*Language Teaching* (2024), **57**, 443–448
doi:10.1017/S0261444824000156

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CHRISTOPHER BRUMFIT ESSAY PRIZE 2023 WINNERS

# Does being gay motivate the language learning journey of a sexually marginalised 'refugee'?

Junjie Li* and Zi Wang

University of Warwick, Coventry, UK
***Corresponding author:** Junjie Li; Email: junjie.li@warwick.ac.uk

(Received 29 April 2024; accepted 1 May 2024)

> I have an idea that some men are born out of their due place. Accident has cast them amid certain surroundings, but they have always a nostalgia for a home they know not. They are strangers in their birthplace … Perhaps it is this sense of strangeness that sends men far and wide in the search for something permanent, to which they may attach themselves … Sometimes a man hits upon a place to which he mysteriously feels that he belongs …
>
> (Maugham, 1919, p. 260)

## 1. A 'home' found in the second language

Why do sexual orientations matter in second language (L2) learning motivation? What is it like to grow up speaking a mother tongue that does not feel like home? How does it feel to self-identify as a 'refugee' owing to linguistic and socio-cultural reasons? Can a sexually marginalised adolescent agentively seek 'asylum' by learning another language? Although sexual identity constitutes a fundamental aspect of a person's sense of agency and self, largely negotiated in and through linguistic practices (Pakuła et al., 2015), little is known about how it mediates individuals' language learning journey over time. In this essay, we attempt to present motivational lessons from a retrospective and introspective account of a sexual minority L2 learner. We also hope to prompt reflections on the wider inclusivity issues involved in the readers' own teaching contexts.

This 'refugee' story is originally narrated by Fig (pseudonym), a friend of ours. We are in awe of the profound insights implicated by Fig's idiosyncratic lived experiences as a gay language learner growing up in mainland China. Troubled by devalued stereotypes and stigma associated with homosexuality (Goffman, 1990), Fig attempted to reconstruct his identity via L2 learning and even academically overcompensated for his sense of not belonging as a child. We feel grateful to be entrusted as authors to re-story this unique L2 learning journey of negotiating and reclaiming human agency in a context less conducive to emancipation, particularly in terms of sexual diversity and queer inclusivity. In order to do justice to the narrative's authenticity and upon the request of Fig, the storytelling resorts to the first-person pronoun, followed by the two authors' collaborative analysis based on multiple rounds of member-checking. All instances of 'we' refer to the voices of the co-authors. We also make sure that Fig is unidentifiable in our narration for the sake of privacy and the ethics of friendship (Tillmann-Healy, 2003).

## 2. An identity crisis

*Everything started with this 'silent' yet critical incident. I can still recall vividly how this mixture of anger and shame was brewing inside me when lectured about 'homosexuality as an illness' in my first year of*

*high school. Without any preparation to be humiliated like that in the classroom, all at once my mind was bombarded by a voice, 'Escape from this place!' Now reflecting back, that was not only the very first moment when I perceived stigma, a word I deeply felt on this occasion before comprehending its literal meaning, but also a symbolic expulsion enforced by my respected teacher.*

*Of course, the teacher did not consciously make such homophobic remarks as any kind of monologue. It was in fact something built upon a class presentation delivered by one of my classmates – a supposedly warm-up introduction prior to the serious learning content. Here is the full context of my classroom experience. In this ice-breaking tradition, each student was expected to take a turn to orally present a piece of latest social-political news within five minutes. It was my favourite part. On that particular day, a classmate of mine chose to focus his presentation on the recently held 2012 Olympic games in London, where over twenty homosexual athletes participated in the sports events. The Olympics that year turned out to be momentous in this regard, as the 'out' non-heterosexual athletes had outnumbered the counterpart crowd from the previous two games in Beijing and Athens, according to the* Guardian *(UK) newspaper. The presentation was so brilliantly done that my whole class applauded with zeal to celebrate such Olympic initiatives to publicly acknowledge LGBT rights.*

*The sudden outburst was nonetheless immediately curbed by the teacher. I remember this enduring silent suspension shared by the whole class. Everyone was looking up to the teacher and expecting some kind of approval with eager eyes. A moment later, the teacher uttered his feedback, almost in the fashion of righteous speech: 'It is a mistake to spread such news here. I reassure you this is a morally wrong thing. Those people are all sick.' Silence, once again. In sharp contrast, my inner world became full of loud emotions this time. I drowned in an identity crisis triggered by the teacher, the only authoritative figure in front of me. Along with this silent crisis were both memories from the past and worries about my future life. I knew at once my desire to 'escape' was becoming more concrete than ever, but where to?*

## 3. The imagined community

*I have loved everything about languages from a very young age. I enjoy switching back and forth between Mandarin Chinese and English in a playful way. It feels liberating. Yet, my love of a foreign language does not always seem light-hearted. Instead, it is only recently that I have realised that it reflects the deeply rooted insecurities about my hidden sexual identity, which would never be wholly accepted by mainstream Chinese society.*

*Flashing back to early puberty, it was never easy for me to fit into any 'normal' boys' club. I only vaguely noticed my unique situation in the sense that I found sexuality-related jokes to be offensive, no matter if they were made by peers, teachers, or even parents. I first encountered the concept of homosexuality, or 'gay', via online forums from the Chinese search engine, Baidu. After a while of further 'self-educating', I ended up being horrified by strangers' homophobic comments, such as 'gay people should all be put into mental hospitals for electroshock' and 'our young people have got infectious diseases from the Western world'. It was through those anonymous posts that I started to contemplate my sexual identity and its tension with Chinese cyberspace while struggling to survive in the imagined hostility around me. Although homophobia tended to be prevalent online, I never equated 'being gay' to being socially sentenced to 'death' until the high school teacher's humiliation in real life.*

*Luckily, I soon learned to immerse myself into an imagined 'home' far away from my immediate surroundings. Anglophone cultural products, such as LGBT-themed movies and novels, offered me a comfort zone in which I could project my future life onto those positively represented homosexual figures. For example, there was this movie, Brokeback Mountain, directed by Ang Lee. It was about how two cowboys fell in love and then fought against public oppression in their own ways. This same-sex relationship never got validation from their families nor the society back then, with 1960s Wyoming, United States, as the background of the story, but provoked prolonged resonance among Western audiences and commentators in the early twenty-first century. For the first time, I appreciated the public acknowledgement of sexual minorities in modern society, despite the film's sad ending itself. Since then, being able to speak fluent English, just like those movie characters, has been an unconscious dream of*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

*mine, a dream about legitimising my identity and searching for a sense of belonging. Perhaps naively, I jumped to the conclusion that only by learning English well can I possibly get to protect myself as a whole.*[1] *The need for self-actualization and expressions of inner voices motivated me to look for a new 'home' outside my motherland. Alternatively, I envisaged a life in the Western world. I promised myself that I would earn the opportunity to study abroad, and I did make it in the end. The mastery of this language became a must. I started to read 'authentic' texts everywhere: on campus, at home, and even on the bus. I just found it natural and fun to recite the lines from every English song and movie. These attempts equally satisfied my parents and teachers anyway, though they never figured out where my passion came from. In the following decade, it might not come as a surprise that I expended a large amount of effort to learn the English language, as an important timetabled subject at school and my ticket to 'Noah's Ark'.*

## 4. The figured lifeworld and unspeakable self

Life throughout early puberty and adolescence evidently engendered clashes between Fig's possible selves. What fascinated us the most were the fragments and the integration of the narrator's multiple self-concepts revolving around L2 learning motivation. In the seminal paper by Markus and Nurius (1986, p. 954), possible selves are generally categorised into three types: 'ideal selves that we would very much like to become', 'selves that we could become', and 'selves we are afraid of becoming'. Such categorisation partly sheds light on this line of narrative: Fig was afraid of carrying a 'gay' identity from childhood into adulthood in his birthplace, which signals sickness as prescribed by his perceived societal norms. It is worth noting that in Chinese cultural contexts, 'filial responsibility' is so highly esteemed that everyone must continue their family line, and failure to meet these obligations is regarded as a 'social transgression' (Wang et al., 2019, p. 440). Pressured by Confucius values and the one-child policy, many LGBT grown-ups end up marrying and bearing offspring, inducing the notorious phenomenon of Tong Qi – that is, wives of homosexual men. Of course, Fig could have conveniently chosen to become an ordinary social being in China as long as his stigmatised sexual identity was concealed well enough. The fear of further internalising stigma, however, was exacerbated when he encountered real-life homophobia in the classroom. The teacher as an absolute authority triggered Fig's identity crisis in high school. He was forced to face the cruel reality that the mediocre closeted life might no longer be feasible. It was again this identity crisis that sent Fig 'far and wide in the search for something permanent' and a more fully rounded ideal self through the acquisition of a foreign language – English.

The escape from the mundane life to the figured world was made possible by agentively learning English. The latter was staked with high hopes for an ideal self to flourish, whereas the former was associated with an ought self in which a part of identity expression was oppressed. Human beings are motivated to act on their actual here-and-now self, so that it can be better matched with the desired future possible selves (Higgins, 1987). In this case, Fig's imagined future self-guides encompass both an ideal self, whose hidden sexual identity would be socially and culturally recognised (though whether this imagination reflects reality is another matter), and an ought self with acceptable academic attainments in learning English, which is one of the school subjects as well as a 'symbolic system' (Kramsch, 2013, p. 6). A harmony between Fig's ideal L2 self and ought-to L2 self was established (Dörnyei, 2009): Apart from the congruence with his innermost voices, the pleasurable immersion in language learning was also sanctioned by both significant others and the 'pre-delineated' sociocultural horizon (Ros i Solé, 2016, p. 75). The discrepancy between Fig's imagined possible selves and the currently invalidated self, in turn, impelled his self-regulatory mechanism and concerted action plans for English language learning. Fig's strong language learning motivation could be partly attributed to two relationships among his figured selves: (1) the harmonious one between the ideal L2 self and the ought-to L2 self, and (2) the offsetting one or counterbalance with a feared self. The two relationships hereby meet Dörnyei's (2009, p. 32) conditions of intense motivational capacities, where the ideal L2 self 'is perceived as plausible and is in harmony – or at least does not clash – with the

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

expectations of the learner's family, peers and other elements of the social environment' and elucidates 'the negative consequences of not achieving the desired end-state'. The self-framework has offered crucial insights into understanding the lived experiences of language learning motivation. However, it should be noted that the implications of Fig's narration have gone beyond the scope of being a gay language learner in a Chinese classroom setting. It unveils a 'refugee' journey of negotiating and reclaiming human agency and finding 'home' more broadly in less privileged situations.

The metaphoric concept of 'home' is not new in language learning motivation literature. The narrator's sense of self is by no means strictly categorical if looked at from a holistic and agency-focussed perspective. A Hong Kong learner in another study, Wolfgang, has experienced an identical phenomenon when learning German (Clarke & Henning, 2013, p. 85):

> Wolfgang's construal of his first home as utilitarian, materialistic and vulgar led him to construct a second home which, so long as he subjected himself to its purported values, might enable him to transform himself into the kind of being he wished to become.

Accordingly, it is through the constant flux of being and becoming that language learners hopefully manage to strike a balance between human agency and the structural constraints, or affordances, present in social contexts (Clarke & Hennig, 2013). In Fig's case,[2] English language learning reciprocally empowers him to seek 'asylum' as a sexually marginalised 'refugee' when his figured 'personal world' does not 'fit political and national boundaries of cultures and languages, and the upholding of linguistic standards' (Ros i Solé, 2016, p. 3). The 'home' in a second language arguably renders novel ways for marginalised learners to escape from the cultural and social identity prescribed at birth and to construct personally meaningful selves, as 'self-reflective intentional agent[s]' and 'person[s]-in-context' (Ushioda, 2009, p. 218).

Based on our anatomy of the narratives provided, we would like to draw attention to the rarely spoken aspects of self in today's language learning motivation research and propose the concept of the unspeakable self. We define it as the core part of one's self system that relates to an individual's hidden identities, often socially oppressed or denied, and which constitutes a site of personal struggle. It resonates with the concept of anti-ought-to self to a certain extent (Thompson, 2017), in the sense that they both serve as promotion-focussed self-guides to resist the internalisation of expectations from the 'other' (e.g. ought-to self) (Dörnyei's, 2009; Higgins, 1987), but it is also characterised by an additional prevention focus to avoid feared outcomes. That is, one of Fig's fears is that his hidden identities could become so perpetually silenced that he would have to conform to repressive societal norms. It inevitably touches on language learners' personal sense of safety, which is considered a fundamental human need foregrounding other higher-order needs of love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1962). Within the dynamism and complexity of one's unspeakable self, there are usually conflicts between a learner's perceived actual self, their ideal self– which is not widely accepted by society – and their ought-to self, which can be perpetuated by significant others but contradicts their own unspeakable self. In Fig's case, such conflicts made him feel powerless in the classroom and beyond, leading him to pursue another lifeworld through language learning.

## 5. Speaking the 'unspeakable'

For Fig, yes, being gay does motivate. The question is whether becoming 'a full human being' or a 'real person', as has been emphasised in motivation literature (e.g. Clarke & Hennig, 2013, p. 87; Ushioda, 2009, p. 215), would necessarily be at the cost of learners' basic dignity in the language classroom. Now returning to the critical incident in Fig's narratives, we suggest that such a transformation could be achieved without a traumatised childhood, with practitioners' increased awareness of the unspeakable self and the diverse personal backgrounds of their students in mind. Sexuality, as one of the many taboo terms, has frequently been regarded as 'the elephant in the room' in language classrooms. As noticed by Banegas and Govender (2022), the intersection between sexual diversities,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

subject knowledge, and pedagogies involved in foreign language education has long been an under-explored issue. Meanwhile, embedded within wider sociocultural environments, language classrooms, as part of social realities rather than isolated vacuums, could easily invoke topics concerning non-heterosexual members, gendered humans, and human relationships (Banegas & Evripidou, 2021). Ushioda (2011, p. 204) writes:

> A foreign language is not simply something to add to our repertoire of skills, but a personalized tool that enables us to expand and express our identity or sense of self in new and interesting ways and with new kinds of people; to participate in a more diverse range of contexts and communities and so broaden our experiences and horizons …

Indeed, the teaching of foreign or L2s encompasses a range of personal meaning-making processes, regarding who we are, who to become, and how to live this life. As fundamental aspects of learners' multi-faceted identities, sexuality and gender matters would be crucial for language practitioners to be aware of. Noticing predominantly normative but problematic assumptions about heterosexuality could be a start, given gender socialisation is traditionally concerned with the male/female dichotomy in most societies, where family, peers, teachers, and researchers all play a role in either reinforcing or interrogating the socially-prescribed stereotypes. Despite the challenges of implementing policy-wide pedagogical or textbook reforms and contesting heterosexual norms imposed by society (e.g. the Confucius values of Chuan Zong Jie Dai, meaning 'carrying on the family line'), it would be qualitatively different for local actors to develop such sensitivities to the needs of marginalised language learners for inclusivity.

Pakuła et al. (2015, p. 7) highlight that 'inclusiveness within the classroom is a must. Without it, some students will feel marginalised; with it, all students are much more likely to feel wanted and appreciated …'. Since LGBT learners' identities are susceptible to what Goffman (1990) would call 'discreditable stigma', language teachers' treatment of sexual diversities and homosexual issues in classroom settings entail extra subtle, nuanced considerations. This is imperative for contexts characterised by party-state surveillance, systematic censorship, and pervasive public discrimination against sexual minorities (e.g. Wang et al., 2019). While it would not be sensible to endorse any radical Western-informed agenda to reform language education policy in every society, a thorny matter emerges for local language practitioners to appropriate contextual practices vis-à-vis overidealised Western values when socialising classroom motivation.

As such, this L2 motivational journey implicates that perhaps the least teachers can do is to allow the natural unfolding of classroom dialogues, enabling learners to engage in authentic self-expressions and personal meaning-making (Ushioda, 2009, 2011), rather than immediately curbing or insensitively misleading relevant topics, as in the incident of Fig's identity crisis. In any case, marginalised language learners' need for belonging and acceptance remains an acute issue. The essay endeavours to bring the 'unspeakable' to the surface by underscoring the key role of language learners' hidden identities, which have often been neglected in the scholarly conversation on possible selves. Bottom-up reflections can be a paramount initial step in the quest for inclusivity: Who are silenced in everyday discourse and why? To what extent do the publicly acknowledged possible selves harmonise learner's diverse lifeworlds? In the future, could (homo)sexuality explicitly qualify as a legitimate topic that belongs in the classroom? The unspeakable self exists; it therefore needs to be spoken and heard.

## Notes

[1] Fig commented that the 'conclusion' represents an immature speculation from his old school days, when he fantasised about the societal acceptance of minority groups simply based on Anglophone media and underestimated the diverse experiences of LGBT grown-ups in non-Western contexts. This partly explains why Fig, at that time, conjured up a self-actualisation vision in a promised land, even though acceptance is a more multi-faceted concept in reality and the narration is not intended to consolidate any Western-centric stereotypes.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000156 Published online by Cambridge University Press

[2] Running the risk of trivialising actual refugee experiences, the analogy of 'refugee' and 'asylum' are exploited as a literary device to symbolise Fig's search for belonging in L2 learning. As can be seen in the essay, by using the analogy, we are trying to convey the depth of Fig's emotional and psychological journey. It by no means equals such a journey to that of those suffering immensely from life-threatening hardships, especially when it comes to war/conflict-affected regions. In line with this caveat, all literary devices as such are co-constructed based on ongoing dialogues, where Fig is actively asked to comment on the text.

## References

Banegas, D. L., & Evripidou, D. (2021). Introduction: Comprehensive sexuality education in ELT. *ELT Journal*, *75*(2), 127–132. doi:10.1093/elt/ccaa085

Banegas, D. L., & Govender, N. (Eds.). (2022). *Gender diversity and sexuality in English language education: New transnational voices*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Clarke, M., & Hennig, B. (2013). Motivation as ethical self-formation. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *45*(1), 77–90. doi:10.1080/00131857.2012.715386

Dörnyei, Z. (2009). The L2 motivational self system. *Motivation, Language Identity and the L2 Self*, *36*(3), 9–11. doi:10.21832/9781847691293-003

Goffman, E. (1990). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Penguin.

Higgins, E. T. (1987). Self-discrepancy: A theory relating self and affect. *Psychological Review*, *94*(3), 319. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.94.3.319

Kramsch, C. (2013). *The multilingual subject: What foreign language learners say about their experience and why it matters*. Oxford University Press.

Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, *41*(9), 954. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.41.9.954

Maslow, A. H. (1962). *Toward a psychology of being*. Van Nostrand Reinhold.

Maugham, W. S. (1919). *The moon and sixpence*. Grosset & Dunlap.

Pakuła, Ł, Pawelczyk, J., & Sunderland, J. (2015). *Gender and sexuality in English language education: Focus on Poland*. British Council.

Ros i Solé, C. (2016). *The personal world of the language learner*. Palgrave Macmillan UK. doi:10.1057/978-1-137-52853-7

Thompson, A. S. (2017). Don't tell me what to do! The anti-ought-to self and language learning motivation. *System*, *67*, 38–49. doi:10.1016/j.system.2017.04.004

Tillmann-Healy, L. M. (2003). Friendship as method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *9*(5), 729–749. doi:10.1177/1077800403254894

Ushioda, E. (2009). A person-in-context relational view of emergent motivation, self and identity. In Z. Dörnyei & E. Ushioda (Eds.), *Motivation, language identity and the L2 self* (pp. 215–228). Multilingual Matters. doi:10.21832/9781847691293-012

Ushioda, E. (2011). Language learning motivation, self and identity: Current theoretical perspectives. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, *24*(3), 199–210. doi:10.1080/09588221.2010.538701

Wang, Y., Hu, Z., Peng, K., Xin, Y., Yang, Y., Drescher, J., & Chen, R. (2019). Discrimination against LGBT populations in China. *The Lancet Public Health*, *4*(9), e440–e441. doi:10.1016/S2468-2667(19)30153-7

**Junjie Li** is a Ph.D. candidate specialising in the motivation of young language learners. He does qualitative research with children and youth to understand lived experiences of language learning motivation change over time. His research interests are childhood, motivation, sense of agency, L2 self, and participatory research. Particularly, his doctoral project explores how young people of different ages perceive and agentively self-regulate motivational ups and downs. Junjie currently works as Senior Graduate Teaching Assistant and MA Dissertation Supervisor in the Department of Applied Linguistics, at the University of Warwick, where he completed an M.A. TESOL with distinction. As GTA, he contributes to two modules: (a) Teaching and Researching Young Language Learners; (b) Specialism in Classroom Motivation.

**Zi Wang** works as Internationalisation Coordinator in Student Opportunity at the University of Warwick, running its intercultural training programme and managing other internationalisation-related education projects. In 2022, Zi earned her Ph.D. degree in English Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics from the Department of Applied Linguistics, the University of Warwick. Her longitudinal qualitative Ph.D. study investigated Chinese learners' multilingual learning motivation. Zi's research interests include the psychology of language learning, multilingualism, and interculturality. She has been running the Language Learning Psychology Online Reading Group since May 2023 (for more details, see X @ziwang28). She has published in journals such as *International Journal of Multilingualism*, *Language Learning Journal*, and *Language and Intercultural Communication*.

**Cite this article:** Li, J., & Wang, Z. (2024). Does being gay motivate the language learning journey of a sexually marginalised 'refugee'? *Language Teaching*, *57*(4), 443–448. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444824000156