

What Makes a Theory Good? Paradigm Shifts in L2 Motivation Research

Alastair Henry (Lund University)

Meng Liu (Beijing Foreign Studies University)

Abstract

This article explores model construction in research on motivation for language learning. Drawing on Kuhn's (1962, 1970) theory of scientific revolutions, it examines critiques of two paradigmatic models: the Socio Educational Model of Second Language Acquisition (Gardner 1985) and the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei 2009). In discussing the challenges to these models, consideration is given to changes in the role and status of English.

Probably everyone working in SLA has at least an informal idea of what makes a theory good and what makes it capable of being ignored. (Beretta 1991: 498)

Introduction

By the 1990s second language acquisition (SLA) had reached a stage where debate on theory construction had begun to take place (Crookes 1992; Gregg 1993; Klein 1990; Lantolf 1996; Long 1990; Spolsky 1990). A central issue involved the existence of multiple, but often non-convergent theories (Beretta 1991; Beretta and Crookes 1993). In this debate, Beretta argued that a key indicator of disciplinary maturity would be when people in the field knew what made a theory good, and what would make it capable of being ignored. Maturity would be reached, he suggested, when 'the culling of theories' became possible, and when convergence could be accomplished 'through principled complementarity' (Beretta 1991: 498).

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In the sub-field of motivation for language learning, debate about what ‘makes a theory good’ and what might make it ‘capable of being ignored’ has taken place in two developmental periods. While the first occurred over a prolonged timespan and involved the qualities and relevance of the Socio Educational Model (SEM: Gardner 1985, 2001), the second is ongoing. Debate involves the capacity of the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS: Dörnyei 2009) to provide an effective model of motivation for language learning. The purpose of this article is to offer an appraisal of these debates. Using Kuhn’s (1962, 1970) theory of scientific development as a lens, we evaluate critiques of (a) the centerpiece constructs, (b) measurement practices, and (c) applications. In line with the theme of this special issue, we consider how changes in the role and status of English have shaped these debates. We begin with a discussion of Kuhnian theory of scientific development, and the concepts of ‘normal science’ and ‘model crisis’.

Normal science and model crisis

In his landmark work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn (1962 1970) offered a narrative account of the dynamics of scientific development where enduring phases of stability are interrupted by periods of turbulence. Kuhn suggested that a scientific field or discipline would mostly be in a stage of equilibrium, or ‘normal science’. In this phase, research would be conducted within a dominant ‘paradigm’: a set of propositional ideas and theories that guide the undertaking of research and that provide an accepted conceptual apparatus with which the field’s problem areas can be investigated.

A paradigm is definitional for a field (Kuhn 1962, 1970). It involves the creation of ‘shared intuitions by a community of scholars, which are often tacitly communicated within the practice of science’ (Anand, Larson, and Mahoney 2020: 1651). Even if a paradigm’s boundaries and constraints might not always be visible, they function to shape the direction of inquiry. A paradigm will have a codifying effect on the articulation of research objectives (what can be investigated) and the choice of methods (how it can be done). In a period of ‘normal science’, it enables researchers ‘to pursue a level of detail, otherwise not possible, by narrowly concentrating the efforts of the community on a small set of problems’ (Anand, Larson, and Mahoney 2020: 1651).

However, in a period of ‘normal science’, anomalies can arise. Anomalies are findings that run counter to the principles of a field-defining paradigm. They can be unexpected problems that are ‘subversive of its basic commitments’, or results that are difficult to explain using existing conceptual resources (Kuhn 1970: 5). When anomalies arise, scientists can question key assumptions and begin to think beyond paradigm confines. When there is ‘repeated failure to make an anomaly conform’ (Kuhn 1970: ix), the field will enter an extraordinary phase. With the genie out of the bottle, there can be greater willingness to express discontent and to engage in open debate on the paradigm’s fundamental tenets. If anomalies accumulate to a degree where they can no longer be adequately accommodated, the drift away from ‘normal science’ will gather pace. Criticism will abound and the conceptual apparatus will be openly questioned. Eventually, reevaluation of the paradigm’s theoretical base and its constructs and frameworks will take place. It is when a field enters a period of disequilibrium—or ‘model crisis’—that the paradigm’s inherent weaknesses become fully apparent (Kuhn 1970: ix). From this phase of crisis, a new paradigm will eventually emerge.

In Kuhn’s developmental account of science, a paradigm is only ever a temporary stage in a field’s development. Taking the view that science is an ongoing process that involves the solving of puzzles (which themselves can change), Kuhn argued that a paradigm can never be expected to offer a complete solution to a problem. It might even be limited in the number of problems that it can actually solve. Rather, to be ‘accepted as a paradigm’ the sole criterion is that ‘a theory must seem better than its competitors’ (Kuhn 1970: 17–18).

Before leaving Kuhn’s historicism and moving on to look at L2 motivation research, two points should be noted. First, Kuhnian theory has also generated counterarguments (Anand, Larson, and Mahoney 2020). These suggest that scientific development defies simple categorization into periods of stability and change. Rather, it is an evolutionary process driven by the frisson of discrepancies in theories and models that are in constant competition, and where development is both linear and nonlinear (Hull 2010). The second point to note is that while the development of L2 motivation research has previously been discussed in terms of ‘normal science’ (Hiver and Al-Hoorie 2020), the emergence of ‘anomalies’ (Henry and Cliffordson 2019), and the occurrence of ‘paradigm shifts’ (Oga-Baldwin 2025), application of Kuhnian principles may be better

suited to mapping the disciplinary trajectories of higher-level and mid-range theories, rather than assessments of the currency of a particular model or framework. With these qualifications kept in mind, we examine two periods of ‘model crisis’ in L2 motivation research. For each period, we consider critiques of (a) the centerpiece constructs, (b) measurement practices, and (c) model applications.

The first period of model crisis and the MLJ debate

For anyone with even a passing interest in L2 motivation research, it is hard to escape references to a debate that took place in *The Modern Language Journal* (MLJ) in the mid-1990s. At this stage, the SEM (Gardner 1985) dominated the field. Controversy was precipitated by an article by Dörnyei (1994a) that began by stating that ‘the main problem with Gardner’s social psychological approach [was] that it was too influential’ (273). The ensuing debate (which included response pieces by Gardner) provided the catalyst for the first period of ‘model crisis’ in L2 motivation research, a period that endured until Dörnyei’s (2009) own L2MSS model achieved paradigmatic status (Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan 2015; Dörnyei and Ryan 2015). Reflecting on the MLJ debate and how it had affected the field, Dörnyei (2009) claimed that dissatisfaction with the SEM had been grounded in a desire (a) to reflect advances in motivation science, and (b) to increase the educational relevance of L2 motivation research.

Critique of the centerpiece construct: problems with integrativeness

The primary critique that Dörnyei (2005, 2009) and others levelled at the SEM involved integrativeness, which Gardner (2001) conceptualized as ‘a genuine interest in learning the second language in order to come closer to the other language community [which at one level] implies an openness to, and respect for other cultural groups and ways of life [and at another] complete identification with the community’ (5). In addition to arguments that the construct was ambiguous, that it implied a form of factual integration, and that it lacked parallels in mainstream psychology, Dörnyei (2009) suggested that it had no meaning in contexts where there was no obvious (i.e., tangibly existing) ethnolinguistic community with which the learner could identify. His primary argument—and an issue to which we will return—was that the absence of a target community undermined the

construct in that it would not be clear who or what the learner wanted to get closer to (Dörnyei 2009).

Critique of measurement practices: the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery
Operationalizing the SEM, Gardner (1985) developed the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). The AMTB is a self-report instrument comprising over 130 items, including integrativeness, language anxiety, and attitudes to the learning situation (Gardner 2019). Dörnyei (1994a, 1994b) was critical of the content validity of elements of the AMTB. In particular, he expressed concern about the motivation component of the integrative orientation, suggesting that ‘if we mixed the thirty items, it would be rather difficult to reconstruct the three scales’ (Dörnyei 1994b: 518). In Dörnyei’s view, the AMTB prioritized measurement over theoretical precision. While he conceded that predictive validity can be enhanced by measuring both motivation and motivated behavior, Dörnyei (2005) argued that it became difficult to ascertain ‘the exact nature of the underlying learner trait that the instrument targets’ (73).

Critique of applications: educational value

The third area where Dörnyei and others were critical of the SEM involved the lack of educational applications. As is well-documented, Gardner never viewed the SEM as a model that would inform practice. Rather, the purpose was to combine cognitive and affective factors in a comprehensive framework as a means of capturing a very specific form of motivation. At the same time, SLA research had been moving in a more educationally oriented direction. Critiques such as those in Crookes and Schmidt’s (1991) landmark article on the social dimensions of L2 motivation underscored the importance of investigating motivation as a phenomenon situated in particular contexts of L2 learning. Contrasting these differing perspectives on L2 motivation research, Dörnyei (2020) noted that Gardner and his associates ‘were first and foremost psychologists who were interested in second language acquisition’, whereas he (Dörnyei) and researchers like him, were ‘second language acquisition specialists (and often also language teachers) interested in psychology’ (Dörnyei 2020: xx). For Dörnyei (2020: xx) it was a difference that ‘had obvious implications for the directions into which [he and others] tried to move the field’.

A Kuhnian reflection

Viewed from the theory of scientific revolutions (Kuhn 1962, 1970), the MLJ debate marks the beginning of a period of disequilibrium. Adding to previous critiques (e.g., Au 1988; Clément and Kruidenier 1983; Oller 1981), the debate precipitated a prolonged period of criticism centered on the model's construction and applications (e.g., Dörnyei and Csizér 2002, 2005). As we have noted, Kuhnian theory suggests that a period of 'model crisis' will eventually be followed by the emergence of a new paradigm, and that the criterion for acceptance of a new model or theory is simply that it 'must seem better than its competitors' (Kuhn 1970: 18). With a focus on the self-concept—and reflecting a growing interest in identity in SLA (e.g., Norton Pierce 1995; Ushioda 2001)—the L2MSS had intuitive appeal. Moreover, Dörnyei (2009) presented the model as having a synthesizing quality, and the capacity to integrate competing frameworks in a streamlined tripartite model comprised of just three elements: *the ideal L2 self* (aspirations that the learner themselves can hold, 'the person I hope to be as an L2-speaker'), *the ought-to L2 self* (expectations held for the learner by significant others, 'the person my parents expect me to be as an L2-speaker'), and the *L2 learning experience* (situated motives for L2 learning). Parsimony is an epistemic virtue. There is an elegance in propositions that are cognitively and computationally economic (Ippoliti 2026). As a streamlined model which (a) resonated with identity concerns, (b) integrated key elements of the SEM and other motivation theories, (c) drew on advances in motivation science, and (d) was meaningful for practitioners, the L2MSS not only 'seemed better' than the SEM. It probably 'seemed better' than any other model currently available or that might be developed in the future.

A second period of model crisis and the SSLA debate

The duration of a period of 'model crisis' can vary. Between the MLJ debate (Dörnyei 1994, 1994; Gardner and Tremblay 1994a, 1994b; Oxford 1994; Oxford and Shearin 1994) and the first claims of paradigmatic status for the L2MSS (Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan 2015; Dörnyei and Ryan 2015), some twenty years elapsed. The phase between one period of 'model crisis' and the next can also vary. While the SEM enjoyed paradigmatic status for more than a quarter of a century, for the L2MSS the period of dominance seems likely to be shorter. Within a decade of the first published studies (in Dörnyei and Ushioda's 2009 anthology), articles identifying anomalies had

begun to appear (e.g., Al-Hoorie 2018; Claro 2020; Henry and Cliffordson 2017; Hiver and Al-Hoorie 2020; Thorsen, Henry, and Cliffordson 2020). Today, criticisms have accumulated to a degree where the field may have entered a second period of ‘model crisis’. Mirroring the MLJ debate some three decades earlier, a collection of articles in the September 2025 volume of *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* (SSLA) included additional critiques of the L2MSS (McClelland and Larson-Hall 2025; Oga-Baldwin 2025; Oga-Baldwin, Al-Hoorie, and Hiver 2025; Vitta, Leeming, and Nicklin 2025), as well as defenses of the model (Nagle 2025; Papi and Teimouri 2025).

Critique of the centerpiece construct: problems with the ideal L2 self

Like the SEM, the L2MSS has a unique, L2-specific construct as its centerpiece. As conceptualized by Dörnyei (2009), the ideal L2 self is ‘the L2-specific facet of one’s “ideal self”’ (29). As we have seen, Dörnyei’s ambition was to create a model that could accommodate the findings of previous research and incorporate the perspectives of ‘competitor’ frameworks. Presenting the L2MSS as a synthetic framework that was in alignment with both the SEM (Gardner 1985) and Self Determination Theory (Noels 2003), Dörnyei (2009: 31) argued that ‘a number of different L2 motivation theories appear to converge in a common tripartite construct’. In relation to the SEM, Dörnyei appropriated the ‘L2 Learning Situation’ element (recast as the L2 learning experience). He also argued that the ideal L2 self could be understood as a reconstitution of the integrativeness construct, and that integrativeness could be ‘re-labeled as the Ideal L2 Self’ (Dörnyei 2005: 103).

The ‘re-labelling’ argument has been the subject of much criticism. Grappling with the problems that arise when constructs from varying disciplinary traditions are conflated, Claro (2020) has suggested that integrativeness and the ideal L2 self can be considered as complementary constructs, in that they both involve a form of identification. In critiques extending beyond definitional distinctions, Henry and Liu (2024a, 2024b, 2025) identified two additionally problematic assumptions.

The first involves the construction of the ideal L2 self. A key issue is whether it can be considered a legitimate hybrid and a seamless synthesis of twin constructs, as Dörnyei proposed, or whether it involves a conjoining of constructs that appear conceptually similar but are in fact distinct. Henry and Liu (2024b, 2025) argued that the constructs from

which the ideal L2 self is derived—possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) and self-guides (Higgins 1987)—differ in a fundamental respect. While possible selves are systematic and defining components *of* the self-concept, self-guides form part of an interpretive framework *through which* the self-concept is evaluated. As its name implies, a self-guide ‘guides’ behavior. It steers a person’s actions in directions where the self-concept becomes closer to ideals and expectations (Higgins, Strauman, and Klein 1986). While possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) and self-evaluative standards (Higgins 1987, 1990) have the potential to provide insights into motivational processes, Henry and Liu (2024a, 2025) have argued that they need to be investigated as discrete constructs with distinct functions.

The second problematic assumption is idea that integrativeness and the ideal L2 self are similar in focus. Referring to Higgins’s (1990) taxonomy of self-evaluative standards, Henry and Liu (2023) argued that integrativeness is not commensurate with a self-guide, as Dörnyei suggested, but rather with a social category factual. While a self-guide and a social category factual can both function as reference points in self-appraisal, the focus of the appraisal differs. When a self-guide is used as an appraisal standard, current attributes are compared with those that the person hopes to possess or believes that they ought to possess. When a social category factual is utilized, current attributes are compared with those of the members of a social category or group, for example a community of TL-speakers.

Critique of measurement practices: inferences and validity

In an early appraisal of the measurement challenges associated with the L2MSS, MacIntyre, Mackinnon, and Clément (2009: 209) made clear that the model builds on ‘the comparison of present and future states’, and that it is ‘the discrepancy between them’ that provides the source of motivation. However, in the model’s operationalization, it is only the *appraisal standard* (the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self) that is measured. The *target* of the appraisal (the actual self) is missing. To address this concern, Henry and Cliffordson (2017) and Thorsen, Henry, and Cliffordson (2020) attempted to operationalize the self-discrepancy. In a three-stage process, Thorsen et al. (2020) first included a measure of the current L2 self. They then calculated the difference between it and the ideal L2 self. In a final step, they measured the effect that the discrepancy had on an outcome

variable. By demonstrating the differential effects of identified discrepancies, the studies highlighted a central problem associated with model parsimony: failure to account for the appraisal mechanism.

The studies also cast light on an additional concern; a disconnect between the timescale at which self-discrepancies are operable and, in L2MSS research, the timescale at which they are operationalized. In self-discrepancy theory (Higgins 1987), self-guides are operational at micro-level timescales. A discrepancy between a self-guide and the actual self will be situationally triggered. Awareness of a discrepancy will generate momentary emotional discomfort. However, in L2MSS research, the L2 self-guides are measured at the timescale at which individual differences arise. At this timescale, awareness of a discrepancy would exist independent from any triggering stimulus. Discomfort would therefore be more chronic in nature.

The disconnect between timescales challenges the inferences that can be drawn from the findings of L2MSS research. It raises the question of extrapolation, and whether it is reasonable to assume that the motivation-generating qualities associated one type of discrepancy transfer to another. Moreover, even if chronic discomfort can be captured as an ID variable, it is not clear whether it would be sufficient to generate the type of sustained motivated behavior that the L2MSS is claimed to predict (Henry and Liu 2024a, 2026). Leaving aside these conceptual issues, there is a further, measurement related, disconnect between research in the L2MSS tradition and practices common in self-discrepancy theory research. While L2MSS research draws on standardized measures, in self-discrepancy research idiographic measurement is often used. The assessment of a discrepancy is based on the respondent's own description of themselves. For example, in designs that use the regulatory focus strength measure (Higgins, Shah, and Friedman 1997), participants first list pairs of ideal and ought attributes and then rate the extent to which (a) they would ideally like to possess the attribute and (b) they actually possess it. In these designs, measurement involves response times.

While in other areas of L2 psychology idiographic measurement is beginning to be used (e.g., Henry et al. 2023), L2MSS research has continued to rely on standardized (nomothetic) measures, mostly Likert-type items. The problems involved in rating statements further increase when variables are closely connected. Findings from recent studies by Al-Hoorie and colleagues (Al-Hoorie, Hiver, and In'nami 2024; Al-Hoorie et

al. 2024) have revealed difficulties in establishing discriminant validity for the ideal L2 self in relation to the associable variable of linguistic self-confidence. Findings indicate that responses to survey items may be driven by self-efficacy beliefs. Confronted with an item purporting to measure the ideal L2 self, Al-Hoorie, Hiver, and In'nami (2024: 322) have argued that a respondent would most likely 'think about their ability and their belief in the extent to which they can achieve the task in question'. Thus, as currently measured, the ideal L2 self may represent 'confidence in one's ability, rather than an actual-ideal discrepancy or future vision of oneself as the ideal L2 self was originally conceptualized' (Al-Hoorie et al. 2024: 2).

Finally, the problems identified by Al-Hoorie and colleagues illustrate wider validity concerns associated with L2MSS research. In contemporary measurement theory, validity is not a property of a scale. Rather, it involves interpretations of generated scores and the inferences that are drawn. It should be viewed as an ongoing process of collecting and assessing evidence (Cizek 2020). However, L2MSS research has operated in a largely instrument-focused mode (Liu and Henry 2025). For the L2MSS scales, validity claims have often been made by simply citing a previous validation study without proper evaluation of contextual evidence. With a focus on the validation of scales, rather than scores, it is easy to assume that operationalizations of the L2MSS capture the target constructs. Alternative interpretations risk being ignored.

Critique of applications: the transformative capacity of the ideal L2 self

In his work, Dörnyei (2009) presented the ideal L2 self as a multifunctional construct. He argued that it could do double duty as both a predictor of motivation, and the means by which it can be generated. However, he failed to elaborate on possible differences in the conceptualization of the ideal L2 self as an ID variable, and as a transformative force. For example, no distinction was made between the conditions under which the ideal L2 self might predict motivated behavior (as an ID variable), and those under which it might generate motivation (in a pedagogical intervention).

It is clear, however, that the guises in which the ideal L2 self appears are not the same. As a model element and ID variable, the ideal L2 self is a hybrid construct. It is purported to subsume both (a) the mental imagery of a possible self (Markus and Nurius 1986), and (b) the appraisal function of a self-guide (Higgins 1987). As an intervention component, however,

the ideal L2 self is presented as a unitary construct. Rooted in Markus and Nurius's (1986) theory of possible selves and the intervention research that it has spawned (Dunkel and Kerpelman 2006), the ideal L2 self is presented as a means by which a language learner can 'appropriate the future' (Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014: 9) and as a tool that can enable 'practitioners to harness the motivational capacity of visualization' (Vlaeva and Dörnyei 2021: 950).

In relation to the power ascribed to the construct and the wealth of advice made available to teachers (e.g., Hadfield and Dörnyei 2013; Dörnyei and Kubanyiova 2014), research reporting on the effects of interventions has been meagre (Liu 2024). While the results of intervention studies have been interpreted as having positive effects (Papi 2022; Vlaeva and Dörnyei 2021), the most frequently reported finding following an intervention is an increase in the strength of the ideal L2 self (the target of the intervention), with some studies also showing increases in intended effort. On rare occasions studies have also shown effects on objective measures. However, research falls short of the standards accepted in experimental paradigms and for intervention research in educational science. Coupled with the problems associated with self-report measures (described above), results do not provide unambiguous support for the construct's transformative capacity. In a recent study designed to meet the standards of high-quality intervention research (i.e., randomization to treatment and control conditions, multiple treatment/control groups, and delayed post-testing), Henry et al. (in prep.) were unable to identify positive effects beyond (a) a marginal increase in the strength of the ideal L2 self at the post-test (but not thereafter), and (b) a small mediation effect on willingness to communicate (but not any other outcome variable). They concluded that the effect of the intervention was small, limited, and temporary.

A Kuhnian reflection

In the light of substantive and methodological criticisms of the L2MSS (Dörnyei 2009) and its iterations (Papi et al. 2019; Teimouri 2017), Oga-Baldwin (2025) has argued that instrumentation and measurement practices have 'not achieved an acceptable level of trustworthiness', and that 'the models that have been developed to date require an overhaul before they can be trusted' (10). Reflecting on the consequences, Al-Hoorie et al. (2024: 2) have spoken of 'a lost decade in the sense that there was a

great deal of effort expended in L2 motivation research with negligible progress'. As Oga-Baldwin (2025) has concluded, the field may have reached a point 'where business-as-usual "normal science" has become untenable' (2). To avoid the dangers of sending future researchers 'down the garden path toward disappointment and dead-ends' (Oga-Baldwin 2025: 10), calls for a substantive moratorium in L2MSS research have been made (Al-Hoorie et al. 2024; Oga-Baldwin 2025).

In offering a Khunian perspective on the two periods of discontinuity witnessed in L2 motivation research, we have emphasized that the sole criterion for the emergence of a paradigm is that the new theory 'must seem better than its competitors' (Kuhn 1970: 18). We also noted that Dörnyei (2009) presented the L2MSS as having a synthesizing capacity, claiming that it could subsume key elements of competing frameworks. For almost a decade, the L2MSS probably did 'seem better' than its competitors. Dominating the field, it left 'little room for conversation about alternative approaches to conceptualizing and quantifying motivation' (Nagle 2025: 1184). However, its status has begun to diminish. As the SSLA debate demonstrates, critiques of the model (Al-Hoorie, Hiver, and In'nami 2025; McClelland and Larson-Hall 2025; Liu and Henry 2025; Oga-Baldwin 2025; Oga-Baldwin, Al-Hoorie, and Hiver 2025; Vitta, Leeming, and Nicklin 2025) outnumber defenses (Nagle 2025; Papi and Teimouri 2025). Moreover, in focusing on definitional validity (Papi and Teimouri 2025) and improvements to measurement practices (Nagle 2025), defenses of the L2MSS have ignored underlying conceptual problems. It is not only that problems at the construct level can create problems at the measurement level (Lawson and Robins 2021). Striving for definitional (or any other type of validity) and attempts at improving measurement quality are valuable only when the constructs measured are conceptually robust. As Machado and Silva (2007) have made clear, 'unclear concepts, equivocal propositions, invalid arguments, and incoherent accounts cannot, by definition, achieve any form of validity' (678).

To repeat a point emphasized throughout this article, a paradigm shift will only occur when a new or different model is recognized by the field as being better than its competitors. However, once a shift has taken place, any common ground that might have existed between the old and the new can quickly diminish. A new period of normal science is 'not only incompatible but often actually incommensurable with that which has

gone before' (Kuhn 1970: 103). We will return to issue of commensurability and whether there are elements of Dörnyei's theory that might endure in a post-L2MSS era in the article's conclusion. However, before considering what a new period of 'normal science' might look like, we consider how changes in the role and status of English have been instrumental in precipitating both periods of 'model crisis'.

Revisiting the first period of model crisis

As we have previously made clear, one of the criticisms of the SEM was that integrativeness was seen to have little meaning in learning contexts with no obvious TL community and speakers with whom the learner could identify (Dörnyei 2005, 2009). Dörnyei's arguments were anchored in the long-standing conviction that in the absence of a tangibly existing group or community of L2 speakers, the identification element of integrativeness could only be understood in a metaphorical sense (for example, in relation to cultural aspects associated with the language and its speakers) (e.g., Dörnyei 1990). Subsequently, Dörnyei came to suggest that the motivation dimension captured by integrativeness might not even relate to a metaphorical 'integration', but to an identification process within the self-concept (e.g., Dörnyei and Csizér 2002).

To accomplish the shift from integrativeness (where a factually existing social group provides a point of reference) to the ideal L2 self (where the mental representation of a desired future state provides the reference point), Dörnyei drew on arguments suggesting that learners of English could identify with a global community of TL speakers (Lamb 2004; Norton 2001; Yashima 2002). In research from Japan, Yashima (2002: 57) had argued that connection with a 'world community of English speakers' could provide an important source of motivation. Developing a similar idea, Lamb (2004: 777) suggested that young people, such as the Indonesian learners of English in his study, could 'develop a global identity that gives them a sense of belonging to a world-wide culture and includes an awareness of the events, practices, styles and information that are part of the global culture'. Drawing on Anderson's (1991) notion of 'imagined communities', Norton (2001) had argued that motivation and investment in L2 learning could be shaped by desired membership of an imaginary community of TL speakers. Summarizing these arguments, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) suggested that in an age where English had become a global commodity and a language learnt by millions, identification with

an imagined global community could provide a better conceptualization of integrativeness:

It appears that the notion of ‘imagined community’ lends itself to be used with regard to the various international or World English identities ... as these identities concern membership in a virtual language community. Indeed, Norton explicitly states that a learner’s imagined community invites an “imagined identity” (p. 166). Looking at integrative motivation from this perspective, it can be viewed as the desired integration into an imagined L2 community. (Dörnyei 2005: 98)

On the basis of this argument, Dörnyei (2005: 98) made the proposals that precipitated the first paradigm shift in L2 motivation research, namely (a) that the field would be better served ‘if we leave the term “integrative” completely behind and focus more on identification aspects and on the learner’s self-concept’, and (b) that ‘an important theoretical strand in personality psychology which has elaborated on “possible” and “ideal selves” appears to be particularly relevant in this respect’.

Revisiting the second period of model crisis

Changes in the status and role of English have been similarly decisive in precipitating the second period of ‘model crisis’. Much has changed in the 20-year period between Dörnyei’s (2005) proposal of a self-system model, and current calls for a substantive moratorium in L2MSS research (Al-Hoorie, Hiver, and In’nami 2024; Oga-Baldwin 2025). As Gardner (2019) himself could note, the constantly changing role of English and the ways in which it is encountered mean that the capacity of a model to effectively capture the learner’s motivation needs to be continually assessed. In a media saturated age, where connectivity has become a social value, and staying online and keeping connected have become sources of social pressure (Kania-Lundholm 2023), the potential for exposure to English continues to grow. With connectivity shaped by artificial intelligence, and with AI steering the mechanisms that produce, circulate, and reproduce the informativity of communication (Esposito 2022), English can be encountered in a multitude of contexts and forms.

In an era where sociality is shaped by algorithms, the relationship that L2 learners have to English is also changing. With English embedded in online content—often just a scroll or click away—there is a need to rethink the effects that exposure has on motivation. It is hard to find support for the argument (a) that people who learn English develop a ‘bicultural

identity' (part local and part global), (b) that this identity 'links them to the international mainstream', and (c) that 'the language of this global identity is English' (Dörnyei 2009: 24). Moreover, the separation of identities into 'local' and 'global' elements as Dörnyei (2009) proposed fails to capture the complexity of identity and the diversity of identity experiences in contemporary times (Henry and Goddard 2015).

In the current period of 'model crisis', there are two ways in which changing encounters with English have influenced evaluations of the L2MSS. As we have seen, major critiques have involved (a) the difficulty to adequately distinguish the ideal L2 self from linguistic self-confidence and self-efficacy beliefs, and (b) failure to model the self-discrepancy process. In the case of discriminant validity, concerns were raised in research conducted by Al-Hoorie and colleagues with learners of L2 English in Korea and Japan. In the first of these studies, Al-Hoorie, Hiver, and In'nami (2024) found worryingly high correlations for scales measuring the ideal L2 self and linguistic self-confidence. This led them to argue that responses to ideal L2 self items 'might be driven by belief in ability rather than an actual-ideal discrepancy' (Al-Hoorie, Hiver, and In'nami 2024: 318). For an item such as 'I can imagine a situation where I am speaking English with foreigners', they suggested that a respondent would be more likely to think about the achievability of the imagined task, than (a) assessing their current state, (b) comparing this to a future state, and (c) considering the gap between the two. Following up these findings, Al-Hoorie et al. (2024) carried out two interlinked studies. First, they manipulated ideal L2 self items by rewording them to explicitly refer to confidence in ability and then tested the scales with the manipulated and original versions to seek evidence of discriminant validity. Thereafter, they conducted cognitive interviews where participants articulated their thought processes when responding to ideal L2 self items. Findings showed a lack of discriminant validity between the original and the manipulated items, and that responses to the ideal L2 self items were dominated by reflections on current ability and expectations about L2 use (as opposed to the conjuring of an image involving an idealized future state, as the L2MSS would suggest). Moreover, in studies that have examined self-discrepancies (Henry and Cliffordson 2017; Thorsen, Henry, and Cliffordson 2020), findings have shown that the discrepancy between the current L2 self and the ideal L2 self could be small, explaining only a limited proportion of variance on the criterion measure.

Together, these studies shed light on how changes in the role and status of English have affected the conceptualization of L2 motivation. To a large degree, the rationale for the ideal L2 self was based on the assumption that since proficiency in English would be a highly desirable but (currently) unattained accomplishment, it would constitute a specific element of a future identity. Dörnyei's (2009) argument was that if the person that a learner would like to become speaks the L2, then the ideal L2 self would be a powerful motivating force. While in previous decades this can have been the case (for certain learners at least), in the current era of digital hyperconnectivity circumstances have changed. Arguments that L2 learners can desire to *become* a speaker of a global language, and that learners of the language develop a 'World English' *identity*—as Dörnyei (2005: 97) suggested—may no longer hold. In many contexts, developing skills in English is not an identity issue at all. Rather, English is simply part of the landscape in which socialization occurs and where identities develop. For the Swedish participants in Thorsen, Henry and Cliffordson's (2020) study, there was no great difference between current and future perceptions of the self as a speaker/user of English. When the Japanese participants in Al-Hoorie et al.'s (2024) study responded to the item 'I can imagine myself having a conversation in English with a foreigner', it was in ways that foregrounded positive evaluations of current ability. Participants described having a conversation in English as a familiar task. On the basis of previous experiences and ongoing contacts, they were confident of successful accomplishment.

A decade ago, Henry and Cliffordson (2017: 716) described the situation in Sweden in the following way:

[F]or people in contexts where English is a part of everyday life, the discrepancy they perceive between their Current L2 Self and their Ideal L2 Self may not be as great as in contexts where English is not as prominent. Consequently, the contribution played by the Ideal L2 Self in generating motivation may not be as central as it is in settings where the impact of global cultures is less profound, and where the presence of English is less pervasive.

They argued that the findings from the Swedish context cast doubt on the universality of the L2MSS, and constituted a troubling anomaly:

However, when a paradigm as powerful as the self-system approach achieves a dominant status in its field, there is a risk that central concepts are adopted uncritically and anomalies ignored (Kuhn 1962). Framed within Ushioda's (2013) observation of

the increasing difficulty of characterizing interactions between motivation and context in general terms, the current study suggests that, in settings where English has become a part of everyday cultural practices and experiences, the strength of individuals' current L2 selves can mean that the idealized version—the English-speaking future self—lacks the power to align motivated behaviour in a manner consistently demonstrated in other contexts. (Henry and Cliffordson 2017: 732–733)

In an era of digital hyperconnectivity, the situation observed ten years ago in Sweden has become more widespread. As the findings presented by Al-Hoorie and his colleagues suggest, English can be viewed more as a social accomplishment than an identity-related aspiration. In current circumstances, and taking account of the pace at which AI is advancing, it is questionable whether a model of motivation centered on an identity-focused and future-oriented construct can remain relevant. In an age of constant exposure to online influences—that for many people include content mediated in English—identity and self-actualization may not take center stage in self-appraisals. As the commodification of English intensifies, appraisals are more likely to take place in relation to social norms and societal expectations connected to language use. Self-appraisal is more likely to involve 'how am I?' questions, than 'who am I?' questions (Henry and Liu 2026).

Conclusion

In this article we have examined two phases of discontinuity in L2 motivation research, and which can be understood as periods of 'model crisis' (Kuhn 1970). The first—a prolonged period during which critiques were levelled at the SEM—led to a paradigm shift where Gardner's (1985) model was superseded by the L2MSS (Boo, Dörnyei, and Ryan 2015; Dörnyei and Ryan 2015). The second period is currently taking place. As is characteristic for a period of 'model crisis', there is disagreement about the value of a paradigmatic model. While some researchers have pointed to a validation crisis (Al-Hoorie, Hiver, and In'nami 2024; Al-Hoorie et al. 2024), others have highlighted problems in the conceptualization of the 'future self-guide' construct (Henry and Liu 2024b, 2025). There are also researchers who have taken defensive positions. Skirting issues involving conceptualization and model construction, focus has been directed to measurement practices (Nagle 2025) and definitional validity (Papi and Teimouri 2025). Other researchers have chosen to ignore the debate

entirely, content to continue with business as usual (e.g., Fathi et al. 2025; Pan and Wang 2025).

At the beginning of the article, we referenced Beretta's (1991) suggestion that a turning point in disciplinary development would be reached when a 'culling' of theories became possible, and/or when convergence could be accomplished 'through principled complementarity' (498). Beretta's concern was with the proliferation of theories in SLA, the dangers of letting all flowers bloom (cf., Lantolf 1996), and the need to separate robust theories from those 'capable of being ignored' (Beretta 1991: 498). In the current period of 'model crisis' the question is on which side of this divide the L2MSS might ultimately fall?

The amalgamation of non-equivalent source constructs in the 'future self-guide' (Dörnyei 2009), a disconnect between the timescales at which constructs are operable and are operationalized, and the assumption that the ideal L2 self can uniquely function as both a predictor and a generator of motivation, constitute significant conceptual shortcomings. Together with the assumption that TL acquisition is universally aspirational and involves the actualization of an 'ideal' state, they can be sufficient to tip the balance in favor of 'capable of being ignored'. At the same time, there are aspects of Dörnyei's theorizing that transcend these deficiencies and suggest possibilities for 'convergence'. To ascertain whether Dörnyei's work will have an enduring influence on L2 motivation research and, in some form, might survive the current period of 'model crisis', a necessary first step will involve dismantling the 'future self-guide' construct. By splitting it into its constituent parts—possible selves (Markus and Nurius 1986) and self-guides and related self-evaluative standards (Higgins 1987)—opportunities to conduct work commensurate with the source constructs can arise (Henry and Liu 2025). With growing appreciation of the 'dangers associated with naïve integration' (King and Fryer 2024: 37), possible selves and self-evaluative standards can make important contributions as discrete constructs with specific functions. In a period where motivation science is being nudged 'towards a more cumulative and integrative approach' (King and Fryer 2024: 37), their value may best be utilized in conceptually coherent multi-component frameworks. In seeking an understanding of persistence in language learning, possible selves can for example be combined with the related constructs of goal self-concordance and autobiographical knowledge to provide a cohesive framework (Henry 2023). Self-guides and other self-evaluative standards

can be used to create context-adjusted frameworks that can provide insights into socially focused appraisals, and the influence that social and societal norms can have on the regulation of L2 learning behavior (e.g., Amorati 2025; Wang et al. 2025). As constructs capturing the influence of social and societal expectations that can exist at different levels of internalization (Moretti and Higgins 1999), self-evaluative standards can provide conceptually coherent components in frameworks drawing on Self Determination Theory (Noels et al. 2019).

As Lightbown (1984: 41) long ago pointed out, ‘virtually all SLA researchers have an interest in the development of a theoretical framework which can explain and predict the observed phenomena of SLA’. While Dörnyei’s theories have been hugely influential and can rightly be credited with invigorating a field that risked stagnation, hindsight suggests that the L2MSS may have been overly ambitious. If the SEM became mired in its own complexity, the failures of the L2MSS lie in the pursuit of parsimony. While cognitive economy has an inherent value, parsimony can ‘obscure relevant variables or exclude complex causal mechanisms necessary for full understanding’ (Ippoliti 2026: 5). This seems to be the case for the L2MSS. Parsimony may have come at considerable cost. Moreover, the message that seems to emerge most clearly from both periods of ‘model crisis’ is that even if L2 motivation might be a ‘special case’ (cf. Al-Hoorie and Hiver 2020), homegrown models seem unlikely to provide adequate understandings.

Reflecting on the current debate, Nagle (2025) has argued that rather than undermining the field, academic discussions ‘speak to its strength and disciplinary maturity’ (1187). With maturity come opportunities to productively draw on developments in mainstream motivation science. Disciplinary maturity enables scholars of L2 motivation ‘to do research with the potential to reciprocally refine and elaborate’ the models and frameworks of both disciplines (Ryan 2022: 2). It is in a climate of greater conceptual awareness, methodological advances, measurement precision, and increased integration with mainstream motivation science that the next paradigm in L2 motivation research seems likely to emerge.

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