

# Saving Face: A Reflection on the Attitudes of Adults when learning a Second Language in Portugal

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### 1. Introduction

Any needs analysis directed at professionals seeking assistance in learning a second language, states their desire to be able to communicate fluently in a work context. It is that desire that drives them to the door of the classroom and arms them with enough motivation to make them believe that positive results will be obtained within a record-breaking period of time. However, despite positive reinforcement from the teacher, this motivation tends to dwindle once they attempt to use their newly-acquired skills in real-world contexts. The lack of self-confidence coupled with the fear of failure before peers and superiors is all-consuming, leading to a sense of incompetence. **The purpose of this study was to analyse the factors which have been brought forward by various authors regarding willingness to communicate (WTC) in an L2 (MacIntyre et al, 1998), with a particular focus on the attitudes of Portuguese professionals seeking fluency in English as an L2 for their work contexts.** Taking part in the study were three students who had English lessons on an individual basis and who had different motivations for acquiring the language. Results indicated that positive reinforcement through **visualisation** of their “ideal [proficient] selves” (Dornyei & Usioda, 2009) and through **anxiety control**, led to an increase in their linguistic self-confidence. Recommendations for further techniques to improve attitudes towards learning are also discussed.

### 2. Objectives and Methodology

**RESEARCH QUESTION 1:** Which factors influence L2 students’ willingness to communicate in the working environment in Portugal?  
**RESEARCH QUESTION 2:** Do techniques such as visualisation of the ideal L2 self improve students’ linguistic self-confidence?

The subjects of the study were three students who were taking a 20-hour course in one-to-one lessons twice a week in English as an L2. All of them were professionals who needed English to be able to communicate in the work context with clients and colleagues.

#### STAGE 1:

Students completed a **needs analysis** before the course began where they indicated:

- their **objectives** for learning English,
- the **external pressures** they felt to be able to perform effectively in the L2,
- their **fears** with regard to speaking the L2 in a work context

Through guided questions, students were asked to:

- A. **visualise themselves** in the work context, using the L2 with their **current level** of language proficiency,  
B. to visualise themselves as **proficient users** of the L2

#### STAGE 2:

After 5, 10 and 15 lessons, students completed a **questionnaire** where they indicated:

- the **external pressures** they continued to feel in order to perform effectively in the L2,
- an **account** of a situation where they had to use the L2 and how they felt
- after **visualisation sessions** in which the participant pictured himself in the L2 context which was causing anxiety (eg. a meeting with foreign clients) a role-play was enacted in which the student simulated the situation. This was done consistently throughout the 20h course.



### 3. Results and Discussion

All three participants in the study indicated that they experienced nervousness before having to use the L2 in a work context, whether it was a formal meeting, a presentation or social interaction. Their fears lay in making **grammatical mistakes, poor pronunciation, not being able to make themselves understood** and **not being able to understand what their colleagues were saying**. One of the participants mentioned that she felt more nervous communicating with colleagues she had known for a long time, than with colleagues she didn’t know well. This stemmed from the fear of being evaluated, especially by superiors, and being subject to criticism by colleagues. Another participant, the CEO of a company who wanted to implement English as a common language in the workplace, feared not being able to set the example by having a comfortable level of language skills when communicating with his employees, and feeling ridiculed as a result.

When asked to visualise their proficient L2 selves, participants transmitted the following scenario:

- **Communicating at a near-native level;**
- **Participating in a discussion with no hesitation: offering suggestions, giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing with points made ;**
- **Having no difficulty in understanding the points made by other participants in the discussion;**
- **Being able to justify results confidently without having to overcome language obstacles;**
- **Feeling equally comfortable with accuracy and pronunciation**

After repeated role-plays following visualisation sessions where students expressed their fears, feedback indicated that anxiety gradually diminished and students’ accounts of real-life situations in the work context showed **increased self-confidence despite acknowledgement that they had not yet reached their desired proficiency level.**

### 4. References

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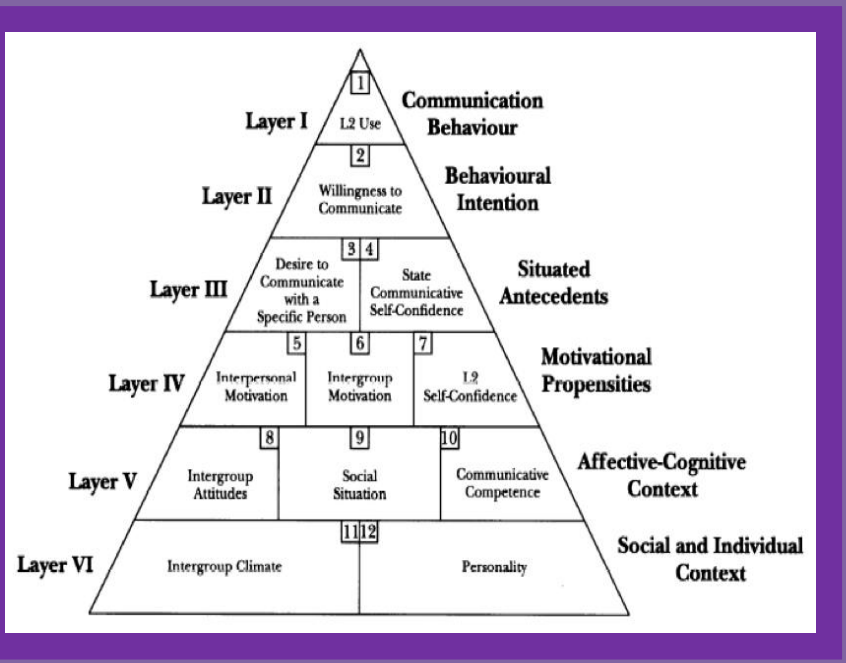


Fig. 1 Heuristic model of variables influencing WTC (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547)

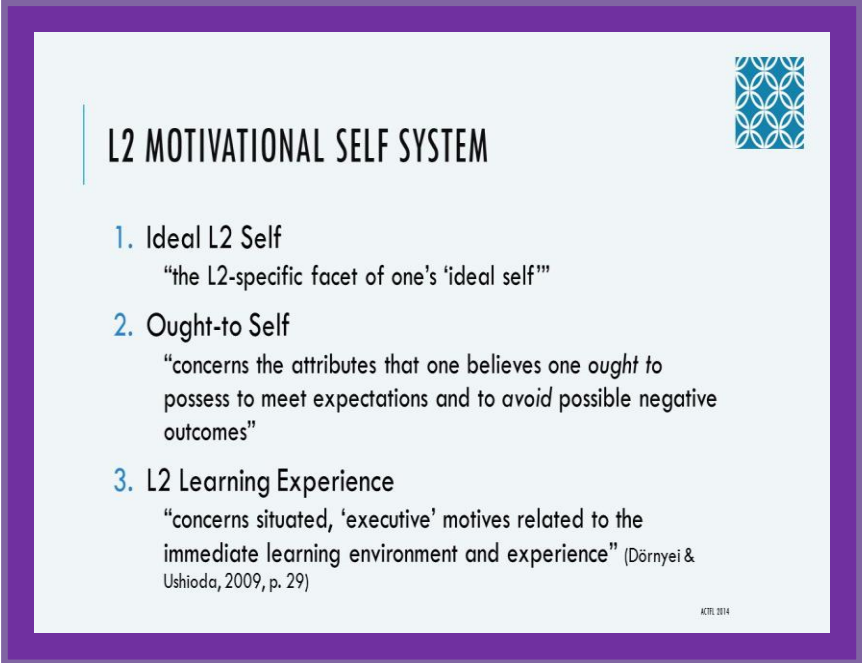


Fig. 2 The L2 motivational self system (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009, p. 29)