L2 Learning Motivation and Academic Achievement: A Literature Review Focusing on Chinese English Majors

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Abstract:

This literature review investigated the relationship between second language (L2) learning motivation and academic achievement among Chinese English majors, synthesizing findings from 17 studies retrieved from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database. The analysis indicates that empirical research dominates current studies (94%), with most employing quantitative methodologies such as questionnaires and statistical analyses, whereas theoretical exploration remains limited. The theoretical frameworks underpinning this field encompass Gardner and Lambert' 's distinction between integrative and instrumental motivation, alongside Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), which highlights the triadic structure of the "ideal L2 self," the "ought-to L2 self," and the "learning experience." Findings reveal a significant positive correlation between motivation and academic performance, with highly motivated students demonstrating greater effort and goal-oriented behavior. Studies also identify discipline-specific differences, such as arts students' heightened sensitivity to external pressures and anxiety in English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts. Despite methodological advancements, limitations persist, including overreliance on quantitative tools and insufficient methodological diversity. Future research should integrate qualitative approaches (e.g., classroom observations, reflective journals) and interdisciplinary perspectives to enrich understanding. This review underscores the critical role of motivation in L2 learning and calls for innovative strategies to enhance English education outcomes in China.

Keywords: Chinese English major; L2 motivation; achievement

1. Introduction

As a key concept in the field of second language acquisition (SLA), motivation has garnered extensive attention from scholars both domestically and internationally. This construct exerts significant influence throughout language acquisition's dynamic trajectory, representing considerable research significance. Linguists have continuously summarized, explored, and refined motivation theories in the teaching practice and guidance, leading to the development and refinement of various SLA motivation frameworks. Academic achievement, as a quantifiable indicator, reflects students' knowledge acquisition, effort, learning attitudes, and study strategies.

Research on the correlation between second language (L2) motivation and academic achievement helps understand learners' psychological processes and individual differences in L2 learning, and has certain significance for English teaching in China. For example, Liu conducted large-scale empirical surveys and quasi - experimental studies based on the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) theory, which has proved that the L2MSS theory has good validity among Chinese English learners [1]. Wang's analysis indicated a statistically significant positive correlation between the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experiences, respectively, with foreign language achievement among English majors [2]. In contrast, no meaningful relationship emerged between the ought-to L2 self and academic achievement. Furthermore, Wang's research identified foreign language anxiety as a factor that impedes performance, demonstrating a substantial adverse correlation with linguistic competence in English majors [2]. The findings indicate that learners with higher anxiety levels tend to demonstrate lower accuracy and fluency in their language output, reduced classroom participation, and consequently poorer academic performance [2]. This implies that affective factors serve as critical mediators in the relationship linking L2 motivation and academic achievement. The study highlights that anxiety not only directly impacts learners' cognitive processing and language application abilities but also indirectly undermines their learning outcomes by reducing engagement with target language activities, thereby forming a chain of influence from emotional states to motivational behavior and ultimately to academic performance. Such findings underscore the importance of integrating affective dimension interventions into L2 teaching strategies to optimize the dynamic interplay between motivation and achievement. It should be noted in this paper that since foreign language teaching in Chinese schools is mainly English teaching, L2 in this paper refers to English.

Most of the existing studies on L2 motivation and academic performance target non-English majors, and there are fewer studies on English majors.

This paper aims to review literature targeting Chinese English majors, synthesizing research on the relationship between L2 motivation and academic achievement.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Integrative and Instrumental Motivation

Research on L2 learning motivation began in the 1950s, integrative-instrumental dichotomy proposed by Gardner and Lambert at the end of the 1950s [3].

Table 1. Gardner and Lambert's motivational dichotomyg

Name	Definition
Integrative Motivation	Learners study the language out of a desire to identify with and integrate into the target language culture, hoping to better assimilate into the group and become a member of the target language community through language learning.
Instrumental Motivation	Learners primarily study the language to obtain some practical benefits or instrumental value (such as career development, academic achievement, or social status), rather than out of interest in the language or its community.

As Table 1 shows, there are significant differences between integrative motivation and instrumental motivation in terms of core objectives. This theory emphasizes the driving role of cultural identification and practical goals on learning behavior, considering the core of motivation as the learner's attitude towards and aspiration to integrate into the target language community. Integrative motivation is regarded as the key to long-term learning motivation, exerting a more positive and enduring impact on language learning. Instrumental motivation, conversely, is more short-term and utilitarian. In addition, after jointly exploring the relationship between learning motivation and language proficiency, Gardner and Lambert believed that both learning motivation and language proficiency jointly influence the process of SLA. Motivation can compensate for deficiencies in language proficiency, and high-

er language proficiency can also promote the maintenance and enhancement of motivation to some extent.

2.2 L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS)

However, with globalization, the limitations of this dichotomy became increasingly apparent. Dornyei's L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) represents a landmark advancement in the field of motivation research. This theory broke through the constraints of traditional research frameworks by introducing a dynamic and multi-level analytical perspective, providing a novel theoretical perspective for understanding the motivational mechanisms in second language acquisition [4].

Table 2. Dörnyei' s L2MSS

Name	Definition	Example
Ideal L2 Self	The image of the ideal language learner that learners aspire to emulate in the future, embodying a positive and desired self-state (comparable to integrative motivation, yet with a heightened emphasis on self-concept).	A student may envision themselves being able to communicate fluently in the second language and using it effortlessly in various situations in trap future.
Ought-to L2 Self	Reflecting the image of the language learner that learners believe they should become, more related to external pressures or a sense of responsibility, learning to avoid negative outcomes.	A student might feel obligated to learn the second language well to achieve their career goals or meet social expectations.
L2 Learning Experience	In contrast to the other two future-oriented selves, it focuses on the learner's learning experience, covering motives directly tied to the learning environment, including the quality of immediate experiences such as teachers, courses, peer interaction, and task design.	

As shown in Table 2, the theoretical framework is built upon three central elements, including the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience.

The theory posits that the two future-oriented selves, the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self, are crucial factors in stimulating learners' language learning motivation. Learners set learning goals and motives based on their ideal and ought-to self-images and strive to achieve these goals during the learning process. It also emphasizes the significance of the L2 learning experience, pointing out that although the first two self-orientations have received more attention in theoretical research, the L2 learning experiences demonstrate strong predictive power for learners' behavioral motivation in the actual learning process, which compensates for traditional theories' neglect of immediate context. Since its introduction in 2009, the L2MSS has become a focal point in SLA research, attracting growing attention from Chinese scholars.

3. Research Method

In May 2025, the author searched the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) database using keywords such as "L2 motivation," "English majors," and "academic achievement," with the time range set from 2010 to 2025, excluding conference papers and duplicate documents. A total of 17 papers focusing on Chinese English major students were selected on the advanced search page. This paper provides a statistical analysis of the research on L2 motivation and academic achievement of Chinese English major students from three aspects: research methods, research content, and main findings.

4. Result

4.1 Research Methodology

According to the classification standard of research methods by Gao, Y., et al., this paper rigorously categorizes the relevant literature on L2 learning motivation [5]. Specifically, these articles focusing on L2 learning motivation are meticulously divided into two major categories, one of which is theoretical research, totaling 1 article, and the other empirical research, totaling 16 articles. Theoretical research accounts for 6%, while empirical research accounts for 94%, indicating that domestic research on L2 motivation and academic achievement is primarily empirical.

The sole theoretical inquiry that utilizes a literature analysis and theory-construction methodology examines a substantial corpus of literature pertaining to the L2MSS theory. This study investigates the origins of the L2 learning experience and critiques the limitations of its theoretical foundations, revealing that the L2 learning experience is often characterized as a broad and somewhat vague attitudinal construct. In the subsequent article, the author

proposed introducing the concept of student engagement from educational psychology, which provides a new theoretical framework for the second language learning experience. This framework defines the second language learning experience as a holistic representation of the quality of learner engagement throughout the entire language learning process. The text goes on to consider which aspects of engagement future research should prioritize and how to measure engagement. Dörnyei contends that interpreting discrete learning episodes through an affirmative, engagement-focused lens potentially enables systematic bridging of concrete facets of current learner involvement with distinct components of prospective educational aspirations [6].

Empirical research can be further divided into three research methods: qualitative research, quantitative research, and mixed-method research. Among the 16 empirical studies, there are 9 quantitative studies, 5 mixed-method studies, and only 1 qualitative study. The research methods used in these 16 empirical studies include questionnaires, interviews, and literature analysis. Most studies tend to combine questionnaire surveys with data analysis. For instance, Zhang & Wang collected data via online survey questionnaires [7]. They then employed descriptive and correlation analyses, as well as hierarchical regression analysis, to demonstrate convincingly that L2 motivation significantly predicts academic achievement among English majors. Some studies adopted a mixed-method approach combining questionnaires with semi-structured interviews. For example, Li explored the L2 learning motivation of Chinese university English majors in an English Medium Instruction (EMI) environment and found that the motivation of humanities and science students converges [8]. Students from both groups with different academic backgrounds were driven by the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, international orientation and instrumental factors. However, students with a humanities background were more influenced by the ought-to L2 self, language anxiety and teacher influence in the EMI environment.

4.2 Research Content

Among the 17 articles, 7 were grounded in Gardner and Lambert's motivation theory, 6 in Dörnyei's L2MSS, and 2 integrated both frameworks [3,4]. The remaining 2 studies utilized alternative theoretical approaches [9,10]. This indicates that Chinese research primarily relies on Gardner's and Dörnyei's theories.

Existing research priorities are focused on advancing the L2MSS theory by conducting in-depth theoretical refinement and empirical validation within specific cultural contexts. Additionally, investigations are exploring the cross-cultural applicability of L2MSS, while also concentrating on elucidating the motivational evolution process through the lens of Complex Dynamic Systems Theory (CDST). Furthermore, studies are examining the interconnections between motivational factors and other affective elements, with an aim to uncover their mutual relationships. Current research generally holds that the ideal L2 self and learning experiences are core predictors of students' academic achievement, while the ought-to L2 self has a relatively limited impact on academic performance. Meanwhile, foreign language anxiety, a factor that has a significantly negative impact on learning outcomes, is widely present among English major students and urgently needs to be alleviated through effective teaching interventions. In addition, motivation is dynamic and plastic, and can be optimized through reasonable strategy interventions.

Dörnyei pointed out that numerous empirical studies based on the L2MSS have confirmed that L2 learning experiences, as a key predictor variable, have significant explanatory power over standardized measurement indicators (such as intention to invest in learning or L2 academic achievement) [6]. In a large-scale Chinese investigation, You and Dörnyei found that attitudes towards L2 learning were most strongly associated with projected behavioural engagement, as evidenced by a correlation coefficient of 0.67 across the entire sample. Furthermore, the ideal L2 self exhibited a substantial correlation coefficient of 0.51, which highlights its significant influence on projected behavioural engagement [11]. However, the ought-to L2 self demonstrates significantly weaker predictive utility (0.38). Although correlation does not necessarily indicate causation, it is necessary to point out that Chinese students' willingness to invest in language learning is mainly associated with an assessment of the quality of the learning process. In You, Dörnyei, and Csizér, the authors further conducted an in-depth investigation into this issue by dividing the same Chinese dataset into multiple subsamples based on various combinations of gender, the level of visual skill development, and distinct learning environments. These subsamples included middle school pupils, university English majors, and non-English major students [12]. Each subsample exhibited the pattern where L2 learning experiences significantly outweighed the ideal L2 self. The theoretical underdevelopment of L2 learning experiences has prompted Dörnyei to conduct in-depth research, constructing new definitions and a theoretical framework for it. In principle, this mechanism is expected to resolve the discrepancies among extant theories by establishing a conceptual framework that integrates the three core dimensions of the L2MSS, thereby enhancing

the theoretical coherence of the L2MSS framework.

Liu validated the applicability of L2MSS among Chinese English learners, demonstrating that pedagogical interventions targeting the "ideal L2 self" enhance motivation and academic performance [1]. Zhang and Wang's investigation revealed that motivation of English learning exerts a statistically significant beneficial effect on academic performance among English majors [7]. It has been demonstrated that students who possess stronger motivational dispositions exhibit higher levels of engagement and sustained focus on academic objectives. Guo & Wang surveyed the motivation types and influencing factors among third-year English majors at a Chinese eastern university and found that students' motivation is mainly driven by personal interest and cultural factors [13]. Li's interdisciplinary comparative study shows that in an EMI environment, humanities students have a significantly higher sensitivity to the constructs of the "ought-to L2 self," foreign language anxiety, and influences of teachers than science students [8]. Chen classified learning motivation and conceptualized learning self-efficacy as a dual-dimensional construct comprising, learning ability self-efficacy and learning behavior self-efficacy [14]. Significant positive correlations were found among learning motivation, learning self-efficacy, and foreign language achievement. Wang examined the correlation between English majors' L2MSS, foreign language anxiety, and academic achievement [2]. Results revealed a significant positive relationship between the ideal L2 self and L2 learning experience relative to foreign language achievement, whereas the "ought-to L2 self" demonstrated no discernible correlation with academic performance.

4.3 Research Findings

After reading the 17 studies, the author compared the main findings of these studies and discovered that all the studies underscored the key role of motivation in L2 acquisition. Eight studies believed that motivation exerts a significant influence on academic achievement of English major students, while two studies indicated a moderate correlation between academic achievement and learning motivation. The L2MSS theory has good validity among Chinese English learners. The ideal L2 self (imagination of future language ability) and L2 learning experience (emotional experience in the learning process) are obviously positively connected with English achievement. The ought-to L2 self (motivation driven by external pressure) has limited or even negative correlation with achievement. The mediating role of emotional factors.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of 17 studies reveals: A significant correlation between L2 motivation and English majors' academic achievement; Empirical research, especially quantitative studies, is predominant. Although the sample size is relatively small, the selected literature is representative as it covers universities in different regions of China, both in the east and the west. Future research can further expand the sample scope to enhance generalizability. Throughout these 17 studies, the research on English majors' second language motivation and academic performance, although increasingly rich, still has certain limitations. Firstly, empirical studies are predominantly empirical and less theoretical in nature, with quantitative studies predominating. The research method is relatively simple, and the body of research is limited. The research methods primarily consist of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, with a paucity of literature adopting three or more research methods. In light of the existing research's limitations, it is incumbent upon the researcher to refine the research methodologies and instruments. In addition, the researcher may wish to consider integrating alternative research methodologies in subsequent studies, while continuously exploring novel perspectives and enhancing the research content. In addition to the use of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, other appropriate methods can be incorporated. Diversified quantitative and qualitative methods, such as classroom observation, reflective journals, and other activities, can be employed to conduct relevant research.

It is hoped that domestic scholars will continue to conduct relevant research, facilitate the development of research in the field of L2 motivation, offering practical suggestions for English teaching in China.

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