

Dynamically Stable Evolution of Ideal Selves in Motivation of High School English Teachers in China

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Abstract

Given that few studies focus on the complex and dynamic nature of English teachers' teaching motivation in China (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021), this study aims to explore English teachers' teaching motivation development with the possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which offers the most comprehensive and versatile lens for the analysis of teachers' teaching motivation. There were seven participants in this study, including English teachers at early, mid, and late stages of their careers from a public high school in northern China. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and teachers' reflective journals. This study found that there was a dynamically stable evolution of participants' ideal teacher selves. While the dynamics meant that there was continuous emergence of new ideal images, the stability meant that teachers' ideal selves were static within a particular period. It is also true that the emergence of new ideal images did not mean that participants had discarded or fully realized prior ones. On the contrary, they preserved and adapted key components of previous ideal images while acquiring new ones. In effect, they formed a synthesized ideal teacher self with various components (i.e., key components of various ideal images emerging at different professional stages), which is susceptible to future changes. In addition, the agreement between ideal selves and the ought-to self enhanced participants' motivation.

Keywords: English teachers' teaching motivation, ideal selves, ecological perspective, the agreement between ideal selves and the ought-to self

1. Introduction

Although there have been "encouraging developments" (Lamb & Wyatt, 2019, p. 523) of teacher motivation in general education, "scant attention" (Liu, 2020, p. 1) has been paid to foreign language teachers' motivation. Dörnyei and Ushioda (2021) reiterate this perception, pointing out that compared with the most prolific areas of foreign or second language learner motivation, insufficient attention has been paid to foreign language teachers' motivation.

Research into the motivation of second and foreign language learners has shifted towards a more comprehensive, context-specific, and dynamic perspective. This approach emphasizes the interplay between the learner, a complex individual with a unique background, identity, and emotional makeup, and the multifaceted social, experiential, and contextual systems in which they are inherently involved (Ushioda, 2009; Consoli, 2021). Informed by recent advancements in the study of second and foreign language learner motivation, and recognizing the lack of research on the teaching motivation of foreign language teachers (Zhai, 2019), the current study focused on the teaching motivation of second language teachers from a comprehensive and dynamic perspective.

More specifically, this study delved into the evolution of teaching motivation among English teachers at various professional stages in a state high school in a small county in Northern China. The exploration used the concept of "possible selves" as a framework and is guided by the following research question:

- (1) What are the characteristics of participants' ideal selves?
- (2) How can the evolution of participants' possible selves influence English teachers' teaching motivation?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Concept of Teacher Motivation*

The term “motivation” is derived from the Latin verb *movere*, signifying “to move” (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). It’s typically perceived as an innate drive that propels individuals to act (Han & Yin, 2016, p.3). Nevertheless, given the intricate and multifaceted characteristics of motivation as a concept, a single universally accepted definition has been elusive among scholars with varying theoretical orientations (Schunk et al., 2008; Turner & Patrick, 2008).

While existing definitions provide some understanding of teachers’ motivation, they often overlook its dynamic nature and the interplay between teachers and the multiple layers of contextual factors. As a result, there’s a pressing need to reinterpret teachers’ motivation for teaching. In this study, teaching motivation is defined as the reasons why teachers persist in their profession. It’s recognized as a complex and dynamic construct influenced by teachers’ experiences, cognition, emotions, and interactions with their environment. In other words, teachers’ motivation is not a single entity but is intricately connected to a multitude of internal and external factors that reflect the complexity of human life (Consoli, 2021).

2.2 *Possible Selves Theory in L2 Teacher Motivation Research*

2.2.1 Possible Selves Theory

The main theoretical frameworks (e.g., Achievement-Goal Theory, Self-Determination Theory) utilized in teacher motivation research have been criticized for being fragmented and emphasizing particular aspects of the multifaceted concept of motivation. In contrast, the possible selves theory offers the most powerful, versatile, comprehensive, and inclusive lens for analyzing teachers’ motivation (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014). Richardson and Watt (2010) note that the possible selves theory offers a new perspective on self-directed motivation and it encompasses “teachers’ perceived goal achievement, perceived demand and stressfulness, satisfaction and liking, and planned effort and persistence” (p. 161).

Markus and Nurius (1986) initially introduced the concept of possible selves to enrich self-concept research, stating that it bridges cognition and motivation by depicting what individuals might become, aspire to become, or fear becoming. Higgins (1987) further developed this concept, distinguishing three constructs: actual self, ideal self, and ought-to self. The actual self pertains to current self-perception and attributes one believes they possess. The ideal self embodies future desired qualities based on aspirations, while the ought-to self relates to perceived duties and responsibilities. A fundamental tenet of the possible selves theory is that the human capacity for imagination allows individuals to surpass reality’s constraints (Kubanyiova, 2009), with significant implications for their present experience. It underscores the immense motivational power of success or failure imagery (p. 45). Despite their future-orientation, possible selves are deeply linked with individuals’ past and present selves.

2.2.2 Possible Selves Theory in L2 Teacher Motivation Research

Drawing on the theory of possible selves, Costa (2012) explored how the current and ideal selves of two beginner English teachers at a public elementary school in Brazil impacted their motivation dynamics. The study’s results indicated that positive actual self-perceptions can boost teachers’ self-confidence and motivation, but negative actual self-perceptions can either stimulate or confine them. Furthermore, positive future self-imagery can enhance teachers’ motivation, while feared selves significantly contribute to accomplishing their daily tasks.

In Japan, Kumazawa (2013) conducted a study focusing on novice English teachers, finding that it wasn’t the teachers’ ideal selves that primarily influenced their motivation. Instead, the significant demotivating factor was the disparities between their ideal selves and their actual and ought-to selves.

Another study within this stance was conducted by Sahakyan (2017). Her study utilized the theory of possible selves, focusing on five teachers at three Armenian universities. These teachers intensely experienced feared, ought-to, and ideal selves at the beginning of their careers, all of which were influenced by their past learning experiences. However, their ideal selves were altered due to the restrictions of various contextual factors. In the end, the teachers developed feasible selves, which were well-suited to the local context and included elements of their ideal, ought-to, and feared selves.

It can be seen that research using the possible selves theory to examine language teachers’ motivational progression is quite sparse. Except for Sahakyan’s (2017) study, the rest have only concentrated on early-career teachers. While Sahakyan did include mid and late-career English teachers, her study was limited to Armenian

university teachers. To fill this gap, the current study aims to explore how in-service English teachers' possible selves influence their motivational changes throughout their teaching careers in Chinese high school environments. More importantly, this study investigates English teachers' motivation development from a holistic perspective, incorporating multiple interconnected components within individuals and their interplay with spatial-temporal context (Larsen-Freeman, 2018). In other words, this study perceives teachers as "living organisms" (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, p. 3) with their own life stories and idiosyncrasies and believes that their development is a product of the interplay between organisms and their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

3. The Study

3.1 A Multiple Case Study Approach

A multi-case study methodology is deemed most suitable for this research as it allows for a holistic exploration of complex phenomena, rather than a reductionist viewpoint (Nisbet & Watt, 1980). Even though the case study approach has been defined in various ways, common and essential elements include boundedness, natural context, and in-depth analysis (Duff, 2007). Furthermore, as highlighted by Cohen et al. (2018), a case study approach can enhance the readers' understanding of the research outcomes as it presents real experiences in a genuine context, rather than merely presenting findings as abstract variables or numerical analysis.

Within the context of this research, this methodology was used to capture "the real-life, intricate, dynamic, and evolving interplay of events, human relationships, and other elements in a unique instance" (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 376). Utilizing this method allows for a comprehensive evaluation of teachers' motivations, emphasizing the reasons behind the creation and evolution of their possible selves. This approach also gives a platform to the teachers' perspectives, which have often been overlooked, thereby potentially impacting the decision-making processes of educators, policymakers, and school administrators.

3.2 The Participants

In the initial phase of this study, a convenience sampling method was employed, facilitated by a local contact at the native high school. This high school, previously being ranked below average among local public high schools, has seen its standing improve due to managerial reforms. After identifying the group of English teachers in this high school as potential participants, a purposive sample was utilized to seek core participants capable of providing rich and diverse insights into the phenomenon. Given the heterogeneous sample with predefined criteria (i.e., age, teaching experience, gender), the multiple data collection instruments, and the constraints of available resources and time, an initial group of eight participants was enlisted. However, one withdrew after the second interview due to workload, leaving seven to participate in the full data collection phase. These seven participants, Cali, Wynne, Jack, Sophia, Lisa, Lily, and Harley (all pseudonyms), served as in-service English teachers from March 2022 to September 2022 at this public high school. A subsequent table (Table 1) provides the biographical vignettes of each participant.

Table 1. The participants' biographical vignettes

No.	Name (Pseudonym)	Biographical Vignettes
1	Jack	He was born in a small village in Northern China. He is now a 41-year-old English teacher with 17 years of teaching experience. He had limited opportunities to learn English prior to middle school because of his socio-economic limitations. A significant influence on his journey was one of his middle English teachers who successfully taught him English phonetic symbols, a milestone that excited him greatly as it unlocked his ability to read English words. After graduation from a university, he became an English teacher in this high school.
2	Cali	She is a 26-year-old English teacher with three years of teaching experience. She studied in the same high school where she now teaches, working together with some of her past teachers. Her local upbringing has given her a deep understanding of the context. After obtaining her Bachelor's degree in English, she became an English teacher at a private English training institution. Followed the advice of her mother and one of her friends, she resigned and returned to her hometown to become an English teacher at a state high school. Currently, she is pursuing a postgraduate degree in Education.

3	Harley	Harley, a 34-year-old English teacher, hails from the same small county where she now teaches. Her journey with English began out of love for the language, choosing it as her major at a Normal University. Despite initially lacking self-confidence in middle school, mastering English became a turning point for her, instilling a new-found confidence. Upon graduation, guided by her parents' advice, she returned to her hometown and initially pursued a career as a translator. However, her path eventually led her back to education, and she has now amassed 8 years of teaching experience.
4	Wynne	She is a 38-year-old English teacher, graduating from a Normal College (offering three-year teacher education programs), and spending 18 years honing her teaching skills. She was born and raised in a same small village of the county where the school is currently located. Her passion for learning English was fueled by her middle and high school English teachers, who were not only professional but also established a meaningful connection with her. After graduation from a normal college, she returned to her roots and became an English teacher in her hometown.
5	Sophia	She, a 40-year-old English teacher with 17 years of experience, was born and raised in a small village of the county where her school is located. She opted to study close to home at a Normal College due to her homesickness, majoring in English. After earning her degree from the Normal College, she continued her education in the same field at a Normal University.
6	Lily	Lily, a 43-year-old English teacher with 23 years of teaching experience, was born and raised in a small village within the county where she now teaches. Following her teacher's advice, she chose to major in English at a Normal University. After graduation, she began her career as an English teacher in a rural middle school, despite the poor conditions of the school. Considering the challenging environment, Lily contemplated leaving her role to pursue postgraduate education. However, after failing to pass the entrance exam for graduate school and getting married, she decided to abandon this pursuit. She was later chosen to teach English at a high school, a position she still holds today.
7	Lisa	Lisa, 51-year-old with 28 years of teaching experience, was born and raised in the same county where she currently teaches. Encouraged by her teachers and parents, she pursued English as her major at a Normal University, despite finding the language challenging. After graduation, she was assigned to be a high school English teacher at her hometown due to a job assignment policy in place at that historical period.

3.3 Data Collection

The primary method of data collection utilized was semi-structured interviews, guided by the Teacher Interview Guide (See Appendix A). These interviews were conducted in two stages (from the end of March, 2022 to mid-July, 2022 and then throughout September, 2022), with a break during the summer holidays. The initial stage of interviews was designed to gather data on the participants' backgrounds, the development of teachers' possible selves, and how these interact with both internal and external factors. The subsequent stage of interviews served as a means of verification, aiming to confirm the accuracy of the researcher's interpretation of the teachers' experiences.

A total of 28 online interviews were carried out and documented. The duration of each interview was roughly 50 minutes. All participants opted to conduct their interviews in Chinese to accurately relay their teaching experiences and the evolution of their motivations. Over the course of the six-month study, the researcher fostered a strong relationship with the participants by safeguarding their rights, honoring their decisions, being attuned to their emotional states, and responding positively to their inquiries.

Additional data collection methods were employed to maintain regular interaction with the participants and to gain a comprehensive understanding of the local context. These included weekly reflective journals from the teachers, submitted after the first interview, as well as documents containing information from the local high school's official website and WeChat account. Table 2 provides a detailed breakdown of the data collection process for this study.

Table 2. Details of the data collection

Participants	Time		Interviews	Reflective Journals
Cali	Phase One	April	Interview 1: 55min, on 6 th April	2
		May	Interview 2: 50 min, on 9 th May	4
		June	Interview 3: 41 min, on 17 th June	4
		July	0	1
	Phase Two	September	Interview 4: 25 min, on 20 th September	2
Sophia	Phase One	April	Interview 1: 60 min, on 6 th April	2
		May	Interview 2: 50 min, on 7 th May	5
		June	Interview 3: 64 min, on 17 th Jun	3
		July	Interview 4: 93 min, on 9 th July	1
	Phase Two	September	0	0
Lily	Phase One	April	Interview 1: 50min, on 7 th April	3
		May	Interview 2: 54min, on 7 th May	4
		June	0	2
		July	Interview 3: 50min, on 2 nd July	0
	Phase Two	September	0	0
Wynne	Phase One	April	Interview 1: 56min, on 7 th April	3
		May	Interview 2: 46min, on 9 th May	4
		Jun	Interview 3: 47min, on 17 th June	3
		July	Interview 4: 22min, on 16 th July	1
	Phase Two	September	0	2
Lisa	Phase One	April	Interview 1: 52min, on 7 th April	2
		May	Interview 2: 51min, on 13 th May	4
		June	Interview 3: 44min, on 17 th June	3
		July	0	1
	Phase Two	September	Interview 4: 10 min, on 22 th September	0
Jack	Phase One	April	Interview 1: 55min, on 8 th April	2
		May	Interview 2: 55min, on 7 th May	4
		June	Interview 3: 65min, on 23 th June	3
		July	Interview 4: 31min, on 7 th July	1
	Phase Two	September	Interview 5: 12 min, on 20 th September	0
Harley	Phase One	April	Interview 1: 53min, on 8 th April	2
		May	Interview 2: 62min, on 28 th May	1
		June	Interview 3: 86min, on 28 th June	4
		July	0	2
	Phase Two	September	Interview 4: 35 min, on 13 th September	0

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the collected data, a procedure that “identifies, analyzes, and codes emergent themes within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). The thematic analysis in this study commenced with an “immersion process” (Mann, 2016, p. 212), which required the researcher to repeatedly listen to the recorded interviews, transcribe them into Chinese, and then translate them into English. To further verify accuracy, both the Chinese and English versions of the transcripts were sent to each participant for review. Beyond interview data, participants’ reflective journals and associated documents were also translated from Chinese to English. To effectively manage, organize, and code the substantial data set (which included 30 hours’ worth of interview transcripts and 75 participants’ reflective journals), the researcher utilized Nvivo 12 software.

Following the identification of primary and overarching codes, these were sorted into themes corresponding to each research question through a reflective and iterative process. Ultimately, each participant was presented with a comprehensive visual representation of their data analysis (a diagram), allowing them to verify the results. Figure 1 provides a comprehensive overview of the codes from all participants’ interviews. Table 3 shows the preliminary codes of Cali’s first interview. Figure 2 is an extract from Cali’s diagrams.

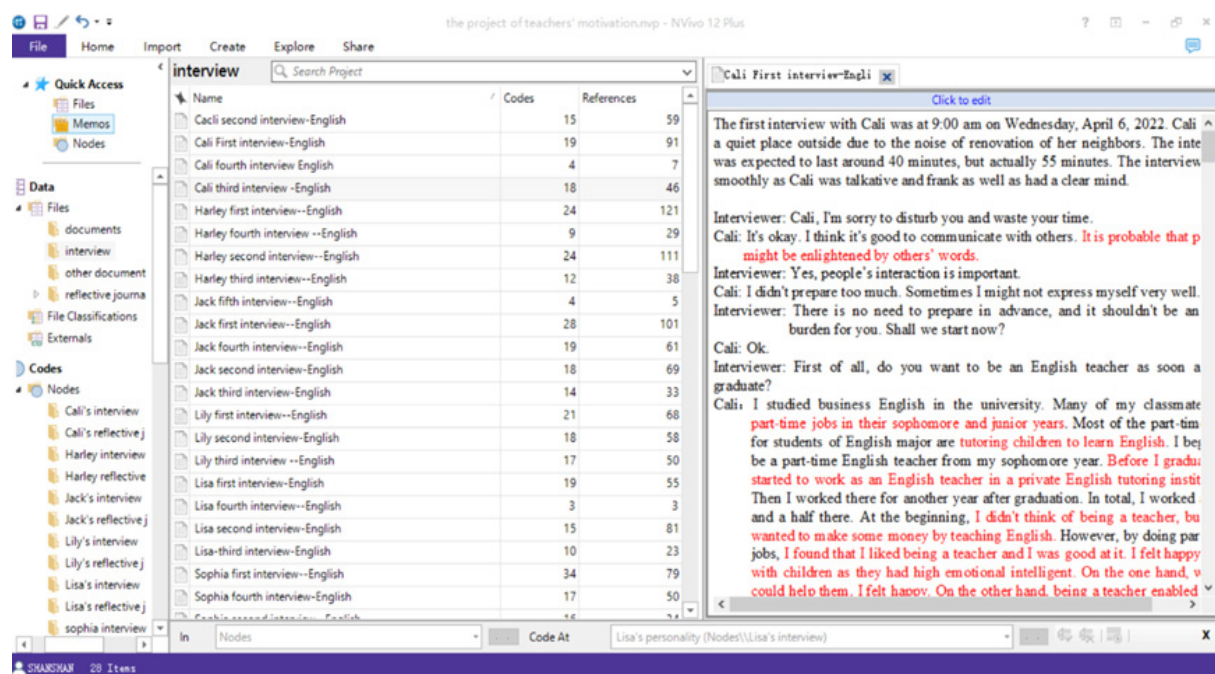


Figure 1. The overall picture of codes of all participants’ interviews

Table 3. Preliminary codes of Cali's first interview

Codes	Description	Examples from the data
Reasons for being an English teacher	Her experiences as a part-time English teacher in a private language training institution have been significantly impactful.	Initially, I hadn't considered a career in teaching, but I saw an opportunity to earn money by teaching English. However, through my experience as a part-time teacher, I discovered not only a fondness for teaching but also a proficiency in it.
Reasons for being an English in the state high school	Following her mother's and a friend's suggestion, she pursued a career as a state high school English teacher, a position she secured after successfully passing the high school teacher recruitment exam.	Initially, I was reluctant to return to my hometown. However, my mother strongly desired my return, and a friend suggested that I could consider taking the state school teacher recruitment examination.
The change of the school environment	Colleagues are motivated by the policies adopted by the new headmaster.	The environment of our school is changing now, and the competition among teachers is fierce. I believe these changes are tied to the current headmaster's management style, which effectively kindles everyone's enthusiasm.
The influence of the current postgraduate study	She benefits a lot from being a part-time postgraduate student.	Many of the teachers who teach us now had stayed abroad, and they inspired us a lot.
The influence of colleagues	She has a harmonious relationship with her colleagues	I also learned a lot from them in respect of teaching skills and knowledge.
Being a state high school teacher is different from being an English teacher in the private language training institution	Being an English teacher in the state high school has many advantages.	It's stable to work in a public high school and this also make it easier to find a boyfriend. Meanwhile, students here are more respected for and polite with teachers
Educational philosophy	She sought to identify straightforward methods to address students' learning difficulties.	Subsequently, I devised a simpler method to help students grasp the rules of exclamatory sentences.
Shortcomings in teaching	She possesses a clear understanding of herself.	Indeed, I still have much to learn, as I occasionally encounter unfamiliar words in my work. Additionally, I find myself unable to explain certain grammar rules as clearly as other teachers. Furthermore, my understanding of some key and complex knowledge points is not yet fully clear.
Support from family member	Both her mother and husband support her work.	Everyone considers teaching a noble profession. A few words from a teacher can significantly influence students.

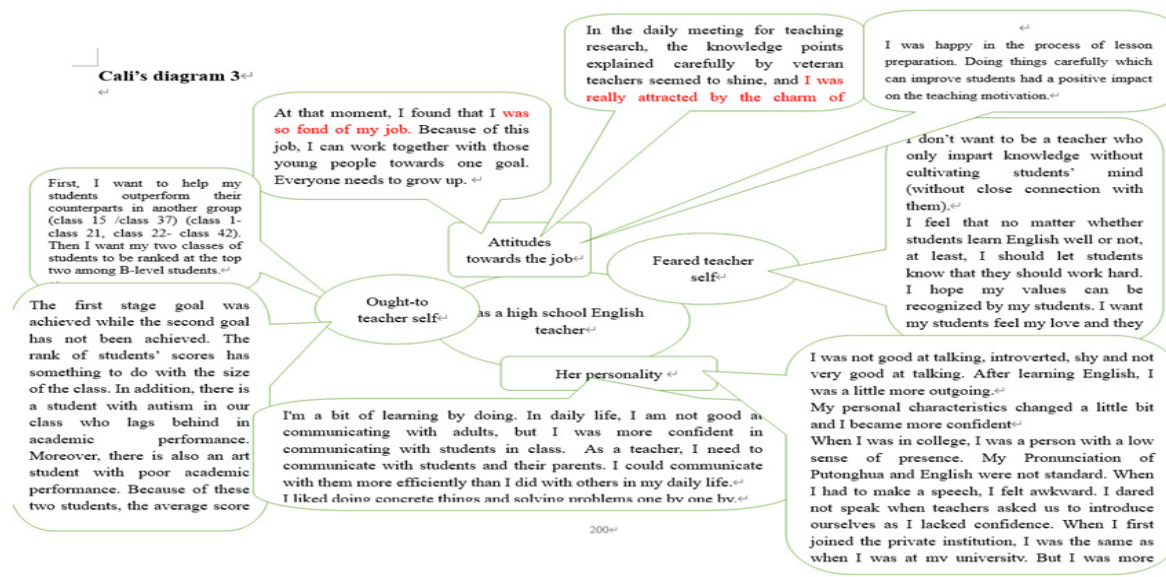


Figure 2. An extract from Cali's diagrams

4. Results

4.1 Characteristics of Participants' Ideal Selves

Since English has been identified as one of the core academic subjects of the university entrance exam, high school managers and students' parents pay great attention to students' scores on English exams. Therefore, teachers exert great effort to attain their ought-to teacher self: the one helps students improve their English exam grades. Among all participants, Lisa was the only one who lacked ideal images and was solely driven by the ought-to self, making her a non-visionary type (Rahmati et al., 2019). Initially, she faced struggles when failing to meet ought-to self requirements. Hindered by a lack of external support and her introverted nature, Lisa was confused about how to improvement herself. Despite frequent frustration, she persisted in striving to fulfill the ought-to self. Unlike Lisa, the other participants possessed clear ideal images with dynamically stable evolution processes and belonged to the type of visionary (i.e., teachers with a clear articulation of future teacher images) mentioned by Rahmati et al. (2019).

It is worth emphasizing that most of the participants' ideal teacher selves were greatly impacted by the ought-to teacher self. An extreme case was Jack. Jack's initial ideal images (the one who was able to explain knowledge in a crystal-clear way and the one who was able to answer all questions raised by students) were derived from his previous learning experience and specific difficulties he encountered in teaching practices. It is worth mentioning that these two ideal images were aligned with the requirement of improving students' exam scores. Contrasting Lisa, Jack benefited greatly from his mentor and colleagues. As an extrovert, he sought advice to navigate difficulties, and his development was further aided by improved school management and support for young teachers. Due to Jack's progress, he not only had the opportunity to teach A-level students, but also assumed increased responsibilities as a head teacher and leader of the joint-lesson planning group. He, therefore, developed another ideal image: the one who was able to help strong students learn English with high efficiency. Because of the reform of the university entrance exam (i.e., the focus of the English test shifting from students' mechanical memorization of grammatical rules and words to students' ability to apply knowledge and think logically), Jack further intensified his latest ideal image because he realized that the traditional way of asking students to spend a great amount of time to do a large quantity of repetitive grammatical exercise was not effective anymore. Jack confessed that most of his attention was spent on the improvement of students' scores, even at the expense of facilitating students' long-term development, because students' academic performance was critical for his promotion and income. Obviously, the evolution of Jack's ideal images was tightly centered around the requirement of the ought-to self.

Students' enrollment by universities is based on their grades. Therefore, my focus is on students' grades. I work for and think for students' grade improvement. I am worried that I do not pay attention to students' moral education and future growth (Jack's reflective journal, July 6th)

In the case of Lily, when she transitioned from a middle school to a high school English teacher, she recognized her professional English knowledge was insufficient, necessitating further learning. She updated her ideal teacher self from the one who wanted to teach students as much knowledge as possible (deriving from her understanding of high school teaching) to the one who can help students find links between pieces of knowledge and enhance their ability of knowledge application. Lily developed the second imagined self because she found that teaching students too much knowledge did not mean they could perform well in their exams. Their poor performance in tests was because they could not synthesize their acquired knowledge to answer test questions. In addition to the ideal selves that are clearly related to the ought-to self, Lily also possessed another ideal teacher self which was partially related to the ought-to self: being the one who can teach students with innovative teaching methods and explain knowledge in an interesting way to help them understand it easily, quickly, and happily (with minimal effort). This approach could effectively enhance students' learning outcomes and simultaneously alleviate their immense study pressure. Hence, this ideal image was also partially linked to Lily's another ideal teacher self: being the one who can contribute to students' psychological health. This was inspired by her personal interest and her identity of being a mother. Lily's focus on students' psychological development could also be understood by her feared teacher self:

The type of teacher that students hate is the one who is extremely distant from the students. These teachers do not understand students as they think things from their perspective. (Lily's interview 2)

I wanted to communicate with students more. I wanted to try my best to provide help to students not only by transmitting knowledge but also by caring about their psychological health. (Lily's interview 1)

In the case of Harley, her ideal teacher images were influenced by her experience as an intern English teacher in a rural middle school. The school's circumstances were quite unfavorable, providing students with limited opportunities to engage in English studies. Harley believed the most effective way to boost the English exam grades of struggling students was by understanding each student's learning difficulties. She worked diligently to identify individual challenges and devise methods for improvement, thus establishing a good rapport with students. Harley envisioned herself as a teacher who could help students overcome these challenges through detailed class explanations and private tutorials. Clearly, Harley's this ideal image was in aligned with the ought-to self. It was worth noting that Harley's ideal self was the opposite of her feared teacher self: a teacher without sufficient professional knowledge and clear instruction. This feared teacher self was influenced by her previous negative learning experience with a physics teacher who lacked professional knowledge and failed to answer Harley's questions, leading Harley to give up learning physics. Meanwhile, because of her close relationships with students in the rural school, she possessed an ideal image of the one who had a close relationship with students and another ideal image of being an educator who could influence students significantly (e.g., encouraging them to put effort into solving learning difficulties). This was also related to Harley's negative experience of one of her head teachers hurting her self-esteem. Therefore, she tried to avoid being a teacher who laughed at students' failure (another feared teacher self) and encouraged students to believe in themselves.

I hope to understand each student's learning difficulties, and help students solve their difficulties. Therefore, students have a significant improvement. (Harley's interview 2)

Harley mentioned that she had realized her ideal teacher self to some extent during the first several years before she married because she had plenty of time and energy to communicate with students and prepare her lessons. However, at the current stage, Harley struggles to attain her ideal teacher selves because of her responsibility as a mother and wife.

In the case of Wynne, her first ideal teacher image was the one who could teach students knowledge that she had, which appeared in the textbook, and that they should know. But she did not have a clear mind about how to teach. Meanwhile, she struggled to meet the requirement of the ought-to self, and she even cried about her students' low grades.

My students' grades were average, falling into the middle range. I taught two classes..... I did not know how to improve my students' grades as I was a new teacher at that time. I cried over that. (Wynne's interview 2)

Wynne's poor performance in her first demonstration class (e.g., failing to complete teaching procedures effectively) indicated that she lacked teaching skills and knowledge of teaching design. Therefore, she possessed another ideal teacher image (i.e., the one who could perform well in the demonstration class with excellent teaching skills and perfect teaching design) which was complementary to and aligned with the first one.

My poor performance in my first public course really frustrated me and I was sad. I think that I should not

just teach what was known by me and contained in the textbook. I should teach systematically with a clear purpose.Then, I started to think seriously. (Wynne's interview 1)

Wynne perceived continuous participation in the demonstration class activities as the only way to solve her difficulties. She finally managed to improve her teaching ability and quality notably, which were critical for the remarkable improvement of students' grades. Wynne was then assigned to teach top students. Because of the students' high language proficiency, the continuous writing task (a new kind of writing task with prompts) of the university entrance exam, and her great interest in writing, Wynne developed her latest ideal teacher self: the one who was able to improve students' written and oral abilities in English. Although Wynne's latest ideal image was closely linked to the test, her eagerness to improve students' communicative ability was also because of their future development.

I hope that their English learning is not solely for the university entrance exam but for communications with foreigners. I hope that they can use English to communicate. At least they have this kind of courage and can say several sentences in English. (Wynne's interview 3)

In the case of Sophia, two of her ideal selves were closely related to improving students' scores: the one who had a good command of English knowledge and who was able to teach each class with good effect. Meanwhile, she wanted to be a teacher who could have a harmonious relationship with students and treat students equally without hurting their self-esteem (derived from her negative learning experience). Like Harley, Sophia realized her ideal selves to some extent in the early years of her teaching career because she spent almost all her time at school and met a group of students who were very willing to cooperate with her. However, Sophia encountered challenges in sustaining her ideal images in recent years because of the test reform and characteristics of her current group of students (e.g., resisting new teaching pedagogies and being used to the traditional passive learning style).

Cali's ideal image was to be an expert teacher with good English knowledge, excellent teaching skills, and advanced educational beliefs. While the first two goals were closely linked to the ought-to teacher self, the last aspect was related to the mission of being a general educator to guide students to a better life. As Cali was the least experienced teacher among the participants, her understanding of the three aspects of her ideal teacher image gradually changed. For example, Cali added standard pronunciation and native-like intonation of English as well as excellent oral communicative ability of English as new components of a good command of English knowledge.

To conclude, there was a dynamically stable evolution process for participants' ideal image formation. While there was continuous emergence of new ideal images or new perceptions of existing ideal images in the teaching career of Jack, Lily, Wynne, and Cali, Sophia and Harley exerted great effort to maintain their comparatively stable ideal images. The dynamicity meant that there was continuous emergence of ideal images; the maintenance of ideal selves was full of ebbs and flows; and the understanding of ideal images was gradually changed. The stability meant that the ideal images were static within a particular period. Furthermore, it refers to the reality that the emergence of ideal images did not mean that participants had discarded or fully realized prior ones. On the contrary, they preserved and adapted key components of previous ideal images while possessing new ones. Finally, they formed a synthesized ideal teacher self with various components (i.e., key components of various ideal images emerged at the different professional stages), which remained open to further changes. In addition, although the ought-to self played a critical role in participants' formation of ideal selves, its influence varied for different participants. While the development of Jack's ideal teacher selves centered around the ought-to self closely, other participants also showed interest in being a general educator to care about students' psychological health and future development.

4.2 The Influence of the Evolution of Participants' Possible Selves on English Teachers' Teaching Motivation

One prominent feature of all the participants' ideal images was attainability. They were mainly derived from participants past learning experiences, the requirement of the ought-to self, concrete difficulties they encountered in teaching practice, other roles they played rather than being a subject teacher (e.g., head teacher, group leader, and general educator), and their interests. Therefore, their ideal images were context-specific and feasible, enhancing or maintaining their teaching motivation. For example, Lily's ideal self of contributing to students' psychological health was inspired by students' struggles and pains in their learning process. In Sophia's case, she initially had no idea how to teach. However, by conscientiously and effectively preparing and teaching each class, she gradually formed one of her ideal teaching personas.

Additionally, when participants noticed the gaps between their actual selves and their ideal selves or the ought-to self, they successfully developed effective strategies to narrow the gap. For instance, both Jack and Lily faced

initial challenges but took every opportunity to learn from experienced teachers. Moreover, Lily supplemented her teaching skills with psychology knowledge from online courses, enhancing her ability to guide students effectively.

In addition, the possible selves owned by most participants were interconnected and complementary. As mentioned previously, some participants' ideal selves were linked closely to the ought-to self. In some cases, it is hard to identify the boundary between the ought-to self and ideal selves and to say whether teachers' ideal images were their aspirations or influenced significantly by the expectations and responsibilities of the ought-to self. For example, Sophia's great effort for the effect of each class was also because she wanted to be recognized by her students in terms of hard-working and excellent teaching skills.

In summary, participants formed their conglomerate of selves interacting with each other and working concurrently. Moreover, participants possessed a synthesized and open ideal teacher self with various components through maintenance, preservation, adaption, and updates, contributing to their commitment in teaching career.

5. Discussion

Kubanyiova (2012) notes that teachers' ideal selves lie at the core of their teaching motivation. Teachers exert self-regulatory effort to reduce discrepancies between actual and ideal teaching selves. The important role of participants' ideal selves played in their teaching motivation was also confirmed by this study. Furthermore, studies by Kumazawa (2013) and Sahakyan (2017) confirm the dynamic process of the formation of participants' possible selves. They find that participants tended to possess distant and unattainable ideal images at the onset, which gradually devolved into feasible ideal selves fitting the local context with participants' reflexivity. This study also identifies the shifting and dynamic nature of participants' possible selves but with distinctive patterns.

Unlike participants in other studies who possessed clear but unattainable ideal selves at the begging of their teaching career (Hamman et al., 2010), most of the participants in this study possessed feasible and concrete ideal images at the onset or shortly after they began to teach. In other words, their ideal teaching images were formed in their immediate teaching contexts, which enabled them to adopt specific strategies and develop self-regulated activities to attain their ideal images (Kubanyiova, 2009). For example, Sophia developed a vivid and elaborated ideal image (i.e., focusing on the effect of each class) after she began to work. Jack formed the ideal image (i.e., being able to answer students' questions) directly from his immediate teaching, which was the basis for his initial ideal image (i.e., explaining knowledge crystal clearly).

Reasons for participants in other studies possessing unattainable and excessively idealistic images at the onset include the distance between the context of their teacher education program and the actual teaching context and the conflict between their ideal selves and the ought-to selves. However, this was not the case of this study. All participants' ideal images were not in conflict with their ought-to selves. In addition, some ideal images of Cali, Lily, and Harley derived from their teaching practice in concrete teaching contexts, which were similar to that of the local high school, rather than from education programs. Moreover, their specific ideal images, which were not distant from their actual selves, increased the likelihood of stimulating their immediate actions to achieve them, which is supported by the concept of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and expectancy-value theories (Wigfield & Eccles, 1992).

Notably, this study introduces a perspective not yet explored in existing literature: three distinct types of the evolution process of participants' ideal selves. First, new ideal images were continuously emerging for Lily, Jack, and Wynne, which served as new sources of their teaching motivation. The realization or partial realization of their previous ideal images enhanced their self-efficacy to pursue new goals. In the negotiated process, key components of each ideal image were preserved and formed a synthesized ideal image that was open to change. In addition, there was no clear time boundary between ideal images formed at different stages. They were intertwined and intersecting (Henry, 2014). Their ideal images were context-specific and vivid, reflecting their difficulties, worries, and concerns. This is similar to the findings of other studies (Kumazawa, 2013; Sahakyan, 2017). Second, although Cali's ideal image (i.e., being an expert teacher) was comparatively stable, her perception of the ideal self was in constant change, such as adding the component of the excellent oral communicative ability of English into the traditional concept of a good command of English knowledge. Third, the ideal selves of Harley and Sophia were specific and individualized, and the maintenance of them was full of ebbs and flows. While Sophia focused on the effect of each lesson, Harley paid attention to the learning difficulties of each student. Although some participants belonged to the same evolution pattern, their concrete content for ideal selves was distinct. They focused on different aspects of instructional practices and students' development. For example, while Lily focused on students' knowledge application ability, Wynne prioritized

students' writing skills. According to Kumazawa (2013), possible selves are personalized forms of people's imaged future.

6. Conclusion

The participants' ideal selves are feasible and concrete, stimulating their regulatory actions and enabling them to develop specific strategies to attain those ideal images. Some participants continuously update or change the perception of their ideal teaching images. Thus, the added components serve as new motivational resources. Others try to maintain their ideal teaching images with ebbs and flows. In addition, most participants possess ideal images of being a general educator, contributing to students' social, emotional, and psychological development. Finally, participants form personalized and interconnected possible selves, which simultaneously motivate them to work. It is worth noting that their conglomerate of interacting selves is susceptible to the influence of important others (e.g., students and colleagues) and multilayered environmental factors (e.g., school management and education reform).

7. Contribution

Theoretically, this study highlights essential features of language teachers' possible selves in China. In addition, this study provides evidence for the contribution of the possible selves theory, which offers a more inclusive and dynamic perspective to understand teachers' motivation trajectories, to studies investigating teacher motivation fluctuations. As for practical implications, the concept of possible selves could be applied in designing teacher education programs. As noted, participants have unique possible selves, each with distinctive teaching interests within the same local context. Therefore, investigating teachers' possible selves offers teacher educators and school managers insight into teachers' individual differences.

8. Limitations

While this study provides significant insights into the motivation of high school English teachers within the Chinese context, it does have some limitations. Primarily, its qualitative approach and limited participant sample restrict its widespread applicability. Nevertheless, the study strives for analytical generalization by meticulously examining and analyzing the participants' experiences and contexts. This approach encourages readers to relate and contrast these findings with their own experiences, possibly deepening their understanding. Furthermore, the study aims for natural generalization, allowing readers to glean insights from the participants' experiences. Secondly, qualitative studies are inherently influenced by researchers' values and biases, compromising objectivity. To mitigate this, the researcher-maintained reflexivity and transparency, providing detailed accounts of data collection and analysis. Participants were also involved in verifying the researcher's understanding and interpretation of the data, fostering a collective construction of meaning. Lastly, due to Covid-19 restrictions, interviews were conducted online, limiting non-verbal communication. However, this format offered participants a comfortable and focused environment to express themselves more naturally.

9. Recommendations for Future Research

This study's findings show that three unique patterns of such evolution have been identified. Hence, future research could address the following question: Do English teachers at different educational levels in China or elsewhere exhibit similar ideal image evolution patterns? Moreover, teacher participants in this study varied significantly in teaching experience. This variance aids in discerning the impact of environmental shifts on teachers' motivation evolution. Some participants face early career challenges and enhance their professional competence through persistent effort (e.g., Jack and Wynne), while others start with high aspirations due to early career success and high self-efficacy (e.g., Cali). Given that most existing motivation studies focus on novice teachers, future research could incorporate participants at various career stages to broaden our understanding of teachers' motivation progression.

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Appendix A

Teacher Interview Guide

- (1) Did you have any other work experience before becoming an English teacher in a secondary school?
- (2) Why did you become an English teacher in a secondary school? Did your English teachers who made a strong impression on you deeply influence your professional choice? Did your family members influence your professional choice?
- (3) Have you ever had any regrets about choosing a teaching career?
- (4) How do you see your English learning experience?
- (5) Do you think that teachers enjoy high social status in your environment?
- (6) Do you think that you suffer from a heavy workload? What are the main tasks of your job?
- (7) What kind of teacher did you want to be when you started teaching (ideal teacher self)? Did that change later? If so, Why?
- (8) What kind of teachers do you least want to be (feared teacher self)?
- (9) Do you think that you suffer from high pressure from your work? Why?
- (10) What is your typical working day like? Could you please describe it?
- (11) How do you think English should be taught? Has this changed a lot?
- (12) What do you think about educational reform such as the standard curriculum? Does this influence your practical teaching?
- (13) What do you think about your professional development? Do you have opportunities to have professional training?
- (14) What sort of rewards (if any) do you get from your current job?
- (15) What are you most satisfied with in your job?
- (16) What are you most dissatisfied with in your job?
- (17) Could you please describe the management in your school?
- (18) Do you like communicating with your students? Do you have close relationships with your students?

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