Teng and Zhang,
Applied Language Sciences, 2025, *1*, 250101
https://doi.org/10.6553/ALS.250101

RESEARCH Open Access

Understanding multilingual self for language minority students from Asia and Europe

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Abstract

Despite the extant literature, studies on how multilingual learners' motivations for L1, L2, and L3 co-evolve and shape a multilingual self is scant. Drawing on the L2 Motivational Self System and dynamic–ecological perspectives, we make an attempt to fill this research gap. We conceptualize motivation as emergent from interactions among ideal/ought-to selves, lived experiences, and contextual affordances. Interviews with 15 language-minority learners from Thailand, Europe, and Hong Kong reveal coupled motivational dynamics: L2 English often forms a stable attractor in high-capital ecologies (e.g., Hong Kong), while L3 (Japanese/Chinese) tends to remain vulnerable unless identity relevance, utility, and participation intensify. In Thailand, rising instrumental value of Chinese perturbs Ought-to–dominated English trajectories, enabling L3 stabilization. European learners in China face participation constraints that keep L3 Chinese peripheral despite immersion, whereas typological proximity (e.g., English–French) supports co-stability via metalinguistic transfer. We propose the Multilingual Self as a Coupled Attractor System, detailing stability gradients and capital/linguistic/participation couplings, and offer suggestions for pedagogical interventions to deepen vulnerable basins and sustain balanced multilingual development.

Keywords: Multilingual self, motivation, identity, multilingual learning

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1. Introduction

Being someone who speaks more than one language seems to many a distinctive privilege. Contrary to this lay view assuming that most people usually speak only their mother tongue, being multilingual or "potentially multilingual by nature" is in fact a desired "state of linguistic competence" (Hammarberg, 2009, p. 2). Multilingual education is thus expected to enhance the linguistic and intercultural competence of multilingual learners (Liu, 2022; Teng & Wang, 2020). However, complexity of first language (L1), second language (L2), and third language (L3) motivational systems may lead to changes related to a multilingual self (Bui et al., 2018; Henry & Thorsen, 2018). Investigations into multilingual learners' interaction of L1, L2, and L3 motivation are thus of significant research value (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Concomitantly, breakthroughs in motivation theory or framework offer new angles or call for new needs for reconceptualizing different dimensions of motivation.

In early studies, researchers (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005) proposed the L2 Motivational Self System, a starting point of perceiving motivation as a dynamic notion rather than a static one. Motivation was then widely perceived as researching learners' ideal selves (i.e., learners' imaginings of using that language in a future situation), their ought-to selves (i.e., learners' responsibility to use that language), and their positive or negative language learning experiences. An interplay between language learners' selves and language learning experiences may provide insights into the dynamics of language learning motivation (Alamer & Alrabai, 2023; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Henry, 2023). The present study examines the phenomena of L1, L2, and L3 learning, as well as the motivational dynamics underlying L2 and L3 acquisition, as complex, interconnected systems situated within multilingual education. Building on dynamic and ecological perspectives (Ushioda, 2020; Henry, 2023), we view multilingual motivation as emergent from interactions among learners' multilingual experiences, contexts, and identities. Accordingly, we propose a conceptual framework of the multilingual self to capture the evolving nature of L1–L2–L3 motivational forces, integrating ideal/ought-to self-guides with learners' lived experiences and translanguaging practices, that can be applied to multilingual learning design and pedagogy.

2. Literature review

2.1 Motivation

The notion of motivation for multilingual learning is receiving increasing attention. In some traditions, motivation is defined as a unitary, fixed, and ahistorical trait that empowers a learner to act (Reeve, 2024). In multilingual learning, however, motivation is generally described as a dynamic process of arousing, directing, and sustaining behavior for learning different languages (Teng & Wang, 2020). A key element in researching motivation is establishing how contextual and situational factors influence learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, which, in turn, affects their engagement and persistence (Noels, 2001; Teng, 2025). Learners who study a language out of love or passion demonstrate intrinsic motivation and are more likely to internalize learning objectives as part of their language learning process. In contrast, learners who study languages to pass

exams, secure employment, or meet parental expectations may be extrinsically motivated, as their motivation stems from external pressures. Noels et al. (2001) conceptualized language learning motivation as a continuum, with amotivation at one pole (e.g., "I am not motivated to learn this language because I don't like it") and intrinsic motivation at the other (e.g., "I am motivated to learn this language because I like it"), with different forms of extrinsic motivation in between. When learners can self-regulate their motivation, their intrinsic motivation may be strengthened (Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Motivation is a central aspect of multilingual education. In early studies, motivation was described as comprising learners' attitudes, behaviors, and desires to learn a language (e.g., Gardner, 2010). Relatedly, two broad types of motivation were identified: instrumental and integrative (Dörnyei, 2009). For students who wish to become successful language users, integrativeness may align with their ideal self, whereas instrumental motivation parallels extrinsic motivation. However, the sustained process of motivational engagement is not fully captured by the instrumental–integrative distinction. To address this, Dörnyei et al. (2015) proposed directed motivational currents (DMCs), defined as "a prolonged process of engagement in a series of tasks which are rewarding primarily because they transport the individual towards a highly valued end" (p. 98). In a DMC, learners' individual learning activities become integrated components of a superordinate, complex motivational structure. Once set in motion, learners are propelled toward a goal or vision, akin to a current that carries along everything entering its flow. Two defining features of DMCs are their directedness and the durability of their self-propelling motivational processes, which enrich our understanding of intrinsic motivation.

A common finding across the studies reviewed above is that motivation is dynamic and situated. For example, Ushioda (2020) emphasized the learning context as learners' continuous pursuit of personal meaning-making. Social settings reshape learners' understandings of contexts and their motivations for language learning. In an empirical study, Mercer (2011) showed that the dynamics of learners' motivation are connected to their engagement across different contexts. Although the dynamic nature of motivation in multilingual learning, including L2 motivation and L3 motivation (Bui et al., 2018; Bui & Teng, 2021), has been explored, dual motivation, that is, the mutual influences involved in learning two languages simultaneously, has not been sufficiently examined in a global context. Given the unique status of English and the differing motivations for learning a second versus a third language, L2 and L3 motivational systems may be especially dynamic. Despite growing recognition of motivational dynamics, research remains limited, particularly longitudinal studies that track L2 and L3 motivational trajectories.

2.2 Multilingual self

Students learning both an L2 and an L3 may share a unifying vision of becoming multilingual. In this sense, motivation for multilingual learners can function as a "task force that effectively promotes positive attitudes about multilingualism" (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014, p. 83). When learners enter motivational currents—a state in which they are absorbed in and enjoy learning activities—they are more likely to sustain engagement in a particular kind of learning (Dörnyei et al., 2015). Any account of

motivation is incomplete without considering the visionary qualities and motivational properties that learners hold while pursuing both an L2 and an L3. For instance, learners may form a future-oriented image of themselves as successful speakers of both languages. This image evolves into an ideal self that they aspire to and that becomes part of their core identity (Teng & Bui, 2020). In such contexts, the ideal self serves as an active self-representation, closely linked to learners' lived language learning experiences. Learners who attach greater importance to these motivational qualities tend to sustain their efforts and invest more in learning. While learners may readily acquire motivation, motivation for L2 and L3 learning can diverge, and not all forms of motivation generate powerful or enduring pathways of learning behavior. Thus, both the shared visionary qualities across L2 and L3 learning and the differences in what motivates learners for each language can shape self-concordant goals and proximal subgoals, key considerations for a fuller account of motivational dynamics in multilingual learning.

Furthermore, the ideal language self—imagining oneself using the language in future contexts, and the ought-to language self, the desire to meet others' expectations, are mediated by learners' actual experiences. Because learners encounter different circumstances across L1, L2, and L3 learning, their ideal and ought-to selves for each language may differ, reflecting the dynamic nature of multilingual motivation. Hajar (2024) investigated the motivations and overarching visions of internally displaced Syrians in Afrin, on the Syrian–Turkish border, who were learning Turkish as an additional language (L3 or L4). Drawing on participants' written narratives and two waves of individual online semi-structured interviews, the study found a spectrum of motives. These ranged from pragmatic aims, such as improving employment prospects in Afrin, to future-oriented aspirations, including envisioning themselves studying or working at Turkish universities and integrating into Turkish society. Zhang (2025) examines how multilingual identity shapes cross-cultural adaptation by tracing the identity construction and adjustment strategies of three multilinguals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds living in Hong Kong. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, fieldnotes, and journals, the study finds that none aimed for full integration into the host society; instead, they adapted effectively while affirming distinct multilingual selves. A cross-case analysis shows that all three exercised agency, leveraging their multilingual repertoires and intercultural communicative competence to navigate interactions with the local community. Wang and Wang (2024) examined 50 Chinese undergraduates majoring in two foreign languages. Using Q methodology grounded in the L2 Motivational Self System, they explored the variety of motivation types and cross-linguistic differences in multilingual motivation. The findings indicate that a multilingual self concept often initiates students' choice of dual-language majors. Importantly, the ought-to self outweighed the ideal self in shaping motivation. Moreover, students specializing in different L3s displayed distinct motivational profiles. As Dörnyei (2009) suggests, when learners' ideal selves become stable, feasible, and elaborated, and are balanced by their ought-to selves, motivation during learning is enhanced. Since language learning extends beyond the classroom into social contexts, multilingual motivation becomes even more dynamic and complex, shaped by contextual affordances for using the target language. The ideal self, the ought-to self, and the

learning experience are not isolated constructs but closely interrelated. In other words, learners' envisioned future language use and their current obligations influence, and are influenced by, their situated learning processes.

2.3 The present study

The complex relationship between L1, L2, and L3 was the basis for exploring multilingual self for language minority students, which remains underexplored. More in-depth qualitative studies can complement knowledge in this area. The present study explored Asian and European learners' developmental trajectories of motivations in learning L1, L2, and L3 and how the motivational dynamics were formed with relation to a possible multilingual self. This study focused on two research questions:

(1) Do the learners demonstrate a multilingual self during multilingual learning?
(2) Is there a change of focus within the multilingual self?
(3) How do the learners respond to the multilingual self?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The sample of participants included five students from Thailand, and five students from Europe, and five students from Hong Kong. The first language for the Thai learners were Thai, and English and Chinese were additional languages. The first language for the European learners was either English, Greece, or German, and Chinese as an additional language. The first language for the Hong Kong students was Cantonese Chinese, and English and Japanese were additional languages. The Thai learners were studying in mainland China. The European participants were either working in mainland China or studying in Hong Kong. The Hong Kong learners were studying in Hong Kong. The participants speak a language at home other than the dominant language of a society. They were thus defined as language minority learners who have multilingual learning experiences. The following table delineates the participants' information. All names were pseudonym names.

Table 1. Profiles of the participants

Regions	Name	Gender	L1	L2	L3	Other languages	Occupation
Europe	William	Male	English	French	Chinese	--	EFL teacher in China
	Carolyn	Female	German	English	Japanese	Latin, French, Chinese	PhD Candidate in Hong Kong
	Adreian	Male	Greek	English	French	Dutch, Italian,	PhD Candidate in Hong Kong
	Fiona	Female	English	French	Chinese	--	EFL teacher in China
	Sam	Male	English	French	Chinese	--	EFL teacher in China
Asia	Kawaek	Female	Thai	English	Chinese	--	Student in China
	Achara	Female	Thai	English	Chinese	Japanese	Student in China
	Aat	Male	Thai	English	Chinese	--	Student in China

Dungkmol	Female	Thai	English	Chinese	--	Student in China
Aurak	Male	Thai	English	Chinese		Student in China
Wong	Male	Cantone	English	Japanese	--	Student in Hong Kong
Sue	Female	Cantone	English	Japanese	--	Student in Hong Kong
Chan	Male	Cantone	English	Japanese	Korean	Student in Hong Kong
Lee	Female	Cantone	English	Japanese	--	Student in Hong Kong
Yip	Female	Cantone	English	Japanese	--	Student in Hong Kong

3.2 Data collection

The main method for data collection in the present study is through interviews, which is a reliable method for generating in-depth explanations of and capturing the dynamics of learners' multilingual self. Through interviews, researchers can also collect learners' life stories in a comprehensive way. In addition, interviews are effective at exploring learners' individuality and obtaining insights into the dynamic interactions between learners and their context (Ushioda, 2020). In the present study, three rounds of interviews were conducted. The first round of interviews focused on the family background, the first, second, and third languages that the learners spoke, and the motivations for learning each language. The second interview focused on learners' motivation change after learning different languages. The second interview also explored learners' life stories in connection to learning each language. The third interview focused on overall reflection on the language learning experiences and their imagined future life related to the use of languages. All interviews were semi-structured. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. During the interviews, if participants mentioned incidents related to their ideal or ought-to selves, they were encouraged to elaborate more on the incidents. The language for the interviews was in English.

3.3 Data analysis

The transcribed data was coded in an iterative way. First, data was analysed in a grounded manner. This could help identify learners' motivations for learning different languages at different stages. Second, the analysed data was then analysed from different aspects of motivations, i.e., ought-to self, ideal self, and language learning experiences under the bigger categories of languages, i.e., L1, L2 and L3. Third, the different category data was compared and subsequently cross examined to explore the complexity of language learning motivations. Fourth, the interviewees also consulted the analysed data to avoid skewed understanding and interpretations of the data. Finally, the analysed data were presented based on the emerging themes of the participants.

4. Results

4.1 Existence of a Multilingual Self

The existence of a multilingual self was related to the possible interplay of L1, L2, and L3.

L1 influence on L2 and L3

The Thai learners labeled themselves as lacking instrumental motivation and being

reluctant to learn and practise Chinese (Teng & Bui, 2020). Our data suggest that the Thai learners found Chinese language as an instrumentally important language for them. Learning Chinese as an additional L3 is a means of obtaining upward mobility. Aurak, one Thai learner, used his job-seeking experiences to highlight the importance of learning Chinese:

> *For me, Chinese is one of the most important languages in Thailand. For example, when I looked a job in international company, surely they would ask me, "Can you speak English?" Then they would ask me, "Can you speak Chinese?" Since I said, "only a little bit." Then they said, "Sorry, we are looking for somebody who are good in Chinese." It is all those experiences that made me think Chinese language is a very important additional language though it is really a difficult language as we have become accustomed to first language system and influenced by second language structures. (Aurak, interview 1)*

The local employment agency in Thailand prefers candidates with a certain level of knowledge of Chinese language and culture. As learners who are learning Chinese as a third language, Anurak seemed to be at a considerable disadvantage, as learning a third language had been greatly influenced by the first and second language learning system. This could be explained as L1 negative influence on L3. However, due to a need for instrumental resources, Anurak aligned with the power of the Chinese language and highlighted the importance of Chinese language for success in hunting jobs.

The Hong Kong learners expressed similarities between Chinese and Japanese. The similar linguistic systems led to their comfort in learning Japanese as an L3. For instance, both Yip and Wong mentioned in the interview that "Japanese is quite similar to Chinese. It should be easier to learn Japanese than English." Wong further mentioned the proximity of Japanese culture to Chinese culture. Related to this, he said,

> *It is always an enjoyment to learn Japanese as it makes me have a familiar feeling because I am a Japanese Manga fan" (Interview 1).*

Based on the above quote, L1 Chinese intrigues the Chinese learners to be curious about the L3 Japanese. Chinese assists in encouraging Wong to look deeper into Japanese language and culture. The perceived similarity between the two languages helped the learners gain momentum in building an L3 self (Bui & Teng, 2021). In this case, Chinese aided a sense of achievement, a feeling that learners may regard as desirable for an L3 self. To some extent, L1 could positively influence L3 motivation.

The European learners expressed the difficulties in learning Chinese in the Chinese-speaking context. This could be described as a type of diasporic experience, because being an L1 English native speaker has created a power to involve Chinese students in an English-speaking ideology. The separation of L1 English motivation and L3 Chinese motivation was reflected in our data. Sam said:

> *Yes, it was odd. When we want to speak Chinese to Chinese students, they want to*

> *practice English with us. It was never easy to learn Chinese in China because there would always be a contradiction between our motivation to learn Chinese and Chinese learners' craze to learn English. There always seems to be invisible ideological separation. Then in China, I don't see any motivation to learn Chinese. (Sam, interview 2)*

Language learners' investment in the target language was dependent on the perception of symbolic and material resources (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). Such resources in turn strengthen the value of cultural capital (Norton, 2000). Social otherness characterizes the Chinese language learning practices of European learners in China. It means the challenges in being involved in target language practices. It was in this context that European learners became less motivated in learning Chinese because their culture and language were more valued by the mainstream.

L2 influence on L3 motivation

If two languages are perceived by the learners as typologically different, contradictory motive can arise. The Hong Kong learners reported negative influence from their L2 English on their L3 Japanese. The only positive influence was the English loanwords, which could facilitate L3 learning. For example, Chan reported,

> *Learning English influenced my Japanese learning. I think quite big influence. I don't think learning English is helpful for Japanese learning. Maybe only some loanwords. I had a difficult time in adjusting myself to the differences between Japanese and English. (Chan, interview 3)*

In the above quote, Chan realized an obvious connection between L2 and L3 learning systems. The difference between L2 and L3 became a source of contradiction between different language learning systems. The L2 learning experiences inhibited Chan's further efforts in L3 learning. The only positive influence was from the English loanwords in Japanese. However, such influence was not sufficient for bridging the gap between L2 and L3 motivational systems.

The Thai learners also reported the negative influence from L2 to L3. For example, Aat mentioned the significant difference between L2 English and L3 Chinese. He reported:

> *I am always very confused about the English structures and Chinese structures. It may be because my English is not so good. Then suddenly I had to learn Chinese. When the two languages were so different, I became even more confused. I wanted to learn the two languages well, but it turned out to be I am weak at the two languages. (Aat, interview 1)*

According to the above quote, Aat was comparing the L3 language system with the previous L2 system in mind. In doing so, Aat developed an estimation of the difficulties in simultaneously learning L2 and L3. Other Thai learners, e.g., Aurak, Dungkmol, also mentioned the negative influence of their previous L2 learning system on learning L3

because their previously exposed L2 systems were significantly different from the L3 systems. The differences between L2 and L3 learning systems stimulated Aurak to perceive the L3 as more "more difficult" and thus "need more efforts than L2 learning" (Aurak, reflective report).

The European learners reported that learning L2 would promote the vitality of the L3 self. Learning L2 would fuel a positive attitude towards the L3. Adrian expressed a balanced distribution of L2 and L3 motivational forces within him. Adrian reported:

> *Languages sometimes help each other. In my case, English helped me learn French. There are some differences in terms of grammar, pronunciation, and sentence formation between English and French. I will try to know in what way the two languages are similar. This method helps me learn more French words. (Adrian, interview 2)*

In the above quote, L2 and L3 selves could harmoniously coexist to generate a multilingual self in a complex motivational system. The rewarding learning experiences in L2 could foster positive language learning motivations for L3. The comparison and contrast between L2 and L3 learning experiences facilitated one's L3 motivation. Adrian was clearly aware of the different ways how the two languages (English and French) were learned (and taught), which fed into his coexistence of multilingual self.

An interesting finding is that the perceived dissimilarity of L2 and L3 can also motivate some of the participants to learn an L3, even though the L3 is considered more difficult than the L2. For example, Fiona and William reported an instrumental need for L3 Chinese learning. They did not attribute demotivation to their current perceptions of L2 French, but they did make comparisons between the two languages. They said they would have never been interested in learning Chinese, and staying in China should be temporary and they would consider leaving it after the contract and Chinese was not useful for them. In particular, William described Chinese as "more complicated in terms of language structures and learning is more difficult" and French "less complicated in terms of words and structures and is easier to learn" (William, interview 1). This is the evidence that Willam already had an initial awareness that learning L3 Chinese should be more difficult than L2 French as he believed that L2 is relatively easier to approach than L3. However, William later reported that "the Chinese language is actually easier to acquire because learning French helps me reflect on the Chinese grammatical system, which is easier" (William, interview 3)

L3 influence on L2 motivation

The Hong Kong learners exhibited a clear awareness of their linguistic repertoire related to their L2 and L3. Such an awareness allowed them to compare the linguistic influences between the two languages. For example, Sue stated the influence of L3 on L2 pronunciation:

> *After learning Japanese, I can understand why Japanese people cannot speak English well. The pronunciation of Japanese loanwords is so weird judging from English pronunciation system. I think my English pronunciation became worse after learning*

Japanese. (Sue, interview 1)

In the above quote, Sue stated the influence of L3 Japanese on L2 English pronunciation. These opinions reflect the statuses of the two languages. This is the evidence for the cross-linguistic influence on pronunciation. Sue code-mixed the English and Japanese pronunciation and regarded her English pronunciation became worse after learning Japanese.

According to the European learners, the lack of satisfactory outcome in L3 learning became an external factor that can bring about changes to one's L2 learning. Such perturbing learning outcome influences the co-existed self in L2 and L3 learning. For example, Adrian reported:

After six years learning French at the public high school, I still did not feel confident to talk with French speakers. We had to follow the "speed" of the worst students in class. As a result, the proficiency level acquired after six years of public school classes were equivalent to one to two years in private tutorials. There was no motivation. I gave it up. The influence was that I had to spend more time in keeping up with my English learning because of the unnecessary time on French learning (Adrian, interview 2).

In the above quote, Adrian stated the lack of motivation in learning L3 French and the need to keep up with L2 English learning. Adrian spoke about being less motivated as a consequence of the learning results. He found it difficult to have any perceptible changes in his L3 learning after six years of public school. This long-accumulated unsatisfactory outcome is likely to have confirmed to him that he was on the wrong direction to learn French. He felt it hard to summon efforts to reduce the gap between his current and ideal L3 selves. This gap could trigger an upward revision of his L2 learning experiences. Related to this, he found it necessary to build an ideal L2 self.

4.2 Fluid Multilingual Selves Across Contexts and Time

Compared with L2 English learning self, the Hong Kong students' self in learning L3 Japanese were relatively weak. Although they had learned Japanese for a certain number of years, they could just read and find it difficult to speak. Concerning the vulnerable L3 self, Chan wrote:

I have learned Japanese for more than 7 years. I thought it would be easier to learn Japanese as it has a lot of similarities with Chinese. I was wrong. I felt quite embarrassed since I could only read but could not speak Japanese. Sometimes when I want to speak Japanese, I automatically thought of some English words in my mind. The decreased passion in Japanese learning strengthened my English learning confidence. (Chan, reflective report)

It seems that L3 learning involves greater degrees of complexity than L2 learning. L3 learning self becomes vulnerable when L2 learning self becomes stronger. The interactions between different L2 and L3 systems in the learner's mind created a sense of

stability and vulnerability (Jessner, 2008). L3 learning is dependent on the development of L2 learning systems. In particular, one or more of L3 Japanese learning system's components changes, e.g., Japanese were easier to read than speak for Chinese learners, alter the state of the L2 English learning system. This situation was obvious in Hong Kong where English plays a dominant position. As Yip mentioned in his reflective report, "English occupies a very dominant position in Hong Kong. The environment forces us to keep a strong mind for English. Then we were left with few room for third Japanese learning." Consistent with Dörnyei (2009), the vulnerability and stability dynamically change during negotiation and adjustment of different language learning systems, and each language learning system changes in response to the other.

The European students tend to relate their changing L2 and L3 learning self to their level of engagement in specific events or movement. The way that language learning motivation changes from one day to another or from one place to another place appears to be a function of internal consideration and external influences. Adrian mentioned the constantly fluid L2 and L3 motivation in an interview:

> *My family ran a restaurant. Greece is a tourist country. Every chance I had, I practiced my poor English. French was offered as a compulsory course at the public school from the age of 12. After six years learning French as an L3 I still did not feel confident to engage in conversations with French speakers. Later I went to university and moved to Britain, and then later to Hong Kong. I realized one important thing which was that I have to keep practicing my English and pronounced like a native speaker because everyone around me thought I am a native English speaker from my appearance. I don't want to disappoint them. French, to me, is only a subject at the secondary school. (Adrian, interview 3)*

It appears that language learning motivations go in currents and waves (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2011). The changes in L2 and L3 motivations were dynamic and fluid. The various internal and external factors, e.g., initial language learning conditions, affective passion or mood in language learning, cognitive factors (e.g., the difficulties in learning a language, a sense of living up to others' expectations of being good at spoken English), and social factors (e.g., what happened due to the changing communities), determine Adrian's motivation at any particular period. As shown in the above excerpt, these factors constantly change across a longitudinal time scale. Across time and space, an enduring L2 stability has been strengthened accompanied with a decreased L3 self. The trajectory of Adrian's L2 motivational system, over his years of learning, have evolved into a stable attractor state where key components in language learning motivation (e.g., the Ideal, Ought-to L2 Selves, and the L2 Learning Experience) converge in a mutually complementary manner.

The Thai students also described how the intensity of motivated behavior would vary. For example, Achara's interview provides an indication of the continuously fluctuated motivation:

> *I started to learn English as early as kindergarten. I don't remember quite well but it*

was quite fun…But later, there were so many drills, exercises, and dictation for passing the exams. I became unwilling to speak English. If you don't get motivated, you would become tired and give a damn in it … and then let it go. Then I changed my mind to learn Chinese. I think Chinese is more important than English, at least in Thailand. So I came to China. I made progress. I became more motivated, then I kept doing it. (Achara, interview 3)

Achara's L2 motivational system appears to be lodged in a deep-sided Ought-to Self dominated attractor state. Her desires or self-regulated behavior in L2 learning were mostly driven by the need to pass the exams. While the motivations in securing exam scores impact her executive decisions, such as doing drills, exercises, and dictation. This was only a level of completing what is asked. A sense of willingness to speak English seems lacking. Instead, Achara established a counterbalancing sense that learning Chinese as an L3 might be personally meaningful or a skill that may be beneficial for future use. As Duangkamol mentioned, "Chinese is an emerging language that we can never underestimate. It is sweeping Thailand and possibly other Southeast Asian countries." Thus, to the Thailand students, the motivational self-system components converge and influence their learning behaviors and cognitive thinking and possibly, trigger shifts in L2 and L3 learning across the state space. The power of Chinese and the traditional disadvantaged English teaching instruction create contextual parameters that can foster conscious movement out of the Ought-to Self attractor state. Under such movement, the learners seek for a different area of the state space (e.g., a preference for learning a language for future use). Such state space becomes a determining influence on the trajectory of either a stable L3 self or vulnerable L2 self.

4.3 Balancing Acts: Prioritization Dilemmas and Dynamic Motivations in Multilingual Self

All the Asian and European learners, except Fiona, Karawek, Wong, and William, mentioned a need to prioritize different language learning systems. The learners seem to be in different dilemma and consistently deprioritize either L2 or L3 based on their situation. For example, Sue, one Hong Kong learner, described her dilemma related to English and Japanese learning experiences:

I studied in a direct subsidy secondary school. That school offered Japanese course. There were a lot of things to do in school. It feels Japanese is just an added language. It is impossible to prioritize it as you don't know much about it. So you do other things first, then want to learn more Japanese, then you will find out there is no time left for Japanese. And then, I understand that learning a language is a life-long learning. I wanted to use the strategies I adopted for learning English to Japanese learning, but it never worked. (Sue, interview 2)

In the above quote, Sue perceived that learning a language is a life-long learning journey. There were difficulties to adopt L2 English learning strategies for L3 learning.

Resource and time were also limited to balance different language learning needs, and there is a pressing need to divert more resources for L2 English learning. There appears to be a paradoxical logic to focus on L2 while learning L3. It appears that Sue encountered the pressure in simultaneously balancing the needs for a range of different language learning systems, and it was difficult for her to constantly channel time and cognitive resources for different language learning systems. In line with Mercer (2011), during the process of allocating resources to different learning demands, learners would always prioritize certain activities over others.

When reflecting on their motivation to learn L3 Japanese, the Hong Kong students expressed their feelings in comparing with the other subjects they learn. As Chan explained, "For subjects like history or general education, you learn something and then you know it is related to your life" (Interview 3). Lee added, "I don't know how learning Japanese can help us. Finding a job? I am not sure. Maybe for travel. You learn it, you forget it because you don't use it" (Interview 3). Yip expressed a need to recalibrate the achievement expectations. For example, he mentioned, "For English subject, I had to aim for an A, but for Japanese I would be happy with a B or even a C" (Interview 3). As mentioned above, Wong is an exception. He had been learning Japanese for around 6 years and were still interested in making more progress. Wong stated,

> *I have some family relatives in Japan. I want to go there and teach Chinese or English in Japanese schools. So I have to learn Japanese. I know that time and resources are limited. But I have to learn both English and Japanese well, which is an asset for me to stay in Japan. Look around the political turmoil in Hong Kong. I can't imagine myself to call it my home. I have to leave Hong Kong. (Wong, interview 3)*

In Wong's response, complex systems do not exist in isolation but occur in relation to the larger social system. The current social systems in Hong Kong are interrelated with language learning motivational systems, impacting the underlying motivations to learn an L2 or L3. In meeting different cognitive demands related to language learning, Wong attempted to balance different needs. Wong attempted to co-adapt cognitive resources as changes in L3 learning system trigger changes in L2 learning system. The L2 and L3 systems are adjacent.

When we checked other exceptional cases, Fiona, Karawek, and William, their similarities lay in their respective experiences of living and staying in their target language community. Fiona and William had worked in France for three years and then moved to China and had stayed in China for over 5 years. Karawek's father is a Chinese. She was born and raised in Thailand and then studied in America for her undergraduate study and then a master degree in China. The three learners all mentioned in their reflective report that "learning an L2 and L3 is not contradictory. Simultaneous learning of an L2 and L3 is not difficult if you understand the specific use for each language." They also mentioned that although their L2 is totally different from L3 Chinese, their learning experiences in L2 can be helpful for L3 learning. This is the evidence for the cross-referencing between different language learning systems (Henry, 2014). The learners used L2 learning experiences as an important source of support for L3 learning.

Factors, higher education needs and professional careers, enhanced their willingness to learn their L2 or L3. Even in the case of Wong, he had never stayed in English speaking or Japanese speaking countries. His imagination about the different use of Japanese and English surely provides support for his multilingual learning. He regarded English and Japanese as important and enjoyable learning experiences for his desired futures. It appears that, in the cases of Fiona, Karawek, and William, a period spent in a target language country had a major perturbing effect on producing a stable L2 or L3 self. For Wong, the prospect of going abroad triggers movement across the state space, leading to the awareness of shifting the vulnerable L3 self to a stable self.

Other learners, including Asian and European learners, mentioned the power of English as an international language. For example, Carolyn and Aat, both stressed the importance of English as a global language in the interview. Take Carolyn as an example:

> *One thing I believe is that if your English is good you can get many assets. It is a global language. Even when I travelled to France, I didn't feel it necessary to learn French. Now I come to Hong Kong. I don't think it necessary to learn Chinese too. It is normal to get less motivated when you think that language is not useful for you. Speaking English makes you so good because you have an advantage. It is a different image. (Carolyn, interview 1)*

In the above quote, Carolyn regarded English as a language that functions all around the globe. Such perceptions of attaching English to a greater value influenced her L3 French and even L4 Chinese motivational systems. Such strong ideal L2 self impacts the ought-to L3 French-speaking/using self, for which Carolyn did not want to learn and speak French in France. Similarly, her perception that learning Chinese is not as rewarding as learning English influences her Chinese learning experiences.

Aat also stressed the importance of English as an international language. He used "a global asset" to describe the advantage in speaking and using English (Reflective report). However, he was also aware of the changing state of English. He repeatedly mentioned the emerging dominance of Chinese. Such sweeping power urged him to learn Chinese. Aat stated:

> *I totally agree with the importance of English as an international language. But in future utility, it is hard to say. Look at Thailand, so many people like me want to come to China and learn Chinese. While English still gains its power as a global language, Chinese is reaching a higher level than before. (Aat, interview 2).*

In the above quote, Aat reflected on the relative utility of learning Chinese. The need to learn the two languages may lead to a gradual weakening of the attractor states (i.e., stable tendencies in L2 dynamic systems). The process of adaptation of the two language learning systems is dyadic and dynamically spiraling. The enhanced strength of counterpart attractor states in learning Chinese prompts perturbation in the stable L2 self. Aat became more engaged in learning Chinese, as he mentioned in the reflective report that his strategy was to formulate sentences and compare the differences and similarities

between L1, L2 and L3. He became more engaged in Chinese learning because he perceived that he will soon be an advantaged position in using that language. It seems that Aat's emergent stabilities of L3 learning behavior are contingent on the contextual variability, in particular, the changing status of L2.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Interpreting the findings, we can see that multilingual learners develop an interacting constellation of L1–L2–L3 selves rather than a single, fixed trait (Reeve, 2024; Teng & Wang, 2020). Within this constellation, some language selves act as stable attractors, highly recurrent, resource-drawing configurations, while others function as vulnerable attractors—intermittently activated and easily perturbed. Crucially, whether a language self is stable or vulnerable emerges from contextual affordances, symbolic and instrumental value, and cross-linguistic relations, not from any inherent property of the language itself (Noels, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Ushioda, 2020).

Across Asian contexts, stability patterns diverge with local ecologies. In Hong Kong, L2 English typically stabilizes as a deep attractor due to high status, dense opportunities for use, clear utility, and assessment pressures, conditions that consolidate extrinsic and internalized motives into sustained engagement (Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei, 2009; Noels et al., 2001). By contrast, L3 Japanese often remains vulnerable, marked by receptive–productive asymmetries and cross-linguistic interference from L1 Chinese and L2 English. When L3 goals acquire identity relevance and near-term utility, consistent with vision-based processes and DMCs, the L3 attractor can deepen, although it typically remains adjacent to the dominant L2 English self (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Teng & Bui, 2020). In Thailand, many learners' L2 English selves are stabilized around an Ought-to orientation (exam-driven, externally regulated), yielding fragile willingness to communicate, consistent with Teng and Bui (2020). As the instrumental value of L3 Chinese rises, shifts in perceived utility and opportunities for participation can move L3 from vulnerability toward stability, illustrating how motivational systems reorganize under changing affordances and futures (Bui et al., 2018; Bui & Teng, 2021; Noels, 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2020).

Among European learners, stability is likewise shaped by ecology and typological proximity. In China, strong English capital (as L1 or a highly developed L2) can attenuate investment in L3 Chinese, reducing participation and leaving the L3 self vulnerable despite immersion, an instance of situated motivation shaped by local interactional preferences (Ushioda, 2020; Mercer, 2011). Conversely, in European pairings with closer typological distance (e.g., English–French), positive transfer and strategic comparison can support co-stability: learners leverage metalinguistic insight to reinforce both L2 and L3 without zero-sum competition (Bui & Teng, 2021).

A dynamic-systems perspective clarifies how attractor dominance shifts as parameters change. Learners may retreat toward L2 after prolonged low yield in L3 (e.g., years of school study with little communicative payoff), or pivot toward L3 when macro cues and employability recalibrate expected utility, patterns consistent with DMC-triggered, vision-aligned surges in effort and the situated nature of motivation (Dörnyei et al., 2015; Ushioda, 2020). Stability is maintained when purpose is repeatedly revalidated through

frequent use, identity alignment, and success experiences. Where L2–L3 comparability is salient, metalinguistic comparisons yield quick, perceptible progress that sustains engagement; where roles and immersion differ across languages, learners can sustain dual focus through differentiated functions for each code (Teng & Bui, 2020).

To integrate these patterns, we conceptualize the Multilingual Self as a Coupled Attractor System, aligning with research that treats motivation as dynamic, vision-driven, and context-embedded (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Dörnyei et al., 2015; Ushioda, 2020; Wang & Wang, 2024). The model features two core properties. First, stability gradients: each language self resides in a basin of attraction whose depth reflects ecological capital (status, access, assessment), identity investment (Ideal vs. Ought-to selves), and use density (Gardner, 2010; Dörnyei, 2009; Noels et al., 2001). Deep basins yield stable selves; shallow basins yield vulnerable selves. Second, coupled dynamics: changes in one basin reshape others via three channels. Capital coupling reallocates attention and effort as symbolic/material values shift (e.g., English's global capital, Chinese's rising regional capital). Linguistic coupling reflects typological proximity/distance, enabling co-stability via transfer or creating interference and trade-offs. Participation coupling captures how authentic use—or its blockage—accelerates stabilization or sustains vulnerability through feedback cycles of success or failure.

This framework elucidates the cases above. In Hong Kong, a capital-rich, assessment-heavy L2 English basin keeps L3 Japanese shallow unless participation and personal purpose intensify (Bui et al., 2018). In Thailand, revaluation of Chinese deepens the L3 basin, enabling escape from an Ought-to L2 basin as vision and opportunity align (Teng & Wang, 2020). For European learners in China, participation coupling is inverted because local peers prefer English practice, starving L3 Chinese of use and keeping it vulnerable despite residence in the target culture (Mercer, 2011; Ushioda, 2020).

Practically, learners can deepen vulnerable basins along the three couplings. For capital coupling, reframing goals into near-term, identity-relevant roles and stacking micro-credentials can support internalization and self-efficacy (Noels et al., 2001; Ryan & Deci, 2020). For linguistic coupling, structured cross-referencing converts interference into metalinguistic insight; modality rebalancing addresses receptive–productive gaps with frequent, low-stakes output; pronunciation compartmentalization limits cross-language bleed, strategies that align with vision-led, task-integrated engagement (Dörnyei et al., 2015). For participation coupling, designing use density, building role-based immersion, and engineering interactions (e.g., language contracts, turn-taking by language) protect vulnerable languages in English-dominant spaces, consistent with situated motivation and meaningful use (Ushioda, 2020).

Sustaining a balanced multilingual self means preventing collapse of the vulnerable self while maintaining the stable one. Time/resource partitioning, periodic "motivation audits" tracking utility, identity resonance, and use frequency, and identity scaffolding that renders the Ideal self vivid while calibrating Ought-to pressures into approach-oriented goals all help align day-to-day action with long-term vision (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Without such balancing, learners in strong English ecologies risk chronic L3 vulnerability and low willingness to communicate;

those in English-dominant interactional spaces may keep L3 peripheral unless participation is structurally ensured; and learners who miss rising capital signals (e.g., for Chinese) may remain trapped in shallow Ought-to basins (Bui & Teng, 2021). Overall, this account reframes multilingual motivation as emergent co-stability among interacting language selves, contingent on how learners and contexts co-construct value, linguistic affordances, and participation opportunities across time.

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