The Construction of Motivational Self System from the Perspective of Activity Theory

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Abstract: In the perspective of activity theory, this study explored the dynamic construction of the L2 motivational self system in the English learning process of two Chinese second-year non-English majors through a case study. The results from in-depth interviews showed that: (1) individual differences in the construction of motivational self images exist when driven by distinct desires; (2) internalized instrumental motivational orientations tend to support individuals to create motivational self image; (3) interactions occur among motivational self images, L2 learning experiences and learning objectives; (4) social community may guide individuals to internalize instrumental motivational orientation, and (5) the external pressure from the social community only cannot reduce the gap between ought-to L2 self and actual L2 self. This study also provides some pedagogical reference for the current college English teaching in Chinese universities.

1. Introduction

Dörnyei (2005[1]) constructed the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) based on the concepts of "self consistency" and "self orientation" from personality psychology together with his own empirical research results. And the past ten years have witnessed a growing interest in studying the motivational self system in different languages and cultural situations. Some studies explored the applicability of L2MSS to different learner groups (e.g., Dörnyei and Chan, 2013[2]; Liu, 2015[3]; Zhang, 2017[4]; Oakes and Howard, 2022[5]). Other studies examined the relationship between L2MSS and such second language learner variables as L2 learning engagement (e.g., Lv and Yang, 2013[6]), learning effort (e.g., Moskovsky et al., 2016[7]), academic resilience (e.g., Zhan, 2018[8]), willingness to communicate (e.g., Peng, 2015[9]; Lee and Lee, 2020[10]), motivated learning behaviour (e.g., Chen, 2019[11]); autonomous learning behaviour (e.g., Sheng and Zhang, 2021[12]); and English learning effectiveness (e.g., Huo and Rui, 2020[13]). There are also studies that investigated L2MSS with external factors including family influence (e.g., Zhou, et al., 2016[14]); teacher support (e.g., Yang and Yu, 2017[15]); and digital network social media (e.g., Lee and Lee, 2021[16]).

These empirical studies have put the L2 Motivational Self System a focal point in various language learning contexts in a globalized world, shedding light on the dynamic complexities of

language learning motivation. And a detailed examination showed that studies overseas mainly used either quantitative, qualitative or mixed research methods. On the other hand, only a couple of studies adopted qualitative method (Chang, 2019[17]; Lv and Yang, 2013[6]; Zhang & Ding 2018[18]). Although the construction of a linear model based on the average feature of the sample group has demonstrated the effectiveness of L2 Motivational Self System in China's college English teaching contexts, it has overlooked the multi-dimensional, nonlinear, and dynamic individual differences inherent in the system itself.

Ushioda (2011[19]) emphasized the value of studying motivation in a context based and qualitative manner, arguing that second language learners need to be understood as "real people" in specific cultural and historical contexts, and thus the focus should be put on "people in context" to capture this non-linear, complex, and dynamic relationship. Thus, this study takes Activity Theory as a framework to explore the dynamic construction process of L2 motivational self system in the process of English learning by focusing on the actual situation and learning experience of individual Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. The results of this study may have some reference for Chinese non-English major undergraduates, also those EFL students in particular, to achieve the expected English proficiency by exerting their proactive role in foreign language learning.

2. Activity Theory and L2 Motivational Self System

2.1. Activity Theory

Engeström's Activity Theory (1987[20]) is rooted in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978[21]), and emphasizes that the central concept of activity refers to a goal-directed, socially situated, and developmentally significant process. Activity Theory includes three core elements, that is, subject, object and community. The subject is the individual or group engaged in the activity. They have a conscious goal and actively manipulate the tools and objects within the activity. The object is what the subject aims to transform or achieve through the activity. The community consists of individuals who share the same object and engage in similar activities. They provide the social context within which the activity takes place. Activity Theory also contains three secondary elements, namely, tool, rules and division of labor. Tools are how subjects interact with the object. Rules govern the activity and shape the behavior of the subjects and the structure of the activity. Division of Labor refers to the distribution of tasks among members of the community, which influences how activities are structured and performed. These secondary elements then form the connection between core elements. Thus, activity is linked by motivation and object, and it is a complete system of behavior, action, and implementation. The relationship between core elements and secondary elements is shown in Figure 1.
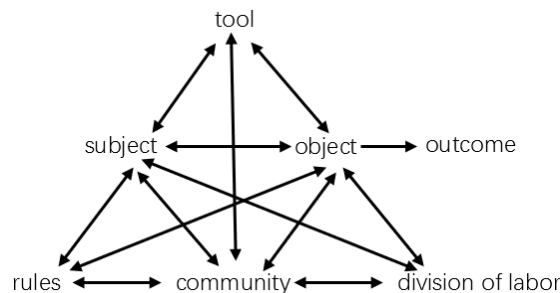

Figure 1: The structure of human activity (Engeström, 1999[22])

The premise of the theory is that collective activities with the basic purpose shared by

communities are carried out by subjects who are motivated by a certain object, which is mediated by tools used to achieve the outcome. This activity is constrained by cultural factors, including rules and division of labor in the direct context, and is also framed by broader social patterns. The Activity Theory, to large extent, explains the dynamic problem of system development and provides a new horizon for exploring the nonlinear relationship between the elements of the L2 motivational self system.

2.2. Activity Theory and L2 Motivational Self System

L2 Motivational Self System proposed by Dörnyei (2005) focuses on the study of learning motivation from external behavior to internal core based on a macro perspective. The system consists of three elements. The first element is ideal L2 self, representing the ideal characteristics that learners hope to possess, and being related to positive outcomes and emotions. Since ideal L2 self reflects learners' desire to master a certain foreign language, this self-image can be regarded as the "subject" in Activity Theory, which reflects the internalization of learners' vision. Internalized activities can further develop beyond the limits of external activity possibilities. Therefore, ideal L2 self generates strong learning motivation to narrow the gap between learners' actual selves and ideal selves.

The second element is ought-to L2 self, referring to the characteristics that learners believe they can possess under the influence of their social and cultural affiliation, and can avoid negative outcomes by possessing these characteristics. This element should be more responsive to external pressure, thus corresponding to the "community" in Activity Theory. Community continuously influences the subject in the process of foreign language learning, guiding learners to reduce the gap between their actual selves and their expected selves. The process of foreign language learning is the internalization of the practical activities of the external community into the psychological activities of the subject, and the psychological activities of the subject also externalize into the practical activities of the external community in the opposite direction.

L2 learning experience is the third element, which focuses on the execution of motivation. This element refers to situational motivation that is closely related to a specific learning context or past learning experience. L2 learning experience embodies the three elements of "tools", "rules" and "division of labor" in Activity Theory. In foreign language teaching design, "tools" can be understood as teaching environments. "Rules" are used to coordinate the relationship between subjects and communities, and are a constraint in foreign language teaching activities. "Division of labor" refers to the cooperation between subjects and communities in the process of foreign language learning, as well as the tasks that need to be completed. For individual learners, the goal is to master the target language. However, in the process of foreign language learning, this macro goal needs to be concretized into specific learning objectives, which interact and rely on foreign language learning activities, and have a two-way effect on the subject and community. In other words, subject and community influence each other through object.

Since Dörnyei's proposal of L2 Motivational Self System, some researchers have conducted quantitative studies on language learners of different ages and countries to verify the adaptability of this system. However, motivation should not only be a quantitative variable, but should be included in the scope of qualitative research using a more individualized and relatively dynamic research method. Therefore, this study takes the Activity Theory as a framework to explore the construction process of the L2 motivational self system in the English learning process of non-English major college students in China. Through the individualized study in the context, this research may put forward suggestions to guide students to exert their proactive role in English language learning.

3. Research Design

3.1. Research question

The descriptive and interpretive characteristics of this study set the L2 motivational self system as a situational, multi-dimensional and dynamic concept. Data analysis was based on the Activity Theory to explore the impact of motivational selves on learners' English learning motivation. The research questions are:

1) What are learners' ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience in their English learning?

2) How are the motivational self images (i.e., ideal L2 self, ought-to L2 self) internalized within the learner' motivational system?

3.2. Participants

The interview was held in a Project 211 university (The Project 211 refers to the construction project of about 100 key universities and key disciplines facing the 21st century in China). Five classroom observations were conducted and two sophomore students who performed significantly differently in the classroom were then invited as the research objects after obtaining their consent. Interviewee A, female, majoring in mechanical engineering, showed positive motivational behavior in the classroom. Interviewee B, male, majoring in Economics and Trade Management, exhibited negative motivational behavior in the classroom. The purpose of this study is to, from the perspective of Activity Theory, explore the role of motivational self images by comparing the construction of L2 motivational self system of the two participants with significant differences in motivational behavior.

3.3. Data collection and data analysis

The data collection began in February 2023 and lasted until April. A total of two interviews were conducted in Chinese. After obtaining the consent of the interviewees, a recording pen was used to record the interview. The duration of each interview was about one hour. After the interview, each of the tape-recorded interviews was transcribed with all spoken discourses as fully as possible.

Next stage after transcriptions was coding or categorizing the contents of the interviews. The coding procedure here was a mixture of deductive and inductive stages. Student interviews were analyzed firstly through a deductive procedure where the categories have already been established as the research questions and consequently applied to the interview data. The segments in the data were selected and sorted according to the categories. The second stage focused on the inductive coding, looking for other emerging themes from the data. To ensure the reliability of the coding, a follow-up verification was carried out on the interviewees.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Interviewee A: the initiative of internalized instrumentality in the motivational self

Interviewee A demonstrated a positive role of internalized instrumental motivational orientation in her motivational self-image during the interview (see Figure 2).
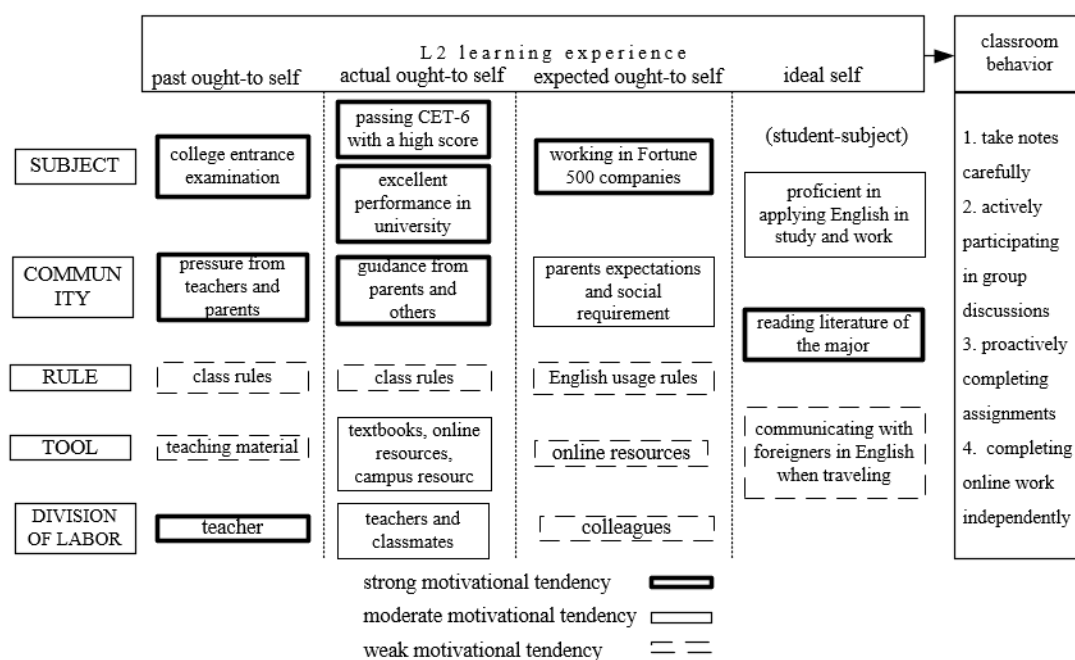
	L2 learning experience				classroom behavior
	past ought-to self	actual ought-to self	expected ought-to self	ideal self (student-subject)	
SUBJECT	college entrance examination	passing CET-6 with a high score / excellent performance in university	working in Fortune 500 companies	proficient in applying English in study and work	1. take notes carefully
COMMUNITY	pressure from teachers and parents	guidance from parents and others	parents expectations and social requirement	reading literature of the major	2. actively participating in group discussions
RULE	class rules	class rules	English usage rules		3. proactively completing assignments
TOOL	teaching material	textbooks, online resources, campus resourc	online resources	communicating with foreigners in English when traveling	4. completing online work independently
DIVISION OF LABOR	teacher	teachers and classmates	colleagues		

strong motivational tendency
moderate motivational tendency
weak motivational tendency

Figure 2: Interviewee A's L2 self system

As shown in Figure 2, when expressing her specific learning objectives, interviewee A summarized that "*I hope I can enter a Fortune 500 company. Having a GPA of around 4.5 and obtaining a College English Test Band 6 certificate* (The National College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 is a large-scale standardized national test sponsored by the Ministry of Education) *can make me competitive in the employment market. If I have a considerable proficiency in English, it may also provide me with great help for my postgraduate study which requires a lot of literature reading in English. Learning English well offers much opportunities for my future study and work. Therefore, I strive to learn English well*". The above account shows that interviewee A's instrumental motivational orientation has been internalized into her ideal L2 self, and has been transformed into specific learning objectives and put into learning actions, including "taking notes seriously in class", "being willing to participate in classroom oral activities", "completing after-class or online exercises", "preparing for the CET-4 and CET-6 exams in advance", and "participating in campus English corners". Interviewee A's English scores fully demonstrated her learning outcome: final examination score being above 90 points, and CET-6 score being 621 points (The full score of the Test Band 4 and Band 6 is 710, and the passing score is 425).

Interviewee A also mentioned the influence from the social community, reflecting a typical ought-to L2 self orientation. She pointed out that "*obtaining a satisfactory job not only comes from the general recognition of the graduates from Project 211 universities in society, but also meets the expectations of my family.*" When talking about the curriculum requirements of the university, interviewee A believed: "*I am not worried about failing the exam at all because of my good English proficiency. I take English-learning seriously just out of the responsibility for myself and my future, not to mention that four years of college is also a process of self-improvement.*" Such description shows that the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self of interviewee A are not two independent elements, but have intersections and can even be transformed into each other in specific situations. The synthesis of her motivational self images comes from the internalization of her instrumental motivational orientation, and the interviewee's clear long-term objectives also contributed to the specific conditions for transformation.

Therefore, an active pursuit of future planning is transformed into a requirement for self-

improvement, becoming the ideal L2 self of interviewee A. At the same time, external pressure from the social community also leads interviewee A to narrow the gap between the expected ought-to L2 self and the actual L2 self. The integration of these two types of motivational self images has also become a driving force for interviewee A to learn English.

When discussing how to maintain her learning motivation, interviewee A said, "*First, I would like to thank my parents and teachers in senior high school. They provided guidance at critical moments, and they gave me autonomy, so I have been very independent and have my own judgements. Second, the learning experience has developed my learning habits that have been consistently maintained to the present. Third, I often communicate with counsellors and senior students. They have broader perspectives so I can learn from them about how to plan my college life to achieve my career goals. I also enjoy reading biographies. Their exhilarating experiences continuously motivate me to move forward. And my English grades are among the top in the class and I often receive praise from teachers, which gives me great confidence.*" Thus, the construction of the ought-to L2 self of Interviewee A is mainly influenced by the social community. Specifically, the guidance from the family has led to Interviewee A's initial awareness of autonomous learning, laying a motivational foundation for her subsequent English learning. Her valuable learning experience in senior high school further strengthened her motivational self. In the university, interviewee A's motivational self image and successful learning experience were developed under the influence of the social community (teachers, counselors, and others), thus forming a virtuous cycle.

In summary, Interviewee A's L2 motivational self system has its specific English functional view and motivational action. The integration of interviewee A's L2 ideal self and L2 ought-to self through internalization of instrumental motivational orientation reflects a high degree of alignment between the subject and the community in terms of learning objectives. In classroom observation and in-depth interviews, the motivational behavior exhibited by interviewee A are also consistent with her motivational selves and learning perspectives. Influenced by her English learning experience, Interviewee A's English functional view is mainly reflected in her interpretation of English as a practical tool that can help her achieve actual value. The L2 motivational self system of interviewee A from the perspective of Activity Theory is shown in Figure 3.
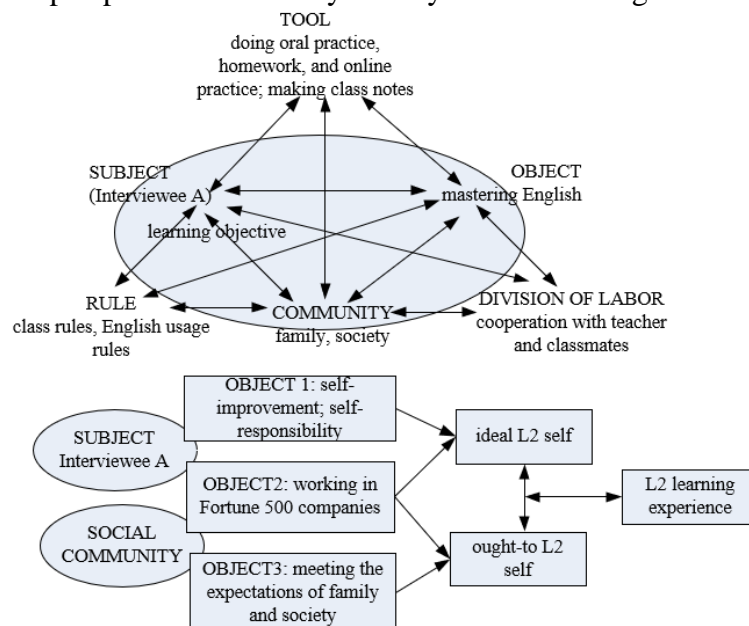

Figure 3: Interviewee A's Activity Theory structure

4.2. Interviewee B: the impact of externalized instrumentality on motivational self

An impact of non-internalized instrumental motivational orientation on his motivational self image construction was showed in the interview with interviewee B (see Figure 4).
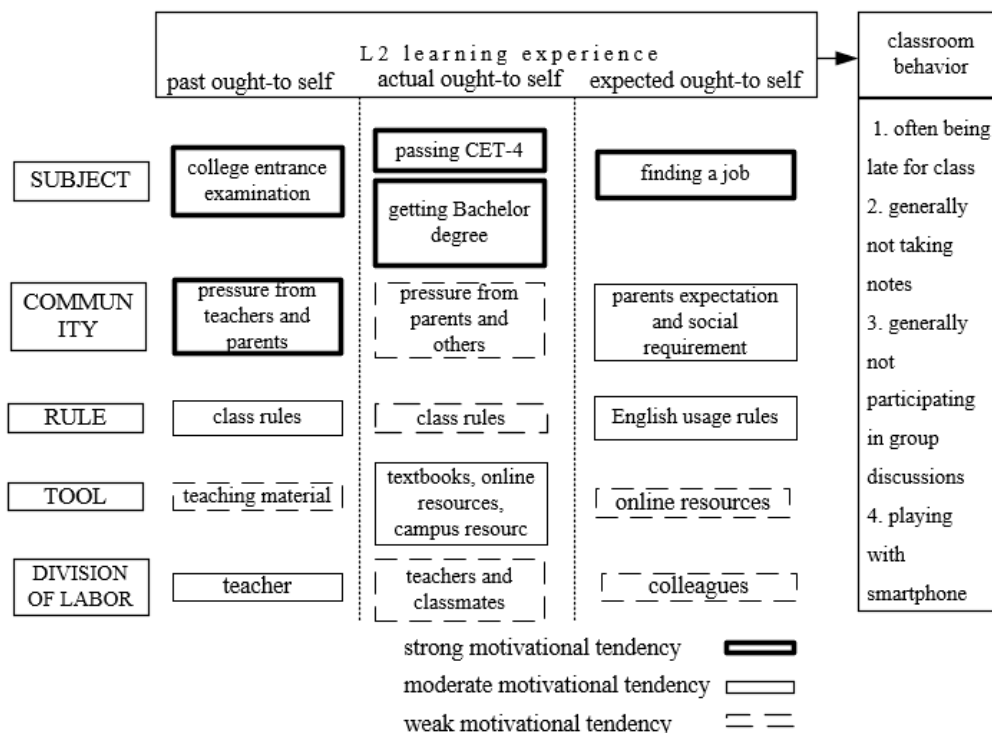

Figure 4: Interviewee B's L2 self system

When talking about his specific learning objectives, interviewee B said, "*I haven't thought about job-hunting after graduation. I have to pass the CET-4, because the certificate is a requirement when looking for a job. I have no clear plan for my college life. When I have time, I would like to play online games. I don't usually study hard until the final exam is coming. After going to college, I can still rely on the knowledge that I got in senior high school, so I don't think it's necessary to study English too hard. Besides, college English teachers no longer emphasize vocabulary and grammar in class, making it feel like I can't learn anything anymore.*" The above narrate shows that the instrumental motivational orientation of interviewee B is completely externalized, and at the same time, the negative L2 learning experience further weakens the construction of his motivational self image, thus leading to his lack of willingness to set specific learning objectives and adopt corresponding motivational behavior during the learning process. In terms of the five classroom observations, interviewee B was late for class three times. He rarely took notes in class, and never raised his hand to participate in oral activities. As for online practice, he admitted that he copied classmates' answers most of the time. Interviewee B's English scores also fully proved his muddling ideas: his final examination scores being all around 65 to 75 points, and his CET-4 scores being 475 points.

Interviewee B further explained the reasons for his lack of learning motivation and failure to set learning objectives: "*I don't have much interest in my major. When I filled the application of college entrance examination, my parents thought it would be easier to find a job if I apply for this major. Senior students also said it is easy to find a job after graduation. My parents just want me to find a job, so I have almost no clear plan for my college life.*" Such description displays that interviewee B lacks the construction of ideal L2 self. His learning motivation mainly comes from

the influence of the social community on his ought-to L2 self. That is, the pressure from university and family forces him to avoid negative outcomes. Due to the lack of internalization of instrumental motivational orientation, interviewee B fails to establish clear learning objectives, thus leading to his negative attitude towards English learning, weak autonomous learning ability, and failure to exhibit motivational behavior. This indicates that external pressures from the social community alone cannot drive the subject to narrow the gap between the ought-to L2 self and the actual L2 self.

In summary, the L2 motivational self system of interviewee B has not been perfected, and the lack of ideal L2 self has led to the inability of the subject to form internalization standards. The social community, on the other hand, has played a negative guiding role in the construction of the subject's ought-to L2 self. Interviewee B therefore is unable to effectively internalize instrumental motivational orientation into his ideal L2 self, thus demonstrating a lack of English learning objectives and motivational behavior. In addition, the negative motivational self image cannot be integrated with interviewee B's L2 learning experience, further affecting the construction of his motivational self image. Under the influence of the subject, social community, and L2 learning experience, Interviewee B's English functional view is mainly reflected in considering English itself as a subject that must be learned to avoid negative outcomes, rather than an important tool for self-improvement. The L2 motivational self system of interviewee B from the perspective of Activity Theory is shown in Figure 5.
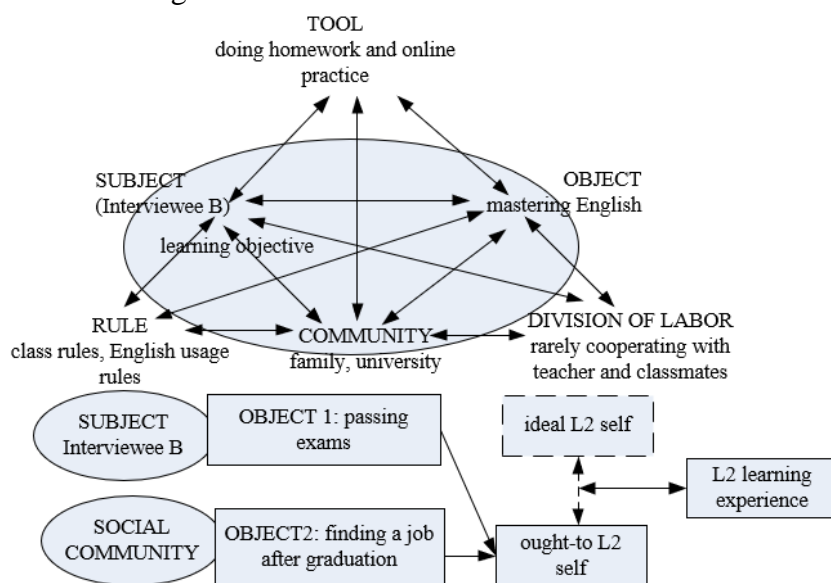

Figure 5: Interviewee B's Activity Theory structure

5. Conclusion and Implication

Based on the Activity Theory, this study explores the impact of motivational self image on learners' English learning motivation through case studies. The main findings of the study are as follows.

(1) There are individual differences in motivational self images that individual learners are driven to achieve, and not all individual learners have various self standard images. Learners who exhibit positive motivational behavior have both ideal L2 selves and ought-to L2 selves, while learners who exhibit negative motivational behavior may have only ought-to L2 selves.

(2) Influenced by China's social and cultural factors, internalized instrumental motivation tends to help individual learners create motivational self image, and there is seems no "utilitarian" motivational orientation for English learning. In English teaching, college teachers can strengthen

students' internalized instrumental motivational orientation in order to establish positive motivational self images, which are conducive to setting specific learning objectives and implementing motivational actions.

(3) There is an interaction between motivational selves, L2 learning experience, and learning objectives. To be more specific, the construction of a positive self image is conducive to learners adopting motivational behavior to achieve learning objectives, thereby strengthening their L2 learning experience. Pleasant L2 learning experiences, in turn, help learners enhance their motivational self images and plan their next-step learning objectives, thus forming a virtuous cycle. On the contrary, negative L2 learning experiences further weaken the construction of learners' motivational self images, leading to a lack of willingness to set specific learning objectives and adopt corresponding motivational behavior during the learning process.

(4) Social communities guide learners to internalize instrumental motivational orientation. The factors that are related to subject's life or to make free choice are the most effective way to internalize the subject's English learning motivation and learning objectives. However, in the absence of ideal L2 self or instrumental motivational orientation that has not yet been internalized, external pressure from the social community alone cannot drive the subject to narrow the gap between the ought-to L2 self and the actual L2 self.

According to the results, it is pedagogically significant to fully perform the positive leading role of motivational self images in English learning. First, teachers may help student establish their English self images based on their subject situation and the requirements of the social community to form self-identity in English learning and specify English learning objectives. In addition, teachers may also make English teaching contents more closely related to students' lives and respect the autonomy of students, allowing them to enjoy the learning process, and regulate English motivational learning behavior. These measures may finally lead to achieve students expected English proficiency.

Taking Activity Theory as the framework to adopt a more dynamic case study perspective, this study focuses on individual differences and the integrity of learners' L2 experience in English learning process to provide some reference for future research on L2 learning motivation. Due to the use of analytical rather than statistical generalizations and the inability to completely rule out social approval motivation of the interviewees during the interview, the research results may have certain limitations. Based on the influence of China's social and cultural impact, it is of great necessity to explore the improvement of data and analysis methods in study of L2 motivational self system in the future.

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