

Effects of Online L2 Learning Experiences on L2 Selves*

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This study considered the social emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic. It utilized quantitative methods to investigate the L2 self-images (i.e., ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and feared L2 self) held by EFL college students in formal online English classes, based on Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System. Meanwhile, this research proved the influence of students' online L2 learning experience, which includes four components (their attitude towards the teacher, classmates, L2 learning environment, and curriculum) on their L2 self-images. The results showed that the ought-to L2 self was prominent during online English classes in comparison to the ideal one. The extent to which the attitudes toward teachers, learning environment, and curriculum affect these two self-images was the main reason for the differences between them. On the other hand, participants' feared L2 self did not show dominance, and it was not significantly influenced by the online learning experiences. Study findings help L2 educators to understand how these immediate learning experiences influence their students' L2 motivation. It enables them to moderate online English classes effectively and helps their students develop positive L2-related self-images.

Keywords: motivation; L2 self; L2 learning experience; formal online EFL class; attitude

1 Introduction

The education system in most countries converted from face-to-face to online classes to minimize the damage caused by the worldwide spread of the 2019 novel Coronavirus (COVID-19). These comprehensive online courses differed from the previous recorded or well-prepared online courses on the Internet. Recent studies indicate that having a large batch of students attend online courses across all grade levels (from elementary school to university) during

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the same period has many drawbacks for education and challenges for educators (Bączek et al., 2020; Bao, 2020; Gao & Zhang, 2020; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Zhou, 2020). It affects students' psychological and personality development, social identity establishment, and communication training. This shifting of learning context attracts attention from second language (L2) researchers. Payne (2020) offered some practical suggestions for online language courses that help learners develop L2 productive skills from a cognitive perspective. Gacs et al. (2020) also proposed planning, implementation, and evaluation of online education by considering ideal and crisis contexts. Russell (2020) measured students' level of online L2 anxiety to help adopt appropriate techniques and interventions. This helped learners reduce the effects of isolation and anxiety during online learning. However, in the first place, it is necessary to clarify what facilitates or limits students' language learning in online L2 courses when direct contact between student-teacher is difficult. It helps to operationalize the recommendations and course design presented in the above studies. Ortega (2009) claimed that the self-image projected by people or their interlocutors while using a foreign language is worth exploring, because the self-related notions connect the cognitive, conative, and affective dimensions, which allows for further research on individual differences. Thus, it is interesting and important to examine the L2 self-image that learners held in online English classes during the severe impact of the epidemic.

In light of the changing motivational development in recent years, the concentration on self-concept in Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) opened new horizons in the field of L2 motivation. This study explored what learners' principal L2 selves (ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and feared L2 self) were in the online language learning environment based on the model of L2MSS. It was also explored whether the L2-related self-images are affected by online L2 learning experience (i.e., learners' attitudes toward the learning environment, teachers, peer students, and other aspects). It will help L2 teachers to better understand their students from a multi-tiered perspective such as self-image, motivation, and learning experience, and then helps language learners to learn.

It distinguishes itself from other general online courses. The "online EFL class" (or "online class") in the present study refers to all the formal English classes at universities in South Korea conducted online in real-time during the COVID-19 period.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Self-images in L2 motivation

Research on self-concept revealed the diversity and complexity of self-

knowledge and its importance in regulating people's behavior (Markus & Nurius, 1986), like the theory of self-attribution (Bern, 1972), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), and self-confidence (Clément et al., 1977). Based on several self-concept studies, Markus and Nurius (1986) added a concept of *possible selves*. They advocated that an individual is free to develop any variety of possible selves such as positive possible selves that may include "the successful self, the creative self, the rich self, the thin self, or the loved and admired self" (p. 954), and negative possible self might include "the alone self, the depressed self, the incompetent self, the alcoholic self, the unemployed self, or the bag lady self" (p. 954). These possible selves may be related to the self that one expects to be (i.e., the ideal self), or the self that should be (i.e., the ought-to self), or the self that one is afraid of to be (i.e., the feared self). They emphasized that a person's repertoire of possible selves may be the cognitive manifestation of long-term goals, aspirations, motivations, fears, and threats. These dynamics are given self-relevant form, meaning, organization, and direction by the possible selves. They are the vital links between self-concept and motivation.

In order to better establish the connection between these self-images and L2 motivation, Dörnyei (2005) developed a new model of L2 motivation—the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) by reframing Gardner's (1985) integrative motivation as part of the self-system. This system provides a new research direction, based on social psychology, to the study of L2 motivation. It establishes the relationship between learners' perception of self-images and their attitudes toward the L2 learning experience. It involves three dimensions:

1) *The ideal L2 self*: It refers to the L2 facet of one's ideal self; for example, if one aims to become a proficient L2 speaker, the ideal L2 self becomes a powerful motivator to learn that L2.

2) *The ought-to L2 self*: It means that if one wants to master an L2 to comply with social pressures, impress significant people, or avoid failure, the ought-to L2 self will be the main motivator for L2 learning (Huang et al., 2015). The ideal and ought-to L2 selves are powerful motivators in learning the language. They could satisfy the psychological desire to reduce the discrepancy between people's current selves and possible selves (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2009).

3) *L2 learning experience*: Instead of *the feared self*, this is the third dimension of the L2MSS. Dörnyei (2009) explains that Markus and Nurius' (1986) work implies that possible selves contain tangible images and senses that are similar to people's experience when they become motivated or goal-directed. The L2 learning experience emphasizes the immediate learning environment and experience involving motivation (Dörnyei, 2005). Many L2 learners are not initially motivated by an internal (i.e., the ideal L2 self) or external (i.e., the ought-to L2 self) self-image to learn a language (Dörnyei, 2009), but depend on the perceived quality of the learners' engagement with

various aspects (i.e., the attitudes towards the learning context, teachers, curriculum or the learners' group) of the learning process (Dörnyei, 2019).

Although *the feared self* is not a component of L2MSS, Dörnyei (2009) emphasized that it regulates motives by guiding the individual away from something. For example, it helps them stay away from foreign language anxiety. The performance form of the feared L2 self may come from the study of foreign language anxiety by Horwitz et al. (1986). It includes three related performances: 1) fear of communicating with others in L2 that explains why many normally talkative people are silent in foreign language classes; 2) fear of exams failure, due to which students believe that anything lower than a perfect test result is a failure. Thus, they often propose some learning requirements that differ from their actual L2 level; and 3) fear of negative evaluation that is broader than the fear of exam failure like students may be sensitive to the evaluations of a fluent speaker (teacher or peer students) in their foreign language class. Oyserman and Markus (1990) proved that the combination of the desired possible self and the feared self might result in maximum motivational effectiveness. Based on this, the feared L2 self will be examined in this study as well.

2.2 Self-images with learning context

The usual perception of self-images comes from “the internalization of values from social and external environments” (Huang et al., 2015, p. 29). According to Gao and Zhang’s (2020) understanding of constructivism, the perception of self-images “is constructed by individuals interrelating with their cultural and social world” (p. 5). Teachers and students inevitably seek understanding and perceptions from the real world where they live and work/learn to understand their identities from their experience. It includes the diverse environment to which students are exposed and different attitudes towards the external environment that shapes dynamic self-images. Taguchi et al. (2009) validated Dörnyei’s L2MSS through a comparative study of the L2 selves in the contexts of China, Japan, and Iran. Learners from all three countries showed strong ideal L2 selves. The reasons that shaped the learners’ ideal L2 selves depended on their cultures, languages, religious beliefs, and education systems. Chinese students’ ideal L2 self became significant with their interest in integration (Chen et al., 2005; Huang et al., 2015) or their perception that high English proficiency leads to well-paying jobs in the future (Matsukawa & Tachibana, 1996). However, language learners within a Confucian-influenced society, in some parts of China, perceived more social roles and obligations (Carless, 2012; Huang et al., 2015). In this case, the main motivation to learn English was their ought-to L2 self. Japanese students’ ideal L2 selves related to the “international posture” (Yashima, 2000, 2009), and Iranian learners’ ideal L2 self could be explained by their desire for higher education or access to upper society class (Taguchi et al., 2009). Yung (2019) also revealed senior school

students' multiple L2 selves in a high-stake test context. These students possessed "dominant ought-to L2 selves, suppressed ideal L2 selves and insecure actual L2 selves" (Yung, 2019, p. 129) while preparing for a public examination.

In recent years, multimedia-based English learning has provided a new learning platform and environment for educators and English learners (e.g., Vivekananda & Khapre, 2021). Zheng et al. (2018) conducted a study in a mandatory English course at a university that had the equipment for web-based and computer-assisted education systems. Their findings showed that students with an ideal L2 self outperformed those with an ought-to L2 self in an online English course. Besides, further online English language teaching research was built on the kind of informal, which Toffoli and Sockett (2010) systematically labeled as "online informal learning of English" (OILE). The OILE was defined as "a complex range of internet-based activities" (Sockett, 2014, p. 7) and mainly focused on out-of-class language learning (Toffoli & Perrot, 2017). According to Lamb and Arisandy (2020), OILE could be any informal English language learning activity involving technology outside the classroom, like entertainment-oriented, L2 self-instruction-oriented, and socially-oriented activities. A growing number of studies have been conducted using this learning context. In informal online English courses taken by students in South Korea, Lee and Lee (2021) discovered that the ideal L2 self had a positive impact on English language learning among middle school, high school, and university students, and that the ought-to L2 self had only predictive power on middle school students' learning but significantly. Lee and Lu (2021) investigated the relationships between L2 selves and communication willingness in both classroom and extracurricular online settings. The results showed that students' ideal L2 self effectively facilitated communication in both contexts. However, unfortunately, the limited relevant research has only verified the effect of the possible self on various variables, but lacks information to identify the major L2 self-images and what aspects in online courses influence students' self-images. Obviously, research on L2 selves, based on L2MSS system in different contexts, is inadequate and incomplete at present.

The abrupt COVID-19 epidemic forced the online delivery of the educational contexts of all conventional lessons (Gao & Zhang, 2020) from the Spring Semester of 2020. While this policy reduced the COVID-19 epidemic's impact on education, as demonstrated in a series of empirical studies over the past year, this sudden change in the learning environment and the unanticipated usage of technologies brought troubles and problems for instructors and learners (Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). For instance, teachers are not well-versed with the information and communication technology literacy for online teaching (Gao & Zhang, 2020), which affects their real potential of teaching. "The imbalance of network devices across regions inevitably leads to inequality in education among students" (Gao & Zhang, 2020, p. 8). The

quality of the equipment used by the students to attend the online class and the home environment in which the students took the online class are also the factors resulting in students' educational inequality. Adnan and Anwar (2020) proved that since they cannot have face-to-face engagement with their instructor and class fellows, the challenges faced by students also included a dearth of campus socialization, group study problems and instructor's response time. Students often face issues such as lack of self-discipline, suitable learning materials, or supportive learning environments during self-isolation at their residence (Bao, 2020).

The above empirical research depends on the learning environment (e.g., the sense of isolation), learning conditions (e.g., availability of network connections), and the relationship with teachers and peer students (e.g., lack of communication). These are issues that have not been experienced in prior educational settings. It proves that online English classes, conducted during the COVID-19, brought an unprecedented learning experience to the students compared to their classroom or other internet-based learning experiences.

There has never been such a large-scale transfer of formal courses from schools to online in the world due to a natural disaster. In the curriculum context derived from this severe situation, especially for college students with only two to five years at university, the continuous online courses place students in an isolated learning environment. Students' perception of their self-image relates to their learning experience. It determines their learning motivation and their response towards the difficulties they encountered in their online English courses. Most of the existing research on online English courses during COVID-19 focused on student cognition like student participation, accessibility, materials, and assignment delivery (Nur Agung et al., 2020; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). No research shows the impact of changes in learners' learning context on L2-related self-images during the forcibly conducted online classes for formal English in schools. Thus, this study attempts to solve the following questions to test this hypothesis:

1) Among ideal, ought-to, and feared L2 self, what kind of self-image is more salient in online EFL course during the COVID-19?

2) How does the online L2 learning experience (i.e., their attitude towards the online English learning environment, teacher, students, and curriculum) affect learners' ideal, ought-to, and feared L2 self?

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

Considering the L2 identity attributes of international students and the convenience of the author's interpersonal relationship, Chinese students studying in Korean universities were the subjects of this study. Data for this

research were provided by 62 participants (12 male and 50 female), including 41 graduates and 21 undergraduates. They all came from non-English majors, which means they had no more specific English courses (e.g., the English courses that specifically train their listening, speaking, writing or reading) other than the uniform and mandatory academic English courses offered by the school. The participants learned English as a foreign language (EFL), and they were classified as 25 beginners, 34 intermediates, and 3 advanced according to their IELTS scores or other equivalent English level test results. Thirty-two students out of the total took one semester of online EFL courses, 19 students took two semesters, and 11 students took three from the beginning of the 2020 spring semester until the end of the 2021 spring semester (See Table 1).

Table 1. Demographics Information of the Participants

Demographics Information	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	12	19
Female	50	81
Total	62	100
Educational status		
Graduate students	41	66
Undergraduate students	21	34
Total	62	100
English level		
Beginner (IELTS 5.5 or below)	25	40
Intermediate (IELTS 6.0–7.0)	34	55
Advanced (IELTS 7.5 or above)	3	5
Total	62	100
Duration of the online EFL class (start with 2020 Spring Semester until 2021 Spring Semester)		
1 semester	32	52
2 semesters	19	31
3 semesters	11	18
Total	62	100

3.2 Instrument

This study used a survey with five multiple-choice questions to collect basic information about the participants. It also used 33 Likert scale questions to investigate students' primary L2 self-images in online English courses since Spring Semester 2020¹ and the impact of the online L2 learning experiences on their L2 self-images. The Likert scale items were sorted out and modified from Gardner (2004) English-language version of Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB). Although Gardner's (1985) integrative motive conceptualization

¹ Due to the influence of COVID19, almost all universities in South Korea have conducted formal courses via online from 2020 Spring Semester.

has been continuously adjusted and developed, it does not mean that this theory has become marginalized (Dörnyei, 2005). The three dimensions (i.e., *integrativeness*, *instrumentality*, and *attitudes toward the learning situation*) included in the motivation behavior of Gardner's motive theory closely corresponded to the three components (i.e., *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to L2 self*, and *L2 learning experience*) of L2MSS (Dörnyei, 2005). Besides, as indicated above, the feared L2 self can be explained in terms of L2 anxiety, which is also one of the measured factors in AMTB (Gardner, 1985, p. 179). In other words, the AMTB contains items that can measure the "selves" and "attitudes" that are relevant to this study. For instance, the items "I wish I could speak many foreign languages perfectly," "My parents feel that it is very important for me to learn English well," and "I'm afraid I won't be respected if I do not learn English well" were consistent with the expectations of the *ideal L2 self*, *ought-to L2 self*, and the *feared L2 self*, respectively. The items "My English teacher has a dynamic and interesting teaching style," "I think my English class is boring," and "I enjoy the activities of our English class more than my other classes" reflected several attitudes toward their learning experiences.

In the questionnaire, there were 33 items, and the responses were measured on a Likert scale. Of them, 23 items were selected from the AMTB and adapted in this study. It also added five items to measure the "attitudes toward students" and five items for the "attitudes toward the online English learning environment" to ensure the completeness and adequacy of the L2MSS-based research. All the Likert-type items were scored by way of six-point with "1" showing "strongly disagree" and "6" showing "strongly agree". Table 2 lists the specific items of relevant measurements with their reliability coefficients.

Table 2. Items of Relevant Measurements in the Questionnaire

Measurement Component	Items
Online L2 learning experience	
<i>Attitudes toward the teacher</i> (5 items, $\alpha = .84$)	1. I feel very close to my teachers.
	2. My English teacher has a dynamic and interesting teaching style.
	3. I can communicate with the teacher in time without much worry when I do not understand the content of the class.
	4. I do not think teachers often ignore me.
	5. The feedback that my teacher gives me is always timely and has a positive effect on me.
<i>Attitudes toward the students</i> (5 items, $\alpha = .91$)	6. I feel very close to my classmates.
	7. My classmates gave me a lot of help.
	8. I prefer to communicate with my classmates via online classes.
	9. I think I have a very harmonious relationship with my classmates in an online class.

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	10.	The online EFL class can build a real relationship between my classmates and me.
<i>Attitudes toward the online L2 learning environment</i> (5 items, $\alpha = .81$)	11.	Speaking English in the online courses made me feel nervous.
	12.	I felt frustrated with the online EFL course even though I cannot communicate in English with my classmates anytime.
	13.	I could not feel the existence of my L2 self in the online EFL class.
	14.	I did not enjoy the online English class.
	15.	Having English classes self-isolated at home made no sense for me.
<i>Attitudes toward the curriculum</i> (4 items, $\alpha = .60$)	16.	I think my online English course met my expectations of L2 learning.
	17.	I think the online EFL courses are interesting.
	18.	I enjoyed the activities/discussions of our English class.
	19.	I did not think the online English course process was too slow to fully understand the material.
<i>L2 self-images</i>		
<i>Ideal L2 self</i> (5 items, $\alpha = .84$)	20.	I wish I could speak English perfectly, even though I rarely have the opportunity to meet my classmates in this emergency period.
	21.	I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English (e.g., the people, the English way of life, etc.).
	22.	I wish I could read newspapers and magazines in English.
	23.	Studying English will make me more educated.
<i>Ought-to L2 self</i> (5 items, $\alpha = .89$)	24.	I desire to be the leader in my English class.
	25.	English is useful for my future career.
	26.	My parents feel that it is very important for me to learn English well.
	27.	My parents are very interested in everything I do in my English.
	28.	I want to get approval from the elders of my family and my professors.
<i>Fearful L2 self</i> (4 items, $\alpha = .83$)	29.	Current social trends seem to demand that everyone has to have English skills, so I should do too.
	30.	I am afraid I will feel embarrassed if I cannot talk with my peer students (or international students) in English.
	31.	I am afraid I won't be respected if I do not learn English well.
	32.	I am afraid that if I do not learn English well, I won't be able to pass all the tests in English.
	33.	I am afraid that my teachers will be disappointed in me because of my poor English.

Note. All variable names appear as abbreviations to facilitate analysis and save space in the below table:

“ATT” for “attitudes toward their teacher”;

“ATS” for “attitudes toward their peer students”;

“ATE” for “attitudes toward the online L2 learning environment”;

“ATC” for “attitude toward the curriculum”;

“IS” for “ideal L2 self”;

“OS” for “ought-to L2 self”;
“FS” for “feared self”.

3.3 Procedure

The survey was created as a web page through the website called *Wenjuanxing* and was sent to the target students through emails and messages based on the membership lists of the Chinese student groups established by students at each university. Survey participation was voluntary, but the prerequisite for participation was that the online English courses were taught in English language. The data were collected during the summer holiday of 2021, when the participants finished their courses for the 2021 spring semester. Since the English levels varied among the participants, the distribution of the questionnaire was in the Chinese language to help participants understand well and obtain accurate measurements. Participants were asked to fill out each item carefully and honestly to rate the English courses they had taken within the past three semesters. Out of 100 responses, the initial screening identified problems in 16 questionnaires (e.g., all answers were the same or incomplete) and 22 questionnaires that were unusable (e.g., these students remained in face-to-face classes during the COVID-19 epidemic). Thus, a total of 38 responses were removed and 62 responses were reserved. The remaining available data were computer-coded and analyzed by using the IBM SPSS statistics 23 version.

4 Results

4.1 Descriptive statistics

Descriptive statistics presented the participant’s L2 self-images in online English courses during the COVID-19 period (research question 1). The results showed that during the online English classroom, most students formed an *ought-to L2 self* ($M = 4.88, SD = 1.06$), an *ideal L2 self* ($M = 4.37, SD = 1.07$), and a *feared L2 self* ($M = 4.27, SD = 1.19$) with little difference between the latter two.

This section also described the perceived quality of the participants’ online learning experiences (i.e., their attitudes towards the learning environment, teachers, students, and curriculum) to facilitate subsequent analysis. According to the mean values in Table 3, students were satisfied with their teachers ($M = 4.06, SD = 1.09$) while implementing online English teaching. The attitude towards the learning environment ($M = 3.44, SD = 1.10$) and their fellow students ($M = 3.31, SD = 1.23$) were normal. The attitude was dissatisfactory towards the English curriculum ($M = 3.27, SD = 1.15$). All variables in Table 3 showed low standard deviation values, indicating that

students' answers were not highly discrete and were stable.

Table 3. Results of the Descriptive Statistics

	<i>N</i>	Mean	Std. Deviation
IS	62	4.37	1.07
OS	62	4.88	1.06
FS	62	4.27	1.19
ATT	62	4.06	1.09
ATS	62	3.31	1.23
ATE	62	3.44	1.10
ATC	62	3.27	1.15
Valid N (listwise)	62		

4.2 Multiple regression analysis: predictors of L2 selves

The regression analysis was conducted sequentially using the entry method with the four attitudes involved in the online L2 learning experiences as the predictor variables (i.e., independent variables), and the three L2 self-images were used as the outcome variables (i.e., dependent variables), to inspect how and how much the online L2 learning experiences affect the learner's ideal, ought-to, and feared L2 self (research question 2).

In Table 4, the second, third, and fourth columns displayed the model summary results of the regression between IS/OS/FS and the independent variables. Although the adjusted R square values were lower than .6, all of them were statistically significant. It indicated that at least one among the independent variables has a significant impact on the perception of the L2 self-images. The values of Durbin-Watson were all around value 2, indicating no autocorrelation in the data and that this regression equation was correct and available.

The results in the last columns of Table 4 revealed the specific variables that affect the L2 self-images during online EFL classes. The *ideal L2 self* had a significant influence from the *attitude towards the teacher* ($p = .019$) and the *online L2 learning environment* ($p = .010$). In contrast, there were three statistically significant factors that influenced the *ought-to L2 self*, namely, the *attitude towards the teacher* ($p = .002$), the *online L2 learning environment* ($p = .001$), and the *attitude towards the EFL curriculum* ($p = .013$). The online learning experiences wholly had a slight effect on the *feared L2 self* at the .05 significant level but its four sub-components did not. It suggested that the students' feared L2 self-image did not have significant effects from online English learning. What's more, combining the data in Tables 3 and 4, it can be observed that although participants were less satisfied with their relationships with their classmates, this had no effect on their L2 selves. The values of VIF proved that there was no collinearity between the independent variables, indicating all data was valuable.

Table 4. Multiple Regression Analysis

Dependent Variables	Adjusted R Square	Durbin-Watson	Sig. ^a	Independent Variables	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
						Tolerance	VIF
IS	.17	1.85	.006 ^{a**}	ATT	.019 [*]	.54	1.84
				ATS	.573	.57	1.76
				ATE	.010 [*]	.49	2.03
				ATC	.192	.47	2.11
OS	.29	2.20	.000 ^{a**}	ATT	.002 ^{**}	.54	1.84
				ATS	.127	.57	1.76
				ATE	.001 ^{**}	.49	2.03
				ATC	.013 [*]	.47	2.11
FS	.10	2.01	.049 ^{a*}	ATS	.197	.57	1.76
				ATE	.079	.49	2.03
				ATC	.997	.47	2.11

a. Predictors: ATT, ATS, ATE, ATC

** . $p < .01$.; * . $p < .05$.

5 Discussion

Based on the L2MSS theoretical framework, this paper presented the most salient L2 self-image during online formal EFL classes and the influences of L2 learning experience on the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and feared L2 self during the COVID-19 emergency period. The results showed that the ought-to L2 self was distinct in the motivational dispositions. The students' ideal L2 self during online English courses was lower than the ought-to L2 self. The perceptions of their feared L2 self were unapparent, which indirectly rationalized its absence in Dörnyei (2005) L2MSS.

Students felt motivated to learn English in online classes due to their obligation and pressure from their parents and society. It differs from the findings of other online-based studies. Lamb and Arisandy (2020) found that students showed high levels of ideal L2 self-motivation in all forms of OILE and had a strong desire to become English speakers in the future. However, it is necessary to emphasize once again that, as stated above, the transfer of formal courses in schools that should be taught in classrooms to online because of emergencies is unprecedented. Thus, the current study presents results based on "online formal EFL classes" that differ from those of other studies based on "online informal learning of English." Inferring from this, students who participated in informal online English learning had a more positive motivated L2 self than those in compulsory formal online English classes. Similarly, it is

also possible to find that students who taken a formal English course with computer assistance had more significant ideal L2 self than the students in this study (cf. Zheng et al., 2018), because computer-mediated L2 instruction contributes to increase learners' interest (e.g., Afrin, 2014; Thorne et al., 2009), while interest is a significant predictor of ideal L2 self (Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei, 2009). Then, it is important to find the reasons why students' perceptions of their *ought-to L2 self* were more prominent than their *ideal L2 self* in the formal online English classes. Study results (see Table 4) revealed that students' attitudes toward the English teacher and online learning environment had a greater significant statistical impact on their *ought-to L2 self* than on the *ideal L2 self* ($ATTIS = .019$ vs. $ATTOS = .002$, $ATEIS = .010$ vs. $ATEOS = .001$). It indicated that the dual forces of students being satisfied with their teachers and discomfited with the online learning environment are the reasons for the salient of the *ought-to L2 self*. Another reason causing the disparity of these two L2 selves was the involvement of the *attitude towards the English curriculum*, which was a variable that only had significant effects on the *ought-to L2 self*. Combining the items measuring participants' *attitudes toward the English curriculum* in the questionnaire (see Table 2) and the results of the descriptive analysis in Table 3, it is reasonable to assume that the curriculum of the formal online English classes failed to meet students' expectations. They were insufficient in stimulating students' interest in L2 learning and their positive future L2 selves. These are the primary factors that drive students to hold a strong *ought-to L2 self*.

Additionally, as can be seen from Table 1, there were 11 participants (18%) who took the online English course for three semesters. This may considerably influence the L2 selves of college students, especially the graduate students with only two-year semesters. Imagine if students enrolled in their master majors in spring 2020, but all their English courses were online. The students seem demotivated to learn English in the *ought-to L2 self* remarkable online English classes. After all, "the ideal self-imagery can induce motivated behavior" (Adolphs et al., 2018, p. 175). From the perspective of L2 learning motivation, the ideal L2 self becomes significant in shaping L2 learning interest and regulates positive outcomes (Higgins, 1998; Dörnyei, 2005; Taguchi et al., 2009). It reveals a person's motivated nature in its self-determined state (Cho, 2020) as opposed to the *ought-to L2 self*. Since the ideal L2 self focuses on how to internalize external reasons (e.g., the realistic desire to assimilate into L2 community, or to succeed in schools or work places) for L2 learning, while the motivation that *ought-to L2 self*-directed is not initiated by the learners' intrinsic interest (Kim, 2009). Based on the study about the interface between L2 motivation theory and the L2 Motivational Self System, Kim (2009) further proved that English learning improves when learners transform their *ought-to L2 self* into the ideal L2 self. It seems difficult to build a positive or practical ideal L2 self-image through an online teaching environment with the current English curriculum.

6 Conclusion

The L2 Motivational Self System has received empirical support from many countries, cultures, and instructional contexts; however, this field is still in a preliminary stage of exploring the composition of learners' L2 self-concept (Huang et al., 2015). Previous results proved that learners' L2 self-images are versatile and changeable (Kim, 2009). Based on a macro perspective, it relates to their country, the culture they meet, and their beliefs (Taguchi et al., 2009). The sudden attack by COVID-19 on humans forced the global education system to become experimental for the digital era. A refined analysis of the sub-components of Dörnyei (2005) L2MSS demonstrated that students' L2 selves could also depend on the different perceived qualities of the various aspects of the immediate learning experience. In particular, the *attitude towards the English curriculum* was significant in determining which L2 self dominated students' motivation for L2 learning in the online formal English classes. Banegas (2019) said, "a curriculum synthesizes values, social practices, beliefs, and negotiations with educators" (p. 424). The improvement of the EFL curriculum through teacher and student engagement can increase language learners' motivation for L2 learning (Banegas, 2019). Thus, the current study's findings assist L2 educators in considering how to establish or sustain students' positive L2 selves at the level of curriculum development. The present study also provides empirical evidence for the theoretical development of L2MSS.

Since some limitations inevitably exist, this article only provides a piece of general advice to appeal to the L2 researchers to focus on the online formal English classes' impact on students' self-images during this period. Thus, it ignores that students coming from different majors essentially have different interests in L2 and their expectations vary for the second language achievement. A larger sample of the population is needed with different participants, such as students learning English as a second language (ESL learners) or students who come from countries with underdeveloped Internet. It is not difficult to find that the sample in this study shows relatively small differences in self-images that may relate to its quality. This study's sample was drawn from urban universities in a developed country, where the equipment for the online English classes, the teaching level, or the participants' learning ability may reduce students' dissatisfaction with an online English curriculum. There might be other findings if the sample is larger or the research is conducted in a different national context that requires further research to demonstrate. A qualitative study can also be carried out to gather what type of online English curriculum is desired by students that can motivate their ideal L2 self.

It is impossible to predict the challenges faced by human beings, and people cannot measure the impact of the next emergency on education and second language acquisition. Formal courses conducted online may become mainstream in the future. Vivekananda and Khapre (2021) also highlighted the

important practical implications of multi-media for teaching and learning in the post-COVID 19 era. Zheng et al. (2018) illuminated the key rationale for developing a positive prospect of online L2 education, that is, students would learn more efficiently if online learning could provide them with positive experiences. SLA researchers should be sensitive to the changes in students' L2 selves and should always be prepared to explore the factors that affect L2 learners' motivation, even the ones that slightly change.

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