Understanding the self: a review of Dörnyei's Second Language Motivation Self System and its relevance in explaining motivation of the Zimbabwean foreign language learner

"Through others, we become ourselves."
Vygotsky

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Abstract

There are two main objectives that this study seeks to address simultaneously; to discuss the concept of *self* system as explained by Zoltán Dörnyei and to establish its relevance in explaining foreign language motivation in Zimbabwe. Basing mainly on recent empirical investigations done by Ndhlovu (in press) and Mkhize and Chisoni (2015), this study will also review Dörnyei's *L2 motivation self system* model in its application to FLL[2]contexts with Zimbabwe being an example. The view expressed in this study is that although the model's contribution in the L2/FL motivation discourse is unequivocally significant, it does not do justice to the understanding of the FL self system and its development especially in FLL contexts such as the Zimbabwean FLL setting. The model does not have a unitary significance since it seems to ignore social factors that are crucial in determining the nature of the FL self in most FL contexts such as Zimbabwe. In this study, these factors are known as the *determinants* and include factors such as cultural factors, lack of policy frameworks, FLL support and career opportunities among others. The understanding is that the impact of these *determinants* upon the *forme*r and *present selves* (positive or negative) not only determines the nature of the *future self* but also the amount of motivation that will determine both the learner's performance and continuity of learning the foreign language. The study then proceeds to offer suggestions or amendments that can be made to the model in an attempt to increase its significance to cover foreign language learning contexts such as Zimbabwe. The integration of these factors is demonstrated in a proposed new model entitled the *L2/FL situational Self model of motivation.* While avoiding to completely dismiss the concept of motivation, this model, just like Norton's (2000/2013) concept of investment, seeks to incorporate socio cultural factors that determine the construction of the foreign language self.

Keywords Dörnyei's L2 motivation Self System, L2/FL situational Self model of motivation and Foreign language learning in Zimbabwe and similar contexts

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[2] In this study, FL stands for Foreign Language while FLL stands for Foreign Language Learning. SL stands for Second language or L2, while SLL stands for Second Language Learning.

1. Introduction

This discussion has been prompted and inspired by the questions raised by Schmidt and his colleagues concerning the application of motivation theories and constructs in other contexts, for example, non European FLL environments. Schmidt and his colleagues begin by raising questions related to the meaning of the term "motivation", they proceed to ask whether the concept of motivation is unitary or has several facets. What is more significant for this study, is their exploration of the question whether motivation is a universal concept or a cross cultural variable (Schmidt et al., 1996, p 11). The latter question in particular has prompted this study to review the aspect of the *self* which is central in Dörnyei's L2 motivation self system model of motivation. The main reason being the observation that the understanding of the self usually carries cultural connotations. In western cultures for example, the self may suggest the nature of being an "independent construal" (Markus and Kitayama, 1991). This paper therefore, seeks not only to review Dörnyei' s theory of motivation but also to find out whether it can be applied to non European contexts such as the Zimbabwean FLL context or not. It has already been mentioned that this study has been prompted and inspired by the questions raised by Schmidt and his colleagues concerning the concept of motivation. One of the questions they raise that can act as a proper background for this study concerns the meaning of the term "motivation" itself. To begin with, one has to note that "motivation is without question the most complex and challenging issue facing learners today"[3]. Motivation has also been described as a multifaceted construct[4]and as such, various definitions have been propounded depending with the field of study and context. These range from social psychological (behavioural science) to cognitive influenced definitions. Researchers in the area of behavioural science were mainly interested in what made a passive animal to move or be active. In view of this, they concluded that to be motivated is "to be moved to do something"[5]. In cognitive terms (based on the research work done by Maslow, 1970), motivation has more to do with decisions and choices people make as to what experiences or orientations they choose and the degree of effort they will exert in achieving their task. Gardner (1985) defines motivation as the extent to which the language learner strives to achieve a particular goal (according to him goals are also "orientations"). In view of the few definitions given above, one can justifiable state that the concept of motivation is not a "simple and straight forward concept since it is composed of many different and overlapping factors which differ depending with situations and circumstances..."[6] Hicks provides useful information concerning the characteristics of motivated and non motivated[7] learners. According to Hicks

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[3] Schneidecker and Freeman (1999)

[4] Gardner (1985) , William and Burden (1997)

[5] Ryan and Deci (2000, p 54), see also Lakhiam (2015)

[6] Williams and Burden (1997, p 111)

[7] Note that there is deliberate avoidance of the terms such "amotivation" (which according to Ryan and Deci (2000, p 61) means "lacking an intention to act and "demotivativation" which refers to reduced or low levels of motivation.

(2008), a motivated learner is "enthusiastic and dedicated, demonstrates effort and determination, studies with intensity and has good reasons for leaning"[8] In contrast, a non motivated leaner is disconnected, not involved and lacks commitment.

For the benefit of this study, motivation in SLL\FLL will therefore, be defined as the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, co-ordinates, amplifies, terminates and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalised and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out (Dörnyei and Otto, 1998, p 65). This definition does two things: firstly it takes into consideration of both behaviourist and cognitive aspects of motivation and therefore it is at least for this study inclusive. Secondly, it embraces the idea that motivation, just like the *Self*, is not static but rather a dynamic construct which is context dependent and process oriented. Therefore, since this study is dealing with a model propounded by one of the researchers credited with spearheading the campaign to view motivation as dynamic, this becomes a suitable working definition for this study.

The *L2 motivation Self System* model is based on earlier theories in psychology, namely Markus and Nurius' (1986) theory of "possible selves", Higgins' (1987) "Self Discrepancy"' theory[9] and Markus and Wurf's (1987) "Self System Schemata"theory. In its review of The *L2 motivation Self System* model , this paper would therefore, make reference to these theories. The model therefore, deserves the credit of suggesting the borrowing of the self notion from psychology and applying it in L2/FLL. Defining the self in itself is problematic because of the elasticity of the term. Various definitions stemming mostly from personality psychology have been discussed. A detailed discussion of these definition is however, beyond the scope of this study. A definition by Harter will be taken as a working definition of *self* in this project. According to Harter (1999), *self* is basically anything and everything we call "me" or "I". Hence in this view, the self relates solely to an individual as opposed to *other/s*.

1.1.   Dörnyei's Second Language Motivation Self System

It is the desire to move away from the socio-psychological dominated views, the realization that second language motivation is dynamic rather than static and focus on L2 classroom contexts that motivated criticism of the socio educational model and gave life to theories such as the L2 Motivated Self System. While retaining some of the main concepts of the L2 motivation (as already developed by Gardner and others), the proponent Zoltán Dörnyei developed his model of L2 motivation self system. According to Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011, p 86), the L2 motivation self system model consists of three components namely the ideal self, the ought self and the L2 leaning experience.

1.1.1. The Ideal L2 self

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[8] Hicks (2008, p 7)
[9] Taylor et.al (2013)

This is the L2 specific facet of one' s ideal self and is based on the desire to be or be like. If a person we desire to be speaks an L2, then the ideal L2 self becomes a powerful motivator to learn a second language. One is motivated by the desire to reduce the discrepancy between the actual and the ideal L2 self. The desire to be that ideal person becomes a stimulator to learn and achieve that goal.

1.1.2. The ought to L2 self

This concerns the attributes that one believes ought to possess in order to meet certain expectations and avoid negative outcomes. If the language learner believes he/she ought to be a successful language learner, then this belief will motivate them to succeed in their endeavours of language learning.

1.1.3. The L2 learning experience

This concerns situated motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience such as; the impact of the teacher, the curriculum, peer group or the experience of the teacher.

The model, as demonstrated above, is centred on the self or individual image. In Murray's (2007) terms, the theory is based on vision or imagination in the sense that having a vision of our ideal self as a foreign language speaker can be a powerful force motivating us to learn a language. In view of the three components that make up the structure of the model, the model makes a number of assumptions. Firstly, the model seems to assume that the self is a unitary concept with a universal applicability across diverse cultures and diverse language contexts. For example, that the fancy vision of the perfect "ideal" L2 self is a dream of every L2 and FL learner.

Secondly, the model seems to disregard the significance of other external factors that affect the self such as cultural factors, economic limitations among others. The model also disregards the significance of the actual or present self. However, the above observations do not take away the contribution of the model in the understanding of L2/FL motivation. For instance, the model makes reference to other factors that are relevant to the immediate learning environment such as the impact of the teacher and the curriculum among other factors.

1.2.   External factors that affect the L2/FL self
1.2.1. Language learning contexts

Most researchers in the field of L2 motivation including Keblawi (2010) and Dörnyei (1990) have acknowledged the view that theories and research results obtained from L2 contexts "in which the target language is learned at least partly embedded in the host environment are not directly applicable to FLL situations" (Dörnyei, 1990, p 45). This view has been seen as a call for more contextualised research. In this regard, one has to take note that in Zimbabwe for example, German, French, Chinese and Portuguese and other languages commonly referred to as the *modern foreign languages* are taught as foreign languages. They play no major role in the community and are primarily limited to the classroom environment. In such a learning environment, the understanding of the self may be different compared to an L2 environment. In a recent study meant to determine the impetus behind

FLL in Zimbabwe, Ndhlovu (in press) established that most Zimbabwean learners are motivated by instrumental goals as compared to integrative motives. If this is the case, then Dörnyei's view of equating the ideal L2 self to integrative motivation creates a conflicting situation in its application to the Zimbabwean and similar FLL contexts. In his explanation of the ideal L2 self, Dörnyei states:

> If one's ideal self is associated with the mastery of an L2, that is, if the person that we would like to become is proficient in the L2,we can be described as having an integrative disposition (Dörnyei, 2005, p 102).

Such an interpretation creates two problems; firstly, Gardner himself, as the proponent of the socio educational model, has already shot down the comparison, describing it as adding confusion in understanding integrative motivation (Gardner, 2005). Secondly, if most Zimbabwean learners of foreign languages are mainly influenced by instrumental rather integrative motives (as demonstrated by Ndhlovu, op.cit), this will probably imply that the ideal L2 self (as the central concept of the *L2 motivation Self System* model), lacks practical significance for the Zimbabwean foreign language learner. After all, Dörnyei himself observed that " in FLL situations, instrumental and socio- cultural motives, and/or other motivational factors that have not yet been analysed may acquire a special importance"(Dörnyei, 1990, p 48).

1.2.2. Cultural factors

In this study, the discussion of cultural factors that may probably affect the interpretation of self as it relates to L2/FL motivation is based upon Markus and Kitayama's (1991) theory of independent and interdependent self construals. According to Markus and Kitayama, most European and American cultures are classified as independent construal, a category of cultures that value individual identity and performance rather than collective efforts and interests. Most Asian and African cultures are classified as interdependent construal. This category values social relationships. One would note that, Zimbabwean culture fits into the latter category. Although global interests have not spared foreign language learners in Zimbabwe, the spirit of *ubuntu*[10] is still considered a value among many. There is a Ndebele saying that goes; *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*[11]*.* This demonstrates the collective nature of the Zimbabwean culture. Hence, the self in a Zimbabwean context needs to be interpreted in harmony with this observation since it has been noted that "the exact content and structure of the inner self may differ considerably by culture" (Markus and Kitayama, 1991, p 226)[12].

However, this understanding does not go along with the interpretation of the self as presented in the *L2 motivation Self System.* Firstly, Harter's (1999) definition of the self as anything and everything we call "me" or "I" is more

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[10] A bantu term that means "humanity to others"
[11] It means "you are what you are because of others"
[12] Similar views have been expressed by Triandis and Suh (2002).

individualistic in nature (suiting the views of independent construals). This definition is more concerned with, to borrow Higgins's (1987) terms, the *own* rather than the *other*. Secondly, the *L2 motivation Self System* is based on an individual's vision or imagination of learning a foreign language. However, in a Zimbabwean context, the choice of subjects that a learner makes, as with its prospects, usually goes beyond individual desires, it is subject to family scrutiny. This is due to interdependence of family members. What then becomes a source of motivation is for a learner to be involved in something that will secure the family's future financial being. Intrinsic individual endeavours become secondary and slave to the bigger picture of being a hero, who will lift everybody else on his/her shoulders. This shapes the self and motivation of most learners in Zimbabwe.

Markus and Nurius's (1986) discussion of the possible selves also demonstrates the significance of the society in shaping the self. They pointed out that although the possible selves are individualised or personalised, they are however, socially based. This therefore, shows the social nature of the self as interpreted in the Zimbabwean society. This influence of other close people in determining the values and interest of an individual is also shown through what Taylor et al. (2013) describe as a possible familial agreement, where by learners get influenced by people close to them on the choice of academic subjects they are to learn. This therefore, suggests that in most interdependent cultures, submissive L2/FL selves are more common compared to ideal L2 selves. Other selves that might be of importance in understanding the FL self in Zimbabwe and similar contexts include the *public* and *imposed* selves. Public selves refer to (actual and external) various social representations that a person may display depending on the relational context while imposed selves refer to (possible and external) representations of other people's hopes, desires and expectations of what an individual should achieve. They are therefore, significant in understanding the FL self and motivation in those communities such as Zimbabwe where the notion that, through others we become ourselves (Vygotsky, 1987) is still cherished.

1.3. FLL support as factor that determines self motivation

The research conducted by Ndhlovu (op.cit) has demonstrated that Zimbabwe does not have clear policy frameworks that address the teaching and learning of foreign languages. This implies that although support given to foreign languages has presently improved when compared to the colonial period, a lot remains to be done if Zimbabwe is to be at par with other countries (in Africa) which are making great strides in promoting FLL such as South Africa. Lack of adequate promotional activities therefore, remains a great concern in Zimbabwe since it seems to impact negatively on FL motivation. According to Ndhlovu (op.cit), in Zimbabwe, foreign languages are shunned by most public schools and tertiary institutions. They are offered mainly at a few private institutions.

This situation creates two problems, firstly, people lose interest in pursuing foreign languages. Secondly, those who proceed to study foreign languages are tormented by questions related to career opportunities. This position is aggravated by a dire economic situation that has seen most foreign owned companies closing down and thus further narrowing the prospects for a

foreign language learner of getting employed. As observed by Mkhize and Chisoni (2015), this problem preoccupies most Zimbabwean learners of foreign languages. Mkhize and Chisoni (ibid) end up suggesting that foreign languages institutions such as the Confucious Institutes should attempt to create jobs or increase links with companies to enable students to get employed. These observations therefore, demonstrate that in Zimbabwe, self motivation mainly resides not in the intrinsic values of the individual learner but in the extrinsic values that are related to the future of the foreign language learner. Lack of adequate support given to foreign languages therefore, contributes in shaping the values and interest of a Zimbabwean FL leaner and thus shaping the FL "ideal" self or to use a better term "possible" self.

In his explanation of the ideal L2 leaner, Dörnyei states that if the person we desire to be speaks an L2, then the ideal L2 self becomes a powerful motivation to learn the L2. This might suggest that one needs a model in order to visualise himself/ herself as successful as that model in learning a foreign language. In SL contexts, where clear and effective SLL policy frameworks are in place and where the learner has access to native speaker communities, such models are easy to come by. However, in FLL contexts such as Zimbabwe, where learners have almost no access to native speaker communities and where foreign languages are hardly promoted in order to breed a class of successful FL learners, such models are hard to come by. According to Mkhize and Chisoni (op.cit), FL models that are readily available to most Zimbabwean learners are their language instructors. In FLL contexts such as Zimbabwe, if one has to create an ideal FL self based on vision, then this has to be a religious vision based on faith not on possibilities. For example, it is easy for a child who grows up in a country that supports the work of astronauts to visualise himself/herself as an astronaut compared to another child who does not only know what an astronaut is but also has not seen any astronaut activities in his/her country. In this view, governmental support and creation of opportunities becomes a motivational force that determines the prospects of a learner and thus shaping the vision of an ideal or rather possible self. FLL in Zimbabwe therefore, needs to be adequately supported and opportunities created in order for an ideal FL self to be a feasible notion. One L2 researcher even suggested that, if we want bread to rise, we need to provide yeast (Maley, 2015).

1.4.   Other short comings of the model

The *L2 motivation Self System* occupies a very important place among L2 motivation theories. However, in its application, the model possesses a number of short comings. In most of his researches on L2 motivation, Dörnyei has reiterated on the view that motivation is dynamic. However, in his discourse on the L2 self, he seems to ignore the dynamic state of the self itself. As Van Lier (2010) has pointed out, the self is not a passive phenomenon. To use Bruner's (2002) terms, the self is a work in progress. It is something we construct and reconstruct in order to meet needs of the situation we find ourselves in. Following these views, the self is seen as an

unstable state whose understanding depends upon various contextual meanings and situations. This is the main reason that has encouraged this study to discuss these contextual factors giving examples from a Zimbabwean FL context and suggesting that the self system is not unitary. Researchers have also raised eye brows on the exclusion of the *actual self* which probably acts as a beginning point of understanding the self system. The actual self is part of Higgins' (op.cit) theory of self discrepancy upon which the *L2 motivation Self System* is partly based. According to Taylor (op.cit), in order to understand the starting point of a motivational process, the actual or present self is of utmost importance. The study of the actual self kicks starts an investigation into the learner's present desires, aspiration and cognitive abilities which in turn will create a visual picture of what they can possibly become. Including a *former self* will therefore, help in creating a complete picture of the learner's self system. This understanding of the self system is well presented by Gardner in his explanation of the role of self in SLA. Gardner (2001) mentions three important phases which make up the process of self modification. These are the past, the present and the future.

Past: It refers to an individuals' past experiences, family, cultural background which are important in SL learning. It also refers to past experiences that influence emotional and cognitive abilities.

Present: The teacher present materials, makes demands or requests and the students respond to these demands. Hence the notion of the present refers to the learner's current classroom experiences that influences emotional and cognitive baggage.

Future: It refers to the use of the language immediately after the current language experience.

1.5.   Suggestions

In order to present a complete self system, it would be a brilliant idea to consider including the *actual* or *present self*. Omitting or disregarding the actual self will be tantamount to omitting crucial information that shapes the projections of the future self. In Zimbabwe for instance, lack of FL teaching and learning policies and a harsh economic environment impact on the everyday learning of foreign languages. This becomes part of the reality of FL learners in and outside the classroom and thus part of the actual self. The lack of support for teaching and learning of foreign languages not only impedes on teachers' performance and motivation but also affects the learners who study under strenuous condition and without adequate learning materials.

The model also needs to take note of other situational factors that affect the self system such as cultural factors. For example, whether the learner's culture is interdependent or independent since this as discussed in this paper, can determine the nature of the self.

A review of the terms used in the *L2 motivation Self System* would be necessary if the model needs to have a universal significance and application. For example, using the term *possible L2/FL selves*[13] instead of the term *ideal L2 self*. The term *possible L2/FL selves* is an elastic term that

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[13] The term "possible self" is taken from Markus and Nurius' (1986) theory of possible selves.

is cognisant of various situational circumstances that can censor the self. In FLL contexts such as Zimbabwe, it is more feasible to talk about what is possible than what is ideal to a foreign language learner. This is due to consideration of various situational factors discussed above. Hence, beside the need to incorporate some of Gardner's (2001) views of self modification, a review of the terms used is necessary.

Lastly, this study proposes a new model that is based on the above suggestions. The working name for this model is the *L2/FL situational Self model of motivation* and is shown in Fig.1.

In this model, there are two important aspects that are crucial in understanding the self system. These are the former self and the present self. These two aspects develop within the L2/FL context or learning environment. The former self refers to the past performances of the language leaner especially those that have attributional effects to his/her future L2/FL performance and motivation. It also refers to the past attitudes towards the L2/FL target language in particular and language learning in general. The present self refers to the present L2/FL language performance of the learner.
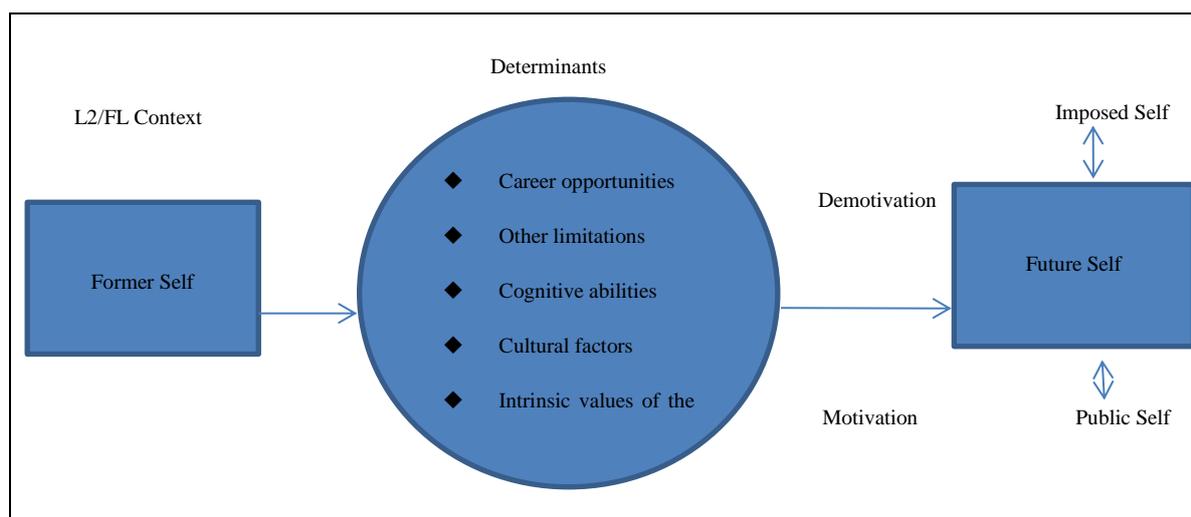

Fig 1. represents the L2/FL Situation Self model of motivation

It also refers to the current attitudes towards the target language and the significance of the target language to the leaner. Both the former and present selves are at the mercy of factors that determine the progress of the leaner in learning the L2/FL. These are referred to as the *determinants*. These determinants include career opportunities, L2/FL teaching and learning support, cognitive abilities, other limitations such as lack of financial support and cultural factors among others. The impact these determinants have upon the former and present selves (whether positive or negative) creates or rather determines the future self. Simply put, the amount of motivation that becomes part of the desire to quit or excel in learning the L2/FL is determined not only by the standpoints of the former and present selves but also by the influence of the determinants upon these selves. In its relation to the performance of learning the L2/FL, the future self can

therefore, be either negative or positive. It can also breed other selves such as the imposed, submissive or public selves. In this way, this new model tries to cover some areas which seem to have been neglected by the *L2 motivation self system model*. Most importantly, this new model attempts to incorporate sociocultural factors that determine the identity construction of FL learners. Hence it attempts to move towards Norton's (2000/2013) concept of "investment" which she considers as a sociological rather than a psychological construct. According to Norton (2000), the notion of investment

> conceives of the language learner as having a complex social history and multiple desires. The notion presupposes that when language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world (p. 10-11).

Such theorizing has led to a review of motivation in the field of SLA, favouring movement of viewing motivation in terms of the individual psychological processes to discussing it in the contexts of social activities (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009). However, views and suggestions outlined here do not intend to take away the credibility and significance of this model in L2/FL motivation discourse.

2. Conclusions

This main objective of this study was to analyse Dörnyei's *L2 motivation self system* model, a model that seeks to explain L2 motivation by discussing the self system and how it can contribute to learners' L2/FL motivation. Basing mainly on the empirical investigations done by Ndhlovu (op.cit) and Mkhize and Chisoni (op.cit), the study also reviewed the *L2 motivation self system* in its application to FL learning contexts with Zimbabwe being an example. The conclusion of this study is that, in its present state, the model does not have a universal significance since it seems to ignore certain factors that are crucial in determining the nature of the FL self in most FL contexts such as Zimbabwe. In this study, these factors are known as the *determinants* and include factors such as cultural factors, lack of policy frameworks, FLL support and career opportunities among others. The impact of these factors upon the former and present selves (positive or negative) not only determines the nature of the future self but also the amount of motivation that will determine both the learner's performance and continuity of learning the foreign language. The incorporation of these factors is demonstrated in a proposed new model entitled the *L2/FL situational Self model of motivation*. The proposed model acknowledges the importance of the psychological concept of motivation as represented here by Dörnyei's model of L2 motivation, but just like Norton's (2000/2013) sociological concept of motivation, it seeks to incorporate socio cultural factors that determine the construction of the foreign language self. The endeavour here is to come up with a model that is cognisant of various external social factors that are strongly influential in the process of FLL in contexts such as Zimbabwe, where most learners are instrumentally motivated.

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