The role of self-concepts in students' motivation in the Brazilian EFL context

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Abstract: *This qualitative research study conducted in a public school in Brazil concerns the influence of personal factors – beliefs, expectations, and self-concepts on students' motivation in an EFL setting, in light of theories of self. Those theories stress the power of individuals' perceptions about themselves, their English classes, and the process of learning as regulators of behavior, influencing the extent to which students engage in L2 learning. Results presented in this article show how personal factors can trigger or hinder motivation and how these are sensitive to situational factors, such as the availability of school resources. Strategies to deal with students' motivation in spite of contextual restraints commonly observed in public schools in Brazil are also addressed in the article.*
Keywords: *self-concepts; student motivation; English teaching and learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Motivation is one of the most important aspects that can affect learners' success in L2 language learning. It "determines the extent of active, personal involvement in foreign or second language learning" (Oxford; Shearin, 1996, p.121). As earlier investigations have proved, there are many factors that can influence students' motivation, such as interests, attitudes, expectations, beliefs, self-concepts, anxiety and gender (Gardner, 1985; Williams; Burden, 1997; Pintrich; Schunk, 1996; Dörnyei, 2001). Parents, peers, school norms and, of course, the teacher can also exert positive or negative influence on students' level of effort and persistence to the learning tasks. Among those factors, the teacher seems to be the one who plays the key role in generating and sustaining students' degree of motivation, especially in Foreign Language (FL) settings, where most of the students' opportunities to learn come from formal contexts of instruction.

Teachers' personalities, self-concepts, confidence, beliefs, teaching styles, enthusiasm, and relationship with learners can increase or decrease students' motivation. Students' behavior and involvement can also affect teachers' motivation. If students are interested in the activities and pay attention to the teachers'

explanations, teachers will feel energized and enthusiastic about their teaching. On the other hand, students' lack of involvement and disruptive behavior can affect the way teachers behave, manage interactions and power, as well as their motivation.

Although there is a great amount of research studies that address the variety of factors that can affect both students' and teachers' motivation, Brazil lacks qualitative studies that focus on personal factors that can affect motivation, such as the students' expectations and self-concepts and how these interact with each other to influence students' motivation. In addition, there are few studies that investigate how school affordances shape students' self-concepts and thus their motivation. Most investigations focus on the role of teachers' methodological choices in students' interest and enthusiasm. Therefore, to fill this gap, I sought to investigate in this article: a) the expectations students have about their English classes in the public school setting; b) how these expectations relate to images students form about themselves as language learners; c) how these images, known as self-concepts can affect students' motivation, and d) how students' self-concepts and motivation can be affected by situational factors, such as school affordances (e.g., available resources, class size, number of lessons per week).

The key questions that guided this investigation are:

1. What do students expect to learn in their English classes?

2. To what extent do students' expectations relate to their self-concepts, and how do they affect their motivation?

3. How can situational factors affect students' self-concepts and their motivation?

To address these questions, I reviewed studies on L2 motivation that adopt different approaches (social psychological, cognitive or process-oriented) to the characterization of motivation. As part of the theoretical framework of this study, I also included self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), possible selves theory (Markus; Nurius, 1986), and investment theory (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2000, 2001) to understand the role of personal motives in students' interest and effort to learn English in a formal setting. Although the self-theories date from the 1980s and 1990s, they have been used recently by a great number of theorists (Kao, 2000; Oyserman; Terry; Bybee, 2002; Oyserman et al., 2004; Day et al., 2006) to address educational issues (e.g., motivation, identity,

success, and failure), in some cases reinterpreting old concepts, such as Robert Gardner's notion of integrativeness (Lamb, 2004; Dörnyei, 2005; Dörnyei; Csizér; Nemeth, 2006).

Lack of student motivation is a common complaint among teachers in the Brazilian public school setting. Therefore, understanding what makes students' motivated and/or demotivated is important in order to increase the quality of teaching and learning in Brazil.

In this article, I adopt a process-oriented perspective of L2 motivation. I see it as an impulse, desire or stimulus that varies among individuals and causes action, making individuals engage and persist in a task. It can change constantly due to different factors: personal (e.g., beliefs, expectations, and self-concepts), teachers' methodological choices (e.g., teaching techniques and styles) and situational influences, such as physical affordances of the school (e.g., materials, facilities, size of the classrooms). Some of those factors, such as learners' aims, expectations and self-concepts can provide incentives or standards for behavior, triggering motivation. Others, related to the teachers' role and school affordances can help students sustain a high motivation or decrease it. In this article, I will discuss the first group of influences, namely personal factors.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section covers two main aspects focused on in this paper, namely, the concept of integrativeness in motivational studies and the definition of multiple selves. In the first sub-section, I discuss one of the most important concepts in the L2 motivational field: the idea of integrativeness introduced by Gardner and Lambert (1972). In addition, I comment on how this concept has developed over the years as part of globalization. In the second sub-section, I introduce the notion of self-concept, focused on this article and how it can affect students' motivation to learn English. I also discuss the types of self-concepts individuals can form throughout their lives, specifically those related to the teaching and learning process.

Changes in the concept of integrativeness

Motivation for learning a second or a foreign language (L2) has been one of the most discussed and researched topics in the last fifty years. Innumerable studies have been published, and different definitions and theoretical frameworks have been proposed in an attempt to discover what makes individuals engage and persist in the language learning process.

Gardner and Lambert were the first to study the phenomenon of L2 motivation in the Canadian bilingual context (1959, 1972). With the Social-Psychological model and the notions of integrativeness, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation, they established one of the most famous frameworks in the study of second language learning motivation, which as of the 1990s "has dominated the language learning motivation scene for about three decades" (Oxford, 1996, p.2). This model received many positive reviews and helped us understand what makes students be interested in studying a language, providing "a solid base for constructing a broader theory" (Oxford; Shearin, 1994, p.12), although the basic model eventually seemed too constraining and needed to be expanded.

In the last five years, some theorists, such as McClelland (2000), Lamb (2004), Dörnyei (2005) and Dörnyei, Csizér and Németh (2006) have been working to broaden the concept of integrativeness introduced by Gardner and colleagues. As originally proposed, integrativeness means "having interest in learning the second language in order to come closer psychologically to the other language community" (Gardner, 2001, p.7). In the Social-Psychological Model, integrativeness includes *integrative motivation* (the desire to learn a language in order to identify with a L2 community), *interest in learning languages and positive attitudes towards the L2 community.*

Through the application of the *Attitudes and Motivation Test Battery* (AMTB), Gardner (1985) shows that individuals with an integrative motivation demonstrate much more effort in learning, and thus achieve greater L2 competence than individuals with an instrumental orientation.[1] This has led to the suggestion that the

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[1] For Gardner, an instrumental orientation means practical reasons for learning a language, without implying any interest in being part of a language community.

integrative motivation was in some way superior to the instrumental motivation and was strongly associated to L2 achievement. However, if we consider many EFL settings around the world, where learners have fewer opportunities to interact with native speakers, a desire of identification, as initially proposed, may not be so common.

According to Lamb (2004), since the introduction of the term integrativeness the world has been changing, especially with globalization, making it impossible to talk about identification with a specific L2 community. Kachru, Kachru and Nelson (2006) point out that based on current studies there are an estimated 375 million speakers of English as a mother tongue, 375 million users of English in English as a Second Language (ESL) societies and around 750 to 1,000 million people who speak English as a Foreign Language. Everyday, there are more and more people around the world speaking English, so for the L2 learners, the English language is not anymore associated solely with Anglophone countries (Lamb, 2004).

In the globalized world, many learners have been developing an international posture that motivates them to learn English. Students are interested in studying and working abroad, as well as interacting with intercultural speakers. Many might not wish to identify with one L2 group (e.g., American or British), but with events, practices, styles, and information of a broader, global community (Lamb, 2004). The media and the internet have been responsible for the development of this global identity, in other words, feelings of immersion in and virtual identification with the global community that speaks English as either a second or a foreign language.

Norton's concepts of *imagined communities* and *investment* in the L2 (Norton Pierce, 1995; Norton, 2000, 2001) can also be used to support the idea of a new view of integrativeness, if we think about them on a global scale.[2] Norton's theory is based on the concept of imagination by Wenger, who defines it, as "the process of expanding our self by transcending our time and space and creating new images of the world and ourselves" (apud Norton; Kamal, 2003, p.303).

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[2]   Although Norton's focus is on the immediate community, her concepts are used in the current article to imply an imagined global community.

According to Norton (2001), when individuals start studying an L2 they invest their time and energy in communities that go beyond the classroom walls. They picture *imagined communities* – images of global or local communities, in which they wish to participate in the future. Those images can serve as strong motivators, as students will invest effort to have access to and to be completely accepted as members of those groups. When learners invest in learning a second or foreign language and try to be part of an imagined community, they persist longer, demonstrating greater motivation.

Norton (2000, 2001) uses the notion of investment, rather than motivation, to discuss the relationship between the learners and the target language. For Norton (2001, p.166),

> If learners invest in a second language, they do so with an understanding that they will acquire a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will increase their value in the social world.

Symbolic and material resources include the L2 itself, education, friendship, religion, capital goods, real state, and money (Norton, 2000, 2001). Individuals who have access to these symbolic and material resources will have, consequently, access to power and privileges, which can, in turn, broaden their future life opportunities. Thus, learners invest in the L2 hoping they will have a good return on their investment, and be allowed to access the so much desired imagined communities.

Norton's concepts of imagined communities and investment, though being applied to L2 contexts, could also be extended to EFL settings to help us explain to what extent learners express commitment to language learning in instructional settings and what factors can affect their investment positively or negatively.

Multiple Selves

Having access to a global, imagined community means, for many students, having better chances in life, such as higher salaries, academic choices and access to information and knowledge. In Brazil, as well as in many other countries, knowing English has

become a requirement in many companies, which has been increasing each day the demand for English instruction.

Since childhood, learners recognize the necessity and importance of being a member of a global community of English speakers in order to succeed. The desire to have access to the symbolic and material resources attached to this language can make them use their imagination to create future images of themselves as competent and active speakers. These images or perceptions constitute students' *self-concepts* and they can influence the extent to which these individuals engage in L2 learning (Markus; Nurius, 1986; Markus; Wurf, 1987; Oyserman, 2001).

Self-concepts serve as regulators of human behaviors and they help individuals interpret their actions and experiences. As Oyserman states, it is what comes to our mind when we think of ourselves, which provides "incentives, standards, plans, rules, and scripts for behavior" (apud Markus; Wurf, 1987, p.299).

According to Markus and Wurf (1987, p.307),

> The self-concept contains a variety of representations - cognitive or affective, in verbal, image, neural or sensory-motor form, representing the self in the past, future or the here-and-now, encompassing the actual or the possible self.

For these authors, the *actual self* is the set of attributes that the individual believes he/she has in the present, while the *possible self* corresponds to the images of what the individual might become in the future, including the selves they could become (*desired selves*), and the selves they are afraid of becoming (*feared selves*).

While the notion of self-concept contains core conceptions that define a person's identity that can be more or less stable over an extended period of time, possible selves have to do with the dynamic properties of the self-concept, such as motivation and social change, which give "direction and impetus for action, change, and development" (Markus; Nurius, 1986, p.960). In this sense, we can say that possible selves can stimulate individuals to learn an L2, especially when they differ from the attributes these individuals think they have in the present (actual selves). If learners see themselves as competent speakers, members of a global community, there are chances that they will exert effort and persist in trying to accomplish those attributes in the present.

People can form positive as well as negative future representations, which in turn can have distinct consequences for motivation and achievement in educational settings. In most situations, positive or desired representations can be very powerful and increase optimism, since they make learners realize that the actual self is mutable. However, they can also be demotivating if individuals create impossibly high standards to reach (see Rogers, 1965). Negative representations can either lead to change, inducing people to transform their current reality, or be imprisoning, as low expectations may "stifle attempts to change or develop" (Markus; Nurius, 1986, p.963).

According to the self-theory, individuals can create as many possible selves as they wish, but their choices are influenced by the social context and their experiences. They can create both *desired selves*, such as the ideal, the creative, the successful, the admired self, as well as *feared selves*, such as the depressive, the lonely, the incompetent, the unemployed self (Dörnyei, 2005). The types of possible selves individuals will generate may vary depending on the possibilities and choices available in the context that surrounds them. For example, in the educational setting, the teacher's style, methodology, attitudes, and motivation, may influence the extent to which students will put effort in achieving their possible selves. Specific teaching practices can either help students achieve their desired selves or push them closer to what they fear.

Among the possible selves individuals project, Higgins (1987, p.320) identifies two important domains of the self that can exert a great impact on individuals' behavior and motivation:
1. The *ideal self*, that is, "your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) would like you, ideally, to possess";
2. The "*ought to" self*, that is, "your representation of the attributes that someone (yourself or another) believes you should or ought to possess"

Although the ideal and the "ought to" selves seem similar, the ideal self focus on the person's wishes and aspirations in order to obtain pleasure or a positive result, while the "ought to" self emphasizes the avoidance of negative outcomes. In the later, there is a sense of duty and responsibility involved.

Higgins (1987, p.320) also identifies a third domain called *actual self*, which includes "your representation of the attributes

that someone (you or another) believes you actually possess". The actual self is how individuals see themselves in the here-and-now. According to Higgins' *self-discrepancy theory*, motivation is the result of an attempt to reduce the discrepancy between the actual and either the ideal self or the "ought to" self. When individuals work hard to make their actual self just like their ideal self or their "ought to" self, they can feel highly motivated. In contrast, when they realize their actual self is far from being like either their ideal self or their "ought to" self, they can experience dissatisfaction and, consequently, a decrease in their motivation.

Because of its links to motivation, self-theory had a significant relevance in the current study to the understanding of the types of expectations students have about their English classes, how they relate to self-images students' form and how these can interact with other situational factors, thus affecting students' motivation.

Methodology

Background

This qualitative research study was conducted in Brazil from 2004 to 2005. The aim of this study was to analyze the impact of a cultural awareness program on students' motivation to learn EFL. Data were collected from March to November, 2004 with second year high school students in two phases. First, I analyzed English classes of one teacher from March to June 2004 (phase 1). Then, I prepared a cultural awareness program to be used with the same group of students and conducted that program from August to November 2004 (phase 2).[3] My aim was to characterize students' motivation in both phases, focusing on the aspects of the learning situation that were affecting their motivation.

Initially, phase one had a minor role. It was a diagnostic phase used to tap students' motivation prior to the cultural awareness program for the purpose of verifying later if there were any changes with the implemented program. However, in the course of the analysis I noticed that phase one was so rich and complex that I decided to expand my initial aim in the following

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[3] The teacher from phase 1 did not track the culture course; it was taught by the present researcher.

ways: first, I included a detailed investigation of students' personal motives, such as expectations, beliefs and self-concepts affecting their motivation in the light of self-discrepancy theory and possible selves theory; second, I considered students' motivational characteristics and changes in two different types of classes, one based on grammar and reading (phase 1) and the other based on cultural aspects (phase 2); third, I incorporated aspects of the context of learning, which affected not only students' motivation but also the teacher's motivation; finally, I explained how these various factors (personal, methodological, and situational) could interact with one another and affect students' motivation. However, this article centers on students' personal factors that can be affecting their motivation on the grammar and reading segment (first phase).

Context and participants

The first phase involved a second year high school English teacher and thirty-two students of a public school in Sao Paulo State, Brazil. The teacher has a major in Languages (Portuguese and English) and Literature (Brazilian, American and British). She graduated from a prestigious public university and has two post-graduate qualifications in Comparative Literature and Psycho-pedagogy. When data were collected in 2004, she had been teaching in public schools for six years.

The majority of the students had very little contact with English outside school, except for a few (18%) who took private English language courses. Most of them do not usually interact with members of English-speaking communities, with which they are familiar only through cultural products, especially movies, music and the internet

The school, which was started in 1920, is situated in a middle class neighborhood and it has around 1,600 students.

Instruments to collect data

To draw students' profile and to tap their expectations and self-concepts, I decided to work with the following instruments: a questionnaire composed of closed-ended and open-ended questions, a semi-structured student interview protocol, a three-

point Likert-scaled questionnaire and audiotaped class observations.

The questionnaire included questions in order to delineate: a) students' age; b) English courses taken; c) contact with English outside the classroom and d) reasons for learning English. This was important to draw the participants' characteristics and to verify if these might be influencing their interest in learning the target language.

Students were also interviewed about: a) the importance of English in public schools; b) their expectations about their English classes; c) their view of their teacher's motivation; d) their evaluation of the course and the teacher (content and activities developed and the teacher's teaching style) and e) their grouping preferences (individual work, pair work, group work). These topics were essential to elicit students' expectations, as well as to check to what extent these were being met along the English lessons. Then, through the analysis of students' expectations, I cold trace the images they were forming about themselves and check how they were affecting their motivation.

The three-point Likert-scaled questionnaire contained fifty items, which were divided into seven categories: a) students' attitudes to the teaching and learning process; b) type of motivation (intrinsic/ extrinsic); c) students' goals and expectations about their English classes; d) students' level of effort; e) class anxiety; f) parental influences and g) students' attitudes to the teacher's approach and methodological choices. These categories were motivated by the works of Gardner (1985, 2001), Schmidt, Boraie and Kassabgy (1999), and Dörnyei (2001). The items were thematically grouped, but category headings were not given to the students. This instrument was used to get a general impression of students' opinion about different factors that are believed to influence L2 motivation. Since the aim of this article is to discuss the role of students' self-concepts in their motivation, I focus on the results of category C (Students' goals and expectations). This questionnaire was employed to supplement the main data, derived from qualitative sources.

Because motivation is abstract and not directly observable, it has to be inferred indirectly from indicators, such as individuals' accounts on questionnaires and interviews or their behaviors. In

this way, audiotaped classroom observations were also useful to capture learners' actual behavior along their English lessons, as well as their teachers' style and techniques, and to verify whether there was a match between what students' expected to learn and what their teacher was actually providing for them. It is believed that the closer students get from what they see as ideal, the more motivated they feel. The teacher has thus a major role in helping students achieve their desired images.

Data analysis procedures

Students interview protocols were transcribed using codes (for pause, questions, laughter, comments and other events) based on Du Bois et al. (1993) and Marcuschi (2000). These protocols were then categorized using Gillham's (2000) techniques. For each answer, I used the following procedure: first, I identified and underlined key words, that is, words or sentences that were mentioned by the students repeatedly. Based on these key-words, I created themes that were later grouped into categories in a grid with examples of the students' answers. I also counted the occurrence of the same theme to have a quantitative perspective (e.g., how many students said they expected to learn grammar, how many would like to learn to speak the L2).

English instruction was observed and audiotaped from March to June 2004. Two audiotaped classes were selected, transcribed and coded, using the same procedures of the interview. The analysis of these classes was important to observe students' performance and reaction on the various activities prepared by the teacher, which then made it possible to trace the learners' actual self and to verify if these corresponded to their ideal or feared images.

For the three-point Likert-scaled questionnaire analysis, I calculated students' answers in terms of percentages, which were then expressed graphically. No further analysis was made, since this was a minor instrument in this study.

Finally, the questionnaire composed of closed-ended and open-ended questions was analyzed using quantitative and qualitative procedures. For the closed-ended questions, I calculated students' answers in terms of percentages. For the open-ended

questions, I categorized students' answers using Gillham's (2000) techniques (also used for the interviews).

In this section I present some results of the current study in terms of students' expectations and beliefs that are strongly linked to the self-concepts they form. I then explore the relationship between these self-concepts and the students' degree of commitment to language learning. Finally, I demonstrate how situational factors might shape students' self-concepts and influence their motivation. This section is divided into three parts, each addressing the research questions presented earlier.

Results for Research Question 1: Students expectations about their English classes

It is believed that expectations – beliefs about future occurrences (Scheibe, 1970) – are among the factors that can affect learners' motivation. The can influence the choices learners make and the chances they take, triggering action. As Gigliotti (1987), Schmidt, Boraie e Kassabgy (1996), Niehoff et al (2001) point out, when learners have high expectations about learning a language and these expectations are met in their language classes, that is, their expectations concerning the use of activities, group work, contents taught and teacher availability are met, they can feel more enthusiastic and will put more effort to complete tasks. On the other hand, low expectations or unmet expectations are more associated with low levels of motivation.

When interviewed about what they expected to learn in their English classes, most students in the present study said they would like to learn basic aspects of the English language (e.g., grammar, everyday expressions and vocabulary) or that they would like to develop their oral proficiency, as we can see in these examples[4]:

> Interviewer (I): What do you expect to learn in your English classes?

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[4]   All the examples presented in this article were translated from Portuguese.

> Student 8 (S8): I expect to learn at least some basic concepts which I think will help me one day (pause) for example to get a job (pause) I want to work with computers and in this field there are a lot of words in English (pause) so maybe I'll need to know the language
>
> Student 19 (S19): I expect to learn grammar (pause) how to write and read well (pause) understand and interpret texts (pause) because if I need to do something I think it's important (pause) especially to learn how to speak the language and pronounce the words correctly

Some students also noted grammar, vocabulary, reading and translation among the skills they would like to develop in their English classes:

> I: What do you expect to learn in your English classes?
>
> S3: how to interpret texts and write a little bit
>
> S5: I would like to learn how to translate texts you know? because sometimes I listen to a song in English or I see a word and I don't know its meaning you know? So this is what I would like to learn
>
> S15: I would like to develop the abilities that are more difficult to me (pause) like grammar and reading

It is interesting to observe that many of those expectations seem to be predictive, that is, expectations about what students assume is going to happen in their English classes, based on previous experiences. They represent expectations students have about what aspects of English is traditionally taught in the public school context, in the sense that these skills (grammar, reading and translation) are the ones often emphasized by the teachers since middle school, except for oral proficiency, which is not a major concern.

However, it is possible to observe that students' expectations are not limited to what they think it is achievable in their English classes. Student 19, for example, mentions that he would like to develop various skills, which indicate that these students also have ideal expectations about their classes, in other words, expectations they would ideally like to occur.

On the Likert-scale questionnaire, when presented with a list of skills they might like to work with, students' opinion were evenly distributed, indicating a desire to know how to use both oral and written skills effectively, in order to become competent speakers of English. Students recognize the importance and the necessity of learning English since this is an international language which is used in many fields:

> S7: English is the first language in the world
> S10: nowadays English is present in everything we do so it's important to know it if we want to have a successful career
> S13: knowing English is important if we want to be connected to the world

Future jobs and travels were the most cited reasons, in the interview, for learning the L2, which may be serving as incentives for students to engage in the learning tasks:

> I: Why is learning English important for you?
> S13: to find a job in the future because everything is in English (pause) for example the news (pause) so it's important to learn English to be aware of what's happening in the world you know? (pause) to have some knowledge (pause) because if we want to learn something about another country and we search the internet the information is in English so I think it's important to know English to be part of the world
> S16: English would be important in my job or in case I travel to another country (pause) and also to communicate with other people (pause) English is an international language (pause)it is spoken everywhere

Twenty-seven out of twenty-eight students who were interviewed said they wanted to learn English in order to have better job opportunities in the future. In the questionnaire composed of open-ended and closed-ended questions, students also point out job opportunities and travels as the main reasons for learning the L2.

Like Student 16, most students recognize the status of English as an international language and the urgency of learning it as a

means to become members of a globalized society. By investing in the language now, students think they can have some return on their investment in the future, for instance, when they start looking for a job. So their expectations go beyond the predictive ones. They would also ideally like to develop different types of skills, some of which are not usually taught in their classes, but which they see as important in order to have privileges in the future.
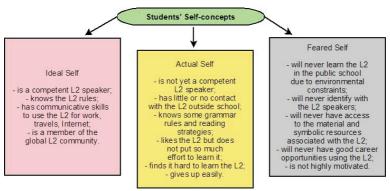
Results for Research Question 2: The relationship among students' expectations, self-concepts and their motivation

For the students who participated in this study, knowing English represents the chance to have better life opportunities, from well-paying jobs and world travels to internet information access. Although some of students' expectations are predictive, that is, they are about what, based on their learning experience they believe is going to happen in their classes (e.g., grammar instruction and reading activities), they also have expectations that represent attributes that they see as ideal or desired, such as gaining oral proficiency in order to communicate with L2 speakers. These future ideal representations are part of learners' self-concepts - images of the self that "function as a repository of autobiographical memories, as an organizer of experience, and as an emotional buffer and motivational resource" (Oyserman, 2001, p.500).

The self-concept contains many representations of the self, including ideal expectations that can serve as incentives for behavior, being therefore linked to motivation. Based on students' answers to the interview protocol and the questionnaires, I observed that some of their ideal representations comprise: a) being a competent L2 speaker; b) knowing the L2 rules (grammar), as well as having the necessary skills to use it in communication (e.g., at work, travels, internet); c) being part of a global community ("to be part of the world"), and d) having a good job. However, considering that the majority of these students still cannot communicate effectively in the L2, these ideal attributes do not exactly correspond to the attributes students possess in the present.

The ideal selves are one type of positive possible selves that individuals can form. There can also be negative images, or feared selves regulating people's actions. Both the positive and the negative images represent the learners' desires, aspirations, and fears and

they can serve as incentives for students to engage in real learning, therefore changing their actual selves. In Figure 1, students' ideal, actual and feared selves are represented, based on the analysis of the questionnaires and the interview protocol, as well as classroom observations:

Students' Self-concepts

Ideal Self	Actual Self	Feared Self
- is a competent L2 speaker;	- is not yet a competent L2 speaker;	- will never learn the L2 in the public school due to environmental constraints;
- knows the L2 rules;	- has little or no contact with the L2 outside school;	- will never identify with the L2 speakers;
- has communicative skills to use the L2 for work, travels, Internet;	- knows some grammar rules and reading strategies;	- will never have access to the material and symbolic resources associated with the L2;
- is a member of the global L2 community.	- likes the L2 but does not put so much effort to learn it;	- will never have good career opportunities using the L2;
	- finds it hard to learn the L2;	- is not highly motivated.
	- gives up easily.	

The students' comments to the following questions exemplify the three types of self-images presented:

> I: What do you expect to learn in your English classes?
> S8: Some content that would help me learn how to speak (pause). I think it's nice to be able to speak (pause) and also understand a little what they [foreign speakers] are saying (ideal self)
> I: How would you describe your level of effort to learn English?
> S5: I don't work so hard (pause) sometimes I don't do the assignments because I don't understand English (pause) we have English classes since fifth grade but I can't learn the language (actual self)
> I: Do you think that your expectations are being met in your English classes?
> S1: I think that the teacher works hard to cover the contents but in my opinion this is not enough (pause) considering what I would like to learn it's bad but I know that it's not possible to do more than what she's already doing (pause) we have few classes per week (pause) unfortunately there's no way to learn English in the public school (feared self)

As Dörnyei (2005, p.106) points out, "if the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the Ideal L2 Self is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves". In Figure 1, we can see that the students' actual self is not equivalent to the ideal images they form of themselves as English learners. Although they want to be competent speakers, their behavior and verbalizations show that they do not expend so much effort in learning the L2, give up easily and do not have the necessary skills to use the target language effectively. So, as a means to achieve their ideal attributes, they need to employ specific strategies if they wish to be closer to those positive images, and at the same time be far from what they see as negative or feared.

According to Schmidt, Boraie and Kassabgy (1996), expectations can have a positive or negative effect on students' motivation whether or not they are being met in the language classes. Therefore, when teachers work to satisfy students' expectations and when students have the teacher's encouragement and support to attain their ideal or desired selves, they can feel highly motivated to learn. On the other hand, when teachers do not take students' interests in consideration, as a result there can be a decrease in their level of engagement in the activities, since they do not see the tasks as relevant to attain their learning purposes. Also, the availability of resources in the school setting can increase or decrease students' interest and level of effort, as shown in the following sub-section.

Results to Research Question 3: The influence of situational factors on students' self-concepts and motivation

Possible selves are personalized and learners may be free to create as many possible selves they wish to, yet they are also subject to contextual influences. The historical, social and socio-cultural context may limit the images individuals create for themselves (Markus; Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, 2001). According to Oyserman (2001, p.507), "social contexts enable, elicit, and scaffold certain selves while disenabling, suppressing, and dismantling others". I would also add the impact caused by the immediate context of

learning, that is, the classroom setting, on students' enthusiasm to lean an L2.

The contextual constraints commonly observed in the public school scenario in Brazil might affect the possible selves students imagine, as well as their persistence to attain them. Despite students' ideal expectations, when interviewed, most of them make clear that they do not believe these are possible to be accomplished in the public school context, due to its lack of resources, few classes per week (two 50 minute-sessions per week), and students' disruptive behavior:

> I: What do you expect to learn in your English classes?
> S9: Here we know that teachers teach us superficial things you know? (pause) it's more grammar or simple things (pause) I would like to learn different things
> S11: Basic things because here we cannot learn more than basic things (pause) there's not enough time to learn English well
> S13: I think it is not possible to learn a lot because there are not so many classes per week (pause) I expect to learn basic aspects of the language so that later I can take a course in a language school (pause) so here I expect to have a basic knowledge of the language

Many students believe that in the public school they could only learn basic aspects of the L2 and others think that in order to be proficient, they needed to study in private language schools. The students' disbelief in the quality of their English classes are represented in Figure 1 in the form of their feared images and, though not expressed by the majority of students, they can exert a powerful effect on students' behavior, causing their effort and motivation to decrease. Students' low degree of motivation is clear in class observations when they engage in off-task conversations, do not answer to the teacher's questions or do not complete tasks. As self-concepts, beliefs about the language learning process can also guide students' actions and behavior, affecting their decisions and level of motivation.

DISCUSSION

As shown in this article, students' self-concepts can trigger action and thus be related to a high or a low motivation to learn. The harder students try to reduce the discrepancy between what they see as ideal and how they actually behave in the present, the more they will feel enthusiastic about their learning.

However, as presented earlier, self-concepts are sensitive to situational influences, such as school affordances, which in this study showed to be affecting students' motivation negatively. In this sense, focusing exclusively on individual's self-concepts may not be enough to understand what motivate students and how to boost their motivation. There are other aspects of the learning situation that will affect the way students' sustain their motivation. Though this was not the focus of this article, it is a fact that the teacher is one of the key elements that can influence the amount of effort and level of persistence students exert during their English classes.

Usually, teachers are constantly under pressure to cover the curriculum and dissatisfied with their working conditions that they may not find room to reflect on their practice and evaluate their job and its impact on students. However, as Day et al. (2006) point out, teachers should find "room to maneuver" within the school environment (Day et al., 2006) if they want to help their students feel motivated and learn better. I suggest the following strategies to increase students' interest in learning the L2:

1. Be a researcher of your classes: teachers should act as researchers, recording their classes, interviewing and questioning their students to keep track of their aims, desires, expectations, fears, and learning progress. This investigation can then be used to design a program in collaboration with students in order to match students' expectations, which can make their motivation rise. Applying a constant evaluation will help teachers change their strategies if they feel their students are not motivated or having trouble to learn the L2. They will also be able to analyze the positive results they are achieving with their groups, which will in turn make them sustain high levels of their own motivation.

2. Keep a less asymmetric relationship with students, giving incentive, encouraging cooperation among students, and sharing

with them the responsibility for their progress; when learners feel that their teacher care about them, they can feel more enthusiastic; 3. Vary the contents, the format of the activities and materials and give students choices to avoid monotony, which can cause demotivation.

CONCLUSIONS

The self-theory made it possible to understand the types of expectations the students in this study created for themselves (predictive and ideal), and their role in stimulating students desire to learn English. Therefore, we agree with other authors that show that self-images can give individuals reasons, plans and standards for engaging in real action, thus affecting motivation. Understanding the images students create for themselves and working in order to help them achieve their ideal expectations (and avoiding what they fear) can be a good strategy for teachers to keep high levels of students' motivation. In addition, teachers can use that understanding to strengthen students' sense of autonomy in search for plans to increase L2 learning outside school, which in turn could enhance not only their motivation to persist in the language classroom, but also their general commitment to L2 language learning.

In the public school scenario in Brazil, there seems to be a negativity that involves the teaching profession and make teachers feel demotivated and give up easily. Negative beliefs as well as environmental problems, such as lack of facilities and materials are among the causes of such dissatisfaction.

Working conditions of teachers can be an obstacle to excellence. However, in order to increase the teacher and students' motivation, we need to stop emphasizing the problems faced in public schools and portraying teachers as helpless victims (Grant; Sleeter, 1987). Though school affordances affect teachers' job and students' effort and opportunities, their performance is not completely determined by the context, and both teachers and students do and can exercise control over the teaching and learning process.

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Título: *O papel do auto-conceito na motivação de alunos brasileiros no contexto do inglês como língua estrangeira*
Resumo: *Este estudo qualitativo, conduzido em uma escola pública no Brasil, trata da influência dos fatores pessoais – crenças, expectativas e auto-conceitos na motivação de alunos para aprender inglês como língua estrangeira, à luz das teorias do "eu". Essas teorias enfatizam a força das percepções que os indivíduos têm de si mesmos, das aulas de inglês e do processo de aprendizagem enquanto reguladoras do comportamento, as quais podem influenciar o grau de engajamento dos alunos no aprendizado da L2. Os resultados apresentados neste artigo mostram como os fatores pessoais podem desencadear ou impedir a motivação e como eles são sensíveis às condições do contexto de aprendizagem, como por exemplo, os recursos oferecidos pela escola. Apresentamos também estratégias para lidar com a motivação dos aprendizes, apesar das restrições contextuais comumente observadas nas escolas públicas brasileiras.*
Palavras-chave: *auto-conceito; motivação do aluno; ensino e aprendizagem de inglês.*