward English and foreign culture may help students maintain stronger motivation and engagement.

Gender differences were found in Ideal L2 Self and Intended Effort, with female students reporting higher scores than male students. This suggests that female students in this sample had stronger future-oriented English self-images and were more willing to invest effort in learning English. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting that female learners often report stronger language learning motivation (Li et al., 2023). One possible explanation is that female learners may form more vivid interpersonal and communicative future self-images, which can strengthen their Ideal L2 Self (Papi, 2010). However, because both male and female students showed generally positive motivation, the findings should not be interpreted as evidence that one gender is always more motivated than the other. As Dörnyei and Clément (2001) suggest, L2 motivation can be largely gender-neutral depending on context.

Major-based differences were more limited. English majors reported higher mean scores than non-English majors on all motivational scales, but only Ought-to L2 Self showed a statistically significant difference. This suggests that English majors may experience stronger obligation-related motivation, possibly because English proficiency is more directly connected with their academic identity and future career expectations. However, the limited number of significant differences also indicates that both English and non-English majors recognize the importance of English. In the era of globalization, English has entered many academic and professional fields, so non-English majors may also view English as a necessary tool for future development. This finding suggests that English learning motivation among Chinese college students is no longer restricted to English majors.

English anxiety had the lowest descriptive score and showed little relationship with Intended Effort. This indicates that anxiety was not a dominant motivational factor in this sample. Although anxiety may negatively affect learning quality in some contexts, appropriate levels of anxiety may also encourage learners to pay attention to their learning (Khan, Shaik-Abdullah, & Sani, 2023). In this study, however, positive motivational factors such as Ideal L2 Self, attitudes toward L2 learning, attitudes toward foreign culture, and learning environment were more relevant to students' intended effort than anxiety.

VI. Conclusion and Implications

The findings lead to three main conclusions.

1. Chinese college students generally reported a relatively high level of English learning motivation. Among the motivational dimensions, attitudes toward foreign culture and Ideal L2 Self showed the highest mean scores, suggesting that students' motivation was strongly shaped by cultural interest and future-oriented self-images.
2. Significant differences were found in selected motivational dimensions. Female students reported significantly higher scores in Ideal L2 Self and Intended Effort, while English majors reported a significantly higher score in Ought-to L2 Self. However, most motivational dimensions did not show significant differences by gender or major, indicating that English learning motivation was broadly shared among the participants.
3. The correlation results showed that Ideal L2 Self, attitudes toward L2 learning, attitudes toward foreign culture, and learning environment were positively associated with Intended Effort. In contrast, English Anxiety showed little relationship with Intended Effort. These results suggest that positive self-images, learning attitudes, cultural interest, and supportive learning environments are more closely related to students' willingness to invest effort in English learning than anxiety.

These findings have practical implications for English teaching in Chinese higher education. Since students' learning experience and attitudes are closely related to their motivation, teachers should create positive and supportive English learning environments. Teachers can design challenging but interesting classroom activities based on students' abilities, interests, and preferences, which may help increase attention and participation in English classes (Na Nongkhai, 2017). In addition, teachers should provide encouragement to enhance students'



confidence and help them develop clear and realistic future English self-images. Activities such as discussing future goals, sharing learning aspirations, and connecting English learning with academic and career plans may help activate students' Ideal L2 Self (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014).

VII. Limitation and Future Research

This study also has several limitations. The sample was relatively small and came from one public university in northern China, which limits the generalizability of the findings. In addition, most participants were female, so the gender comparison should be interpreted cautiously. The study also focused on a specific group of college students, and students from other regions, universities, or year levels may show different motivational patterns. Future research could use larger and more balanced samples to further examine English learning motivation among Chinese college students.

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