Becoming a speaker of multiple languages: an investigation into UK university students’ motivation for learning Chinese

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This study explored the language learning motivation of a small group of five university students in the UK through the constructs of Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System and Henry’s notion of ‘the ideal multilingual self’. The five participants, all successful language learners at school, chose to specialise in modern languages at university and in addition to the foreign languages they had previously learned, decided to study Chinese. Interviews were conducted in the final year of the participants’ university course and their motivational changes during the course of studying Chinese were explored. The results revealed that two students who achieved remarkable success in learning Chinese came to possess a strong desire to integrate in Chinese society, linked to a longer period spent studying in the target language country. We suggest that integrative orientation is a significant component in maintaining the ideal L2 self, especially when a psychological and physical distance exists in relation to the target language, its culture and the country.

Keywords: language learning motivation; L2 motivational self system; ideal multilingual self; integrative orientation; anglophone university students

# Introduction

Learning modern foreign languages (MFLs) has been a controversial educational issue in English-speaking countries, and the citizens of these countries are often deemed to have relatively little interest in learning foreign languages (Bartram 2010). Lanvers (2017: 517) critically describes the situation in the UK as follows: ‘Britain, perhaps more than any other Anglophone country, has a long-standing reputation of being “bad at languages”’. As Oakes (2013: 179) has noted, the current status of English as a lingua franca in business, media and academia may well be creating an ‘English is enough mentality’ among British people with a consequent impact on motivation for learning other languages.

Although it is possible to try to identify the causes of ‘the language crisis’ (Lanvers 2017: 517) in Britain, we have followed Busse and Williams’ (2010) suggestion and have chosen instead to explore the motivation of UK learners who do demonstrate sustained motivation for learning foreign languages, choosing to specialise in MFLs at university. Our particular focus is on a small group of students who, in addition to their study of European languages such as French, Spanish and German, decided to take on the learning of Chinese. Given that these students chose to learn a novel language, they may be seen as being motivated by the specific prospect of becoming speakers of *multiple* languages. Building on previous studies conducted in Britain (e.g. Busse 2013; Busse and Williams 2010; Oakes 2013), this exploratory study draws on Dörnyei’s (2005, 2009) L2 Motivational Self System construct (L2MSS) to provide further insights into the motivation of language learners whose first language (L1) is English.

# Theoretical background

Gardner’s socio-educational model (Gardner 1985) led the field of language learning motivation research for a substantial period of time (Dörnyei 2005) and has exerted a significant impact on the field. Gardner’s model has created a solid foundation for the advancement of motivation research, particularly in terms of the key construct, ‘integrative motivation’, despite some controversy surrounding its legitimacy outside of the context (Canada: the place the Anglophone and Francophone communities coexist) where Gardner undertook much of his original research (Dörnyei: 2005). Gardner’s definition of ‘integrativeness’as reflecting ‘a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the target language community’ that ‘[a]t one level, … implie[s] an openness to, and respect for the target language cultural groups and ways of life’ (Gardner 2001: 5), can be applied to a wide range of contexts. However, Gardner (2001: 5) acknowledges that a strong form of ‘integrativeness’ might be seen as ‘complete identification with the community (and possibly even withdrawal from one’s original group), but more commonly it might well involve integration within both communities’. This definition appears less applicable to contexts where learners do not come into much contact with a target language community in their everyday life. Furthermore, as Dörnyei (1994a, 2005) has pointed out, Gardner’s usage of terminology—‘integrativeness’, ‘integrative orientation’ and ‘integrative motive’ having all been components in his model—can be confusing at times. Notwithstanding the controversial nature of the ‘integrative motive’, however, the concept has always been a crucial element of L2 motivation research.

After the long dominance of Gardner’s socio-educational model, the 1990s, which Dörnyei (2019: 21) calls the period of ‘the motivational renaissance’, witnessed a dramatic shift in language learning motivation research, starting with Crookes and Schmidt’s (1991: 502) critique of Gardner’s model, stating that ‘a theory of the role of motivation in SL learning ought to be general and not restricted to particular context or groups.’ In addition to the questioning of the legitimacy of the socio-educational model in *foreign*, as opposed to *second,* language contexts (Dörnyei 1994a, 1994b), the application of self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan 1985) by Noels and her associates (Noels 2001; ﻿Noels, Pelletier, Clément and Vallerand 2000) and the introduction of a qualitative approach into the motivation research field (Ushioda 2001), paved the way to a new paradigm.

In 2005, while expressing his admiration for Gardner’s concept of ‘integrativeness’, Dörnyei (2005) argued that the concept needed reinterpretation through the application of ‘a theory of self and identity’ (2005: 93). His new framework—the L2 Motivational Self System (2005)—was established based on the combination of the concept of *possible selves* introduced by Markus and Nurius (1986) and Higgins’s (1987) *self-discrepancy theory*. Dörnyei’s construct consists of three factors: the *ideal L2 self,* ‘a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves’; the *ought-to L2 self*, i.e. ‘the attributes that one believes one ought to possess in order to avoid possible negative outcomes’; and *L2 learning experienc*e, the ‘situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience’ (Dörnyei 2005: 105-106). As Dörnyei (2009) explicitly states, the main focus of his new theory was to re-interpret Gardner’s integrativeness/integrative motivation as a dimension of the ideal L2 self. Although the term ‘integrativeness’ does not appear in Dörnyei’s model, the concept is clearly incorporated in the ideal L2 self component:

… our attitudes towards members of the L2 community must be related to our ideal language self image. I would suggest that the more positive our disposition toward these L2 speakers, the more attractive our idealised L2 self; or, to turn this equation around, it is difficult to imagine that we can have a vivid and attractive ideal L2 self if the L2 is spoken by a community that we despise.

Referring to Norton’s (2001) concept of ‘communities of imagination’, Dörnyei argues that learners can create their positive L2 ideal self in the imagined community, based both on their own experiences and imagination. Hence, even if a target language does not exist in learners’ daily life, they can still possess integrative disposition towards their *imagined* L2 community.

The ideal L2 self also encompasses one aspect of instrumentality, according to Dörnyei (2009). This was a factor that was found to be closely related to integrativeness in Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh’s (2006) large-scale longitudinal study conducted in Hungary. Following Higgins’s (1987) separation of ‘promotion’ and ‘prevention’ in future self-guides, Dörnyei (2009) divided instrumental motivation into two parts; he categorised instrumental motives which relate to ‘promotion’, such as people’s future success, as part of the ideal L2 self, while instrumental motives with ‘prevention’ tendencies such as studying to avoid failure in an exam, were linked to the ought-to L2 self.

The L2 Motivational Self System has been the most widely used framework (Ushioda and Dörnyei 2017) for more than a decade since its launch. Although Dörnyei and Ushioda (2009), following some cautions provided by MacIntyre, Mackinnon and Clément (2009), raised several issues regarding the L2MSS (e.g. the stability of learners’ ideal and ought-to selves, and the influence of culture on learners’ self-concept), its wide implementation in the research of L2 English learning (e.g. Csizér and Kormos 2009; Lamb 2012; Ryan 2009; Taguchi, Magid and Papi 2009) and the learning of languages other than English (LOTEs) (e.g. Busse and Williams 2010; Henry 2011, 2017; Henry and Thorsen 2018; Liu and Thompson 2018; Thompson 2017; Thompson and Vásquez 2015) demonstrates the value of the L2MSS as a framework for investigating language learner motivation. Furthermore, the addition of other ‘self’ aspects such as the ‘ideal *multilingual* self’ (see Henry 2017; Henry and Thorsen 2018) and the ‘*anti* ought-to self’ (see Liu and Thompson 2018; Thompson 2017; Thompson and Vásquez 2015) may help us understand language learners’ motivation in greater depth in different learning contexts.

In a special issue of *The Modern Language Journal* on motivation for LOTEs, Henry (2017) proposed the construct of the ‘ideal multilingual self’, drawing on studies by Kramsch and Huffmaster (2015) and Pavlenko (2006) which examined the identity experiences of multilingual language learners/users, along with his own ethnographic study of Swedish learners of multiple foreign languages. Many of the participants in Henry’s study were learning more than two foreign languages in addition to English. He argued that learners of two or more foreign languages could develop ideal multilingual selves in addition to an ideal L2 self specific to each foreign language being learned. The ideal multilingual self is an abstract concept of a holistic language learning self and potentially affects learners’ motivation for learning any language. Following this claim, Henry and Thorsen (2018) conducted an empirical study involving 323 secondary school students in Sweden in order to investigate the validity of the concept. The results revealed that the ideal multilingual self and the ideal L2 self for specific languages were indeed separate constructs. The ideal multilingual self exerted an indirect effect on learners’ intended effort in language learning, but this was mediated through the ideal L2 self. The researchers thus concluded that in comparison to the ideal L2 self, the ideal multilingual self was less likely to be directly and closely connected to learners’ learning activities. However, they noted that their research was undertaken with early teenagers (aged 13 to 15) and that a different picture in the relationship between the ideal multilingual self and ideal L2 selves might well emerge with different learner groups, in particular with more mature learners.

In relation to research on language learning motivation in the British context, Busse and Williams’ (2010) mixed-methods study of university students studying German at two UK universities found three important motivating factors: gaining language proficiency (German), enjoyment of learning German (intrinsic motivation), and having a clear future vision of themselves as proficient German users (the ideal L2 self). Although in both their quantitative and qualitative data, instrumental and integrative motivation emerged as influential variables, neither of them was as powerful as the above-mentioned three variables (proficiency, enjoyment and future vision). Based on these results, the authors concluded that the ideal self concept in the L2MSS model was able to explain these German learners’ motivation more precisely than integrative and instrumental motivations, and it was also applicable to LOTE contexts. Busse (2017), referring to her own research (Busse 2013; Busse and Williams 2010), also noted that some of her participants (L1 English students learning German) possessed a more global perspective of becoming multilingual rather than just aiming to become a fluent user of German. In her words, ‘being fluent in different FLs was perceived as a way of becoming an educated European citizen’ (Busse 2017: 568).

# Aims of the study

The aim of this study was to investigate the motivation of five UK university students who started learning Chinese in addition to the foreign languages that they had already studied prior to entering university such as French, German and Spanish, both as learners of Chinese and as multiple language learners. Given that four of the five participants were studying their three MFLs simultaneously at university (the fifth participant was studying two MFLs), we decided to use Henry’s (2017) concept of the ideal multilingual self as well as Dörnyei’s L2MSS (2005, 2009) as key frameworks for this investigation. Our specific research question was: how do the ideal L2 (Chinese) self, the ought-to L2 self and the ideal multilingual self function in the students’ motivational evolution/fluctuation during the course of their four years of university study as language major students?

# Participants

In order to recruit participants for this study, we approached two Chinese tutors who were teaching at a university in the south of the UK. At this university, students entering the School of Modern Languages and Linguistics are able to choose single or combined degree programmes in French, German, Spanish, [Portuguese](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/ml/languages/portuguese_studies.page) and [Latin American Studies](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/ml/languages/spanish_portuguese_and_latin_american_studies.page), [European Studies](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/ml/languages/european_studies.page) and [Linguistics](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/ml/languages/linguistic_studies.page). They can also learn other foreign languages such as Ancient Greek, Arabic, Chinese, English, Italian, Japanese, Latin and Russian. If they choose only languages, they are required to take three, aiming to reach Stage 6 in all three languages: Stage 1 corresponds to beginner level and Stage 7 to near-native proficiency (see Appendix 1 for entry requirements and the level of achievement expected at each stage).

The two Chinese tutors allowed us to speak to potential participants in two of their classes to explain the detail of our study. All of the students present in these classes willingly agreed to participate in our study. At the time of recruitment we informed them of a voucher incentive they would receive in return for their participation, and a £15 voucher was sent to them after the interviews. The participants in this study—Beth, Brian, Freya, Peggy and Sonia (all the names are pseudonyms)—were all fourth and final year students majoring in modern foreign languages when the interviews were conducted.

Prior to entering university, all of the participants had studied at least two MFLs (French, Spanish or German: see Table 1 for more details). Peggy was the only one who had studied Chinese previously at school. She had completed a GCSE1 in Chinese, which allowed her to start her university Chinese course at Stage 2, one level higher than the other students. On the Chinese language course, students were able to proceed to one level higher by attending a six-week summer course in Nanjing, China. All the students except Peggy attended this summer course: Beth, Brian and Sonia at the end of their first year and Freya at the end of her second year. Beth, Brian and Sonia completed Stage 1 at the end of their first year and then proceeded to Stage 3 in their second year while Freya completed Stages 1 and 2 over her first two years and then skipped Stage 3 by attending the course at the end of her second year. [Please insert Table 1 near here].

As a course requirement, the participants all studied abroad (for nine months) in their third year; Brian and Freya chose China as their destination, and the others chose either Spain (Peggy) or France (Beth and Sonia). Freya started her year abroad in China as soon as she had completed the summer course in Nanjing. Upon the completion of their year abroad and return to university in their fourth year, Brian and Freya were at Stage 6 having completed Stages 4 and 5 while studying in China, while the three others were at Stage 4.

# Interviews

In order to investigate the participants’ motivational evolution and fluctuation in depth, we chose a qualitative approach based on interviews for this investigation. All the interviews were conducted in a room in the building of the students’ faculty in their free time in November and December 2018. This was a significant point in time for them since they were now into their final year of undergraduate study and on the point of beginning to plan their future. They were all considering possibilities for making the best of their expertise as learners/users of multiple foreign languages in their future career. Although the interviews were semi-structured (see Appendix 2 for questions), further questions added on the spot varied slightly from participant to participant. Each participant was interviewed once and the length of the interviews was as follows: Beth 44:48 min, Brian 1:00:29, Freya 56:29, Peggy 31:25 and Sonia 46:05.

# Data analysis

All the interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. In order to understand the data and identify some themes common to all interviewees, the authors read all the transcripts individually while keeping the interview questions in mind. Based on preliminary analysis, we decided to use the umbrella themes of the ‘ideal L2 self’, the ‘ought-to L2 self’ (Dörnyei 2005, 2009) and the ‘ideal multilingual self’ (Henry 2017). Aiming to delineate participants’ motivational changes at different stages in their Chinese learning history, we divided their learning process into several periods: the period of ‘before entering university’, ‘after starting to learn Chinese’, ‘the summer language course’, ‘the year abroad’ and ‘the final year at university’. Except for our decision to use the ‘self’ constructs as mentioned above as a basis for our data analysis, we decided to be open to new themes that emerged from each interview.

For the main data analysis, all the transcripts were transferred to NVivo 10 and content analysis was carried out. When we differed in creating new categories, we discussed these in order to reach agreement. For example, in one of the main categories, ‘before entering university’, we created the same subcategories—‘enjoyment’, ‘success’, ‘ideal L2 self’, ‘ought-to L2 self’ and ‘ideal multilingual self’ - but one of us also came up with subcategories such as ‘influence of others’ and ‘encouragement’, which we decided to merge into ‘ought-to L2 self’, recording these changes in the research journal managed by the first author.

# Findings

## Motivation for majoring in MFLs and learning Chinese

As was the case in studies by Ushioda (2001), Busse and Williams (2010), and Busse (2013), learners’ previous experiences of enjoyment in language learning were found to be a powerful motivational factor in the current study. The participants reported that their enjoyment of MFLs at school led to their choice of languages at university, as indicated by Peggy:

Interviewer: Did you think about specialising in anything else?

Peggy: No.

Interviewer: Okay, so you were into learning languages?

Peggy: Yes.

Interviewer: When did you think about studying languages at uni?

Peggy: Probably in, like, year eight or year nine.

Interviewer: Wow. Quite early.

Peggy: Yeah, because that’s what I quite enjoyed the most in school. I wasn’t really good at anything else, (…) and that was like the natural obvious choice.

It is worth highlighting here the slight difference between our participants and those in Busse and Williams’ (2010) study; while both sets of participants chose to continue studying language(s) they had enjoyed learning at school (German in the case of Busse and Williams’ study, and two of French, German and Spanish in the current study), our participants also opted for a new and unfamiliar language in addition to the languages they were already good at, as noted by Sonia:

Sonia: I didn’t want to stop doing French and Spanish (…) I wanted to do a new language as well, so this university does three and I wanted to do something that wasn’t a Romance language, do something a bit different.

Busse and Williams (2010) concluded that their participants’ previous success was a secondary motivating factor and was not as powerful as the enjoyment they experienced in learning German. This also seemed to be the case for the participants in this study, to the extent that none of them referred to their previous success with languages, except for a Peggy’s comment ‘I wasn’t really good at anything else’. However, their success and confidence as language learners were hidden behind their decision to study a new MFL in addition to the languages they had studied at school. Furthermore, they did not opt for another Romance language, which would have been an easier option for them. Choosing Chinese, which was novel to them, could be seen - as in Sonia’s remark above - as a manifestation of their desire to make them stand out, a point we will discuss next. While the participants did not refer explicitly to their earlier success as motivating their decision to take Chinese, confidence in their language learning ability based on their earlier success may well have been as powerful a factor as ‘enjoyment’, and both of these factors will have undoubtedly generated their desire to become multilingual speakers. At the stage of embarking on learning Chinese, their image of future-selves would still have been too vague to be categorised as an ‘ideal multilingual self’, but they must at least have envisaged themselves becoming fluent users of Chinese along with their other MFLs, based on their previous achievement.

All the participants reported that when they were considering majoring in languages, they were already thinking about taking Chinese (Freya studied only two MFLs since her major was European Studies). For example, Freya described her fascination with unfamiliar languages, referring to her childhood experience of a friend using Farsi. Beth was quickly convinced to choose Chinese after talking to one of the Chinese lecturers who enthusiastically explained the benefits of learning Chinese at a university open day event. Brian assumed this was his last opportunity to learn a new language intensively as a student. It seems that at this early stage, none of them had a specific interest in China or in Chinese language and culture, but all of them were searching for something ‘new’, which would bring them the enjoyment of learning another language.

At the same time, Beth, Brian and Freya added instrumental reasons for their choice of Chinese, specifically stating that it would boost their value in their future job-hunting:

Freya: China was becoming quite an important competitor in that kind of a global society and, you know, it’s becoming like a major player and, yeah, I thought I would become prominent. I thought it would give me an advantage when looking for jobs, give me a bit of an edge over other people that perhaps don’t have Chinese.

Brian, referring to his teacher whom he respected, also stated that Chinese is ‘something that should always make you stand out’. Not knowing whether learning Chinese would bring practical benefits as they had conceived, they may well have been referring to general assumptions. However, it may also be that, feeling they were already successful language learners, they wanted to become distinctive multilinguals. Moreover, Brian seemed to consider that mastering Chinese would earn him respect and approval from other people:

Brian: I probably cared too much about what other people thought of me and so it was like ‘I’ll do Chinese and I would definitely get their respect,’ sort of thing.

As we noted earlier, one interesting feature which emerged from the data is that these students reported no integrative orientation at the point of starting learning Chinese; none of them mentioned any interest in the country, its people or the culture associated with the target language. At this stage, their interest seemed to be in a new language that would make them outshine other MFL learners and be useful in the future job market.

## Motivation for learning Chinese before the year abroad

As shown in Table 1, at the onset of their final year Brian and Freya were at Stage 6, and Beth, Peggy and Sonia were at Stage 4. The difference between these two groups lay principally in whether or not they chose China as their year abroad destination. Both Brian and Freya completed a course equivalent to Stages 4 and 5 while in China, and this appeared to strongly affect their motivation.

Regardless of their enjoyment of Chinese lessons when they started learning Chinese, all the participants referred to the difficulties they had encountered especially at the early stage of their learning. They used words such as ‘hard’ and ‘difficult’ (Beth and Sonia), ‘struggle’ and ‘felt stupid’ (Brian), ‘overwhelmed’ (Freya) and ‘had a bit of a shock’ (Peggy). Beth even mentioned that she was almost at the point of giving up Chinese because she had never before encountered any difficulty in learning languages. Although all of them experienced a certain level of difficulty, Brian and Freya reported their strong determination for going to China for their year abroad. This may well be reflecting not only their desire to become ‘special’ but also their capability of picturing their ideal L2 (Chinese)/multilingual self and the effort they invested in order to fill the discrepancy between their ideal self and current self. Knowing the requirement for the year abroad in China—achieving Stage 3 by the end of their second year - Brian and Freya made every effort to meet it once they had set a year abroad in China as their goal. Brian attended a six-week summer course in Nanjing, China, at the end of his first year so that he could proceed to Stage 3 in his second year; Freya attended it at the end of her second year, just before her year abroad in China.

As seen in his remarks below, Brian’s motivation started to change after the commencement of learning based on his fascination for Chinese as a language:

Brian: It was like ‘I’ll do Chinese and I would definitely get their respect,’ sort of thing. And then, but then as I started it was just like ‘I really don’t care what other people think.’ It was just the case, ‘This is really cool. I’m interested in the language. I would like to get good’.

He also explained that his strong interest in Chinese led to significant investment in improving it and the positive outcomes that followed his effort:

Brian: To be honest, I neglected my other languages a bit because I really wanted to get a good base in Chinese. So I just sort of kept up the other languages but really focused. That was reflected in my grades because my grades in Chinese were definitely a lot higher than in French and Spanish in my first year, and now it’s kind of, like, balanced out.

However, what was behind his investment to improve Chinese seems to be related not merely to his attraction to the new language, but also to achieving his goal—becoming a multilingual speaker of MFLs.

Brian: I’m gonna graduate and I’ll have the three languages at the same level in Stage 6. That is quite important for me.

Brian’s remarks here can be interpreted as the emergence of his clear ideal multilingual self.

Freya’s motivation for choosing China seems to have been more linked to an instrumental motivation; she wanted to avoid the other possible option in France along with her originally stated reason for choosing Chinese—'it [Chinese] would give me an advantage when looking for jobs, give me a bit of an edge over other people that perhaps don’t have Chinese’.

## Influence of the six-week summer course

Beth, Brian and Sonia attended a six-week summer course in China at the end of their first year and Freya did this at the end of her second year. The motivation of Beth, Brian and Sonia for attending the course was mainly being able to skip one stage of their study:

Beth: When I started Chinese, obviously I was at Stage 1 and then my tutor told us if we went to Nanjing and did this course, we could come back into Stage 3 in our second year. So that’s why I did it and also I thought ‘I’ve never been to China before, so it’d be cool to actually see the country of the language that I’m learning,’ so yeah!

The six-week course, which was equivalent to one year of study, must have led to a very positive image of themselves making substantial progress by the beginning of the following academic year. Brian’s motivation, which was wearing off after a year of learning Chinese, was clearly reignited:

Brian: I was motivated because it was new and exciting, but I can remember feeling a bit like tired out and my motivation was probably a bit low. But then going to Nanjing in the summer, really, was like ‘Oh this is cool. This is really exciting. I wanna do it.’ That propelled me through second year definitely, really. When I came back, it was like ‘Look, look at me. I’ve improved’.

As we highlighted earlier, Brian had revealed that his motivation for learning Chinese at the start of his university course was linked to a strong aspiration for recognition of his achievement by other people, although this had become less important as he started the Chinese course. However, his comments above suggest that others’ evaluation was still a crucial element in boosting his motivation. It seems likely, thus, that this type of motivation—instrumental motivation with a promotion focus, which is categorised as part of the ideal L2 self in Dörnyei’s (2009) L2MSS—contributes to strengthening and enhancing a learner’s ideal L2 self.

In contrast, it appears that the summer course exerted a negative effect on Sonia’s motivation: ‘I think I definitely improved a lot, but I still didn’t feel that comfortable because I feel like it was like a big jump from Stage one to Stage three’. Although she confirmed that this apparently negatively affected her motivation for learning Chinese in her second year, it did not impede her motivation altogether, given that she flew to China straight after her return from her year abroad in France, worrying that her Chinese had regressed.

In comparison, Beth’s experience of feelings of exclusion in Nanjing, which clearly overwhelmed her, was probably more strongly detrimental to her motivation for learning Chinese:

Beth: Yeah, I did initially think of going to China because obviously my Chinese level was lower than the other two. I really like the Chinese culture. I think it’s really interesting, but I don’t think I could live there for a whole year. It’ll be too different for me. I know it’s a stupid thing to say but, like, all very foreign to me. I just felt like I could never fit in and obviously I looked very different as well, so I thought I would always be an outsider.

Considering that learners need positive attitudes towards the target language society in order to generate and preserve a powerful ideal L2 self (Dörnyei 2009), Beth’s feelings of being an outsider, experienced at an early stage of her learning, may have exerted a severely adverse effect on her motivation.

## A year abroad and studying Chinese

As mentioned earlier, Brian’s and Freya’s motivations for their year abroad in China were slightly different; Brian was driven by his ideal multilingual self while Freya was influenced by her avoidance of the other optional destination. Despite the difference in the nature of their motivation, they both seem to have made huge linguistic improvements, as expected. In addition to endorsement from their Chinese tutors, Brian acknowledged his progress by realising that he was capable of talking to his previous classmate in China—a Thai student—in Chinese for over two hours. However, while Brian appreciated the community he belonged to in China, which consisted of non-native speakers of Chinese, it seems that he also began to possess some sort of integrative orientation towards the Chinese society for the first time in his Chinese learning experience. As seen in his comment below, he articulated his desire to make friends with Chinese people, while at the same time referred to the barrier he felt existed between local people and himself:

Brian: I tried as hard as I could to speak with native people and to make friends but, yeah, I have said that to some people before, it felt like my relationship with Chinese people was more like a language exchange than a real life friendship which I really, I do regret that a bit. But I feel it was a mixture of probably me going there and lacking confidence in my language ability at first (…) I felt like Chinese people were kind of closed (…) but at the same time I was probably as closed (…) during the year there it was hard to integrate and feel like really a part of Chinese society because, I don’t know, I was always a guy from England, sort of thing.

Brian reported his fascination with the Chinese language around the start of Chinese learning, but up until his year abroad, his motivation was primarily rooted in his ideal multilingual self, driven by his aim to achieve the same level of proficiency in three languages. He did not refer to any particular interest in Chinese culture, its people or the country at that early stage. However, it appears that his time spent in China, and experience of the difficulty of merging into the local Chinese community, started to transform his motivation with a surge of integrative disposition. It is likely, thus, that Brian’s ideal L2 (Chinese) self finally started to function actively during his year abroad based on his strong desire for integration into Chinese society. He described his future plan of doing a Master’s with a vision of integration into Chinese society:

Brian: (…) potentially, yeah, if it’s not next year, then I hope at some point, yeah, because I, like I was saying to you earlier, I don’t feel like I fully integrated. I didn’t. I felt last year I didn’t fully integrate into the society.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Brian: By the time I finish, I will be more at a stage where I could go out with my confidence and will be finding friends rather than hoping someone will come and call me.

Although Beth, Peggy and Sonia did not choose China as their year-abroad destination, all of them made an effort to maintain their Chinese while abroad, feeling concerned about deterioration of their proficiency; Beth attended a module of Chinese-French translation while in France; Peggy took all of her Chinese textbooks to Spain and studied Chinese in her free time; Sonia contacted her Chinese tutors in order to obtain the textbooks for the following year. Sonia even took the rather extreme step of going to China upon finishing her year abroad:

Interviewer: So, how did you get on with learning Chinese?

Sonia: I didn’t. I forgot and then I thought ‘I have to go to China,’ so I went to China in the summer.

Interviewer: When did you decide to go to China?

Sonia: It was when I was in France in my second semester. I thought ‘I forgot a lot of Chinese. What am I going to do?’ So I emailed our professor, I emailed Yang [a Chinese tutor] (…) and I got my books so I could start studying these. But then I thought ‘That’s not really well if you can’t say anything’ and I wanted to earn some money as well, so I thought teaching English in China would be the best thing to do.

Sonia’s decision to go to China was based on her fear of possible future struggle when returning to the university, i.e. her ought-to self functioned as a drive to avoid future disappointment. We can also see her somewhat radical strategy as reflecting her pride in herself as a successful language learner.

## Future as a user/learner of Chinese

The participants’ choices of their study-abroad destinations clearly affected not only their achievement but also their future plans. Brian and Freya, who already had positive attitudes towards China in addition to their initial instrumental motivation, seemed to have strengthened their motivation for Chinese, with Brian stating: ‘My future has Chinese in it.’ At the time of the interview, he was planning either to apply for a job to analyse Chinese under the ‘graduate scheme’ or to attend a postgraduate course in China or Taiwan. Likewise, Freya was considering pursuing postgraduate study in China:

Freya: I’ll definitely go back, the question of when is, like, less decided. I’m currently thinking about going back for a Master’s.

Additionally, Freya saw her future as follows:

Freya: I still hope, very very much hope with my heart that I’m, you know, maybe in a corporate environment in London based, this is my dream, using my Chinese for networking, connecting internationally with clients or, you know, whoever in China and maybe visiting China. So, I want it to be a big part of my life forever.

Here we note again that both Brian and Freya expressed integrative motivation after their year abroad in describing their desire to return to China to pursue further education.

In contrast, the other three students, Beth, Peggy and Sonia, were not anticipating such a strong relationship with Chinese and China. For example, Beth was reluctant to stay in China for a long period of time due to the cultural differences she had experienced at her stay in Nanjing:

Beth: I just don’t wanna give up with it [Chinese], after, like, four years of learning it would be a shame to just forget about it.

Even Sonia, who flew to China upon returning from her year abroad in France, expressed limitations on any plans to return to China:

Sonia: I think I can only do for a short amount of time. I think if I have to spend a long time in China, I think I would just miss (…) the cultural difference is too much.

Although Peggy applied for teaching jobs in China, planning to work there for at least one year, she did not consider Chinese as a language she would use in her future job, stating ‘I do see myself speaking French and Spanish in my work, more than my Chinese.’ Regardless of the interest in Chinese culture which all three explicitly stated in the interviews, their comments suggest a superficial engagement with the target language community in contrast to Brian and Freya. This would confirm that it is hard to formulate and develop an ideal L2 self without strong orientations towards the target language country and people.

# Conclusion and implications

All the participants in the current study were good language learners who enjoyed learning foreign languages at school, which led to their specialisation in MFLs at higher education. As Busse and Williams (2010: 81) state: ‘Language skills are seen as an asset […] and also, so it seems, provide students with a sense of doing something ‘special’,’. Certainly, the students in the current study were looking for a language to make them ‘outstanding’. Acknowledging the powerful influence of China in the world, they chose a language that not many British people have yet acquired. However, over the course of four years of learning Chinese, these good language learners divided into two groups: one group with Brian and Freya, who saw a firm relationship with Chinese in the future, and the other with Beth, Peggy and Sonia, who did not.

Although it should be acknowledged that the limited sample size of the current study restricts our understanding of student motivation for learning multiple languages at tertiary level, our retrospective interview data point to two important aspects of motivation of adult language learners: the relationship between the ‘ideal multilingual self’ and the ‘ideal L2 self’ as well as the significant role of integrative orientation in sustaining the ideal L2 self.

As mentioned above, due to the data limitation, we can only speculate that all the participants would have envisaged achieving ideal multilingual selves (Henry, 2017) prior to entering university. However, if learners’ ideal multilingual selves remain vague without concrete goals, as seen in the cases of Beth, Peggy and Sonia, it seems difficult to maintain motivation for learning different languages simultaneously. In contrast, while Brian started out with a somewhat blurry ideal multilingual self just like the other students, it became quite specific—to reach Stage 6 in three languages – during the early stage of learning. in his determination to achieve this goal, Brian devoted much of his learning time to Chinese at the expense of his other two languages. His case shows that when learners study multiple languages, they will need to be strategic in balancing study across the languages in order to achieve their ideal multilingual selves. Moreover, they will need to be able to develop and maintain a solid ideal L2 self in relation to the weakest language in order to become an effective multilingual user. Thus, a multiple language learner’s ideal multilingual self and ideal L2 self in each language may be different constructs (Henry and Thorsen 2018), but these two components are clearly connected closely in a process of achieving one’s ideal multilingual self.

As pointed out earlier, none of the participants showed much integrative orientation at the commencement of learning Chinese, which was similar to the results of Busse and Williams (2010). They reported that among their university-level learners of German, the mean score for integrative motives was weaker than that of instrumental motives in the ideal L2 self component. In a similar vein, at least initially, the ideal L2 Chinese self of the participants in the current study seemed to consist solely of instrumental motivation without any link to the actual community of their target language. A plausible explanation for this is a lack of contact with China, Chinese people and culture in these students’ daily life circles prior to attending university. However, the division of the five students into two groups seemed to emerge depending on whether they were able to develop their ‘ideal L2 Chinese self’ specifically with integrative orientation in the course of their learning. Brian and Freya gradually came to be fascinated not only by the Chinese language itself, but also by its culture, its people, and the country, which eventually led to the generation of their integrative orientation, whereas the other three students were not able to reach that level. In particular, Beth’s experience of feeling an outsider during the summer course in Nanjing after studying Chinese for only one year seemed to become a critical turning point which possibly affected the formation of her integrative disposition. This demonstrates that whatever the initial drive for learning a new language is, integrative orientation is likely to be an indispensable component in strengthening the ideal L2 self. Brian’s and Freya’s integrative motivation might not have been Gardner’s (2001) strong form of integrative motivation, i.e. identification with, and integration into the target language community, but they did possess a strong desire to be accepted as a legitimate member in the target language society.

When the five participants were studying their other languages (French, German and Spanish) prior to entering university, it is conceivable that they sensed less physical and psychological distance with the countries where these languages are spoken than they did in studying Chinese. This study indicates the crucial role that integrative orientation can play in sustaining the learning of a language which is distant from learners’ L1 both physically and psychologically, and highlights the impact of contact with the target language country and people. One of the key challenges in promoting learning MFLs, especially the languages which are new and unfamiliar to learners, is how to enhance learners’ interest in the culture(s), people and society of the target language in order to enhance their integrative motivation and help them generate and maintain their ideal L2 and multilingual selves. In the aftermath of Brexit, such an approach to promoting MFLs seems vital to establishing and sustaining strong relationships with other countries in the world. (7,028 words)

# Note

# GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations in England are taken at age 15 or 16, and for MFLs correspond roughly to CEFR A2-B1.

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**Appendix 1 Entry requirements for each stage and the level of achievement expected at each stage**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **STAGE 1** | **STAGE 2** | **STAGE 3** | **STAGE 4** | **STAGE 5** | **STAGE 6** | **STAGE 7** |
| **Entry requirements** | None  OR  relatively little  experience of  studying the  language  OR  other qualification or  experience equivalent to CEFR A1\* | Stage 1B  OR  other qualification or experience equivalent to CEFR A2 | Stage 2B  OR  other qualification equivalent  to CEFR B1 | Stage 3B  OR  experience of using and /or studying the language at a level higher than  CEFR B1 | Stage 4B  OR  qualification or  experience equivalent to CEFR B2  but with experience  of using and / or studying the language at a level higher than  CEFR B2 | Stage 5  OR  qualification or  experience equivalent to CEFR B2  but with significant experience of using  and / or studying  the language at a  level higher than  CEFR B2 | Stage 6  OR  other qualification or  experience equivalent to CEFR C1 |
| **Level of achievement**  **expected** | CEFR A2 | CEFR B1 | CEFR B2 | CEFR B2/C1 | CEFR C1 | CEFR C1/C2 | CEFR C2 |

\*CEFR refers to the Common European Framework of Reference and its 6 point scale – A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2.

# Appendix 2 Interview guide

1. Why did you decide to major in MFLs and choose Chinese among the foreign languages offered at your university?
2. Do you think you have made a right choice? Why?
3. Do you enjoy learning Chinese in the classroom? What do you enjoy the most?
4. What difficulties have you encountered in learning Chinese? How did you get over these issues?
5. Do you do anything outside the classroom to improve your Chinese?
6. Has your motivation to learn Chinese fluctuated since you started learning Chinese? If there was fluctuation (a time when you felt demotivated), why do you think it happened? How did you become motivated again?
7. Have you ever visited in China? Did your visit/stay in China increase your motivation for learning Chinese?
8. How was your study abroad experience in ( )?
9. Do you have any kind of vision of yourself in relation to (using/learning) Chinese?

(What is your goal of learning Chinese?)