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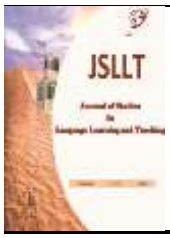

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The Effect of EFL Students' L2 Self-Images on Their Self-Regulation: A Mixed-Method Study

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Abstract

Dörnyei identifies that the main driving force of language learning is learners' future image of themselves as successful users of the language. Besides, self-regulation has been an influential process affecting L2. The current mixed-method research aimed to investigate the impact of Iranian EFL learners' L2 self-images on their self-regulation. For this purpose, data were collected by Likert items from two surveys (n = 120) and in-depth interviews (n = 8). The participants, aged 21-25, were divided into two proficiency groups, intermediate and upper-intermediate, based on the Oxford placement test. To answer the research questions, multiple regression analysis was implemented and semi-structured interviews were used. The result of regression analysis indicated that ideal L2 self was a prerequisite for self-regulatory phases; its most influential impact was seen on performance phase followed by forethought and self-reflection phase. However, the ought-to L2 did not affect self-regulation phases. Complementary to these findings, the qualitative analysis showed that the learners' desired self-image made them be active in three phases of self-regulation. They set goals to manage their studying time, valued their English studying environment, and were highly active in terms of task strategies as well as help seeking. Accordingly, enhancing learners' vision of idealized L2 selves, as a pedagogical implication of this study, could trigger more self-regulatory behavior and assist L2 learning process.

Keywords: L2 self-images, Ideal L2 self, Ought-to L2 self, Self-regulation phases, EFL learners.

I | Introduction

Numerou The important role that second language (L2) motivation plays in L2 language learning has been evident since Gardner's (1985) socio-educational model, which focused primarily on integrative motivation. According to it, a learner's "genuine interest in learning the second language" becomes closer to the target language community (Gardner, 2001, p. 5).

During past decades**,** although integrative motivation has had a huge impact on L2 motivation research, this concept has raised a large number of debates among researchers. For instance, Dörnyei and Csizér (2002) clarified the vagueness of integrativeness. They concluded that the process of identification underlies integrativeness and "might be better explained as an internal process of identification within the person's self-concept, rather than identification within an external reference group" (p. 453). Taking this explanation into account, it seems logical that Gardner's model cannot explain L2 motivation any more. It is too static and restricted, and it cannot be applicable in diverse language learning environments (Dörnyei, 2009). Dörnyei (2005, 2009) broadened the scope of the

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theory by proposing that L2 motivation is dynamic in nature. So, the focus of the researchers started to move away from the old notion of integrativeness to self-based theories of motivation.

Derived from Markus and Nurius's (1986) possible selves as well as Higgins' self-discrepancy theory (1987), Dörnyei initiated a new path in L2 motivation. His L2 motivational self-system identifies learners' future image of themselves as the main driving force of language learning. As he elaborated on it, this future image is concerned with how successful a learner is as a user of a language. In other words, Dörnyei (2005, 2009) calls it possible (imagined) selves and distinguishes two types of possible selves, which are viewed as the backbone of his theoretical framework; they are ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self. The first component, as Irie and Brewster (2013, p. 110) define, is "a learner's desired L2 user attributes" that is essential in shaping a broader successful future self-imagery. This might act as a "powerful motivator to reduce the discrepancy between the here-and-now or actual self and this ideal image" (Papi, 2010, pp. 468-469).

The second component, ought-to L2 self, refers to "an L2 user self-image that learners feel obliged to realize or to avoid becoming" (Irie & Brewster, 2013, p. 110). If a person wants to learn an L2 in order to live up to the expectations of others, this self-image serves as the main motivator for L2 learning (Papi, 2010). Therefore, these self-images require active engagement to turn motivation into achievement, which a process where self-regulated learning (SRL) plays an essential role.

SRL, as a highly influential process affecting L2, bridges the gap between L2 self-images and learning behaviors. Zimmerman (1998) defines SRL as learners' proactive use of metacognitive, motivational, and behavioral strategies across three phases: Forethought**,** Performance, and Self-reflection. The first phase "refers to influential processes and beliefs that precede efforts to learn and set the stage for such learning" (Zimmerman 1998, p. 2) and includes SRL strategies such as goal setting and environment structuring. The second phase encompasses the processes that occur during learning, affecting learner's concentration and performance and including SRL strategies such as task strategies, time management, and help seeking. The final phase involves learners' self-assessing as they reflect on their own progress and includes processes that affect learners' reactions to their experience. It has been assumed that learners with vivid ideal L2 selves are more likely to set mastery-oriented goals (forethought), persist in challenging tasks (performance), and adapt strategies based on progress (self-reflection). Conversely, weak self-images may undermine SRL, as learners lack the motivational vision to sustain effort (Yashima, 2013, p. 36).

While studies have explored L2 self-images (e.g., Papi, 2010; Yashima, 2013) and SRL (e.g., Zimmerman, 1998) separately, some gaps remain. Firstly, most studies on L2 selves and SRL focus on acquisition-rich environments (e.g., ESL settings), neglecting contexts like Iran, where English lacks daily use and formal instruction is limited. Secondly, how the ideal L2 self affects three phases of self-regulation (i.e., forethought, performance, and self-reflection) is under-examined, especially in a context like Iran where learners must rely on autonomous, self-regulated efforts to succeed. Finally, there is a lack of research focused on how educators can practically use this relationship. The previous works rarely address how educators can use this relationship to design interventions for under-resourced EFL contexts such as Iran.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that, while quantitative studies (e.g., surveys) are common in Iran's applied linguistics field, truly integrated mixed-methods studies, particularly those involving in-depth qualitative components, are less frequent. The reasons are multifaceted and deeply rooted in cultural and social norms that directly impact participant willingness and the feasibility of qualitative inquiry. Therefore, the gap is not necessarily a lack of interest in the topic, but rather a series of significant practical and cultural barriers that make a rigorous mixed-methods approach particularly challenging to execute effectively in the Iranian context.

To address this gap and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of Iranian L2 self-images and their self-regulation, the present study employed a mixed-methods design. This approach allowed for the statistical generalization of quantitative survey data alongside the rich, contextual insights derived from qualitative interviews. Recognizing that these cultural norms impact participant willingness, we obtained informed consent from all the participants prior to the study. Furthermore, immense time was invested in building trust, navigating bureaucracy, and carefully designing methods that would give a feeling of safety and respect to the participants to ensure the feasibility and ethical integrity of the qualitative inquiry.

II. Aim of the study

This study is the first to investigate how Iranian EFL learners' L2 self-images shape their SRL strategies across Zimmerman's three phases. It aims to empower educators by providing insights for designing interventions that strengthen learners' future self-visualization and scaffold SRL strategy use, thereby closing the gap between motivation and achievement. This study addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self on the three phases of self-regulation (forethought, performance and self-reflection)?
2. How do EFL learners perceive the impact of ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self on the three phases of self-regulation (forethought, performance, and self-reflection)?

III. Review of the related literature

This research is an attempt to investigate the relationship between the L2 Motivational self-system and SRL among Iranian EFL learners. While these concepts are often studied in isolation, a growing body of research suggests a significant interconnection between them, though the nature of this association is complex and mediated by various factors. This review synthesizes key findings on both constructs before critically examining the evidence for their interplay, ultimately identifying a gap for a context-specific investigation in Iran.

3.1. The L2 motivational self-system: From global validation to contextual nuance

Since its introduction, L2 motivational self-system has generated extensive research focused on validating the model across diverse contexts. Early foundational studies, such as those by Ryan (2008) in Japan and Taguchi et al. (2009) across China, Japan and Iran, were crucial in establishing the model's cross-cultural validity. They revealed a strong correlation between the ideal L2 self and the traditional concept of integrativeness, suggesting that the Ideal L2 self could provide a more universal explanatory framework for L2 motivation.

Subsequent research expanded on these findings, exploring the system's dynamics and antecedents. For instance, Kim's (2009) qualitative work in Korea, grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, importantly highlighted that motivational selves are not static but emerge through social interaction and the integration of personal motives with specific learning goals.

This underscores the role of the learning environment, a key mediating variable. Further quantitative studies (e.g., Papi, 2010; Dörnyei & Chan, 2013) reinforced the predictive power of future self-guides on intended effort, while also introducing the role of anxiety and learning styles. However, these studies primarily established correlation, not causation. More recently, research like Amorati's (2020) work with Italian learners in Melbourne has examined the contextual factors that shape these self-guides, proposing new dimensions like the "community-engaged L2 self," which is highly relevant to learners in immersive environments.

3.2. SRL: A multifaceted determinant of success

Parallel research on SRL has consistently identified it as a crucial factor in academic success. The literature reveals that SRL is not an isolated skill but is deeply intertwined with motivational and affective factors. For example, studies consistently show that self-efficacy is a powerful prerequisite to the use of SRL strategies (Shih, 2019; Pawlak, Csizér, & Soto, 2020), suggesting that learners must believe in their capability to succeed before they effectively regulate their learning. Furthermore, proficiency level acts as a significant mediator; Mezei (2008) found that upper-intermediate learners demonstrated greater metacognitive awareness and regulatory ability than pre-intermediate learners, indicating that SRL capacity may develop alongside language proficiency.

The application of SRL has been shown to enhance specific language skills. Research in writing (Qiu & Lee, 2020; Robillos, 2023a) and speaking (Robillos, 2023b) demonstrates that successful performance is linked to strategic planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Furthermore, meta-analyses (e.g., Xu, Zhao, Zhang, Liew, & Kogut, 2022) confirm the efficacy of SRL across learning environments such as online and blended environments, highlighting its fundamental role in the learning process. However, the effectiveness of specific strategies may be influenced by contextual variables such as cultural background as well as educational setting.

3.3. The interplay of L2 selves and self-regulation

The theoretical link between possible selves and self-regulation is long-established. As noted by Borkowski and Thorpe (1994), possible selves are inherently goal-oriented constructs, and the pursuit of goals is a vital core function of SRL. This foundational principle remains highly relevant to current SLA debates. Chan (2014) argues that possible selves can directly "elicit self-regulatory behavior" by enhancing "the end accessibility and desirability of behavioral responses" (pp. 25-26). This provides the theoretical bedrock for hypothesizing a causal pathway from a future self-image to present-day strategic behavior.

Empirical evidence largely supports this connection. Research across various contexts, including Korea (Kim & Kim, 2014), Hungary (Csizér & Kormos, 2014), and Iran (Rahimi Domakani et al., 2016), has consistently identified the ideal L2 self as a strong and significant predictor of self-regulation. This is further supported by context-specific studies, such as Tran and Tran's (2021) finding that Vietnamese EFL students actively employed SRL strategies within a project-based learning framework, demonstrating the behavioral manifestation of this link. The prevailing explanation is that a vivid and elaborate ideal self serves as a powerful emotional and motivational catalyst. It not only drives learners towards active engagement in strategic self-regulation but also motivates them to bridge the gap between their current and future selves (Higgins, 1987).

However, the literature is not without inconsistency, and the relationship is probably not straightforward. While some studies (e.g., Kim & Kim, 2014) found both ideal and ought-to L2 selves to be predictors, the ideal self is consistently the stronger and more reliable predictor. This suggests that the type of motivation (approach vs. avoidance) is a critical factor. Furthermore, some studies advocate for a dynamic view of this relationship. Papi and Teimouri (2012), for instance, provided strong evidence for a dynamic perspective towards L2 motivation and possible L2 selves among Iranian EFL learners. They suggested that these constructs are fluid and interact over time. This dynamism complicates the picture as the majority of the existing studies are correlational. In fact, it is difficult to determine directionality whether a strong ideal self leads to more SRL, or successful SRL strengthens one's ideal self, or the relationship is bidirectional.

3.4. Gap identification and research justification

Crucially, the role of key mediating variables like age, proficiency, and specific learning environment within the link between L2 motivational self-system and SRL remains underexplored. This is particularly the case in the Iranian EFL context, which is characterized by its unique socio-cultural and educational dynamics. While Iranian studies (e.g., Taguchi et al., 2009; Rahimi Domakani et al., 2016) have included Iranian participants, more research is needed to understand how the unique challenges and resources in Iranian classrooms impact the way student motivation leads to SRL. Therefore, this study seeks to address the gap by not only investigating the association between the L2 motivational self-system and SRL among Iranian learners but also by considering how their unique context shapes this dynamic.

IV. Methodology

4.1. Participants

A total of 120 EFL students were selected using a simple random sampling procedure to ensure a representative sample and minimize selection bias. The sampling frame consisted of the official enrollment lists for the target population. There were all the 450 junior BA students in English Literature and all the 180 MA students in TEFL at Shiraz University. For each group separately, we generated a list of random numbers using the random number generator function in Excel, sorted the student lists by these numbers, and selected the first 70 BA students (50 females, 20 males) and the first 50 MA students (22 females, 28 males) from this randomized order, yielding a total sample of 72 females and 48 males. The participants comprised these 70 BA and 50 MA students, whose proficiency levels were objectively defined as intermediate (B1) and upper-intermediate (B2), respectively, based on their scores on the Oxford Placement Test (OPT). The mean age of the learners was 23.

Furthermore, a qualitative sample of eight MA TEFL students (five females and three males, aged 21-25) was selected through purposeful sampling to provide deep, insightful perspectives on the research problem. The participants were chosen based on the following pre-defined criteria to ensure they were information-rich cases (Patton, 2015): 1) intermediate or upper-intermediate L2 proficiency (verified by teacher assessment and the Oxford Placement Test), 2) a strong academic record (grades of very good

or excellent), and 3) most critically, being identified as highly motivated by their teachers and through self-assessment, demonstrating high level of self-efficacy and clear goal-orientation.

This strategic focus on motivated learners was essential for the specific analytical objectives of the qualitative phase. As the study aimed to deconstruct the drivers and sustaining mechanisms of L2 motivation, the sampling of learners who actively exhibited this trait was paramount. Following Iwaniec (2014), such learners with metacognitive awareness and experiential depth are better to determine the reason behind their motivation; they provide rich and detailed accounts of their language learning experiences. Consequently, selecting such participants was essential for generating the deep elucidative data required for a nuanced thematic analysis.

4.2. Instrumentation

To determine Iranian L2 self-images (ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self), a comprehensive attitudinal questionnaire established by Taguchi et al. (2009) was employed. Being originally based on a study by Dörnyei et al. (2006) in Hungary, the questionnaire consists of 76 items which measure 13 scales including ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, criterion measures, parental encouragement, instrumentality-promotion, and instrumentality-prevention. The other scales included integrativeness, travel orientation, attitude toward learning English, cultural interest, attitude toward L2 community, ethnocentrism, and fear of assimilation. Assessing learners on a six-point Likert scale, the questionnaire contains values ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (6). The English Learner Questionnaire had acceptable internal consistency (α =.86). Also, all the subscales had adequate internal consistency (Taguchi et al., 2009). Furthermore, the validity of the questionnaire had been confirmed in different studies (Dörnyei et al., 2006; Taguchi et al., 2009; Islam et al., 2013). It is worth mentioning that, for the purpose of this study, only two scales were used as follows:

- Ideal L2 self (6 items): Defined as "the L2-specific facet of one's ideal self" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 106).
- Ought-to L2 self (6 items): Defined as attributes one believes one ought to possess "to avoid possible negative outcomes" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 106).

In the present study, the internal consistency for the two subscales (the ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self) was acceptable (α = .71). The other subscales from the original questionnaire were not utilized for analysis.

Besides, the Online SRL Questionnaire (OSLQ; Barnard, Lan & Paton, 2008; Barnard et al., 2009) was implemented. Although designed for online contexts, the self-regulatory processes it measures (e.g., goal setting, time management) are universal and critically relevant to success in face-to-face language learning. Also, the items were interpreted by the participants as pertaining to their general study habits and classroom learning environment.

The scale consists of 24 items which assesses learners on a five-point Likert scale having values ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). The questionnaire comprises six subscales, including goal setting, task strategies, time management, environment structuring, self-evaluation, as well as help seeking. The OSLQ showed acceptable internal consistency of reliability (α = .90). Also, in terms of subscales, the OSLQ revealed adequate reliability estimates ranged from .85 to .92 (Barnard-Brak et al., 2010). Furthermore, being validated in online, blended learning environments, and academic achievement, the questionnaire has shown adequate psychometric properties (Bernard et al., 2008, 2009).

The six variables used in the survey are defined as follows:

1. Goal setting is setting specific goals to do a task (5 items).
2. Environment structuring refers to the strategies that help learners manage their studying environments (4 items).
3. Task strategies are the methods learners use to perform a specific task (4 items).
4. Time management refers to the strategies that help learners to regulate their studying time (3 items).
5. Help seeking is defined as seeking others' support, including both peers and instructors (4 items).
6. Self-evaluation is learners' evaluation of their own job when doing a task. It can also refer to others' evaluation (i.e., peers) of learner's job (4 items).

Secondly, a qualitative study was conducted using semi-structured interviews. The topics for the interviews were chosen on the basis of the results of the quantitative study (self-images survey as well as OSLQ) and asked in open format in order that the interviewees would be able to freely express their thoughts and opinions.

4.3. Procedures

The data collection was conducted in three phases in which two quantitative surveys were followed by a qualitative interview phase. The first survey, designed to measure ideal and ought-to L2 selves, was administered to 120 EFL students during class time. For this purpose, original English instruments were used. The full survey contained numerous items. In this study, our analysis focused exclusively on 12 specific items (6 pertaining to the ideal L2 self and 6 to the ought-to L2 self). Immediately after the participants completed the first survey, the second questionnaire was distributed. Finally, to gain deeper insight into the quantitative findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted.

In fact, the interviews were held approximately two weeks after the survey phase to allow for the initial data analysis and to develop targeted interview questions based on the survey responses. It is worth mentioning that, from the original pool of 120 survey respondents, a purposive sample of eight participants was selected for interviews. The primary selection criterion was their score profile on the 12 key items, aiming to include learners who demonstrated either a strong ideal L2 self, a strong ought-to L2 self, or a mix of both. Furthermore, within this scoring framework, we selected the individuals who were highly motivated learners and who expressed a willingness to discuss their motivations in depth.

The interviews were conducted in Persian (the participants' L1) to ensure comfortable expression of complex ideas in detail. Each interview lasted from 20 to 30 minutes. With the participants' prior consent, all the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy during transcription and analysis. The participants were ensured that all the data would be kept confidential and just used for research purposes. They were encouraged to freely express their ideas at length.

4.4. Data analysis

Initially, the collected questionnaires data were processed using SPSS to obtain descriptive statistics. Then, to investigate the impact of L2 self-images on the three phases of self-regulation, multiple regression analysis was run. Finally, to find out learners' perception of the impact of L2 self-images on three phases of self-regulation, semi-structured interviews were implemented. They were done to obtain additional information and clarifications on the first research question and to support conclusions from the quantitative data. All the interviews were transcribed and coded thematically, from which a range of key terms contributing to learners' L2 self-images and self-regulation emerged. That is, in the first step, the utterances concerning similar topics were grouped together. The themes emerging in this way were then defined into categories and subcategories and ascribed an appropriate code each. The coding scheme is provided in Table 12. Finally, to be sure that the coding scheme was a reliable one, the interview data were given to another researcher for coding. The researcher's coding scheme showed more than %80 similarity with our coding, assuring that our coding process was a reliable one.

V. Results

5.1. Regression analysis

5.1.1. Regression analysis of the forethought phase

To investigate the impact of EFL learners' L2 self-images on three phases of self-regulation, a series of multiple regression analyses were run. The forethought phase involves preparatory processes like goal-setting and strategic planning. Theoretically, a vivid ideal L2 self—a learner's internalized vision of their desired future proficiency—should provide a strong motivational foundation and clear direction for these activities. In contrast, the ought-to L2 self**,** which is driven by external pressures and obligations, might be less effective in fostering proactive, self-initiated planning.

The summed mean score of items in the forethought phase (goal-setting and environment structuring) was designated as the dependent variable. The results of the multiple regression analysis are shown in Tables 1, 2, and 3.

Table 1. Model summary of standard multiple regression

Model	*R*	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. error of the estimate
1	.382	.146	.132	.871

Note. Predictors: (Constant), ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self

Note. Dependent variable: forethought phase

Table 2. ANOVA results of standard multiple regression

Model		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	*F*	*Sig.*
1	Regression	15.327	2	7.664	10.098	.000
	Residual	89.666	118	0.760		
	Total	104.993	120			

Note. Predictors: (Constant), ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self

Note. Dependent variable: forethought phase

Table 3. Results for Standard Multiple Regression of the Ideal L2 Self and Forethought Phase

Model	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	*T*	*Sig.*
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	3.012	.441	7.664	6.832	.000
Ideal L2 self	.376	.089	.365	4.225	.010
Ought-to L2 self	.042	.095	.039	.442	.659

Note. Dependent variable: forethought phase

As shown in Table 1, The R^2 value was .146, indicating that the model explains 14.6% of the variance in the forethought phase. The ideal L2 self with a standardized beta (β) value of .376 made a significant contribution to the forethought phase (Table 3). The explanatory power of the ideal L2 self on the first phase of self-regulation indicated that EFL learners with more vivid ideal L2 selves are more likely to set goals and make efficient use of environment strategies. However, the ought-to L2 self with a β value of .039 did not make a significant unique contribution (p = .659) to predicting the forethought phase (Table 3).

5.1.2. Regression analysis of the performance phase

The performance phase encompasses the active use of strategies during learning, such as task strategies, time management, and help-seeking. It was hypothesized that the ideal L2 self would be a key motivator here, as striving towards an attractive future self-image should energize effort and promote the persistent application of strategies to overcome challenges during task execution. The ought-to L2 self was expected to have a weaker influence, as its avoidance-based motivation might not sustain the same level of active engagement.

To investigate the impact of EFL learners' L2 self-images on the second phase of self-regulation, the summed mean score of three items (task strategies, time management, and help seeking) was designed as the dependent variable. The results of the multiple regression analysis for the performance phase are shown in Tables 4, 5, and 6.

Table 4. Model summary of standard multiple regression

Model	*R*	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. error of the estimate
1	.459	.211	.197	.871

Note. Predictors: (Constant), ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self

Note. Dependent variable: performance phase

Table 5. ANOVA results of standard multiple regression

Model		Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	*F*	*Sig.*
1	Regression	17.862	2	8.931	15.778	.000
	Residual	66.867	118	0.566		
	Total	84.729	120			

Note. Predictors: (Constant), ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self

Note. Dependent variable: performance phase

Table 6. Results for standard multiple regression of the ideal L2 self and performance phase

Model	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	*T*	*Sig.*
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.601	.438141		6.831	.000
Ideal L2 self	.418	.077	.451	5.429	.000
Ought-to L2 self	.031	.082	.030	.378	.706

Note. Dependent variable: performance phase

As Table 4 indicates, the ideal L2 self was influential on the performance phase, as it explained 21.1% of the variance. Furthermore, with a β value of .418, the ideal L2 self made a significant and unique contribution to predicting the performance phase (Table 6). The unique explanatory power of the ideal L2 self on the performance phase indicated that EFL learners with a more clearly visualized ideal L2 self are more likely to use self-regulated strategies in the performance phase. However, the ought-to L2 self with a β value of .030 did not make a significant unique contribution (p = .706) to predicting the performance phase (Table 6).

5.1.3. Regression analysis of the self-reflection phase

The self-reflection phase involves self-evaluation and attributions about one's performance. Theoretically, the ideal L2 self could serve as a benchmark for evaluation, where learners assess their progress against their internalized standard. However, this phase may also be influenced by a wider range of cognitive and emotional factors, potentially diminishing the unique predictive power of self-images. The ought-to L2 self, associated with fear of failure, might lead to more negative or defensive evaluations.

Finally, for the multiple regression analysis of the third phase of self-regulation, the mean score of items in self-reflection phase was designed as the dependent variable. The results of regression analysis for the self-reflection phase are shown in Tables 7, 8, and 9.

Table 7. Model summary of standard multiple regression

Model	*R*	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Std. error of the estimate
1	.237	.056	.040	1.058

* Predictors: (Constant), ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self

* Dependent variable: self-reflection phase

Table 8. ANOVA results of standard multiple regression

Model	Sum of squares	Df	Mean square	*F*	*Sig.*
1 Regression	7.865	2	3.933	3.514	.030
Residual	132.546	118	1.119		
Total	140.411	120			

Note. Predictors: (Constant), ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self

Note. Dependent variable: self-reflection phase

Table 9. Results for standard multiple regression of ideal L2 self and the self-reflection phase

Model	Unstandardized coefficient		Standardized coefficient	*T*	*Sig.*
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2.755	.536		5.141	.000
Ideal L2 self	.271	.108	.227	2.509	.013
Ought-to L2 self	.025	.116	.019	.216	.829

Note. Dependent variable: self-reflection phase

The multiple regression analysis showed **a** significant impact of the ideal L2 self on the self-reflection phase. The ideal L2 self explained 5.6% of the variance, as shown in Table 7. With a β value of .227, it suggests that the self-evaluation of outcomes by EFL learners can be significantly influenced by their ideal L2 self (Table 9). However, the ought-to L2 self with a β value of .013 did not make a significant unique contribution ($p = .829$) to predicting the self-reflection phase (Table 9).

In sum, the ideal L2 self made a significant and unique contribution to predicting all three phases of self-regulation. However, the ought-to L2 self did not make a significant contribution to predicting the three phases of self-regulation. Considering the impact of the ideal L2 self on the three phases of self-regulation, its strongest impact was on the performance phase ($R^2 = .211$, $F (2, 118) = 15.778$, $^*p < .05$). This was followed by a weaker impact on the forethought phase ($R^2 = .146$, $F (2, 118) = 10.098$, $^*p < .05$), and the weakest impact on the self-reflection phase ($R^2 = .056$, $F (2, 118) = 3.514$, $^*p < .05$).

While the regression analysis demonstrated the significant role of the ideal L2 self, it raised further questions about the nature and manifestation of this motivation in learners' practices. To explore the lived experiences behind these statistical relationships, a qualitative interview phase was designed.

2. Interviews

The interview consisted of two parts. In the first part, the participants were asked if their L2 selves make them be active in terms of three phases of self-regulation. The interview questions were twelve in number and made by researchers based on theoretical underpinning in L2 literature related to the issues under investigation.

This part was designed to quickly gauge whether the participant's ideal L2 self or ought-to L2 self was the driving force behind their use of self-regulation strategies. The questions for the ideal L2 self were framed as:

1. Aya alagheye shakhsiye shoma baraye tasalot be zabane englisi baes mishavad dar yadgiriyetan hadafgozari konid? (Does your personal dream or desire to be a proficient English speaker make you proficient in setting goals for your learning?)
2. Aya angizeye shoma baraye yadgiriye zabane englisi baes mishavad yadashtbardari konid? (Does your internal motivation to learn English make you interested in taking notes?)
3. Aya tasvire zehniye shoma az yek zabanamooze englisiye khoob baes mishavad az teknikhaye modiriate zaban dar yadgiriyetan estefade konid? (Does your vision of yourself as a good English user make you interested in using time management strategies?)
4. Aya alagheye shoma be yadgiriye zaban baes mishavad dar soorat niyaz az baghiye komak begirid? (Does your own wish to master English make you interested in seeking help when you need it?)
5. Aya tasvire zehniye shoma az zaban dar entekhabe mohitetan asar migozarad (masalan enntekhabe mohite aram baraye yadgiri?) (Does your ideal self make you interested in structuring your study environment (e.g., finding a quiet place)?
6. Aya meyle darooniye shoma be yadgiriye zaban baes mishavad pishraftetan ra arzyabi konid? (Does your internal desire to learn make you interested in evaluating your own progress?)

The questions for ought-to L2 self were framed as:

7. Aya fesharhaye birooni be onvane mesal az tarafe khanevade ya emtehanat baes mishavad dar yagiriye zaban hadaf gozari konid? (Do external pressures (e.g., from parents, exams) make you proficient in setting goals?)
8. Aya elzamate kharegi baes mishavad shoma be yadashtbardary alaghemand shavid? (Do external demands make you interested in taking notes?)
9. Aya dalayele birooni be yadgiriye zaban baes mishavad shoma be rahkarhaye modiriyate zaman alaghemand shavid? (Do external reasons for learning English make you interested in time management strategies?)
10. Aya shoma asasan dar yadgiriye zaban bedalile entezarate birooni az baghiye komak mikhahid? (Do you seek help primarily because of external expectations?)
11. Aya shoma batavajo be entezarate digaran mohite yadgiritan ra entekhab mikonid? (Do you structure your environment because of what others expect of you?)

12. Aya shoma bedalile fesharhaye birooni yadgiritan ra arzyabi mikonid? (Do you evaluate your learning because of external pressures?)

The answers to these questions are summarized in the following tables. The questions of the first part of interview are shown in Tables 10 and 11.

Table 10. Keywords on the impact of ideal L2 self on the three phases of self-regulation

Keywords	Yes	No
1. Being proficient in goal setting	8	
2. Being interested in note taking	8	
3. Being interested in time management strategies	8	
4. Being interested in help seeking	8	
5. Being interested in environment structuring	8	
6. Being interested in self-evaluation	8	

Table 11. Keywords on the impact of ought-to L2 self on the three phases of self-regulation

Keywords	Yes	No
1. Being proficient in goal setting		8
2. Being interested in note taking		8
3. Being interested in time management strategies		8
4. Being interested in help seeking		8
5. Being interested in environment structuring		8
6. Being interested in self-evaluation		8

The tables show that all participants answered "Yes" to the Ideal-self questions and "No" to the Ought-to-self questions. As Table 10 indicates, all eight participants claimed that their internal desire to learn L2 made them be active in terms of three phases of self-regulation; however, their external desire to learn the L2 had no impact on their self-regulation phases (Table 11).

In the second part of the interview, the participants were asked how their internal desire impacted their self-regulation phases. Accordingly, some extracts of the participants were provided and followed by the keywords taken from Dörnyei (2009) and Zimmerman (1998) and are shown in Table 12.

Table 12. Coding scheme of L2 self-images and self-regulation

ideal L2 self	Internal desires and wishes to learn an L2, Being a proficient L2 user
ought-to L2 self	External desires such as parents, peers, or environment to learn the L2
Three phases of self-regulation	Phase 1 (forethought phase): Goal setting: setting daily, weekly, or monthly goals for studying English; Environment structuring: studying in a comfortable and quiet place. Phase 2 (performance phase): Task strategies: how does one connect the materials learned; Help seeking: asking for help from instructor or peers; Time management: how much one allocate the time for studying English. Phase 3 (self-reflection phase): Self-evaluation: continuously evaluating ones' learning outcomes.

This part was designed to get qualitative data on *how* the Ideal L2 self specifically influenced each phase of self-regulation. The researchers used the keywords from the coding scheme (Table 12) to analyze the responses. The questions for this part were framed as:

Forethought phase:

1. **Goal setting:** Shoma onvan kardid ke dar yadgiriye zaban az hadafgozari estefade mikonid. Mitoonid begid chetor? Aya ahdafe roozane, haftegi, ya bolanmodat darid? Chera? ("You mentioned your desire to learn English makes you set goals. Can you tell me *how* you do that? What kind of goals do you set (daily, weekly, long-term) and why?)

2. Environment structuring: Chetor alagheye shoma be englisi makane motaleetan ra tahte tasir gharar midahad? Makane ideale shoma chegoone ast? (How does your interest in English influence *where* and *how* you choose to study? Can you describe your ideal study environment?)

Performance phase:

3. Task strategies: Alagheye shoma be yadgiriye englisi chetor bar raveshe motalee va yadgiriye matalabe jaded tasir migozarad? Aya mitavanid rahkarhaye khasi ke estefade mikonid masalan yadashtbardri ya rasme nemoodar ra tosif konid? (How does your passion for learning English affect the way you study and learn new material? Can you describe any specific strategies you use, like note-taking or making diagrams?)

4. Help seeking: Hadafe shoma baraye residan be tasalot dar zaban chetor baes mishavad az digaran komak begirid? Az che kasani komak mikhahid (hamsalan, moaleman, anlain) chera? (How does your goal of becoming proficient lead you to seek help? Who do you ask for help (peers, teachers, online) and why?)

5. Time management: alagheye shoma be yadgiriye zaban chetor modiriyate zamanetan baraye motalee ra tahte tasir gharar midahad? Aya zamanbandiye sabeti darid? (How does your motivation to learn English impact how you manage your time for studying? Do you have a fixed schedule?)

Self-reflection phase

6. Self-Evaluation: Tamayole darooniye shoma be yadgiri chetor baese arzyabiye pishraftetan mishavad? Che raveshhaye khasi baraye baresiye mizane yadgiriyetan estefade mikonid (Khodazmaie, kholasenevisi, bahs ba hamkelasihayetan? (How does your internal desire to learn make you evaluate your progress? What specific methods do you use to check how much you've earned (e.g., self-testing, summarizing, discussing with classmates)?)

Regarding the forethought phase, all of the students claimed that to be a proficient L2 user, they set goals; in this way they can manage their studying time more efficiently which leads them to better learning. Mina stated that she sets not only *short-term goals* but also *long-term ones*. She explained:

My interest in learning English definitely makes me *set short-term goals* especially *daily* or *weekly*. But, I also *set long-term standards* for my last term examinations. I admit that both *goals* are important to me but *long-term goals* are of higher importance since they shape the framework of the ongoing materials to be learned.

Internal desires to learn an L2, forethought phase, goal setting

In addition, Elahe reported that to *master the course materials*, she *plans daily*. She explained: "having *a daily plan* for my English courses gives me great enjoyment as well as a sense of confidence. However, sometimes due to lack of time, I decide to *plan weekly*". She also stated that "having a *specific plan* for studying helps me lower my anxiety and leads me to *learn the materials better.*

Being a proficient L2 user, forethought phase, goal setting

Also, most of the students claimed that to be a proficient L2 user, the environment in which they are studying English is very important to them. Mina reported:

Going out of my comfort zone makes me *distracted* so I choose the *most comfortable place* for studying English. I am extremely *sensitive to noise*. It is the *most distraction* for me. To be honest, I feel the *most comfort* at my desk. And at times I have to choose another place, I rarely feel *at ease*.

Forethought phase, environment structuring

Regarding the performance phase, the participants mentioned that *their interest and passion towards learning English* made them be highly active in terms of task strategies. Most of the students explained that they used note taking strategy to *master the course content.* Mina explained that she divided the subjects learned into *different categories and sub categories* and she used *tree diagrams* to *make connections between the materials learned.* Also, Bahar stated:

Note taking is the most efficient way helping me *learn the materials better*. Sometimes, it may take me a lot of time, but it is really enjoyable since it makes the *connection between the learned materials stronger*.

Internal desire to learn an L2, being a proficient L2 user, performance phase, task strategies

Besides, most students reported that their desire to be a proficient L2 user definitely leads them to help seeking strategies. Mina mentioned that at times she confronts any *trouble at understanding* the materials, she *asks* ***for*** *help* from other students. She likes to *share her ideas* with other students since she thinks it makes their relationship stronger. She also mentioned: "at times I can't get the answer, I don't hesitate to *ask my professors*. *Asking* ***for*** *help* from them as a *more knowledgeable source* gives me a sense of motivation and self-confidence."

Being a proficient L2 user, performance phase, help seeking

While Elahe reported that to *master the course materials*, she doesn't like to ask **for** help from her friends or professors as the first choice since she uses a very different but efficient way. She explained:

At times I don't get the point, I try to search **online** since it is the fastest and the most precise way. Trying to find the answer by myself, I'm filled with a sense of motivation and pleasure as well.

She also claimed that "just when I could not find the answer **online**, I *go to my friends and professors* as the last resort."

Being a proficient L2 user, performance phase, help-seeking

When the researcher asked the participants if their internal desire to learn an L2 made them allocate their time for studying English, most of the students had different views. Mina and Bahar reported that their desire to learn English makes them *allocate the same time every day*. Bahar stated that "I'm really *interested in English*. So, why not *devoting* ***some*** *time* to it? I choose the *same time* since I can concentrate more." While Elahe explained that her *desire in learning an L2* makes her *allocate the time* for studying *weekly*. In contrast, Samira mentioned that she doesn't allocate the same time every day. Most of the **time**, she ***allocate*** *the time monthly*. As she said: "I am not used to studying the materials the same day I learn them. I collect a part of them and when I feel that yeah it's the time, I go to them."

Internal desire to learn an L2, performance phase, time management

Finally, when the students were asked if their desire to learn the L2 makes them evaluate their learning, all of the students responded yes. They explained that they *summarize the materials* learned or *communicate* with other students to find out *how much they have learned*. For example, Mina noted: "*My passion to learn English* definitely leads me to *evaluate what I've learned*." She explained: "First of all, I *summarize* the learned materials. Secondly, I *share my ideas* with my classmates. We *explain the materials* for each other to ensure that we have *learned them completely*."

Internal desire to learn an L2, self-reflection phase, self-evaluation

Also, Elahe mentioned:

To *master the course materials*, I *summarize* what I have learned. However, most of the time, I *communicate with my classmates* to *evaluate the materials learned*. Sometimes, we divide into small groups and try to *share our ideas*. I think it is the most efficient way to *evaluate my learning*.

Being a proficient L2 user, self-reflection phase, self-evaluation

However, other students' desire to learn English seemed to make them evaluate their learning in a different way. For example, Samane explained that in addition to *communicating with others*, she evaluates her understanding by *testing*. Also, Bahar stated: "First of all, I *review my notes*. Secondly, I take practice *tests* to evaluate *how much I have learned*."

Self-reflection phase, self-evaluation

In conclusion, the thematic analysis of the interview data provides crucial explanatory depth and contextual understanding to the quantitative results. The regression models successfully identified the *what*: the ideal L2 self is a statistically significant predictor of self-regulation across all three phases, with its influence being strongest during performance and weakest during reflection phase, while the ought-to L2 self showed no predictive utility. The interviews powerfully illuminate the *why* and *how* behind these patterns. Participants consistently described their vivid ideal L2 self—their internal desire to be a proficient user—as the primary force motivating their self-regulatory practices. This vision encourages learners to set precise short- and long-term goals, maintain a flexible and enjoyable repertoire of strategies, and consistently evaluate their progress through personalized methods. Most strikingly, the interviews confirm the quantitative null finding, with participants universally rejecting external pressures as a meaningful influence on their learning processes. The qualitative findings, therefore, do more than just complement the quantitative results; they breathe life into them. By revealing the rich and deeply personal narratives behind the statistics, the interviews present a coherent picture of self-regulation. This synthesis portrays self-regulation as a self-directed process oriented toward future goals.

VI. Discussion

Our first research question aimed to determine how self-related beliefs impact three different phases of self-regulation. The results of a multiple regression analysis showed that the ideal L2 self affects all the three phases of self-regulation. This finding is in line with the previous studies in the field of SLA (Csizér & Kormos, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2014; Rahimi Domakani et. al, 2016; Rashidi & Haji Mohammmadi, 2020).

Thus, Ideal L2 self, as a powerful self-related belief, was a prerequisite for the three different phases of self-regulation.

However, in the case of ought-to L2 self, no significant impact on self-regulation phases was observed. This finding is in accord with the earlier studies (Iwaniec, 2014; Kim & Kim, 2014; Rahimi Domakani et al., 2016; Rashidi & Haji Mohammmadi, 2020; Vafakhah, Maftoon, & Sayyari, 2024), suggesting that those learners with more actualized image of their desired L2 self would be more prone to self-regulate. In contrast, Vafakhah et al. (2024) found positive correlations between ought-to L2 self and self-regulatory strategies. These contradictory results can be because of the difference of sampling as well as data analysis between the two studies. Specifically, Vafakhah et al. (2024) had a small sample size (60 EFL intermediate learners in the age range of 12-15); it was a quantitative study.

It is noteworthy that, according to Kim and Kim (2014), the influence of ideal L2 self on self-regulatory phases can be explained with regard to the preactional, actional, and postactional phases of the process model of L2 motivation proposed by Dörnyei and Otté (1998). In the first phase of L2 motivation model (i.e., preactional), motivation is needed to be established which then affects the goals and tasks learners pursue (Dörnyei, 2005). In the lens of L2 motivational self-system, the created ideal L2 self encourages learners to initiate self-regulation during their L2 learning. That is, learners set goals and choose environments optimal for successful L2 learning, as they wish to actualize their ideal L2 self. In this regard, the idealized L2 self-image can be helpful for establishing a concrete goal (Kim & Kim, 2014). Also, possible selves have been viewed as a good starting point for self-regulation (Borkowski & Thorpe, 1994). So, a highly salient ideal L2 self is considered as a motivational factor which can elicit self-regulation in L2 learning.

After self-regulation is initiated, the actional phase has a significant role in not only maintaining but protecting the learning process when learners face a large number of distracting factors (Dörnyei, 2005). A sustained ideal L2 self would help learners to maintain their focus on studying when they are exposed to distracting influences. That is, in the second phase of self-regulation, learners with stronger ideal selves are more active in managing their studying time, choosing the appropriate task strategies, and asking for help from others. Finally, in the last phase, learners evaluate how well materials are learned. Therefore, learners with better-defined ideal selves are supposed to be much stronger at evaluating their learning outcomes.

In the current research, the strong impact of ideal L2 self was seen on the performance phase, followed by the forethought and self-reflection phases. However, ought-to L2 self showed no significant impact on self-regulation phases. These findings can be explained in three ways.

Firstly, the strong impact of ideal L2 self on the performance phase (which includes task strategies, help seeking, and time management) is mostly because of the nature of the task itself, as tasks have goals in themselves, and, as mentioned before, L2 self-images include goals. This finding is in accord with Haji Mohammadi (2016). Also, from a pedagogical perspective, the significant role of tasks on L2 motivational self-system can be seen in Nguyễn, Phạm, and Nguyễn (2022) who found that task-based instruction can be effective in increasing L2 motivational self-system in online EFL speaking classes.

However, it is worth mentioning that the results contrast with those of Kim and Kim (2014), as they found the explanatory power of ideal L2 self on the forethought phase was slightly more than the performance phase. This contradiction is due to the contextual differences. It seems that, first and foremost, Korean L2 selves were affected by their goal setting and environment structuring which was followed by task strategies, help seeking, and time management strategies. However, for Iranian EFL learners, ideal L2 self was mostly affected by their task strategies, help seeking, and time management strategies which was followed by goal setting and environment structuring.

Secondly, ideal L2 self influenced the forethought phase less than the performance phase but more than self-reflection phase. Again, this impact can be explained by the nature of goals since forethought phase includes goal setting strategies (Iwaniec, 2014). Also, the considerable role of goal setting on ideal L2 self was seen in Mikami's study (2023), as he found that goal setting strategies significantly affected ideal L2 self. This suggests that, in order to facilitate ideal L2 self, goal-setting strategies need to be incorporated in classroom activities.

Finally, the impact of ideal L2 self on the self-reflection phase was weaker, which is in line with Kim and Kim (2014). Their explanation was that self-reflection phase involves self-evaluation, and evaluating

the outcomes can be carried out partly based on goals. The goals are derived from the ideal L2 self which is concerned with one's own vision of oneself rather than the consideration of others (Kim & Kim, 2014). However, self-evaluation in the self-reflection phase includes comparison with others. So, the effect is less powerful compared to the performance and forethought phases.

Furthermore, the interview results provided support for our quantitative findings. All the learners reported that actualizing a desired self-image led them to a highly self-regulated phase. They reported that this desire made them be active in all the three phases of self-regulation. Those with a more vivid ideal L2 self were more prone to set regular goals, make use of task strategies, choose a comfortable place for studying and set aside a specific time for studying English. They were also interested in asking for help from their peers or teachers and evaluating their learning frequently. The results are in line with the findings of Rashidi and Haji Mohammadi (2020). However, they all claimed that ought-to L2 self was not a driving force for triggering their self-regulation phases.

While this study focused on the individual dimension of self-regulation, the frequent mention of seeking help from peers and teachers in the interview data points to the social embeddedness of these processes. This suggests a valuable avenue for future research, that is, to move beyond the individual and investigate the role of co-regulation and socially shared regulation in relation to L2 motivational selves. Exploring how learners jointly construct regulatory strategies (co-regulation) or how groups establish shared goals and monitor their progress together (socially shared regulation) could provide a more holistic understanding of how self-related beliefs function within the social dynamics of the classroom.

VII. Conclusion and implications

In this mixed-method study, we investigated the impact of L2 self-images on different phases of self-regulation. Our central finding, which directly addresses our research question, is that the ideal L2 self is a fundamental prerequisite for all the three phases of self-regulation, whereas the ought-to L2 self has no significant impact. This conclusion is robustly supported by both our multiple regression analysis and interview data.

This insight carries significant pedagogical weight. Since the ideal L2 self is a key predictor of success, a primary implication is that L2 teachers should work to enhance learners' vision of their idealized future selves. This can be achieved through several methods. Teachers can encourage learners to build self-confidence and set explicit, attainable goals. They can also focus on improving learners' attitudes towards L2 learning. Finally, devising classroom activities that boost imagery abilities can help learners develop a strong personal language vision. These strategies make the learning process less demanding and more pleasant (Dörnyei, 2009). Strengthening these factors ultimately promotes proficiency, which, in turn, reinforces the ideal L2 self (Rahimi Domakani et al., 2016).

Although this study offers valuable insights into second language acquisition, it is not without limitations. First, while a mixed-methods approach was employed, the study could have been strengthened by incorporating multi-method data sources such as task performances, video recordings, field notes, and analyses of nonverbal communication to provide a more holistic understanding. Second, the investigation was limited to the relationship between L2 self-images and phases of self-regulation; future research should explore the role of other critical factors, such as emotions. Finally, the study focused primarily on a socio-cognitive model of self-regulation, leaving the other aspects of regulation such as co-regulation and socially shared regulation unexamined. These areas present significant opportunities for future inquiry.

In conclusion, by demonstrating the unique motivational power of the ideal L2 self over the ought-to self, this study confirms that fostering a learner's positive future self-image is not merely beneficial but is, in fact, a critical prerequisite for successful self-regulation in language learning.

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