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“Your mum and dad can’t teach you!”: Constraints on agency among rural learners of English in the developing world

Introduction

Differences in educational attainment among social classes are a contemporary concern across the globe (Attewell & Newman 2010), not least in developing countries where the aggressive pursuit of the English language by the new urban middle-classes is seen as potentially exacerbating social and economic inequalities (Graddol 2006, Tsui & Tollefson 2007). Hu (2003), for example, highlighted the disparities in official provision of English in urban and rural areas of China, while several papers in a recent British Council volume have described ways in which rural and other disadvantaged groups in developing societies are systematically excluded from opportunities to access English language education (e.g. Coleman 2011, Seargeant and Erling 2011, Author 2011). At the same time, there is continuing interest in the field of Second Language Acquisition in the concept of learner agency, as a counterpoint to the ‘structuring’ effects of class and other socio-economic conditions. As Mercer (2011) argues, globalization has helped to spread educational principles such as learner-centredness and autonomy while also providing increased opportunities for independent learning; young people may be viewed as active agents of their own educational destiny, influenced but not determined by features of their context.

This paper examines the interplay of agency and structure in the learning of English by young adolescents in rural Indonesia, with a special focus on one important component of agency: motivation. A previous paper from Indonesia reported the results of a large-scale (n=527) survey which found significant differences in the motivation and English language proficiency of three groups of junior high school learners, in a metropolitan city, a provincial town, and a rural area, with learners from the rural area lagging far behind their urban counterparts after just two years of formal study of the language in school (Author, in press). But the deficit in attainment was clear even among individuals who, according to the survey instrument deployed, shared similar motivational profiles. A follow-up interview study attempted to link these individual-level psychological constructs to the sociocultural context in the hope of identifying some of the structural constraints on their personal agency.

A Self System Approach to L2 Motivation

In line with contemporary thinking in the field of L2 motivation, the original survey research adopted a self-perspective, using Dörnyei’s L2 Motivational Self System model (2009) as the framework for describing learner motivation. In this conceptualization, learner motivation is said to derive primarily from three distinct sources: from the *Ideal L2 self* – ‘the representation of the attributes that one would ideally like to possess’ (ibid, 13); from the *Ought-to L2 self* – ‘the representation of attributes that one believes one ought to possess’ (ibid, 13); and from their own *L2 learning experience* – motives deriving from persons, objects and practices in the immediate learning environment. An expanding body of research supports the validity of this tri-partite model in a variety of institutional and geographic contexts (Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009, Kormos, Kiddle & Csizér 2011), with the ‘Ideal L2 self’ and ‘L2

learning experience' consistently found to be the variables most directly associated with motivated learning behavior; the relative proportion of each has been found to vary according to context. For example among Chinese school students, attitudes towards the L2 learning experience were less important than the Ideal L2 self; the reverse was true for Iranian and Japanese learners (Taguchi, Magid & Papi 2009). My own study with Indonesian junior high school pupils produced slightly different results: the Ideal L2 self only made a significant contribution to intended learning effort in the metropolitan area, not in the provincial or rural area where L2 learning experience, in and out of school, was found to be much the largest contributor (Author, in press). To find out whether this could be explained by their relative distance from English-speaking communities was one of the motives for this second phase of research.

A decade ago Turner wrote, '[t]he present challenge to motivation research is to integrate the notions of self and context' (2001, 85) and illustrated her argument with a mixed method study that demonstrated how supposedly highly adaptive motivational dispositions – 'flow', and a 'mastery' orientation to academic tasks – did not necessarily produce the expected motivated behaviours; for instance, in a particularly relaxed classroom culture, challenging tasks that might have generated 'flow' experiences were not appreciated by students, who instead prioritized harmonious and cooperative relations with peers and teacher. As another potentially positive motivational disposition, the Ideal L2 self will be similarly bound up, in origin and in effect, with each individual's context. The sociologist Derek Layder (1993) usefully maps out the different 'levels' of context that social science researchers need to take into account – self, situated activity, social setting and the wider national context – and in the next section I consider how each of these may impact on the operation of L2 learners' ideal selves.

Viewing the Ideal L2 self in Context

Self

To motivate effectively, an ideal self needs to have certain characteristics and to be in harmony with other aspects of the self. Dörnyei (2009) himself has stressed how important it is for the Ideal L2 self to be 'elaborate and vivid' (32) and Erikson goes further to suggest that an ideal self 'should include an experience of what it would be like to be in this state' (2007, 349). By contrast, where future selves are abstract and vague, as in Yowell's (2002) study of 9th grade Latino students, they tend to have weak motivational power. A future self also needs to be optimally plausible and to be 'kept alive' through regular priming in the course of daily life. It can also be more effective if there is an equivalent 'feared self' – what one might become if the Ideal self is not achieved – which acts as an emotional spur to action (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry & Hart-Johnson 2004). Finally, an essential corollary of a future self-guide is a plan of action to achieve it. Pizzolato (2006) found that academically successful students from a low-income community had 'worked to construct procedural schemas, schemas about how to get into college, about the processes and experiences involved', while those with 'aschematic' possible selves often failed to realize them (64).

Situated Activity

The emergence and development of future self-guides is intimately connected to the kinds of social interaction and activity that learners engage in, the 'individual's immediate social experiences' (Markus

& Nurius 1986, 961). The most immediate influence is the family, usually termed 'milieu' in social psychological approaches to L2 motivation (e.g. Gardner 1985), and there are plentiful studies in general education of how the family environment shapes adolescents' motivation to study, not only through their willingness and capacity to become directly involved in supporting their children's study activities but through more subtle effects on their self-concepts (Spera 2005, Fan & Williams 2010, You & Nguyen 2011). As Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen and Colvin (2011, 91) summarize '[i]t is clear that to some degree parents play a key role in the shaping of educational aspirations in their children', with those of lower socio-economic status tending to pass on lowered expectations, often accompanied by lack of understanding of educational procedures and anxieties about affordability. Regular interaction with slightly older friends or peers who like and use English – what Murphey and Arao (2001) term 'near peer role models' – would also have a significant role to play in increasing the perceptual richness and emotional charge of Ideal selves. By contrast, when young people develop Ideal selves that clash with the predilections of family members and friends, they are liable to face resistance or threats of ostracism. In the study mentioned above, Pizzolato (2006) reported that '[u]ntil students were able to figure out ways to maintain relationships while moving along their possible-self trajectory, they tended to inhibit their achievement process' (65).

Institutional and National Setting

Although the individual's psychobiography and social activity will be the most relevant domains for researchers interested in 'future self-guides', Layder (1993) reminds us that these are always embedded in wider institutional, national and cultural settings. For most young people around the world, the school remains the primary site for language learning, and what the school offers in terms of resources, peer influences, teaching support and classroom practices can have a major effect on learner motivation (Pintrich & Schunk 2007). In Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System, school would impact more directly on the construct 'L2 learning experience', but the high correlation between this construct and the 'Ideal L2 self' (e.g. Taguchi et al. 2009, Kormos, Kiddle & Csizér 2011) suggests that the institution may also help shape its pupils' future self-guides and in turn their desire to study. For example school career counselors directly engage with pupils' future lives, and in addition the school will convey many covert messages about their possible futures, from the reported experiences of alumni to the social references in teachers' classroom talk.

There is an even more 'macro' level of context to consider. Cultural norms and values infuse institutions, social activity and individuals' beliefs and behavior. MacIntyre, McKinnon and Clément (2009) have suggested that cultural variations in how people construe the self may be pertinent for the L2 Motivational Self System. For example, people in collectivist cultures tend to see themselves as more interdependent and their personal goals may be social rather than individualistic (Triandis 2001). It is therefore conceivable that learners' Ideal L2 selves in strongly collectivist cultures may be distinct from those in individualist cultures, and for that reason have different motivational effects (Elliot & Phuong-Mai 2008). In Hofstede's seminal categorization of cultures (1980), Indonesia is ranked as one of the least 'individualist' of the 53 countries studied.

Methodology

The survey phase of this research identified adolescent learners of English in rural areas of Indonesia who had strong Ideal L2 selves, a strong expressed motivation to study English, but a proficiency level well below those learners with a similar motivational profile in the provincial town and metropolitan areas. A related finding was that in the population as a whole, the Ideal L2 selves were found to contribute less to the criterion measure of intended learning effort than in previous studies of the L2 Motivational Self System (e.g. Taguchi et al. 2009, Kormos et al. 2011). The review of the literature on contextual mediators of motivation suggest many possible reasons why the relationship between Ideal L2 self, motivation and achievement may vary. The main aim of this second phase of the study was to explain the results by exploring in more depth the nature of individual rural learners' Ideal L2 selves, and to search for components of the context which may be supporting or constraining their agency for learning, with particular attention given to their families as the most likely immediate social influence. In particular, three questions were posed:

1. What is the nature of rural learners' Ideal L2 selves?
2. What efforts do they make to learn English?
3. How does the social context support or inhibit their learning of English?

Ten individuals from the rural area¹ who fit the above profile (high Ideal L2 self, strong expressed motivation, moderate achievement compared to urban learners) were contacted through their schools and invited to take part in interviews with the author; at the same time, letters were sent to their parents asking permission to interview their child, and also inviting the parents themselves to be interviewed by the author's Indonesian collaborator about their child's learning of English. All agreed. To provide a contrast, two learners with a similar profile but from an urban school were also selected for interview, along with their parents, and one learner with a very different profile (low Ideal L2 self, low motivation, very low proficiency) from one of the rural schools, with her parents.

Interviews with the learners took place in school and were conducted either in English (in the case of the two urban learners) or in Indonesian. Interviews with parents took place usually in the learners' home (in two cases parents preferred to come to the school instead) and were conducted in Indonesian; eight mothers, four fathers and one couple participated. In the interviews with learners, the author adapted the technique used by Shepard and Marshall (1999) to elicit the possible selves of young adolescents in Canada. Once the purpose of the interview had been explained, each learner was given a set of blank cards and asked to write down their visions of themselves in the future, along with a number from 1-7 representing the subjective importance of the aspiration, and another number indicating the likelihood of it being achieved. The time frame was kept deliberately vague, unlike in studies with older participants which may specify 'next year' as the envisioned future (e.g. Oyserman et al. 2004). Participants took 5-10 minutes to complete the cards on their own, and they were then used as the basis for the interview. With each card participants were asked to elaborate on the vision described, stating what steps they had taken to achieve the aim, and commenting on the relationship of the aim to English. The second part of the interview consisted of more overt discussion of their learning of English, including early experiences with the language, their view of school English lessons, out-of-school learning, particularly good or bad experiences involving English, and their anticipation of future challenges. Interviews with parents were also semi-structured, elicited basic biographical information

and then focused on the parents' hopes for their child, the support they offered, the perceived role of English, their views of English language education in school and awareness of other L2 learning resources. In all, 26 interviews were conducted, with an average length of 20 minutes, and were audio-recorded with the participants' permission.

Data Analysis

All the interviews were transcribed in full and imported into NVivo 8. Qualitative content analysis was carried out in the original language, using a coding structure based initially on the research questions – learners' Ideal L2 selves, reported (by self or parent) to learn English, and forms of contextual support or obstruction. The initial source for the first category was the learners' cards, containing their written descriptions of their Ideal L2 selves; these were tabulated and cross-checked with references in the interviews where their visions were discussed, with the child or parent. The last two main categories were then expanded during subsequent readings to include several sub-categories, and as the data were coded they eventually formed conceptually-linked extracts of text which could be compared and contrasted across the participants. In building my interpretations of the data, I was mindful of the need to treat the interviews as subjective accounts co-constructed in a particular discursive setting (Mann 2011). The researchers represented distinct 'power centres' (Blommaert 2010) to the interviewees. The author was in all cases the first 'native speaker' of English they had ever interacted with and was thus an unexpected opportunity to enact an English-speaking identity; while for the rural parents the Indonesian interviewer as a teacher in a respected urban school represented a local power centre, reflected in the fact that several parents asked him for advice about how to advance their child's school career.

Results

This section presents the results of the data analysis, organized under the broad headings of the three research questions. The data presented comes mainly from the rural participants and their parents, but with occasional reference to the other three learners/parents for contrastive purposes. Learners are referred to by the letters A – M.

Learners' Ideal Selves

The learners' visions of themselves in the future fell into five categories: future study or work, family, place of residence, personal character, and 'other'. This probably reflects the verbal prompts that I gave at the time in Indonesian, in which I exemplified the term 'ideal self' by reference to 'work, family, home'. Despite their relatively isolated geographical location, many have an international flavor: one girl (H) says she wants 'to travel the world with my family', while another (K) will 'travel to South Korean and meet my idols' and also 'go on the Haj with my parents'. Every person expresses a desire for upward social mobility, though the jobs mentioned are glamorous rather than socially respected (e.g. model, air stewardess) or will not bring significant material rewards (e.g. teacher). By contrast, both the urban learners stated that they wanted to become doctors, a profession that assures both respect and wealth. These findings reflect those of Nilan (2008), who also found generally high aspirations in her large-scale survey of Indonesian youth, with a social reproduction effect whereby children of middle-class parents tended to have slightly higher ambitions than those of 'blue collar'/farming parents.

What is striking in the learners' statements on their cards, however, is how the desire for social advancement is viewed not only as a means of self-fulfillment but of benefitting others. Eight of the ten rural learners explicitly state that they want to make their parents proud, and several other ambitions are framed in terms of social good – C wishes to become a plant expert to help find a cure for global warming, D wants to be a lawyer to defend the rights of her family and neighbours against powerful criminals in the community, J wants to be a policewoman because society needs people who 'help others'.

As expected from their survey responses, English is implicated in the achievement of many of these visions, and in interview seven of the learners confirmed that competence in the language was important, as did the two urban learners; by contrast, the learner with a low 'Ideal L2 self' score on the questionnaire explicitly denied any link between her ambitions and English. A wide range of uses for English were mentioned, including succeeding in the education system, entering the medical profession, communicating with foreign patients, training for other kinds of work, international travel, talking to foreign tourists, and making friends on the internet. As Seargeant (2009) has pointed out with reference to Japan, these actually represent several distinct 'Englishes', a range of 'repertoires' (Blommaert 2010) which need to be learned and practised in very different ways. But there is no evidence that the learners are aware of this, and alongside these particular uses for English is a pervasive view of its general importance for young Indonesians, as expressed here by B:

I: In your opinion is there a connection between competence in English and your dreams?

B: Definitely! It's really important because English is the world's second language and if you don't have it, it's like you can't do anything in Indonesia [B 13:40 – after 13 minutes, 40 seconds]

Learner G claimed that she needed to learn English to become a model and when pressed on exactly what aspect of modeling demanded linguistic skills, replied: 'Some time if I could use English I could be a model on a photo shoot in Bali, you see. And then I could save lots of money and send it to my parents to make them happy' [G 11:45]. The language is thus bound up in a fantasy of future happiness.

Again emphasizing the social nature of their ideal selves, three of the learners talk of passing on their skills to the next generation. For example, as a future English teacher E sees herself building a school that will spread the language through her local community – at the moment, she says, 'local people are looked down on because they don't know English' [G 6:45] and on her card she wrote 'things are not going well around here, because many people don't know English, the international language'; and one of the urban learners, searching for a practical use for his envisaged competence in English, says 'if I am good at English, maybe I can teach my children to talk English better' (L 10:30).

Efforts to learn English

With the exception of the learner with a low Ideal L2 self score, all the interviewed learners claimed to invest effort in learning English beyond the requirements of their school lessons, though their comments ranged from the passionate (e.g. B: 'I make a big effort, apart from really wanting it, even though I'm from a poor family, if the will is there, if I'm insistent, I'm sure I can do it, I always try to pray for it, that's

the most important thing' 12:00) to the detached (F: 'it depends on my mood' 9:15). The learners cite a variety of ways in which extra-curricular learning can happen. Seven of the ten rural interviewees had attended a private English course at some stage, though none evinced any enthusiasm for the lessons they had there. They became more animated when talking about English in relation to other activities, especially those involving the use of modern technology. Learner E spoke in tones of wonder about the people she saw on TV 'really good at English, speaking fluently... Indonesians talking with English people and their language is fluent!' [4: 10]. Six learners mentioned learning from the internet, either using a mobile phone with an internet connection or an internet café. Four girls (B, E, F, G) claimed to learn English while using Facebook and other online resources:

F: For instance I like making contact with people from outside, I've got email you see and I like chatting in English, if for example I want to speak English I look up the meaning in Indonesian, what is it in English, find it on Google, translate from Indonesian to English [F 10:30]

Another girl (E) spent so much time chatting to 'foreigners' on Facebook in the internet café that her mother and older sister were becoming concerned, both about the cost and the people she was communicating with. Text-messaging was also viewed by some as an opportunity to use English words, even when with other Indonesians.

Whether using ICT or more traditional written materials, extra-curricular English learning is rarely a solitary activity; most often it involved learning with, or even teaching, other people. Virtually every learner appears to have someone who has inspired them to learn or who offers support. Learners A and E both have older sisters studying English at university. Learner B has friends at another junior high school from whom she gets 'information about English'. Learner C has a group of friends who meet at her house; they 'look for words in English together, playing games but learning English at the same time' [PF 11:10]. Learner G has an aunt who teaches English, and an uncle who likes to joke with G in English. Learner H says a cousin practices English with her, which her mother confirms: 'they often get together, here at home... H is an only child, you see, so no one disturbs them' [PH: 11:20].

Although the learners mention various strategies for learning English outside school, there is no evidence that any of them were following a plan or had any pedagogic guidance; activities appeared to be idiosyncratic and spontaneous. In fact, school itself was strangely absent from their talk. Asked to recall particularly good or bad experiences of learning English, only four could think of anything pleasurable, and two of these referred to regular classroom events where they had performed well and been praised by the teacher or their classmates. Rather more (8) could think of unpleasant experiences, mostly occasions when they had faced a particular difficulty or performed poorly, but their talk was generally dispassionate.

Aspects of the social context

All the rural parents show concern for their children's education, and every one of the learners acknowledge their help, usually in general terms such as 'they really support my education' [e.g. G 21:45]. But the parents tend to conceptualize 'support' in financial terms, and each one hedged their

hopes and desires for their children with doubts about whether circumstances would allow them to be realized. For example, after discussing his hope that A might become a nurse (not in fact her own ambition), her father admits:

We have hopes, but look at our economic situation, everyone knows it's difficult these days, not like in the past [laughs], the economy is very low, we're down to the basics, even if we just survive that's enough! [PA 2:00]

When the interviewer asked him what he did in practical terms to help his daughter, he replies: 'as for my efforts, I work in the fish market' [3:45] and proceeds to explain about the precariousness of his employment there. Learner F's mother also expresses the limits on their ability to help her children:

Me and my husband, I always say to our children, your mum and dad can't teach you, all we can do, your mum and dad is to try and provide the funds, money, as well as pray for the good of our child, so it's for you to think, if you want to get on in life, it's you who has to know the way [PF 6:10]

She goes on to point out how state education, although ostensibly free, can still incur significant costs for families, both for transport and accommodation (senior high schools are usually located in towns) and by delaying the moment that children themselves become earners. Learner K's mother stresses how she tries to keep the family's financial challenges to herself– 'if my child asks for something I just ask them to be patient.....I don't complain in front of them' [PK 6: 30] – but three of the learners do show awareness of their relatively humble socio-economic status, for example D accepts that for economic reasons she will have to go to her local senior high school rather than the more prestigious one in the town centre.

Learner F's mother demonstrates another common characteristic of the rural parents; they recognize the potential importance of education, and of English in particular, but being lowly educated themselves feel unable to offer any more practical support for the children beyond prayers and exhortations to 'study hard'. Such fatalistic attitudes extended to their local school. When directly asked for evaluative comments on the school, their responses were brief and benign. Only one parent offered a mild criticism, negatively comparing the 'limited knowledge' that her daughter got at school with the excitement she felt using English while texting and chatting online with her friends. As for how English could benefit their child, the responses were similarly vague. For instance, after endorsing her daughter's ambition to become a doctor, H's mother was asked whether English would help her realize this goal:

PH: Yes...yes for sure

I: Sure?

PH: Yes

I: So if she's clever at English, she could become a doctor, could be a child who's...

PH: Who's capable

I: Who's wise

PH: Yes, hopefully, if we can use English, we can get out of here [laughs] [PH 8:15]

The parent and the interviewer appear to construct together a notion of English as an index of general 'capability', even 'wisdom'. Her final comment, said half-jokingly perhaps, points to its role in enabling geographical mobility for her whole family. Like F's mother, she is aware of the possible value of English in the future, but has no awareness of the specific competences her daughter needs and does not feel she is in a position to offer strategic support for her. When parents do mention offering specific help, it is always in *response* to a request from their children; for instance, to buy an electronic dictionary (learner C) or to attend a private course (several learners).

Some rural parents express surprise at their own daughters' interest and progress in English. C's father remarks of his daughter, 'you very rarely find someone like this'; another father, acknowledging his daughter's local renown in English, says 'round here, to speak frankly, I want to say it straight, richer people have sometimes said to me, wah, how do you manage to do it, in your condition? I answer, it all depends on the desire' [PB 7:50]. This theme is later picked up by the Indonesian interviewer, who remarking on B's competence in 'the international language', tells her father 'we can feel real pride in having children like B, it's not our language, it's not the language of our ancestors, but she's managed to learn it.' The daughter herself, though, hints at the social tightrope she has to walk, with ambitions to be a teacher of both English and religion. On her written cards and in her interview she stresses the need for her to 'work with society', and not seem 'arrogant', and she said she had given up wanting to be a reporter or a news announcer because 'it's like putting yourself above everyone else' [B 9:15]. She perceived that her English proficiency made her susceptible to the same criticism. It may be significant that her favourite learning experiences were those that temporarily took her out of this reality; she liked it when her school had an 'English day' when everyone was supposed to speak English, and she enjoyed the English speech contests when she competed against high achieving pupils from other schools.

There was little of this fatalism and humility in the talk of the two urban parents. Both spoke knowledgeably about the education system, and how they could steer their children through it to best effect. For example, M's mother commented:

Yes that's also something we stress, if she's successful in getting a scholarship, like Y (her older sister) did, then it is important for her to get into a school which has links with good universities, for example Senior High School No.X has a cooperation with Universitas Gajah Mada and Universitas Indonesia, those are really prestigious. [PM 16:30]

and while her discussions with the interviewer covered similar ground to some of the rural parents, she showed much more awareness of ways to help her children, and spoke on a more equal footing with the Indonesian interviewer. Learner M, for her part, acknowledged that her father had inspired her goal of becoming a doctor, and that her parents tried to persuade her to speak English with them from time to time, in the home. Learner L's father was more assertive, and over half of his interview was taken up with *complaints* about his son's current school, generally considered the best state school in town.

Problems he identified included teachers not giving sufficiently detailed pupil reports, a 'spoonfeeding' style of pedagogy, and the school's failure to establish a proper teacher-parent committee. He admitted to taking a very proactive role in supporting his 14-year-old son's academic performance: 'I keep a close eye on his studying..... I myself, and his mother too. And it has to be consolidated at home too. Always check the results of his tests' [PL 2:40].

Discussion

The qualitative data endorse the validity of the survey construct 'Ideal L2 self' in that, as predicted, each of these individuals were found to have visions of themselves as future users of English, while the one learner who scored low on the Ideal L2 self measure confirmed that she saw no relationship between English and the achievement of her dreams. Further, these rural learners do invest effort in learning English: without exception they are recognised as good pupils by their teachers, and by their parents, and they mentioned a range of strategies they employ to learn the language beyond what is required of them in the school classroom. However none gave the impression that their out of school learning was systematic or extensive, and none had the confidence to speak English with me in conversation, as both urban learners tried to do.

One explanation for this could be found in the nature of their future self-guides. Their future visions have the character more of fantasy rather than concrete ambition; several learners had diverse career ambitions for instance, and although they saw clearly how mastery of English could enhance their future lives, they were not aware of a need for a particular type of competence and they did not appear to have formed proximal learning goals. These are what Pizzolato (2006) terms 'aschematic' future selves. That the two urban youths also failed to articulate any plan for learning suggests that this might be due to age rather than social class or geographical situation. At age 14, none of these learners had yet been forced to make any significant career choices, nor faced high-stakes assessment which would narrow possible futures. This would help to account for the generally suppressed link between the Ideal L2 self and motivated learning behaviour found in the statistical study (Author, in press), compared to the results for older teenagers and young adults in other EFL settings such as Hungary (Csizér & Kormos 2009) and Chile (Kormos et al. 2011).

It is also possible that cultural factors are involved in moderating the role of the Ideal L2 self. A predilection for social goals is a characteristic of the 'interdependent self' in collectivist societies (Markus & Kitayama 1991), though Li (2006) found this not to be true of the educational ambitions of city-dwelling Chinese adolescents. The aspirations of these rural Indonesians do have a strong social character, viewing their future mastery of English as something that could benefit not only themselves but their families and local society. One might hypothesize that in such an environment an individualist concept like the 'Ideal L2 self' may have less power to motivate, particularly if the future self-guide is not widely shared in the community, and could even be perceived as being 'arrogant' (see learner B's remarks above).

Parents are generally perceived to be a primary source of their children's future self-guides (Zentner & Renaud 2007). In this study, parents did indeed share the language ideals of their children – they all

recognized that English could be important for their future – but it is far from certain that they were the *source* of these Ideals. None of the rural parents were able to articulate the particular ways in which competence in English would help their children, nor did they express views on optimal ways of learning. They did urge their children to study hard and where possible provided resources for their studies, but they were not proactive. Moreover they were painfully aware that they lacked the financial and social capital necessary to advance their children’s academic careers, as reflected in the frequent invocation of the power of prayer. By contrast, both the urban parents interviewed could explain in some detail what advantage English could bring to their children, could comment on how their child was progressing, and jointly set high targets with them (the medical profession).

The fatalism of rural parents could be expected to inhibit their adolescent children’s academic engagement and career expectations (Fan & Williams 2010), especially where schools also fail to provide inspiration or guidance. Classroom learning has a low profile in both children and parents’ talk, despite the fact that in the earlier quantitative phase of the study, the construct ‘learning experience in school’ was found to be the strongest predictor of motivated learning behavior while also correlating highly with the Ideal L2 self (Author, in press). As the writer has witnessed on numerous occasions, school English lessons in Indonesia tend to lack methodological variety, consisting mainly of textbook-based reading, grammar and vocabulary exercises, and in hot, humid conditions the 90-minute lessons can be trying for teacher and pupils alike. It has been argued, however, that Asian learners recognize that ‘education is often a demanding and arduous process’ and, compared to Anglophone youth, have less expectation that school lessons will ‘always be fun or intrinsically appealing’ (Elliot & Phuong-Mai 2008, 49). Possibly those pupils with a strong pre-existing desire to learn English do derive personal satisfaction from these lessons, sufficient to explain the statistical association between this measure and overall motivation but not remarkable enough to be worthy of comment in interview.

Who or what, it may then be asked, was the source of the rural learners’ Ideal L2 selves? Several of the learners mentioned older siblings, cousins or relatively young aunts who had achieved some competence in English and who supported their learning; increased geographical mobility means that young people may have contact with more ‘near-peer role models’ (Murphey & Arao 2001) than in the past, and these figures may support the formation of Ideal L2 selves. Moreover, the rapid spread of technology means that young people’s imaginings need no longer be limited to their immediate social environment. Urban youth cultures that were once only glimpsed on a neighbour’s TV can now be accessed in internet café or on mobile phone, through Twitter or Facebook, and these media in turn offer links to like-minded compatriots keen to share interests. The situation in this relatively remote part of rural Sumatra may not therefore be so different from that found by Kormos et al. (2011) in Chile, where ‘for the young generation, their motif to learn English is in all likelihood associated with the wish to become part of the global community of teenagers interacting in the borderless environment of the Internet and information technology’ (16). For English is not simply something to aspire to; it is part of the medium of these social networks. Several of the learners in this study say they use English in text messages, and a quick survey of their Facebook pages reveals English words and phrases, sometimes partly Indonesianized, sprinkled through their messages. Perhaps because of its capacity to reach across

national borders, social networking appears to legitimate the use of English when in more local domains of interaction it may be considered pretentious.

Summary

This research was itself constrained by the relative remoteness of the location, which meant it was not possible to spend the extensive time on site to do full justice to the complexity and dynamism of learner agency (Mercer 2011). A design that tracked fewer individuals over a period of time, in class, home and elsewhere, would in particular have enabled us to understand better the consistency and strength of the individual's ideal selves and shed more light on the social and economic constraints on the learning and use of English in this rural context. It would also have helped to overcome the human and particularly Asian reluctance to disclose oneself to strangers in interview (Li 2006).

Nevertheless the study offers plausible explanations for the most striking result obtained in the quantitative study, namely the presence of Ideal L2 selves among some rural learners alongside generally low L2 attainment levels.

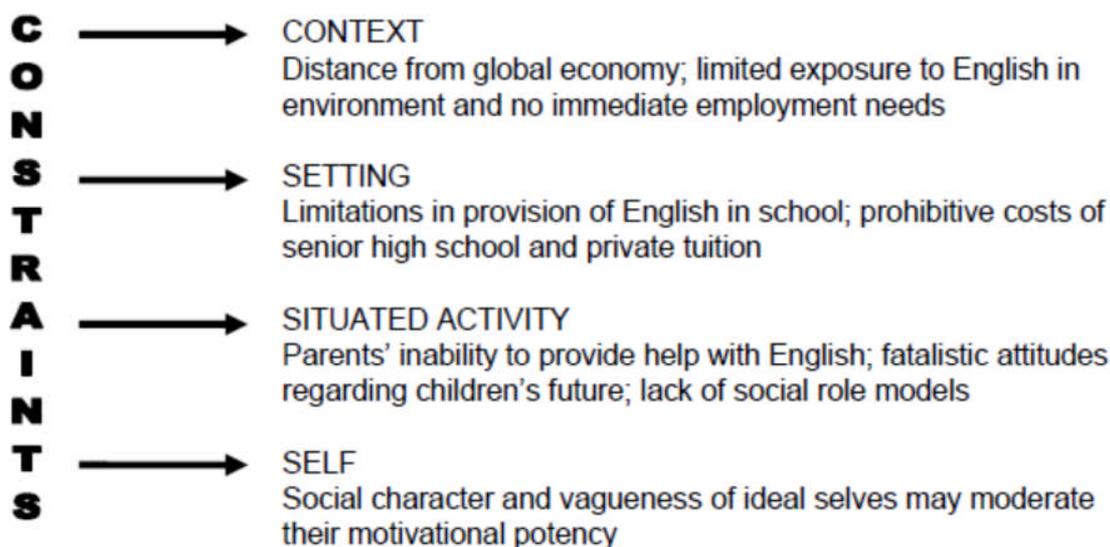


Figure 1. Constraints on learners' agency at different levels of social organisation (based on Layder 1993).

There are constraints operating on the agency of these young people that suppress their achievement relative to their urban compatriots. These are summarized in Figure 1, adapting Layder's research map (1993, 72) to demonstrate how the constraints operate at different levels of context. Their Ideal L2 selves tend to be vague, idealistic and unaccompanied by the 'procedural strategies that act as a roadmap towards the goal' (Dörnyei 2009, 32) – this may be partly a factor of age, but future research should investigate whether their social orientation also moderates their motivational potency. The nature of their social interactions in the home may also put the brake on personal aspirations to study English: their parents can offer little direct support, beyond encouragement and prayer, and their ability

to provide material or financial help is also limited; further, the fatalism apparent in rural parents' attitudes to their children's education, compared to the more optimistic and pro-active urban parents, may undermine the plausibility of their children's ideal selves. At the next level, the social organizations which should be the primary site of English learning either fail to provide enriching L2 learning experiences (local state schools) or are too expensive (private language schools and urban senior high schools). Finally the geographical distance from centres of economic activity means young people get less exposure to English in the environment, and there is less immediate need or social encouragement to acquire English for employment or higher education.

In demonstrating the multiple levels at which rural youth is disadvantaged in its efforts to acquire English, this study indicates one reason for why for young Indonesians 'life chances are still largely reliant on a young person's class position' (Nilan 2008, 13). However the study also provides grounds for a more optimistic prognosis. For despite their very peripheral location and the relatively humble lifestyle of their families, these young people do have visions of an English-speaking future self, and this does inspire them to exert effort to learn the language beyond what is required of them by the school curriculum. Increasing geographical mobility and the rapid spread of mobile and internet technology facilitate the flow of English into local society, provide new ways of learning and reasons to use it, and so give opportunities for regular activation of these learners' Ideal L2 selves, in turn making them seem more plausible to themselves and their social milieu.

Notes

¹ Two of the schools were in fact located no more than 7 km from the urban centre (the provincial capital); young people visited the town by motorbike, riverboat or bus at least once a month; the third school was located about 40km away from the city amid palm oil and rubber plantations. All three locations would however be unambiguously classified as 'rural' by local people by virtue of their traditional, agriculture-based way of life. This is reflected in the participants' fathers' occupations: the two urban fathers were a doctor and senior civil servant; the 11 rural fathers were agricultural workers (6), food sellers (2), river port labourer, teacher and tailor.

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