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***“The Danish speak so many languages it’s really embarrassing.”***

## **UK Adult Language Students’ Motivation and Learner Identity**

### **Introduction**

The decline of language learning in the UK at all levels, including in the tertiary and post-compulsory sectors, has been a concern for academics, educators and linguists for over a decade (e.g. Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000; Coleman 2009, 2011). The poor record of language learning in the UK has often been linked to the expeditious development of Global English, in policy-related publications (Nuffield Languages Inquiry 2000:44; McPake et al. 2008:150) and academic papers alike (Lamy 2003; McPake et al. 1999:19; Coleman 2009). However, while the potentially demotivating effect of Global English on the learning of other languages seems to offer a plausible rationale for poor language learning efforts in L1 English speakers, the problem remains that – so far – no empirical evidence can corroborate this. As there are to date few studies investigating language learning motivation for L1 English students in the context of Global English (one exception is Pickett 2010), it seems timely to ask L1 English students what they think about language learning in the context of Global English. This study explores student perceptions of Global English, learner identity and language learning motivation.

In the current language learning climate in the UK, Open University language students stand out as demonstrating high initial motivation by the mere facts of paying for their studies, studying part-time, often in addition to work or other commitments, and studying via distance. These conditions set this learner group somewhat apart from the UK language learning community described above, an observation likely to have implications for their notion of learner identity. However, their exceptional status also renders them all the more interesting for researchers, policy makers and educators alike who are

interested in understanding and fostering such positive learner attitudes more widely in the UK.

### ***Recent developments in language learning motivation research***

Motivation in language learning has been a focus in SLA research for some time now. In recent years, motivation has been increasingly understood as a fluctuating process of interaction between 'the individual and social learning settings' (Ushioda 2003:90), thus acknowledging both micro - and macro-contextual influences on motivation (Ushioda 2006). Dörnyei's *L2 Motivational Self System* (2009), adapted to L2 learning from Markus and Nurius (1986) and Higgins's Self Discrepancy Model (1987), comprises three levels: the concept *Ideal L2 Self* is understood as: 'the representation of all the attributes that a person would like to possess' (e.g., hopes, aspirations, desires) (Csizér and Dörnyei, 2005a: 616). The *Ought-to-Self*, on the other hand, relates to negative aspirations in motivation, avoiding negative outcomes and responding to external expectations (Dörnyei 2009: 29), thus covering attributes the learner thinks he/she *should* possess. According to Dörnyei (2005:106), the desire to reduce discrepancies between *Ideal* or *Ought-to Self* and the student's current self-image ('actual self', Higgins 1987) is a strong learning motivator. Ribas (2009) states:

motivation is the result of an attempt to reduce the discrepancy between the actual and either the ideal self or the "ought to" self. When individuals work hard to make their actual self just like their ideal self or their "ought to" self, they can feel highly motivated. In contrast, when they realize their actual self is far from being like either their ideal self or their "ought to" self, they can experience dissatisfaction and, consequently, a decrease in their motivation. (Ribas, 2009:471)

A third motivational strand in Dörnyei's model concerns the *L2 learning experience*, described as the motivation emerging in interaction with the learning environment, e.g. the teacher, curriculum etc. (Dörnyei 2009). Both *Ought-to* and *Ideal Self* are understood as images of what the individual might become in the future, also referred to as *Possible Selves* (Markus and Nurius 1986). One crucial aspect of the *Self System* is that individuals are free to invent as many *Possible Selves* as they wish. Thus, language learners may harbour a variety of interacting personal, professional and social motivations (e.g. Ribas 2009: 478). The flexibility and multiplicity of *Possible Selves* in this

model may be of particular relevance for the adult learner (life-long and life-wide learning, i.e. in multiple spaces simultaneously, Barnett 2010:1). Possibly for this reason, the *L2 Motivational Self System* for learning has gained increasing attention in recent years (Mannix 2010; Barnett 2005).

### ***Identity in language learning***

The last decade has seen an expansion of work exploring further psychological concepts in language learning, of both a theoretical and an empirical nature. A variety of psychological dimensions in language learning have been explored, such as *affect* (for instance, Bown and White 2010 a, 2010b; Garret and Young 2009; Hurd 2008, 2009) and *anxiety* (for instance, Hurd 2007, Horwitz 2010; Dewaele, Petrides and Furnham 2008, for a review, see Bown and White 2010a). Notions of *learner autonomy* and *identity* – and their intricate relation – have received particular attention (for instance, Murray, Gao and Lamb 2011; Mantero 2007; Miller 2010; Little, Ridley and Ushioda 2003; Murphy 2011 a and b, 2008, 2007; Gardner 2011; van Lier 2007, to name but a few).

One communality of such studies is their ‘sociocultural turn’ in theorizing language acquisition (Block 2010; Mantero 2007): dimensions of language learning are dominantly seen from a poststructuralist perspective, viewing learner identities and attitudes as a result of complex socio-cultural negotiations. For any language learner, the learning experience is considered to offer a path to ‘new ways of thinking and behaving in new communities of practice’ (Nguyen and Kellogg 2009:56). This notion will be of particular relevance for learners opting to study language – including in this study – for their study choice already demonstrates a willingness to engage in such ‘new ways of thinking and behaving’.

The current emphasis on self images and identity in L2 motivation has re-shaped traditional notions of L2 motivation. For instance, the notion of ‘integrative orientation’ has received a new meaning as the

*internal process of identification within the person’s self concept, rather than identification with an external reference group. (Ushioda 2011:190)*

Recent discussions of the *L2 Motivational Self System* have increasingly emphasised the complex interplay of contextual features of language learning. For instance, Ushioda's (2009, 2011) 'person-in-context-relational view of motivation' proposes a greater emphasis on the individual learner context, both on the macro - and micro level. This study is located within this contextual view of motivation, exploring the interrelations of two salient and possibly opposing aspects, namely the context of Global English for L1 English speakers, and these students' L2 motivations and identities.

### ***The distance language learner: motivation and identity***

It is generally accepted that distance students need greater determination (Coleman and Furnborough 2010), often employ a range of self-motivating strategies to sustain interest (Murphy 2007, 2008), and display strong feelings of ownership of their learning (Hurd 2006). Indeed, successful distance language students generally display a high degree of learner autonomy and responsibility (Coleman et al. 2010; Murphy 2011b); furthermore, these students' enjoyment and fulfilment in learning increases with their sense of progress (Coleman and Furnborough 2010), indicating that such learners often combine high ownership of their learning with ambitious learning goals.

The central role of affect in self-directed and independent study is emphasised by Bown and White (2010a:440). This poses particular challenges for the distance *language* learner, as languages are generally considered more difficult to learn via distance than other subjects:

[...] learning in distance mode has always been seen as problematic for the acquisition, practice, and assessment of foreign language speaking skills, given the physical absence of a teacher, the isolated context, and reduced opportunities for interacting in the target language. (Hurd 2006:304)

The motivationally adverse factors of distance learning ('perceived inadequacy of feedback, frustration at unresolved problems, and lack of opportunities to practise with others and share experiences', Hurd 2005:9) are seen to put the

distance language learner in a uniquely disadvantaged position situation due to the

mismatch between the inherently social nature of languages and the essentially solo mode of learning. (Hurd 2006:320)

It is therefore of particular interest to investigate how distance language students cope with and interpret the social nature of language learning within their own learning context. This study focuses on one facet of this problem, namely the social identities that students map out in their *Ideal* and *Ought-to-Selves*.

### ***Global language and L1 speakers***

According to Crystal (2003:4), a language can only become global through the interest of L2 speakers, namely if it is 'taken up by other countries [...] who may have few or no native speakers'. This makes English the most popular global language to date, by virtue of the extent of its popularity among L2 learners. This descriptive definition of a global language attempts to refrain from value assumptions or judgements concerning Global English, such as 'ownership' of English, and is adopted here. This neutral stance towards English as global language is of special importance in this study, given that it concerns precisely the elicitation of attitudes or value judgements about Global English.

Furthermore, unlike in the majority of studies concerned with Global English, this study concerns L1 English speakers. As the term 'L1 speaker' remains ill-defined (Escudero and Sharwood-Smith 2001), this study has chosen to adopt an understanding of L1 in line with its direction of inquiry, namely students' own perceptions of their language learning and linguistic history. The researcher also accepted participants' own life-history-based understanding of L1, i.e. as the language of birth and primary socialization (Abrahamsson and Hyltenstam 2009), a definition which does allow the possibility of several L1s.

### **Method**

In order to elicit attitudinal and evaluative judgements about language learning and learner identity, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable (cf. Bown and White 2010b), especially given the novelty of some of the research questions regarding views on Global English. Grounded theory was deemed most appropriate for this novel data, as it allows the researcher to generate or discover a theoretical framework within which social processes can be accurately described and fully explained. (Garret and Young 2009: 211).

In order to achieve the greatest possible coherence between data, coding and emergent theory, an 'emergent integrative framework which encapsulates the fullest possible diversity of categories and properties' (Glaser and Strauss 1967:41) was adopted. This method involves the constant comparison of coding and analysis, and aims to create the greatest possible coherence between data and theory, thus ensuring that theories are generated in a systematic manner (Glaser and Strauss 1967:102). The final coding system, is the result of constant revision, to ensure both the best fit with the data and parsimony of codes. The codes form headings in the *Results* section and are each exemplified by 2-4 student quotations. After coding, the resulting concepts were also analysed for their fit with the *L2 Self Motivation System*. Discrepancies and overlaps between this theory and concepts emerging from this study will be discussed in the conclusion.

Emails were sent out to a subgroup of 180 Beginner language students at the Open University, studying a range of six different languages (French, German, Spanish, Chinese, Welsh, Italian), when students were half way through their Beginner course. With the exception of an equal gender distribution, the subgroup was randomly selected from the pool of Beginner language students at the Open University. Students were invited to participate in a telephone interview about their language learning. Students were assured that their participation or responses would have no bearing on their studies, and that their anonymity would be maintained at all times. Eleven students (six male, five female) replied and were interviewed, using a semi-structured format (see Appendix). The age range and diversity of educational and professional backgrounds were representative of Open University language

students (Coleman and Furnborough 2010). All participants declared having English as L1, and one reported having both English and Mandarin Chinese as L1. Three students lived outside the UK at the time of the interview.

Interviews were transcribed orthographically.

The research questions were as follows:

- What are students' attitudes towards
  - Global English?
  - the impact of Global English on
    - UK language learners?
    - themselves as language learners?
- What are students' notions of
  - *Ideal L2 Self*?
  - *Ought-to L2 Self*?
- How do students' personal, social and other motivations interrelate and relate to their learner context?

## **Results**

### ***Global English – pros and cons***

The majority of students (8) viewed the communicative advantage of a global language as being very positive; for instance:

PB:

It's kind of a modern Esperanto. A lot of people do speak English.

JE:

I get the impression it's pretty positive. People like learning English and in many countries people seem to feel that it is important to learn especially if they want to get out of the country, so it seems to be a passport to getting on in life.

Five students also evoked the advantages of English as a lingua franca for the world of business and IT. Some students had more nuanced opinions.

One student reported:

PW:

I think it has advantages as well as disadvantages. The advantage is you have a language to communicate everywhere in the world. The disadvantage to me is well it makes us lazy [...]

The demotivating effect of English as L1 was repeated by many:

DB:

[...] in Britain, it's negative because there are so many who speak English in the world so we lose the incentive to learn languages.

SB:

It does make you lazy - when there are so many other languages around the world that you might have to learn to 'get by' so you rely on being able to find someone who speaks English.

The two students studying Welsh viewed Global English in distinctly negative terms:

TG:

One of the negative things is that everybody speaks it, and I'm learning Welsh, so I am using a language that is shared with half the population, around the whole world, and I'm learning a language, Welsh, that is more intimate and more personal.

HB:

[Global English is] more negative because I specialise in minority languages. I am learning Welsh...

Thus, students acknowledged the pragmatic advantages of a global lingua franca but emphasised the demotivating effects for L1 speakers. Two students also remarked that English as the main lingua franca might soon be overtaken, e.g.:

RA:

I don't know if it's gonna spread the way it has done. I think Chinese will take over.

### ***L1 English as hindrance?***

On a personal level, most students (7) reported that their language learning had somehow changed their relation to their L1, in a positive sense.

Two students reported getting to know English better through learning other languages:

PW:

I like English. I am getting to know it more. [...] I'm getting to know it more from the technical, the grammatical point of view.

TG:

[...]I think we [English] speak a rather inflected and complicated form of English, with lots of irony... that is said to be typically English.

A more salient feature, however, was the complaint of not being able to practise the L2 because interlocutors prefer to speak English:

LA:

I've tried to learn many languages and I don't get the opportunity to practise even when I speak to my colleagues – they speak English to me.

JE:

In some places it's a disadvantage [to speak English]. You go along to a country and you want to practise and you are frustrated that it's not always easy to do so.

This conundrum for L1 English language learners can even lead to learning in secret:

SB:

When my father lived in Norway in his late teens/early twenties he was made to learn Norwegian at night school in Norway because learning it during his normal day from other Norwegians was hopeless as they just wanted to practise their English.

### ***...and L1 English as help?***

One student reported that, as a result of Global English, teaching of many languages is often conducted via the medium of English, hence helping with language learning:

MB:

If you're going to learn an Asian language you need to be able to speak English. I have studied Asian languages here in Switzerland and if you didn't know English you would never be able to do anything in the course.

To summarize, student perceptions of L1 English in terms of their language learning were dominated by a sense of frustration about not being able to practise the L2 sufficiently. Access to a global lingua franca, however – whether English or another – had overall positive resonances. Thus, students clearly differentiated between their perceptions of global phenomena and their impact on their personal learner contexts.

***Perceptions of learner communities: them and us?***

*Language learning attitudes in the UK*

The attitude towards language learning in Britain was described in unequivocally negative terms. For instance:

PB:

They [the British] have English they don't learn, the old saying: they just shout louder.

SB:

Definitely – a majority of people cannot be bothered to learn another language – they see no point until it actually affects them.

MB:

People don't expect you to be able to speak languages when you are British.

Without exception, students related the lack of interest in learning languages to Global English:

MB:

There is certainly an attitude that it's not necessary, languages are not really promoted.

PW :

I think the laziness of British people has to do with the fact that so many speak English.

TG:

I think it's laziness, it has not been necessary for us to speak other languages to get on in business, so we rely on the fact that we speak the same language as the US and other countries have been very quick to learn English [...].

KB:

I think we are very very lazy, we are depriving ourselves of language learning. I think we have become quite insular in our culture.

The British lack of interest was not necessarily portrayed as hostile or xenophobic:

KB:

I know lots of people who say with some regret they don't speak languages... regret or disappointment or laziness...so the attitude is there but they are not getting to do it in practice.

### *Language teaching provision in the UK*

The verdict on language learning in the UK was universally negative, e.g.:

PW:

It's a shame we don't do it (= language learning). [...] I feel that with the adolescents today it's not taught that well here, in England.

SB:

I am very sad about the state of language learning in the UK.

HA:

Negligible. I would think it hardly goes on at all. Not widespread in England, never has been.

RA:

We are very poor at languages.

PB:

Negligible. I'm not aware of many people being able to speak a different language.

HB:

[the fact that the British are not learning languages] It's partly Global English and partly the attitude in Britain, that languages are seen to be very difficult and they can't do it. But you see it's a perception that you have to have a language brain to learn a language. It's complete nonsense, you find people speaking Cornish who never passed an exam or anything. I think languages in Britain are seen as difficult. The other thing is it's very badly taught here in schools. They don't actually teach grammar.

JE:

It's very poor. I think generally the experience of language learning is quite poor.

The verdict is striking both in its vigour and consensus, and begs the question of how the students, all British nationals *themselves*, relate to this part of their own identity. Pronoun use indicates that, in most instances, students used the inclusive 'we' when talking about the 'typically British' attitude, e.g.:

RA:

[...] I think it's [i.e. not trying another language] because people are scared – what if we have to go out of our comfort zone and speak French, that would be embarrassing for **us**. (author's emphasis)

PW:

It makes **us** lazy. It makes **us** assume things as well. **We** assume that when we speak the same language **we** share the same culture and **we** don't. (author's emphasis)

KB:

By learning a language you learn a lot about culture as well. I think **we** are becoming more ignorant. (author's emphasis)

One student living in France clearly distanced himself from 'them', i.e. the British as non-linguists:

TG:

**The British** are extremely reluctant. **They** seem to be culturally very unwilling to learn. I think people in England who are known to be successful linguists they are looked at as almost another species: oh you must be very brainy because you speak languages, so partly admiration, but also partly patronising: oh poor chap he does this because he can't do anything else. (author's emphasis)

However students living in the UK also referred to the British as 'them', e.g.:

LA:

Of course you can travel... but it does depend on how you want to live your life. Subtler things like being able to read the original language rather than the English translation...but I don't think **the British** have the attitude that you do need to learn, I don't think that would be a valid point to put to **them, they** would not go beyond the basics.(author's emphasis)

One student, also living in the UK, alternated between the first and third person pronoun:

RA:

When people just speak to you in English, it's rude, expecting everyone else to speak your own language. And I think a lot of **the English people** are not rude but **they** just don't understand languages, and I think it's because **people** are scared – what if **we** have to go out of our comfort zone and speak French, that would be embarrassing for **us**. (author's emphasis)

Finally, one student used the inclusive pronoun to refer explicitly to OU language learners, as opposed to 'the British' in general:

TG:

Of course **we** (= OU students) are to some degree not typical, **we** want to learn. (author's emphasis)

To summarize, the students' images of the British language learning community were entirely negative, evoking adjectives such as lazy, culturally unwilling, ignorant, etc. This image was sharply contrasted to their own identity as a minority of willing learners and OU students. Students linked their desire for language learning to notions of etiquette and 'good behaviour', and, conversely, others' lack of learning to embarrassment and rudeness.

JE:

I have always tried wherever I have gone to try and say a few words even if it's just please and thank you. I am actually embarrassed I'm really embarrassed if I go to a country and I cannot even say the odd word.

SB:

I think that it [the notion that language learning is unnecessary if you speak English] is a lazy attitude and disrespectful. I think that you are more likely to get better service and a better experience, have enhanced job or career prospects if you can speak the language of the country that you are in.

Rejecting the 'typically British' attitude as lacking etiquette and respect, students project their own Ideal Selves as more considerate, courteous and well-behaved. For this motivational orientation, avoiding embarrassment becomes a central motivator. Indeed, the words *embarrassment*, *embarrassed* or *embarrassing* came up frequently:

RA:

When I lived in France... it is really embarrassing, I think, not to try to speak the language of the country you're in. That made me want to learn, after years of understanding that and having that embarrassment.

JE:

I am actually embarrassed I'm really embarrassed if I go to a country and I cannot even say the odd word.

Thus, negative perceptions of UK learners form a strong motivator for these students who not only want to be different but also want to be *seen* to be different when abroad. Interestingly, within the *L2 Motivational Self System*, motivations referring to etiquette and courtesy would normally be associated with *Ought-to* rather than *Ideal Selves*. The adult learners in this study might be expected to have internalised notions of etiquette and 'good' social behaviour to a large extent, but these social skills develop in response to external expectations, and would therefore seem to fit *Ought-to Self* better than the *Ideal*.

An alternative model to fit this data might be Self Determination Theory (SDT) (e.g. Deci and Ryan 2000; Ryan 2009), which sees motivations on a continuum of more extrinsic to more intrinsic regulation. Five distinct categories along this continuum have been identified (Deci and Ryan 2000): *external regulation* (i.e., motivation coming entirely from external sources such as rewards or threats); *introjected regulation* (i.e., externally imposed rules that students accept as norms they should follow in order not to feel guilty); *identified regulation* (i.e. engaging in an activity because the individual values it highly and sees its usefulness); *integrated regulation* (i.e. involving choiceful behaviour that is fully assimilated with the individual's other values, needs, and identity); and pure *intrinsic regulation* (i.e. highly autonomous, engaging in behaviour purely out of interest). Thus, in this model, the students' imperative to comply with etiquette and 'good behaviour' would best be described as *introjected regulation*.

#### *Language teaching in Europe: Them and us-again?*

Students rated language teaching as more efficient, and enjoying higher status, in other European countries.

PW:

I feel that with the adolescents today it's not taught that well here, in England. I don't know how they do it in Holland but it works. I can only say it does not work in Britain, I don't know why really.

MB:

I mean anybody who goes to University outside Britain has to have a language whereas in Britain you can just go to University being able to speak English only.

JE:

I can only talk about how they [Europeans] speak English, and I can certainly say that the standards are a lot higher, I don't know why, the teaching they achieve or that they are better motivated, especially to learn English. There seems to be an acceptance to learn [...]

The unassuming yet pragmatic attitude towards language learning in other countries was often described with admiration:

PW:

If you look at the region here [South-West France], there are quite a lot of Dutch but nobody speaks Dutch [...] they are all excellent linguists, they speak English, most of them speak French and I suppose that's coming from a country where the language is not spoken widely. They have to learn, they have to look outwards.

The perceived worthiness of other nations was again a potential source of embarrassment, putting the British to shame:

RA:

[...] The Danish for example speak so many languages it's really embarrassing.

Better teaching methods and systems were cited as one reason for better learning outcomes, e.g.:

LA:

Others learn it earlier, and also learn more languages – a lot of people I know have three languages. In my children's school they started way too late... and then it's just harder to learn then.

Students also spontaneously produced a 'rank order' of European linguistic achievements, e.g.:

MB:

If you look at the results Britain is probably at the bottom of the table, Scandinavians probably at the top – they can speak English to an incredibly high standard. Holland is also very good. France is quite poor at other languages, Italy is quite poor, Ireland is not that good either... but Britain is a very big exception [...]

PW:

I don't know how they do it in Holland but it works. I can only say it does not work in Britain, I don't know why really.

LA:

Certainly the attitude by many here is you don't need the languages. With people learning English it's not the same. They want to learn to get on in life... a British company that has a global presence you need to have good English.

To conclude, students' negative images of UK language learners create divides on several levels: as avid learners, the OU students are keen to distance themselves from the negative UK image, rejecting their perceived value systems of insularity, discourtesy, lack of interest in other cultures etc. By praising better language learning and teaching elsewhere, they evoke a further British-non-British divide. Taken together, these positions suggest that these OU students might locate the ideal 'homes' of some of their values and beliefs systems, including that of 'good social behaviour', abroad rather than in Britain. Given that social class is known to be a major determiner of language study in the UK (Coleman 2009:118) and that OU language students have been found to share a distinct, comparatively privileged socio-educational background (see Coleman and Furnborough 2010), it would be of great interest to explore further how this positive attitude to other cultures relates to students' socio-economic and educational background. The socio-economic aspect is especially relevant in the context of the current UK language learning crisis, which has consolidated language tuition in more selective or 'elitist' institutions, in both secondary and tertiary sectors (Coleman 2009).

If applying principles of SDT to the range of motivations described in this study, the motivation relating to perceptions of the less 'worthy', 'polite' or 'considerate' UK population stands out as being the most externally-regulated, for students also rely on a range of highly intrinsic motivations, as will be demonstrated in the next section.

### ***Multifaceted Ideal Selves***

One important aspect often evoked in adult learners is that of autonomy (see above). In the language learning context, this can translate into the desire to communicate at a level that allows them to be themselves in their L2. One student expressed this eloquently:

**PW:**

I think if you rely on English to communicate then you communicate on one level, you get by. I know people, English, live in the South West of France and they get by but they don't... it would not be satisfactory for me I think. You can go and buy your baguette in the morning but you can't have a joke with him. It's the same for commerce and everything else. You can get by but you will not pass a certain level. That goes for business as well. Obviously you cannot speak all the languages but a little bit of the language you need would help I think.

Motivations mapping onto what has traditionally been described as 'integrative orientation' were also mentioned:

**KB:**

I want to learn about the culture not just the language, when I go back I want to have the opportunity to travel, the language itself is not as important as the other things, travelling and so on.

**MB:**

I like to be able to at least get by in the language of the country I'm in. That opens a lot more doors for you. [...] I learn Chinese because I go to China about 4 times a year and I can probably speak to about 1% of the people I meet. Whereas what I'd like to be able to do is to understand what's going on when I go into a company, meet some people who can't speak English. You learn a lot about the culture of the country and things by learning the language.

**RA:**

Always you feel you're missing out on something. For instance in France you would listen to the conversation, get your business done and that's fine but behind there is a lot of language going on that you're missing out on, and that is exactly the same for me in Spain.

**DB:**

I want to understand not just the language but also the culture.

**PB:**

It would be nice to learn a bit more about the nuances and that, in Spanish, you are missing a lot if you don't understand properly. You are just getting the veneer but not really the country and things.

To summarize, these students' *Ideal L2 Selves* relate to autonomy and self-expression as well as orientations traditionally described as integrative. The motivations to learn cultural nuances and to express oneself were contrasted to the perfunctory use of English with L2 speakers. Self-expression in language learning has particular salience, as Ushioda remarks:

...The identity perspective [...] highlights a dimension of motivation that is specifically concerned with *self-expression*, which has unique relevance, of course, when the object of learning is a language. (Ushioda 2011:22)

These students also expressed *Ideal Selves* of a much wider scope than in a linguistic sense. The metaphor of 'opening your horizon' was evoked three times, e.g.:

HB:

I would say that learning a language opens your horizon so much it's always worth doing it.

PB:

It opens up different horizons, other cultures, what's happening in other countries, instead of being dominated by the politics in your own country, you see what happens in other countries.

Students also considered the benefit of language learning for general communicative competence:

TG:

[...] what I admire about linguists – I'm not a good linguist, I had endless trouble with French – what I admire is that they do something that expands their mental capacity. When I was in the position to employ people I always looked at their languages to see what communication skills they had because it seems to me when you have learned other languages you have the ability to see things from a different perspective and interpret differently...they communicate better, so I was always impressed when people had A level or even a language degree. [...]

Students also reported the intellectual pleasure of using and learning languages:

TG:

Latin stayed with me, and I enjoy looking at a root and say that is Latin, take it apart, and I always found that it would be a shame not to be able to look at a word and not being able to say where it comes from.

PW:

I like to have an academic stream, some studying going on to keep my brain active so Italian is that. [...] The language is important but more important for me is to study something.

Furthermore, students' motivations were also marked by past negative or missed learning opportunities:

RA:

I'm doing two languages with the OU, I need 2 languages, I missed out on so much at school.

PB:

I missed out on learning when I was younger so I now have the time for it.

To summarize, the *Ideal Selves* of these students encompass a wide range of both linguistic and non-linguistic ideals. These motivational orientations reveal OU language students, often marked by past negative learning experiences, to be highly aspirational: they value language learning for the mental stimulation, cultural enrichment, and for its own sake (see also Coleman and Furnborough 2010). The quotation:

TG:

It's an aspiration that I have not quite fulfilled.

might typify this orientation. However, students also relied on motivations relating to their very person-specific context, as the next section illustrates.

### ***Personal motivations in context***

The highly personalised nature of some motivational orientations may come as little surprise for this group of mature learners. Nearly all students reported some form of personal affinity to their L2. For instance, one student was influenced by her mother still using her old French book, another reported feeling an affinity to France due to its geographic proximity, two learners reported wanting to get closer to their cultural heritage through learning the language of their ancestors, one reporting being influenced by her grandfather:

LA:

I have always been aware of community languages, my grandfather was interested in many languages, he was surrounded by dictionaries and things.

All three students living outside the UK at the time of the interview were studying other languages than their host language (presumably having perfected the language of their country of residence), and started learning their third or fourth foreign language. Two students reported having close relatives speaking their L2:

PB:

I've got Swiss relatives. I'd like to converse more with them.

TG:

French I found very difficult, and it's a problem because my wife is French.

Instrumental orientations, such as the use for employment, getting a qualification, were hardly mentioned, and if so, in combination with others:

LA:

[...] For my work also, my job is to find out about the location of our customers, so I often have to look at other websites in languages. One of the reasons I wanted to learn Italian... I looked at some websites that were in Italian.

To summarize, all participating students showed highly developed *Ideal Selves*, depicting a rich tapestry of linguistic aspirations and integrative orientations, both on a level of general interest in L2 culture and close social contacts, but also seeking intellectual stimulation, and a chance to supersede past negative learning experiences. Referring to the *L2 Motivational Self System*, three interesting observations about these *Ideal Selves* can be made: they are, at least in part, not linguistic, hence the need to view the projected ideals much more broadly than in purely linguistic terms. Secondly, they reveal the highly aspirational nature of these learners, wanting to 'prove themselves'. Recalling the discussion of 'good social behaviour' (see above), this begs the question of to what extent the aspirational orientation can be described as *Ought-to* rather than *Ideal Self*. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly for the *L2 Motivational Self System*, many motivations stem from the students' personal life contexts, as well as from their sociolinguistic and political identity, as L1 English speakers and language learners, and as British nationals. There is little scope in the current *L2 Motivational Self System* for such complex factors. Alternative frameworks which might do justice to these complex interactions are discussed below.

## **Discussion**

Whether due to the complexity of distance language learning or as a consequence of investigating mature students (or perhaps both), this study has revealed a rich web of *Possible Selves*, finding identities not just in projected future *L2 Selves* but also in the act of learning. As Bown and White have argued (2010a), the proximity of positive and negative emotions can be a salient feature in language learning, but it takes a particular shape here: the *Ideal L2 Selves* depicted arise partly out of negation of perceived British (learner) identities. Students were acutely aware of implications of Global English on language learning but, rather than following the rationale of L1 English as a demotivator, used their 'niche position' as language learners as a motivational advantage: the mere fact of choosing to study languages grants them membership of the minority group of positively framed learners. In terms of Self Discrepancy Theory, students' dual membership of both the negatively perceived group of L1 English speakers in general and the positive group of

active language learners created a powerful incentive to widen the gap from the former group and narrow it to the latter. The students' verdicts on language learning in other countries, indeed their values of language learning and of correct etiquette and behaviour, suggest that these students look towards their cosmopolitan rather than British identity when choosing affinities for their personal value and belief systems. The actual self as British is backgrounded, the actual language learner self foregrounded. Thus, potential conflicts arising from the dual identity as British and aspirational language learner are minimalised.

Given that students were learning a language via distance, their social identity as learners was nonetheless very important; for instance, the ability to be oneself in the target language was rated highly. The social nature of their motivation also became apparent through the highly contextualised understanding of their learning. For instance, students' personal life stories often shaped their *Ideal L2 Selves*, but their acute awareness of Global English also demonstrated the impact of the macro context on motivation. Thus, this study highlights the importance of factors both on the micro (personal life) and macro (societal) level influencing student motivation. Factors that could be situated on the meso level, however, in particular their distance learning contexts, such as interaction with the teacher and other students, were not mentioned, a finding that might be attributable to the distance learner situation. At this point, it is important to stress that Open University students are given a variety of opportunities to interact both with fellow students and their tutor. Clearly, further investigation is needed to clarify this matter.

The niche group of language learners investigated here adopted a very distinctive notion of learner identity and *Ideal Self*. Rather idiosyncratically, this learner group twisted their perceived L1 motivational disadvantage to their advantage, if adopting a slight stance of superiority. While it is interesting to speculate as to what extent this particular stance may be characteristic of this learner group (as mature, or as distance learners, see Coleman and Furnborough, 2010), the potential pedagogical benefits of such a stance should not be overlooked: in the face of the UK language learning crisis (see Introduction), pedagogues are constantly seeking new means to persuade

students to opt for languages – if this includes appealing to their pride, it might be an effective novel way to capture the *Ideal Selves* of some students at least. Furthermore, students in this study displayed a much more cosmopolitan (rather than Anglo-centric) stance towards language learning than might have been expected from the UK public (see Coleman 2009), demonstrating that a determination to ‘take on the challenge’ of the British reputation as bad linguists exists – at least in a subgroup of the population. This positive stance has not been exploited sufficiently by policy makers and language pedagogues, who – perhaps in an effort to avoid embarrassment or demotivation – have tended to shy away from comparisons with language learning in Europe. Judging from this data, precisely this approach may yield positive responses from some students.

Given the impact of English as L1 – arguably the most powerful global language to date – on motivational orientations, it would also be of great interest to explore student motivations in relation to the power of different L2s: do students studying other powerful – possibly rival – global languages, such as Chinese, display different learner identities to the ones described here? Do students of languages with little international presence, for instance Welsh, display the ‘them and us’ divide more strongly, and so forth. Given the manifold possible permutations of the power relations between the different languages involved, exploring motivations in a person-in-context relational view should be considered in its infancy.

To return to Dörnyei’s *L2 Motivational Self System*, the findings in this study are compatible with but overreach this framework. As discussed above, other theoretical frameworks, such as SDT (Deci and Ryan 2000), might offer a better fit for this data, at least with respect to the manifold shades of intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivations, but this framework equally does not do justice to the contextual factors emphasised by these students. To return to Ushioda’s ‘person-in-context relational view’ of motivation, she explains:

By this, I mean a focus on real persons, rather than on learners as theoretical abstractions; a focus on the agency of the individual person as a thinking, feeling human being, with an identity, a personality, a unique history and background, with goals, motives; intentions; a focus on the interaction between this self-reflective agent,

and the fluid web and complex web of social relations, activities, experiences, and multiple micro- and macro- contexts [...] (2011:12f)

This elaborate L2 motivational model, acknowledging at once learner agency and the multiplicity of contextual influences, can be found in complexity theory. Indeed, complexity theory has been applied to language learning motivational studies (e.g. Sade 2011; Larsen-Freeman 1997). In this framework, the complex interrelatedness of factors on the micro, meso and macro level can lead to varied and even unpredictable results, and thus offers a coherent theoretical basis to explain the multiplicity of *Possible Selves* observed in this study. It is thus suggested that this theoretical framework might best be suited for further investigations in this matter.

#### *Limitations of this study*

This is a tentative first exploration of the complexity of L2 learner motivation, English as L1 and Global English. Inasmuch as the findings suggest a dichotomy of ‘the stereotypical British learner’ and these students’ learner images, they might open new directions in L2 motivational research. However, it cannot be stressed enough that the students in this study, as adult and distance language learners at tertiary level, constitute a somewhat marginalised minority, and it would be imprudent to generalise findings for other language learner groups with English as L1. Younger learners, learners from different socio-educational backgrounds, and especially learners in the compulsory sector, might develop very different (de)motivational stances (see Coleman, Galaczi and Astruc 2007; Burden, Williams and Lanvers 2002).

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## **Appendix**

### ***Semi-structured interview questions:***

When you think about English in the world today, what is the first thing you think about?

How do you view the spread of English? More negative or positive...?

Do you think the worldwide use of English has an effect on how you feel about English as your L1?

When you think about language learning today in the UK, what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Do you think the widespread of English has an effect on your learning? What kind of effect?

Some people might say that if you speak English you don't need to learn other languages. What do you think about that?

In general in the UK, would you say having English has an effect on how we learn languages?

Personally how important is language learning for you?

What would you say about language learning in other European countries?