# Exploring the Roles of the L2 Motivational Self System in the English Learning Achievement of Thai High School Learners

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## ABSTRACT

This research investigated the roles of the Second Language (L2) Motivational Self System (L2MSS) in the English learning achievement of Thai high school learners and the success in learning English of Thai high school students. By adapting the frameworks of the L2 MSS, which consisted of the ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience, this research aimed to explore perceptions to understand the learners' motivation that can impact English learning achievement. The sample included 120 twelfth-grade students selected through random sampling from four typical English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes at a local secondary school. Data were collected through a questionnaire and in-depth interviews, following a mixed-method study format. The questionnaire aimed to identify various characteristics of Thai EFL learners. Meanwhile, ten participants were invited for interviews to ascertain the perceptions of Thai high school learners regarding L2 MSS in their English learning achievements. The findings from the questionnaire indicated that the ideal L2 self was the most important factor, followed by the L2 learning experience, while the ought-to L2 self was the least influential. Moreover, the interview results suggested that both high and low achievers appeared to share common goals in learning English. Therefore, this research provides teachers with insights into creating more visionary, motivational approaches in the language classroom, as the ideal L2 self becomes the driving force for performance.

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## Introduction

Mastering a second language (L2) has been beneficial for the learners to achieve their specific objectives such as being able to communicate globally, understand the information accurately, and be skilful through exploration [1]. Determining the objective is necessary in the beginning of their learning process before putting an effort into learning L2. Meanwhile, the objective can only be elaborated based on motivation that learners have from within once they started to learn L2 [2]. Motivation has been a significant predictor on determining successful levels of learning L2 [3]. The question is, therefore, how motivation can influence the level of successful learning L2.

Motivation is about the direction and magnitude of human behavior, explaining choice, persistence, and effort concerning human behavior [4]. It has been regarded as the critical reason why learners do the activity, how hard they plan to continue the activity, and how eager they determine to achieve the goal [5]. Various views on the definition of learning motivation that have occurred might have become as the control to indicate the most appropriate definition that has impact on the phenomena. According to Dembo [6], motivation is closely linked to self, defined as 'the internal processes that give behaviour its energy and direction', and those processes are much related to learners' goals, beliefs, perceptions, and expectations.

In addition, Ushioda and Dörnyei [2] stated that motivation is a complex mental process that is gradual such as initial planning and goal setting, intention information, task generation, action implementation, action control and outcome evaluation. With any definitions within this regard, the justified opinion on the definition of motivation is mainly concerned with human behaviour in terms of direction and magnitude which, accordingly, correlate the decision, the persistence and the effort given for a particular action, including in mastering the English language.

In the context of Thailand, learning motivation plays a significant role in the process of mastering the English language [7]. The teaching and learning of foreign languages have been efficiently promoted since an early age, in accordance with the National Education Act of 1999. While English is not compulsory, it is among the foreign languages required to be taught at the secondary level, as it is a mandatory subject in the National University Entrance Examination [8]. Consequently, learners must prepare for English proficiency if they intend to pursue further education at the university level.

Furthermore, young Thai learners express their goal of learning English to achieve high scores for their high school graduation and meet the standard requirements for university admission [9]. Since obtaining a high English score is a crucial factor in securing their future university studies, they are compelled to invest time and effort in improving their English skills. Due to the stringent institutional requirements that emphasize English testing, English teachers at Thai universities tend to develop L2 (second language) proficiency that is more beneficial for learners' preparation [10]. The university offers international programs that use English as the medium of instruction in the classroom to maintain learners' English proficiency. Therefore, their motivation must stem not solely from the externally

imposed demands of an examination-based system but also from their personal desire to make their English studies meaningful for their future [11].

Given that the objectives arise from diverse motivations, it is essential to identify the primary factor that influences many young Thai learners to take the initiative to learn English. To comprehend the intrinsic motivation that develops internally, Dörnyei [12] introduced the L2 Motivational Self System, which guides decisions based on specific, discernible purposes. The L2 Motivational Self System comprises three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience [12].

Since the inception of L2MSS research, the relationships among its internal components have been empirically examined across a variety of socio-cultural contexts [13]. These investigations have revealed that the internal structure of L2MSS can operate differently in different contexts [14]. For instance, Csizér and Kormos [15] discovered that the ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience had a positive impact on the ideal L2 self in the Hungarian context. This finding was subsequently replicated by Peng [16, 17] in China. In contrast, Kim et al. [18] suggested that the L2 learning experience of Korean EFL learners was not significantly correlated with either the ideal or ought-to L2 self. Consequently, it is imperative to explore the advantages of English proficiency by investigating the role of L2MSS in the English Learning Achievement of Thai High School Learners.

In light of the explanations provided above, despite motivation being widely recognized as a crucial factor in the success of English language learning, there is a relative scarcity of data-supported research in the field of English teaching in Thailand, particularly concerning the relationship between motivation and achievement, especially at the secondary level. Additionally, the present research is grounded in a comprehensive model of L2MSS, encompassing learners' ideal and ought-to selves as well as their learning experiences. The objective of this research is to enhance our understanding of the connection between motivation and learners' English learning achievements. Consequently, the findings of this study have the potential to raise awareness regarding the significance of learning motivation in aiding students in their academic pursuits. Furthermore, this research may offer solutions to the challenges of disengaged learners and low achievers in English language classrooms.

## Objectives of the research

The objectives of this research were

1. To investigate the characteristics of Thai ELF learners in secondary schools in Thailand.

2. To investigate the roles of motivation in studying English as a foreign language

3. To investigate the perceptions of Thai ELF school learners on the L2 Motivational Self System as a foreign language.

## Literature Review

The most prominent L2 motivation theory related to the concept of self is the L2 Motivational Self System [13, 22]. This theory is based on a motivational self-system framework that comprises three key components, each of which forms the foundation for measuring the phenomenon of learning English. These components are as follows: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience [22]. The ideal L2 self represents the L2-specific aspect of one's ideal self, an aspirational image that the L2 learner aims to become in the future. It encompasses a wide range of components, including cultural interest, instrumental motivation, promotion, and attitude towards the L2 community [22]. For instance, learners with a vivid ideal self often strive to learn an L2 by envisioning themselves fluently communicating in that language.

The ought-to L2 self, on the other hand, pertains to the attributes that learners believe they ought to possess due to a sense of duty, obligation, or responsibility [22]. For example, some individuals may learn an L2 primarily to meet the expectations of important individuals or merely to avoid potential negative consequences.

The L2 learning experience involves motive factors that are specific to the immediate learning environment and experience [22]. It encompasses the interactions of language learners with various elements such as curriculum, classmates, peer groups, teachers, classroom atmosphere, and their overall attitudes towards the L2. As explained by Dörnyei [12], initial motivation often arises from active engagement in the learning processes rather than from the generation of internal or external self-guides. Previous studies have indicated that the L2 learning experience significantly contributes to a student's motivation [15].

## Methodology

1. Research Approach

This research was designed as mixed methods for investigating the L2 Motivational Self System. [19] pointed out that mixing methodologies, both quantitative and qualitative, could maximize the research to be valid internally as well as externally in that it would balance methodological issues to be settled more productively. This research employed an explanatory sequential design [20] in which the quantitative data were collected first, followed by qualitative data collection. The purpose was to make use of the qualitative results to further explain and interpret the findings from the quantitative phase.
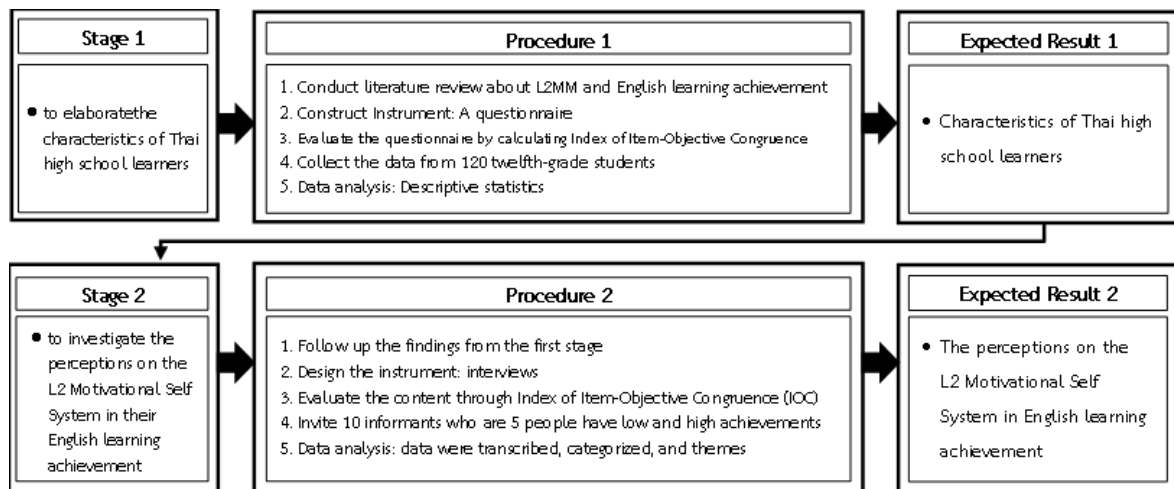
| Stage 1 | Procedure 1 | Expected Result 1 |
|---|---|---|
| • to elaboratethe characteristics of Thai high school learners | 1. Conduct literature review about L2MM and English learning achievement<br>2. Construct Instrument: A questionnaire<br>3. Evaluate the questionnaire by calculating Index of Item-Objective Congruence<br>4. Collect the data from 120 twelfth-grade students<br>5. Data analysis: Descriptive statistics | • Characteristics of Thai high school learners |

| Stage 2 | Procedure 2 | Expected Result 2 |
|---|---|---|
| • to investigate the perceptions on the L2 Motivational Self System in their English learning achievement | 1. Follow up the findings from the first stage<br>2. Design the instrument: interviews<br>3. Evaluate the content through Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC)<br>4. Invite 10 informants who are 5 people have low and high achievements<br>5. Data analysis: data were transcribed, categorized, and themes | • The perceptions on the L2 Motivational Self System in English learning achievement |

**Figure 1** Design of the study

2. Research Population and Sample

This research included a total of 120 twelfth-grade students, selected using the random sampling method, from four typical English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes in a Thai secondary school. The survey was administered online, and participation was entirely voluntary. Additionally, interviews were conducted with 10 participants to ascertain their perceptions regarding the impact of the L2 Motivational Self System on their English learning achievements and success in learning English. These 10 participants were carefully selected to serve as the sample for the interviews. Furthermore, these interviewees were divided into two distinct groups: high achievers and low achievers, based on their English scores.

3. Research Instrument

A questionnaire was employed to gather data to elaborate learners' motivation toward English language learning. The questionnaire was constructed. The items in the questionnaire were written in Thai and rated by using the Likert scale indicating the following level of agreeing: the most, moderate, less, and the least, respectively. Four-point scale selected as it may encourage respondents to make a choice rather than selecting a neutral or middle option. This can help researchers gather more decisive responses. The quality of the instruments was evaluated in terms of objectivity and validity by three experts. The experts rated each item according to the objectives of the statements and how the respondents understood the questions by rating on the evaluation form. Then, the Index of Item-Objective Congruence (IOC) was calculated by scoring the answers as follows: The item is appropriate = 1, Not sure = 0, The item is not appropriate = -1.

The pilot study was conducted with a group of students who were similar in terms of educational background and language proficiency, and the result showed total alpha level for all items was 0.975. The questionnaire was revised based on the information gained from the pilot study. The

questionnaire consisted of eighteen items were used to measure, in which each component consisted of six items associated with the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and L2 learning experience, respectively.

The qualitative method of inquiry to be described in this research was conducted. The interview was used to receive in-depth information from the learners [21]. The steps for development and assessment of the interview were started with the study of the basic concepts and the related documents and evaluation. The items in the interview were written in Thai and the quality of the interview tool was evaluated in terms of objectivity and validity by three experts. The experts rated each item according to the objectives of the statements and how the respondents understood the questions by rating on the evaluation form. Data gained from the interview were transcribed, categorized, through content analysis into themes [21].

## Analysis of Data

Data collection was conducted through an online platform, with the instrument distributed to participants via social media applications. Consequently, the data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed using percentages. The use of percentages was particularly relevant as the primary objective of this research was to elaborate on specific characteristics. Therefore, it was appropriate to interpret the data using the highest percentage values [23].

The data collected consisted of participants' background information and their responses to the questionnaire items. The background information included gender and age. The questionnaire utilized a four-point scale, with "Strongly Agree" assigned four points, "Agree" assigned three points, "Disagree" assigned two points, and "Strongly Disagree" assigned one point. To determine the characteristics of Thai high school learners concerning the L2 Motivational Self System and its impact on their English learning achievements, categorization was employed. This categorization involved identifying similarity and relevance words that could appropriately represent each item among the questionnaire items.

Percentages were chosen as the preferred method for analysis because they facilitate straightforward relative comparisons between different categories, groups, or time periods [20]. This allows for a better understanding of the proportional distribution or contribution of each category within the entire dataset. Furthermore, percentages make it evident whether values have increased or decreased relative to a baseline or previous time period. This is critical for evaluating trends and identifying areas that require improvement or further attention.

To assess the level of perception among Thai high school learners regarding the L2 Motivational Self System and its impact on their English learning achievements, the collected data were transcribed and categorized into themes. This categorization process aimed to determine the level of perception based on the interview responses. The interview data explored the roles of L2MSS in English learning achievement and were subsequently coded into categories and themes. This categorization involved

identifying similarities and gathering insights to elucidate which influential factors affect students' L2 motivation.

## Result findings

1. The characteristics of Thai high school learners

The findings of the characteristics of English learning were based on the L2 MSS: Ideal L2 Self, Ought-to L2 Self, and L2 learning experience. It showed the item of each component that indicated the determinants in the form of percentage. Also, the item is grouped into characteristics in according to the keyword that appears on the statement. The following are the table of each component that indicated percentage and characteristics.

**Table 1** Percentage of determinants of ideal L2 self

| No. | Statements | Learners | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | % | Characteristics |
| Ideal L2 Self | | | |
| 1. | I can imagine myself living abroad, having a discussion in English, and using English effectively to communicate with locals | 85.3 | the ideal image for being a good communicator |
| 2. | I can imagine a situation where I am speaking English with international friends or foreign colleagues | 89.7 | |
| 3. | I can imagine myself writing English emails fluently | 82.8 | |
| 4. | Whenever I think of my future career, I can imagine myself using English as if I were a native speaker of English | 79.3 | the ideal image for work |
| 5. | The things I want to do in the future require me to use English | 92.2 | |
| 6. | I imagine myself studying in a university where all my courses are taught in English | 71.2 | the ideal image for studying |

As can be seen from the table above, the highest percentage of the item was the things I want to do in the future require me to use English (92.2%). Meanwhile, the lowest percentage of the item was I imagine myself studying in a university where all my courses are taught in English with the percentage of 71.2%. Also, the items were grouped into three characteristics of ideal L2 Self.

**Table 2** Percentage of determinants of ought-to L2 self

| No. | Statements | Learners | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | % | Characteristics |
| Ought-to L2 Self | | | |
| 1. | I consider learning English important because my parents and people I respect think that I should do it to be an educated person. | 61.2 | responsibility |
| 2. | I study English because people around me think it is important | 74.2 | obligation |
| 3. | It will have a negative impact on my life if I do not learn English | 74.2 | |
| 4. | Learning English is necessary because people surrounding me expect me to do so | 81.9 | supposed duty |
| 5. | Studying English is important to me because other people will respect me more if I have knowledge of English | 66.3 | |
| 6. | If I fail to learn English, I will be letting other people down | 43.1 | |

The table above shows that the highest percentage of the item was Learning English is necessary because people surrounding me expect me to do so (81.9%). Meanwhile, the lowest percentage of the item was If I fail to learn English, I will be letting other people down with the percentage of 43.1%. Also, the items were grouped into three characteristics of Ought-to L2 Self.

**Table 3** Percentage of determinants of L2 learning experience

| No. | Statements | Learners | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | % | Characteristics |
| L2 Learning Experience | | | |
| 1. | I really enjoy learning English and the atmosphere of my English class | 86.2 | learning atmosphere |
| 2. | I find learning English very interesting, and I like the activities done in my English classes | 91.4 | learning activity |
| 3. | I like English because of my English teachers | 80.4 | teacher |
| 4. | My classmates in my English class help me understand English better | 94.8 | classmate |
| 5. | The books in my English class suit my needs | 75.9 | teaching material |
| 6. | The level of difficulty with materials helps me improve my English | 71.4 | |

The table above indicates that the highest percentage of the item was My classmates in my English class help me understand English better (81.9%). Meanwhile, the lowest percentage of the item was the level of difficulty with materials helps me improve my English with the percentage of 71.4%. Also, the items were grouped into five characteristics of L2 Learning Experience.

Although there are some variations in the learners' percentage of motivation in each component, the findings from the study have generally displayed the substantial enhancement of learners' reasoning, especially when the motivational approach of enhancing learners' Ideal L2 self was obviously realizing the purpose of L2.

2. The perceptions of Thai high school learners on the L2 Motivational Self System in English learning achievement

The findings from the semi-structured interview shows useful information regarding learners' perspectives on the L2 motivational self system that can have an impact on their learning achievement. Ten participants who were high achievers and low achievers participated in elaborating the characteristics of each motivational self system. The most item is selected to describe as follows.

a. Ideal L2 Self

Learners' opinion regarding ideal L2 self were elaborated into three characteristics. The first is "ideal image for work". This characteristic emphasized on the obvious goal of learning L2. One learner expressed the experience.

"...I wanted to communicate with foreigners, and they are able to understand what I was trying to say. It will be great to me..." (Participant 3, high achiever)

It can be inferred that learner's perspective articulate the reason of being able to speak in English. In the very specific context that learners wanted to communicate well in any circumstances.

Also, it reflected from the learners' effort to make them perform well in learning English. Two learners answered the following.

"...I concentrate on the lesson taught in class and also review some lessons after class. I also attend tutorial courses sometimes..." (Participant 1, high achiever)

"...I will focus on studying in class and learn some vocabulary from online platforms. I sometimes ask the teacher when I don't understand in class..." (Participant 8, low achiever)

Their effort also came from their perception about the benefit that led to achieve their desire. The learners' answers from the interview are as follows:

"...I agree with this statement because English knowledge is very important now. If I can speak or communicate in English, I have more opportunities to get a good job..." (Participant 2, high achiever)

There were several keywords to be traced from the above quotations, they were Communication with Foreigners, Academic Focus, Online Learning and Teacher Interaction, and Employment Opportunities.

b. Ought-to L2 Self

Many learners considered English as an important subject to be learned. To them, the expectation to have mastery in English is the motivational factor for them to sustain their performance. The learner expressed as follows.

*"…English is considered the most important L2 for Thai people. My teachers, parents, and others always tell me about the importance of English learning…"* (Participant 5, high achiever)

Learner was encouraged from their environment regarding learning English such their parents.

*"…Yes. My parents always explain to me why I have to study English. They also tell me that English is used around the world. So, it's a very important language…"* (Participant 6, low achiever)

Hence, there were several keywords to be withdrawn from the above quotations, they were English as a Highly Important Language and Parental Influence and Motivation.

    c.  L2 Learning Experience

Learners' degree of L2 motivation was mentioned the most in the L2 learning experience component. Accordingly, most of them display their positive feelings towards the L2 learning, which is described in the following extracts:

*"…I like the materials used in class because it's more interesting than the book. Also, the teacher often gives rewards to the students. …"* (Participant 7, low achiever)

*"…I enjoy learning in groups. Moreover, I like watching VDO clips or movies that are related to what the teacher teaches in class. …"* (Participant 9, low achiever)

Many learners perceived that their motivation was extended due to the good teaching material, which means the teaching material plays an important part in their learning in general and in their motivation in learning in particular.

A learner mentioned the impact of the classmate and the teacher on their learning motivation were as follows.

*"…(teacher) The teacher is nice and has high energy in class. She often tells a story by easy vocabulary to the students…", "…(classmates) The classmates are the coworker in class to make my English learning successful…"* (Participant 10, low achiever)

*"…(teacher) The teacher is kind and makes me feel comfortable. The teacher motivates students by giving rewards…", …(classmates) Classmates who are good at English often help me when I ask for help…"* (Participant 4, high achiever)

To be summarized, the following are the keywords synthesized from the statements above, they were Engaging Learning Materials and Rewards, Group Learning and Multimedia Engagement, and Teacher Characteristics and Teaching Style.

According to the interview, the learners' responses show the indifferent motivation in learning English from both high and low achievers. It indicates that most of them learned English for the reason that they expect to get a good plan for their career such as having a job in Thailand and other countries. Being good at English is the first requirement for finding jobs at present. Moreover, they also had the motivation to learn English to pursue their study at higher levels.

## Discussion and Conclusion

### a. Discussion

This research identifies the Ideal L2 self as a more influential motivating factor in students' learning processes. This is because young Thai learners in this study are well aware of the benefits of mastering English. Their perception of English learning is particularly strong and evident, especially when they express their learning goals. Consequently, the Ideal L2 self emerges as one of their primary interests.

However, the results of a prior study [24] suggested that their immediate learning experiences related to the English class environment, class activities, English teachers, classmates, and learning materials had a more significant impact on their L2 Motivational Self System (L2 MSS) than their possible selves. This present research argues that the Ideal L2 self still remains the most important factor, given its association with the awareness of purpose and goals to be achieved. As they are aware of the actions required from the very beginning, it supports their performance in mastering English. This research contributes to our understanding of L2 MSS [12] with an emphasis on strategies for enhancing students' Ideal L2 self, which is expected to foster their motivation in learning. Learners' motivation substantially and potentially increased after reflecting on the purpose of learning English integrated into the course. Therefore, this research adds to the body of knowledge related to L2 MSS in general, specifically promoting the significance of the Ideal L2 self in determining English learning achievements.

In comparison to other components such as the ought-to L2 self, Dörnyei and Chan [25] added that while the ought-to L2 self contributes to learners' motivation, it lacks the energizing drive to make a significant impact on motivated behaviors in many educational contexts by itself. Furthermore, a study by Moskovsky, Assulaimani, Racheva, and Harkins [26], which yielded similar results, further confirmed this. In this context, MacIntyre, MacKinnon, and Clément [27] noted that cultural differences in learners' self-concepts can affect the motivational qualities of possible selves, including their ought-to L2 self. In the participants' cultural and educational context, where English was not extensively used in daily communication and was not the primary language of instruction in school, the participants might not perceive any obligation to avoid negative outcomes, such as disappointing those around them or gaining less acknowledgment or respect. This is because the society in which they live does not extensively use English, understanding that it is not of paramount importance in their daily lives.

The findings indicate that the ideal L2 self is the most important factor influencing English learning achievement among Thai high school students. This implies that learners who have a clear and positive vision of their future English-speaking selves are more likely to excel in learning the language. Interestingly, the research finds that both high and low achievers in English learning have common goals. This suggests that motivation is a factor that can influence learners' performance regardless of their current level of achievement.

### b. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research confirms previous findings that L2 achievement is determined by various factors and asserts that motivation [28], despite being the driving force behind effortful learning behaviors, is only indirectly related to L2 achievement [12]. Therefore, the relationship between L2MSS and L2 achievement generally indicates that one component of L2 MSS, the ideal L2 self, has the potential to influence learners' achievement. However, it can still be stated that while learners' L2 MSS can predict their self-reported learning intentions, it may not be a strong predictor of their actual achievement.

Finally, the present research results also serve as evidence that the motivation-achievement relationship requires the ideal L2 self as a crucial step in mastering English, as the ideal L2 self provides the fundamental learning purpose. This research concludes by stating that the relationship between motivation and achievement in language learning is complex and that further research is needed. Specifically, it highlights the ongoing importance of the ideal L2 self in determining learning mastery.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of this research, it is possible to determine the success of motivated high performers, as indicated by the following implications:

a. Learners' high motivation not correlating significantly with their achievement could imply that their self-reported high motivation was not accompanied by actual actions. Thus, it becomes important to assess the extent to which learners exhibit motivated behaviors.

b. At the school policy level, the importance of motivation for learning English should be emphasized to teachers through professional development. Therefore, teachers should consider these factors when designing English language lesson plans and should be well-informed about new and effective teaching methods.

c. It is suggested to investigate the extent to which learners' L2 MSS can predict their achievement or actual proficiency rather than relying solely on their self-reported learning intentions, as these intentions do not always translate into motivated behaviors.

d. There is a need to better understand the framework of the L2 MSS in different age groups within the context of English language learning in Thailand.

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