Exploring Identity in the Language Classroom

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Abstract

Language educators consider student motivation as fundamental in supporting student learning and central to making sound pedagogical decisions in order to help students develop competence in the target language. However, many teachers opt for using simplistic and prescriptive formulas or one-size-fits-all motivational models that claim positive learning results in the shortest amount of time. Unfortunately, teachers will soon discover that these models did not really make a difference in their students' levels of engagement and effort. There is a need to move away from fixed or static ideas of a language learner—and its simplistic rigidity— and, instead, think about learners' motivation as a multifaceted construct. This article outlines the current developments in the theory of language learning motivation in an effort to understand its complex nature, and identifies how identity constructs such as the *possible L2 selves* and *transportable identities* help place students' individualities at the center of pedagogical choices that support the multifaceted nature of language learners. Finally, this article provides practical examples of how to integrate these constructs into the design of everyday language learning activities.

Introduction

Motivation is an essential component in the process of acquiring a functional level of performance in a second language (L2). If one is working with a group of students who do not have a working knowledge of an L2 but are willing to put forth the effort necessary to reach a level of practical use of the target language, then these students will be more likely to attain their goal compared to a group

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of students who are bright but who do not want to commit the time and effort necessary to become proficient at least at the Intermediate level according to the ACTFL proficiency guidelines (2012). Therefore, language educators consider student motivation as fundamental in supporting learning and central to making sound pedagogical decisions in order to help students develop competence in the target language. It is necessary, however, that teachers stop searching for prescriptive motivational models that were designed with an archetypal student in mind. These models do not take into account the intricate reality of individual students and are based on a static definition of an otherwise complex concept, namely, motivation. Therefore, in order to promote sustainable student engagement that would result in the achievement of a functional knowledge of an L2, educators must see their students as unique individuals with transportable identities or, according to Zimmerman, identities that are part of the individuals as "they move through their daily routines" (as cited in Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p.70), exhibiting a variety of interests such as that of a passionate gamer or an avid soccer fan. They can then design meaningful and relevant pedagogical environments that would support student engagement and enhance language-learning motivation.

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In this article, I will explore the role of identity in the language classroom from a construct called "Possible Language 2 Selves." According to Markus and Nurius (1986), Possible Selves are future ideas of the self that one "would like to become, has to become, or is afraid of becoming" (p.954) and have proven to be powerful motivators of behavior (Dörnyei, 2005). Furthermore, the development of possible language selves helps position the learner at the center of pedagogical choices and learning environments, making teaching differentiation more in sync with the complex nature of student identity. This article will outline the current developments in the theory of language learning motivation, explain the meaning of "Possible Language 2 Selves," and identify how this construct helps place students' identities at the center of pedagogical choices. Lastly, practical examples will illustrate how to integrate this concept into the design of everyday language learning activities to support motivation and increase student engagement.

An Overview of Current Developments in the Field of L2 Motivation Theory

The discipline of educational psychology has strongly influenced the evolution of L2 motivation theory, particularly in the last five decades. Process and socio-dynamic theories have emerged, characterized by the need to understand motivational processes as they are being constructed across time and space in relation to the development of self or selves and a learner's identity. There is a clear move from linear representations of motivation to a more organic and complex

representation of the motivational construct. The two main conceptual approaches are Ushioda's (2009) "A Person in Context Relational View of Motivation" and Dörnyei's (2009) "L2 Motivational Self System" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Ushioda's (2009) framework addresses L2 learners as "real people in a particular cultural and historical context, and whose motivation and identities shape and are shaped by these contexts" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, p. 78). She suggests focusing the area of motivational inquiry on areas that are relevant to context. She poses as an example the microanalysis of classroom talk as a focused way to explore evolving motivation among the persons involved in the conversation at a specific time and place. A key motivational concern in the findings would be to explore differences in emergent motivation through the developing discourse among persons-in-context of those allowed to 'speak as themselves' or as 'language learners.'

Finally, Dörnyei (2005) developed The L2 Motivational Self System based on the concept of *possible selves* from social psychology (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and *integrative motivation* or motivation rooted on the desire to belong to the target culture from Gardner's (1985) framework to explain motivation in contexts in whic the target language community was not readily available and where a framework with an imaginative or creative nature is more suitable. Possible selves are individuals' ideas of what they *would like* to become or what they *are afraid* of becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1986). They represent clear visions of oneself in the future, with a strong power to motivate action only if the learner has a desired future self-image. This self-image is different from the current learners' self or present belief or idea about who they are as learners. It is *elaborate* and *vivid*, it is perceived as realistically likely or *plausible* but not easily *attainable*, it is in *harmony* with expectancies of the learner's relatives or peers, it is *regularly activated*, it has clear and *effective procedural plans* and strategies, and it is counteracted by a *feared possible self* in the same realm (Dörnyei and Ushioda, 2011, p. 84). Possible selves provide a dynamic interpretive conglomerate that could help us understand motivation at a deeper level because they link the learners' future visions with their emotional and cognitive systems, providing, in this way, a better understanding of these selves' motivational capacity.

Dörnyei's system has three sources of motivation to learn an L2:

1. The Ideal L2 Self represents the individuals' future image of themselves as L2 speakers, *i.e., the vision one has of a fluent speaker.*
2. The Ought-to L2 Self represents the attributes that one has to possess in order to avoid a negative outcome. For instance, *not taking a language class could mean not graduating on time.*
3. The L2 Learning Experience represents the potential influence that learning environments have on a learner's desire to engage in a particular behavior such as learning a language. A positive experience leads to a desire to invest time in learning the target language. (Dörnyei, 2009, p.29)

The area of research in language learning motivation is looking into more organic and complex approaches in order to understand this type of motivation more

holistically. However, research using socio-dynamic perspectives has been done in contexts in which acquiring the target language is highly valued. Little is known about the contexts in which the target language is not as highly regarded as those mentioned above. The construct of self and identity allow one to look deeper into the individual in the pursuit of comprehending why some students engage in a sustainable behavior that could lead to the acquisition of a working L2 knowledge. The construct of possible selves positions the learner's thoughts, feelings, and actions as key elements in the interpretation or development of motivated behavior.

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The next section will explain how one could integrate future self-guides into the dynamics of a classroom. It will also look at the design of pedagogical practices.

Future Self-Guides in the Classroom

The *future self-guides* or *possible selves* construct offers a lens that helps us personalize and differentiate our pedagogical practices to enhance language learners' experiences, their curiosity for language learning, and L2 competence-orienting behavior that would help them attain a degree of functional L2 knowledge. This construct considers a learner as an individual with multidimensional identities and a variety of values and goals rather than as an individual with uniform values and needs. Language classes, for the most part, emphasize this uniformity and the idea of *monolithic entities* by focusing exclusively on PPP approaches (presentation, practice, production) to content or by stressing the role of a language learner as one who practices grammar structures and produces target-like forms. In Lamb's survey results, a student said "In school it's just about grammar, grammar, grammar, and grammar; I still learn about grammar since I was elementary school ….." (as cited in Ushioda, 2013, p. 26). Taylor (2008) states that by not stressing differentiation in the classroom, students get bored or disengaged because they do not find the information relevant and useful. Emphasizing uniformity leads to a lost opportunity to engage people in the process of L2 learning (Ushioda, 2013).

The future selves concept provides an approach with which language educators could design pedagogies that facilitate the support of these multidimensional identities, values, and goals that could enhance the relevance of language learning and the possibility for students to develop future images of themselves as speakers of the target language. Hadfield & Dörnyei (2013) offer a visionary motivational program that helps create the conditions to support the main sources of motivation to learn a target language: "a learner's vision of her/himself as an effective L2 speaker, the social pressure coming from the learner's environment, and positive learning experiences" (p. 4). They state that with a well-developed and supported image of oneself as a language speaker, the motivation to learn that language is automatic and powerful. Their program has six steps:

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1. Creating the vision

This step encourages learners to bring forth an ideal L2 self by using the power of imagination. The teacher would design pedagogical strategies that could help students create a vivid image of themselves as language speakers, for example, an image that is attractive, desirable, and that would combine perfectly with other vivid possible selves—a manager self or a musician self. The more vivid the image one has, the stronger the power this image exerts to motivate learning (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). These activities could involve mime, drama, poster making, journals, and visualizations among others. For instance, a typical element in a textbook is a dialogue that introduces the unit. Instead of using the characters' stories, one could use students' stories to better connect with the realities of the people in the class. It is imperative that teachers make an effort to know their students beyond their names and/or areas of interest displayed in a course list to design meaningful experiences that allow their students the possibility to create and connect their possible L2 self with other salient selves. According to Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013), the levels of creativity experienced in this stage strengthen learners' *sense of identity* and *self-worth* (p.14).

2. Strengthening the vision

This step stresses the importance of elaborating a future image that is vivid and well-defined in order for that image to be a motivator of action (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). The aim is to keep the created vision alive and to enrich it so that it remains salient in the students' self-concept. There are several ways to strengthen the ideal L2 self by developing projects about the students' lives or inviting role models who speak the target language and who work in areas of students' interest. For instance, an identity project for a beginner level could be to ask the students to develop an info-poster that illustrates a common day in the students' lives and their goals in five years rather than talking about an imaginary person's life from a textbook. If you have students who are interested in performing arts, they can all read a paragraph about the beginnings of a famous artist who spoke the target language and compare his or her life to their own lives in the target language. They could also compare the artist's goals with theirs. This step could help students "see their desired language selves with more clarity and, consequently, with more urgency for action" (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014, p. 65).

3. Substantiating the vision

In this step, the teacher would make sure that the ideal future self is possible and can be achieved. If the students do not see their future self guides as being plausible, these future images will quickly disappear from their working self-concept, deterring them from continuing in their goal to achieve that future image. In the case of language learning, it would be important for a student to set a realistic goal in terms of time and attainability of a desired level of the target language. For instance, a student enrolled in his or her first level of a language could not expect to become functionally proficient at the end of the semester. That would be unrealistic. At this point, the most common activities would be individual talks with the student to discuss realistic goals and misconceptions about the

language learning process. Explaining to students the ACTFL proficiency levels or the European Framework levels together with the use of "Can-do statements" could help the student set more realistic goals. Furthermore, Swender (2003) offers a list of professions and job positions according to proficiency levels that helps set realistic levels of expectation according to the linguistic demands of the job. For example, someone who works as a receptionist for a company and who occasionally has to answer general questions about the workplace in the target language is expected to function at an Intermediate-High level of proficiency. A person at this level "can initiate, maintain, and bring to a close simple conversations by asking and responding to simple questions" (Swender, 2003, p. 525). Another activity aimed at the larger classroom community would be the use of a questionnaire about language learning beliefs and planning a discussion about the results in their native language for the lower levels or in the target language for the higher levels.

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4. Operationalizing the vision

Once there is a well-defined and attainable future self-image, the next step would entail providing a path to make that self a reality. Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) state that the ideal L2 self needs to have a set of two important things that would facilitate the imagined future self in becoming real: "an imagery component and a repertoire of appropriate plans, scripts, and self-regulatory strategies" (p.99). The main goal of this stage is to transform vision into action. The teacher at this stage will provide the student with individual guidance and create a plan to make that self a reality. An example of an activity here would be to elaborate a poster in the target language that maps out the steps that are necessary in order to achieve that future self.

5. Keeping the vision alive

This stage acknowledges the importance of keeping future images alive in the person's self-concept in order to avoid dormancy and, in many cases, the evaporation of those images. A person could have a number of possible selves competing with each other to remain relevant. However, only those selves that are strong, well defined, and salient would remain active. That is why it is imperative to keep them alive in the person's working memory by using regular reminders or by priming them. Dörnyei and Kubanyiova (2014) define priming as a technique in psychology that activates mental mechanisms outside of the participant's conscious awareness. For instance, if during the previous class students watched a film about Nelson Mandela's life and his contributions to humankind and in the following class they are asked to name the most influential person in the world's history, the name of Nelson Mandela would be more than likely the most popular choice. In the same way, it is important to incorporate in the design of classroom experiences activities that help the target language and its culture come alive for the learners. Activities that are authentic and take the language experiences beyond the classroom are powerful ways to prime the relevance of

the target language use in the students' working self-concept. At this stage communicative approaches and task-based learning activities are a perfect fit to keep the vision alive because they are centered on everyday life experiences making it easier to find ways to connect with students' lives outside the classroom. For instance, a few weeks ago, a debate about color perception of a dress took over the social media. An instructor could take the opportunity to use the dress to help students

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create Internet memes as a marketing device in the target language. An Internet meme is a catchphrase or piece of media with the intention to imitate or mimic a piece of cultural information ("Meme," 2015). These memes could be in the form of pictures, videos, or #hashtags and in simple language that could be used in the lower levels of language classes. The use of memes is very common in social media and it could help increase the students' willingness to communicate in the target language because they serve as a mechanism for the students' own cultural expression.

6. Counterbalancing the vision

This step emphasizes the two tendencies that regulate motivation: approach and avoid. The main point in this phase is to balance the future self-vision with the notion of what would happen if the desired self is not attained. According to Oyserman and Markus, desired future selves are the most powerful motivators when you also take into account both tendencies (as cited in Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013). Envisioning a future self would be the *approach* tendency, and discussing possible negative outcomes if the future self is not attained could stimulate students to *avoid* behaviors or habits that could result in failure. Discussing productive behaviors would increase the possibility of attaining the desired future self. However, one could also increase the possibility of failure because the student might feel disempowered by thoughts of failure. One way to approach this is to emphasize how to prevent negative outcomes. By creating a plan or a set of strategies, the student can be helped to develop a sense of control to avoid those negative outcomes and stress the importance of attaining the desired future image. This process could start with individual talks about fears and worries and then continue with the design of a doable set of strategies to reach the desired possible self. Another strategy is to share a case study written in the target language about previous students with strong possible L2 images and their self-barriers to attaining those images. Students could design a plan to be successful at achieving those images.

Having a vision matters in students' motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2013; Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013; Taylor, 2013). A vision could guide the design of pedagogical practices that help students envision themselves as L2 users, help them understand the value of language learning, and allow students to experience the value of language learning in their everyday life so they can take action (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). A vision program supports the design of transformative language classrooms where language is not

only a linguistic system but also "a social practice that organizes experiences and negotiates identities" (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2013, p. 114).

Student's Identity in the Language Classroom

Most students enroll in language classes because it is a requirement. Thus, being in a language class feels imposed and completely unrelated to real life. Therefore, a common challenge for language teachers is to be able to engage students' current selves in their L2 interactions in the classroom so they can speak as themselves with *their transportable identities* (Ushioda, 2013). Taking into account their transportable identities will facilitate the design of more meaningful and sound language experiences that could increase not only the likelihood of a possible L2 self formation but also the likelihood of achieving a working knowledge of the target language. One way to start is by considering students' transportable identities in the everyday planning of language practices. The possible L2 selves construct offers the visionary motivational program described above that could guide teachers in planning experiences that would take into account a multifaceted identity and the development of a possible L2 self that would support other relevant possible selves and make the language classroom experience more applicable and meaningful to the student.

It is necessary to point out that the visionary motivational program offers six phases that language teachers could consider in their planning process, but these phases are in no way sequential. In one language class, the teacher could identify students at different stages in the development of their possible selves. The idea is to personalize classroom experiences that would facilitate the creation of possible L2 selves or enhance and support those that are already part of the students' working self. Therefore, it is imperative that instructors not approach the visionary motivational program as strictly sequential phases but rather as a recursive process. The key is not to homogenize the process for all the students at the same time.

Combining the six stages process for developing students' possible L2 selves, together with communicative approaches of language learning, can guide teachers in designing motivational learning experiences that could promote enough curiosity that would lead to long-lasting engagement in the process of learning a language in a classroom where there is a set curriculum, such as those provided by textbooks. The starting point is to approach language learning as a form of expression of students' own identities, with the possibility to make this learning process relevant and long-lasting.

Figure 1 on the next page illustrates how educators could integrate their students' transportable identities into a dynamic and flexible design of pedagogical experiences informed by Dörnyei's visionary program.

The first step of the visionary motivational program is to "get to know the students" beyond the obvious level of name and academic areas of interest and get more information about their future goals and favorite activities. This information would help language teachers design course content, activities, and assessments that are closer and more relevant to students' lives. This information would also help

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Figure 1.

Information Gathering
- Survey
- Questionnaire
- Interviews

Pedagogical Practices
- Visionary Motivational Program
- Creating
- Strengthening
- Substantiating
- Keeping it Alive

Support - Operationalizing and Counterbalancing the Vision
- Face-to-Face Meetings
- Plan of Action

teachers incorporate elements into the classroom experiences that would facilitate the inclusion of the vision program at several points in the course. The main goal of a language program is communication, but by pairing it with the future selves' vision program, the goal of communication would be enhanced by supporting the relevance of students' identities in the process. A short interest inventory would give teachers as much information as necessary about their students. Here is an example of questions that could be used weeks prior to the start of a semester or academic year to guide the design of pedagogical practices that support the complexity of students' continuously evolving self-concept and the formation potential of possible L2 selves. This questionnaire could be in the native language or target language depending on the proficiency level of the students.

Name:
Major: (reasons for this major)
Minor: (reasons for this minor)
What do you like to do in your free time?
What would you like to do after finishing college?
Complete the following sentence: In 10 years, I will…
Why did you choose [whatever language the student is taking]?
What would you like to learn in this class?
What type of classroom activities do you like the most?

The possibility for the continuous development of communicative proficiency beyond the classroom is thus increased if students' identities are integrated into the design of pedagogical practices that allow them to speak as themselves.

Second, once they gather information from the questionnaire, teachers should design pedagogical activities that include experiences and topics of interest to the students. For instance, here is an example of a student's answers to the questionnaire:

Name: *James* (not his real name)
Major: (reasons for this major): *Communications because I am interested in working in broadcasting.*
Minor: (reasons for this minor): *Political science because I am interested in international affairs, and it is a good combination for my career as a broadcaster.*
What do you like to do in your free time? *Watching sports and reading.*
What would you like to do after finishing college? *Work as a news anchor*
Complete the following sentence: In 10 years, I will *work for a major news broadcaster such as CNN or ABC.*
Why did you choose Spanish? *Because it was suggested by my advisor*
What would you like to learn in this class? *How to speak Spanish*
What type of classroom activities do you like the most? *Games, culture, and interactive activities*

This student's interests and reason(s) to be in the Spanish class are a good representation of many of our students. A sample of activities and/or modifications to common exercises in the target language and culture that may take into account his interest in broadcasting, sports, and international affairs would include readings about sports news and international events, a podcast about a recent event in a L2-speaking country, a project about famous L2-speaking people in sports or the creation of a classroom newspaper or short videos. Figure 2 provides an example of a set of typical activities for an intermediate language class that have been modified to take into account James' interests and those of others with similar pursuits. It is important to point out that although this particular example is tailored to meet the needs of a specific student the teacher may group students together in accordance with their common interests and goals. This would not only promote greater communication among the students but would also save the teacher from being overwhelmed by having to design individual activities for each student:

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Table 1.

	Activities	Modified Version
Goals	**1. To identify and name words related to the airport and traveling** **2. To make travel arrangements**	
Introduction	1. To read the introductory dialogue from the textbook and answer the following questions: a. Who is traveling? b. Where? c. Where are they? d. How long is the trip?	1. Ask the students to close their eyes and try to remember their last vacation trip for two minutes. Ask them to try to remember as much information as they can. 2. Tell the students that those events are taking place right now (address the present tense). Ask the same questions and add ones that are more personal, such as: Who is traveling with you? How do you feel at this moment? 3. They can share their answers with two other students and report differences and similarities. The teacher could also ask them to compare their trip with the one from the dialogue. [adapted from Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013)]
Vocabulary Practice	2. Fill in the blanks with the words from the vocabulary list. a. Three friends are waiting in ___. b. They have to buy ___ trip tickets to Colombia.	4. The fill-in-the-blanks activity could be personalized by using James' name and famous peoples' names from the media. It could also include places familiar to James.
Communication	3. Dialogue between a travel agent and a customer. Students are designated as Student A and Student B and use the clues from the book to create the dialogue.	5. The teacher organizes the classroom as an airport with a large central place and four information areas (help desk, transport desk, tourist information, and flight information). Each student is given a role card with complicated or authentic traveling situations. For instance, James' card could be that he is flying to Colombia to start a job as a news anchor at a major news network, but his luggage did not arrive on time. James would also have to book a hotel near the network's main office. The teacher asks the students to imagine that they are at the airport and that they have to go to the appropriate desk to find the information they need. They might have to visit more than one desk. Once they solve their problem, they sit and observe the ones that are still working on solving their situation [adapted from Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013, p.268)].
Assessment	4. One provided by the book	6. The content of the questions could be personalized with information given during the three stages of the lesson.

The left column contains activities that any educator could find in a regular language classroom to help students achieve the goal of making travel arrangements. These activities are normally disconnected from the realities of a regular language student. They also support the checklist requirement approach to studying language. For instance, one can find a regular unit starting with a dialogue between two students with common L2 names at the airport ready to go to a target language-speaking country and talking about the steps to go through customs while in line. Teachers would normally ask their students to read the dialogue. However, how many of our students are named Mauricio and find themselves talking about the nuances of taking off their shoes at the inspection line after doing it for 10+ years? How would they be able to apply the vocabulary when they are only asked to repeat, rather than to discuss, for example, the reasons behind a strict security protocol in the USA? The activities in the left column stress the approach of language study as another distant academic subject, whereas the right column describes more personalized activities that illustrate several stages of the motivational vision program.

The activity from the introduction, picturing a recent trip, is an example of a visualization activity that exemplifies the steps of creating, strengthening, and keeping the vision alive. It also invites the students to bring their L2 selves into the experience rather than talking about unknown people with whom they have nothing in common. The vocabulary exercise could help the students remember the terminology of the lesson by making connections with an actual self—James' self—and increasing the meaningfulness and familiarity of the material (Gregersen & MacIntyre, 2013), which is a required step in nourishing the vision of a possible L2 self. The airport exercise is an example of an activity that helps keep the vision of a possible L2 self alive in the student and invites the student to be a participant in the target language's imagined community. These exercises facilitate a more meaningful connection between the self and the target language, which, in turn, could help develop possible L2 selves and increase language-learning motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Ushioda (2009) states that in order to promote autonomous learning, it is necessary to encourage students to develop and express their own identities through the language they are learning. However, let us stress that one activity could be relevant to some but not all. It is important to make sure that we address different interests at different times. For instance, one activity could take into account a wide variety of experiences such as the visualization exercise of the last vacation trip described in Figure 2 above. This exercise allows the students to speak as themselves and to accomplish the communicative task. This task accommodates a diversity of backgrounds and worldliness. Furthermore, many students share similar hobbies. As suggested earlier, language teachers could arrange their students in smaller groups by interests, making the personalization of activities more manageable. Group mixer activities could also help include a diversity of interests and passions.

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Finally, it might be necessary to hold one-to-one meetings with students who are disengaged and who do not seem to connect with the material in the classroom. These meetings would offer the opportunity for the students to express their fears and worries, and by identifying possible learning barriers, thereby avoid the possibility of a *fear self* (failing the class). This stage will help complement the 'approach motivation' of visualizing an ideal future self (Hadfield & Dörnyei, 2013) by addressing an 'avoid motivation,' that of failing the class. In such a situation, one needs to discuss and create a plan that would make the possibility of failing the class remote if the student gets involved in his own learning process. During the meeting, the teacher would identify what the possible causes for the lack of interest and failure are, provide a plan with a helpful list of strategies to help the student succeed (e.g., visualize a goal, make rules to attain it, develop a routine, or make use of the environment), and, more importantly, express confidence in the students' ability to persevere and triumph in the end. Teachers have to let their students know that they believe in their efforts.

In summary, language learning motivation is complex and would benefit greatly from a construct that starts from the individual by facilitating the development of possible L2 selves, rather than relying on external mechanisms, such as textbooks, which are mostly irrelevant to students' lives. The development of possible L2 selves draws upon the imagination and identity of the students, and serves as a powerful motivator for learning in the language classroom. This article invites the language teaching community to explore the many possibilities offered by this future image construct in the design of engaging instructional strategies that would enhance the possibility of a continuous development of communicative proficiency beyond the language classroom.

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