

Students' Initial Motivation to Study a Foreign Language in a Swedish Academic Context: A Case Study on Dutch

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Abstract

Motivation to learn languages other than English (LOTEs) that are not spoken as widely as French, German, or Spanish needs more attention in research. This qualitative study examines the initial motivation to learn Dutch as a foreign language in higher education in Sweden, utilizing a questionnaire asking students at beginner level to describe their motivation in their own words. The questionnaire was distributed between 2020 and 2023 and was answered by a total of 222 students. Abductive thematic analysis was used in analyzing the data and resulted in four overarching themes of motivation: Getting closer to one's desirable self, Building relationships, Career asset, and Migration. These themes were discussed in-depth in relation to the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) and the concept of the ideal multilingual self. The implications for motivation in higher education language teaching were discussed in relation to the study's findings. Finally, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of the Swedish higher education system, which, due to its structural characteristics, contributes to the enrolment of a heterogeneous student population in university language programs.

Keywords: Dutch as a foreign language, LOTE, L2MSS, motivation, higher education

1. Introduction

Recent decades have seen an increase in research on motivation in the field of second language learning. Between 2005 and 2014, over 70% of all empirical studies conducted investigated motivation to learn English (Boo et al., 2015). The reason for this can undoubtedly be traced to the role of English as a global language (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2017). Nevertheless, in recent years a distinct research field probing into students' motivation to learn languages other than English (LOTEs) has emerged (e.g. Busse, 2013, 2017; Ivaska, 2017; Huhtala et al., 2019; D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021; Howard & Oakes, 2021; Oakes & Howard, 2022). In accordance with the findings by Boo et al. (2015), Mendoza and Phung (2019) state that about a fourth of L2 motivation research addresses LOTEs.

Investigating students' motivation to learn a LOTE is important for several reasons. The European Union's language policy states that all citizens should master two languages besides their mother tongue (L1), which makes the study of LOTEs relevant for understanding what motivates learners to study a particular third language (L3), the second language (L2) being almost exclusively

English. Research has shown that motivation to learn LOTEs differs from that to learn English, which is typically a routine part of education whereas the decision to learn a LOTE more likely stems from personal choice (cf. Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017).

Accordingly, the aim of the present study is to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the motivation to study LOTEs in higher education by investigating students' initial motivation to study Dutch in a university setting in Sweden. The motivation to study Dutch as a foreign language in a university setting has not yet been explored, despite courses in Dutch being included in some 40 university programs and educational institutes over the world (Internationale Vereniging voor Neerlandistiek, 2026). Hence, this study fills a gap, but also offers insights into the motivation to study a minor LOTE, i.e., languages that are not spoken as widely as French, German, and Spanish, in a Swedish academic context.

The study is qualitative and aims to explore the following research question: "How do students describe their initial motivation to study Dutch?". For the data analysis, to be able to establish the students' crucial sources of motivation, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019) is drawn upon. A total of 222 students who started to study Dutch during five semesters from 2020 to 2023 completed a questionnaire consisting of five main questions concerning their motivation for enrolling in the course and their expectations of Dutch language learning. The present study focuses on responses to one of these open-ended questions: "Why did you decide to enroll in this course?". Finally, four overarching themes of motivation, compiled from the student data, are discussed in-depth utilizing the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) framework (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009) and the ideal multilingual self, suggested by Henry (2017).

2. Theoretical framework

The framework proposed by Dörnyei (2005, 2009), known as the L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), stands as the most widely utilized research paradigm in the field of L2 motivation. According to this framework, three principal components are posited to constitute and predict motivation to learn a second language: 1) the ideal L2 self, encompassing a desirable self-image and the envisioned future self in relation to L2 learning. Evidently, there is a gap between the learner's current self and the ideal future self as an L2 language user that motivates the learner to bridge this gap. Moreover, there needs to be a detailed and vivid future self-image to motivate action; 2) the ought-to L2 self, reflecting the perceived obligations and expectations from significant others such as parents, peers, and educators, as well as the desire to avoid negative outcomes associated with L2 learning. Hence, motivation arises from a desire to acquire L2 attributes expected by significant others in one's social circle; 3) the L2 learning experience, encompassing factors related to the immediate learning environment, such as the influence of teachers, peer groups, and the course curriculum (Dörnyei, 2009; Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017). However, Dörnyei (2009) put forward that the L2 learning experience is conceptualized on a different level than the two self-guides above. Furthermore, there is little empirical research examining this third component (Dörnyei, 2019; Li & Liu, 2023).

The extensive use of the model in research has made it feasible to identify problems and, on that basis, to further develop the model. Notably, the framework's emphasis on the ideal L2 self primarily pertains to an individual's future self-concept rather than their identification with a specific L2-speaking community. Unlike English L2 learners, who often associate themselves with a global English-speaking community, LOTE learners typically identify with specific linguistic

communities. Hence, Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie (2017) discuss an extension of the concept of the ideal L2 self in the form of rooted L2 self, which would indicate the wish to be a part of a specific language community. Furthermore, the L2MSS framework inadequately addresses the motivational disposition associated with the mastery of multiple languages.

Henry (2017) states that the L2MSS is designed with only one L2 in mind and that L2MSS research has concerned itself with studying the motivation to learn each language separately, while there are learners who learn or have learned multiple languages and have developed a multilingual identity. In the L2MSS, for every language learned, the learner develops a separate ideal L2 self, which entails that their self could consist of an ideal L2_x self for one language and an ideal L2_y self for another. Henry (2017) suggests that the learner's ideal L2_x self and ideal L2_y self could strengthen the motivation to learn another language, hence creating a motivation to become multilingual. To overcome this shortcoming in the L2MSS framework, scholars have put forward the concept of the ideal multilingual self as opposed to the ideal L2 self, reflecting a person's whole linguistic and cultural repertoire (Henry, 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Ushioda, 2017).

In recent years, further criticism of the L2MSS has emerged (Henry & Liu, 2023, 2024). Henry & Liu (2023) argue that the components incorporated in the L2MSS are too narrow to grasp a wider array of motivational sources, i.e., social and situational points of reference. Thus, the L2MSS is limited to a desired L2 self-image by a learner or to L2 attributes expected by closely connected others of that learner. They put forward a model that conceptualizes the connections between the self-system and self-regulated learning, drawing on the recognized interrelatedness of motivation and self-regulation. Section 5, which presents the results, addresses problem areas related to the L2MSS identified by Henry and Liu (2023).

3. Previous studies on LOTE learning motivation

A number of studies regarding LOTES have emerged in recent years. For the present study, there are two different settings to consider in relation to LOTES. On the one hand, a LOTE can be studied as a foreign language or L3 in higher education in a country with less exposure to the language; on the other hand, a LOTE can be studied at university level as an L2/L3 in the language community where it is at least one of the official languages (e.g. Převrátlová, 2024; Wang, 2023). This section is limited to studies on motivation concerning LOTES in an academic context where the language is learned in a country with little exposure to the particular L3/foreign language which is the main focus of the present study.

Ivaska (2017) explored the relationship between initial motivation and future goals among university students of Nordic and Baltic languages in North America. The study found that students with a strong ideal L2 self exerted more effort and achieved better academic results. Personal interest in the language—rather than motivation driven by external social connections such as family members—correlated with higher effort and success. Also, students' future personal and professional plans involving the language to be learned were positively correlated with the effort they put into learning it. Interestingly, students with pre-existing personal connections to the language were less likely to succeed in their studies. Similarly, Huhtala et al. (2019) examined the motivations of Finnish university students studying German, Swedish, and French at an advanced level. Their findings indicated that the ideal L2 self played a key role at the start of the language studies, while motivation during the course was influenced by the L2 learning experience, including the quality of instruction, the social environment, and the sense of community. Study-abroad experiences, an L2-related professional vision, and participation in L2-related activities also boosted motivation and a sense of belonging. A vivid and realistic powerful vision connected to the

target language (TL) further reinforced long-term motivation, with emotional attachment to the LOTE playing a central role throughout the language learning journey.

In Australia, D'Orazzi and Hajek (2021) analyzed university students' motivation to study Italian at university level using a three-level model: the psychology of the language learner (including the ideal L2 self), the learning environment, and the sociocultural environment (including the ought-to L2 self). At the level of the individual learner, the authors adopt the concept of intrinsic motivation, drawing on Deci and Ryan (1985). Most students began learning Italian for intrinsically motivated reasons, particularly a personal interest in the language and culture, as well as a desire to become bilingual or a global citizen (D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021). Sociocultural factors, such as communicating with Italian family members or partners, were also important for initial motivation. However, motivation associated with sociocultural factors tended to decline over time. In contrast, motivation linked to a positive learning environment increased, suggesting that engagement with the learning context can sustain motivation.

Busse (2013) examined the relationship between ideal L2 self and self-efficacy in university students of German in the UK. She found that a detailed, vivid image of a future self positively influenced motivation, but only when this was aligned with the learner's realistic belief in their ability to succeed (self-efficacy). A weaker or less vivid vision of the ideal L2 self often coincided with lower self-efficacy. Busse's research also highlighted the role of instrumental goals—such as career opportunities—in shaping students' visions of their future selves. Nourzadeh et al. (2023) studied Iranian learners of Korean, a language they were learning in addition to more dominant ones like English. Their participants were primarily motivated by their ideal L2 selves, drawn by a deep interest in Korean culture and media (e.g. K-pop). The study found little mention of external expectations or academic pressure, suggesting that the ought-to L2 self was not the main motivator.

Lastly, Howard and Oakes (2021) conducted a cross-country study comparing university students of French in England, Ireland, Sweden, and Poland. In the former two countries French was a second language (L2), while in Sweden and Poland it was often a third language (L3), since most students in these countries had already learned English. Despite similar motivational patterns across the countries—desire for proficiency, instrumental goals, and an elaborate ideal L2 self—the L1 Anglophone students (England and Ireland) reported both higher motivation and self-reported proficiency. This might be explained by longer exposure to French in secondary education and the idea of “finite motivational resources”, proposed by Henry (2010). When French is studied as an L3, the Swedish and Polish students may have already invested significant effort in mastering their L2 (usually English), leaving less motivation to learn an additional language.

In sum, in these studies on motivation to study LOTEs, the initial role of the ideal L2 self is highlighted, i.e., the importance of a strong, vivid image of a future self. Some studies show that, over time, the L2 learning experience seems to gain more importance in sustaining the learning motivation.

4. Method

4.1 The context of the present study

This study was conducted within the context of one of the largest universities in Sweden, which offers a bachelor's and a master's degree in Dutch. Additionally, the bachelor's degree entails three semesters' study including language learning, literature, and linguistics. Furthermore, students need

to sign up to other courses provided by the university to complete a bachelor's or a master's degree with Dutch as a major. Since 2020, all courses are provided online, using a video conferencing software program during lectures. Additionally, the university's learning platform serves as a learning tool. Language acquisition is the main focus during the first semester; however, two courses are also offered on society, history, and literature. As Dutch is not offered in secondary school (unlike other LOTEs, i.e. German, French, and Spanish), the first semester is a beginner-level course in Dutch. In Sweden, there are few possibilities to study Dutch, with the exception of the university courses at Stockholm University, the only university in Sweden offering Dutch. Moreover, there are no tuition fees for university students in Sweden. All in all, this attracts students from all over Sweden and many students choose to study Dutch for only one semester as there is no requirement to complete the whole program in the Swedish higher education system. Finally, while students' linguistic backgrounds are quite diverse, all students have proficiency in at least Swedish and English, and typically also in other languages, including languages other than English spoken in Sweden's multicultural society.

4.2 Research design

This study employed a qualitative research design based on a questionnaire mainly containing open-ended questions. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate as it enables an exploration of participants' perspectives, expressed in their own words. Specifically, the use of open-ended questionnaire data allows for the collection of rich descriptive accounts from a relatively large number of participants, while still retaining participants' personal formulations of their motivations (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). This design was therefore well suited to capturing the breadth and variation in students' initial motivations for enrolling in a beginner-level Dutch language course.

4.3 Recruitment procedure, participants, and data collection

The potential participants consisted of students enrolled in an academic beginner-level course in Dutch between 2020 and 2023. The course was offered twice per academic year, during the autumn and spring semesters, and was available in both part-time and full-time formats. Instruction and learning activities took place mostly during evening hours.

During the first week of the course, all registered students received a message via the digital learning platform encouraging them to participate in an online questionnaire hosted on the course's learning platform. The survey remained open for two weeks, and a reminder message was sent after one week to encourage participation among non-respondents.

The survey consisted of five main questions, including several sub-items, designed to capture students' expectations, goals, motivations, and intended engagement with the course. The questions addressed students' reasons for enrolling in the course; their expectations of the course, their fellow students, and the teacher; their goals for improving their general language-learning abilities; and their willingness to engage in different aspects of learning, including seminar participation, class discussions, vocabulary and grammar study, and other Dutch-language activities outside class (e.g., reading, watching films, and listening to radio, podcasts, or music). For the purposes of the present study, the analysis focuses on one specific question, asking students to describe, in their own words, their reasons for enrolling in the course. The dataset therefore comprises students' written responses to the question, "Why did you decide to enroll in this course?"

In total, 222 students completed the survey, corresponding to a response rate of approximately 72% of the students who started the course during the data collection periods. No background variables such as age, gender, educational background, or prior language learning experience were

systematically collected as part of the survey. Apart from enrollment in either the part-time or full-time course format, no identifying or demographic data were linked to individual responses.

4.4 Data analysis

The study adopted an abductive thematic analysis, moving iteratively between empirical data and theory. Initial coding and theme development were inductive, allowing motivations to emerge from participants' own accounts, while the final interpretation of the themes was informed by the L2MSS.

In line with Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019) thematic analysis, the analysis proceeded through six phases. First, the two authors familiarized themselves with the dataset through repeated readings of the students' responses, while making initial notes and reflections. Second, initial codes were generated using a semantic approach, focusing on the explicit meanings articulated by the participants. For example, students stated reasons for studying Dutch were coded with labels such as enjoyment of language learning, interest in Dutch language, interest in the country or culture, family connections, and romantic relationships. Statements such as "I think Dutch sounds fun and interesting" were coded as enjoyment or curiosity, while statements such as "I need it for my future career" were coded as instrumental motivation.

In the third phase, conceptually related codes were grouped into preliminary subthemes. Codes reflecting enjoyment, interest, and curiosity were clustered into subthemes representing internally driven motives, whereas codes related to practical utility, academic requirements, or future career goals formed subthemes associated with instrumental motivation. Socially grounded codes were organized into subthemes capturing the role of personal relationships and social integration as motivational drivers.

In the fourth phase, these subthemes were further synthesized into overarching themes. The themes were reviewed iteratively in relation to both the coded extracts and the entire dataset to ensure internal coherence, clear boundaries between themes, and consistency with the data corpus as a whole. Importantly, the analysis did not prioritize the frequency of particular motivations. Rather than focusing on how often specific codes occurred, the analytical focus was on identifying the range and diversity of motivations expressed across the dataset. Motivations expressed by only a small number of participants were therefore retained, as they contributed to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of students' initial motivation to study Dutch. Appendix A presents the final coding manual, including the overarching themes and subthemes, and percentage of coded excerpts.

In the fifth phase, the themes were defined and named. Overarching themes were identified reflecting motives related to the self (e.g., enjoyment, interest, and personal development), building relationships (e.g., family, partners, and social networks), career asset (e.g., employment, studies, and future opportunities), and migration (e.g., relocating to the Dutch language area).

In the sixth and final phase, the themes were interpreted through the theoretical lens of the L2 Motivational Self System (Dörnyei, 2005, 2009), following the principles of scholarly thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

To enhance the rigor of the analysis, both authors conducted the initial stages of coding independently. Coding decisions were subsequently compared and discussed, and discrepancies were resolved through analytic dialogue. Regular discussions were held throughout the analytical

process to refine codes, subthemes, and themes, thereby supporting a rigorous and transparent interpretation of the data.

4.5 Ethical considerations

All participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily. The survey was anonymous, and no identifying information was collected that could be used to trace responses back to individual students. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and their right to refrain from answering any question or to withdraw without negative consequences.

5. Results

The aim of the study was to explore students' initial motivation for studying Dutch at university level in Sweden. The analysis of the qualitative data resulted in four overarching themes of motivation: (1) Getting closer to one's desirable self; (2) Building relationships; (3) Career asset; and (4) Migration. Furthermore, the analysis has shown that various motives were interconnected and that a vast majority of the participants experienced multiple types of motivation for studying the language. In the following section we will describe every theme and the subthemes they are comprised of, illustrated by quotes from the participants.

5.1 Getting closer to one's desirable self

This theme entails motivation for studying Dutch that are related to the students' perceptions of themselves as well as the belief that learning Dutch will bring them closer to the person they desire to be. Moreover, students learning Dutch express gaining motivation from the process itself since it entails positive emotions such as joy, pleasure, satisfaction, and stimulation. This could be described as satisfaction of the self. Students stated that they enjoy how the language sounds and are intrigued by its grammatic structure. Interest and enjoyment as motivation for learning the language are illustrated by the quotes "Dutch is fun; it's good to get some formal background in grammar", and "Because I like learning new languages and fell in love with Amsterdam a couple of years ago". The quotes depict a satisfaction related to the language itself, showing positive emotions with words such as "fun" and "love". Moreover, the analysis identified two types of desirable selves that the students strived to get closer to by acquiring the language: Self as a language collector, and Self as a part of the Dutch language and culture.

5.1.1 Self as a language collector

Languages are generally of interest to a group of students, and the possibility of adding another language to one's collection tends to be a strong motivator. The motivation to collect languages is expressed by comparing Dutch to other languages that the students already comprehend, for instance German. Learning various languages is a way to challenge oneself but is also a reflection of one's inner development, as indicated in the quotes "I know German so I wanted to test if I could also learn Dutch", "Languages are my great interest. I've studied several languages but not Dutch, so now I thought it was time to do that too". The language collector could be seen as a cosmopolitan, being able to connect to different people and cultures in the world through language. This subtheme can be linked to the ideal multilingual self as opposed to the ideal L2 self (Henry, 2017; Henry & Thorsen, 2018; Ushioda, 2017). This is voiced in utterances about enjoying knowing several languages and adding Dutch to the list, or expressing that knowing multiple languages is a way to absorb culture and understand people. In Wang and Fisher's (2023) longitudinal case study on Chinese students' motivation to learn both English and French, only those who enhanced their French motivation by accumulating cross-linguistic experiences (i.e., comparing the different

languages they learned) developed an ideal multilingual self. In this study, students comparing Dutch to other languages, e.g. German, might be able to sustain their motivation in order to become a multilingual or enhance their multilingual identity.

5.1.2 Self as a part of the Dutch language and culture

Participants expressed a wish to identify themselves with the culture and be a part of it. They sometimes even mentioned a need to get closer to their own linguistic background as it is expressed by one of the participants “I’m an Afrikaner from South Africa and have always wanted to immerse myself in the language that’s the origin of my mother tongue”, and by another “I want to learn Dutch because I want to be a part of the Netherlands”. In these excerpts, there is a difference in what motivates immersion in the language. The opportunity to get closer to a desirable self through one’s language background—e.g. being a speaker of Afrikaans—reflects motivation based on something one already partly possesses, in contrast to motivation stemming from an integrative orientation towards a country and its culture, as in the latter quote above.

The component the ideal L2 self can be linked to the theme Getting closer to one’s desirable self. Students envisioned themselves being part of the Netherlands or Flanders, or being the person who understands the culture through knowledge of the language; or wished to be fluent in Dutch because of their love for the country. This aligns with Dörnyei and Al-Hoorie’s (2017) view that LOTE learners typically identify with specific linguistic communities (rooted L2 self), unlike English L2 learners, who often associate themselves with a global English-speaking community. Henry and Liu (2023) argue that, in its current conceptualization, the L2 Motivational Self System (specifically the ideal L2 self) is unable to adequately distinguish between fantasy—referred to as the “fantasy problem” (p. 4)—and desire, and that desire does not necessarily translate into action-oriented representations. In this case study, it is not possible to determine whether the students’ future possible self will translate into sustained motivation or result in satisfactory learning outcomes.

5.2 Building relationships

The second overarching theme entails connecting to others and building relationships, privately as well as professionally. Through language one is able to communicate with colleagues or a significant other and their family.

5.2.1 Relationship with a romantic partner or family

The possibility of developing closer relationships through language with a romantic partner or family members emerged as a distinct motivational theme in the data. For several participants, learning Dutch was closely connected to a partner’s linguistic background and to the desire to communicate more fully with the partner and their family. For example, one participant explained that their partner was from the Netherlands and that they wanted to be able to communicate with his family. Similarly, another participant stated that they wanted to learn Dutch because their husband was from Belgium and that they wanted to communicate better with his family, while also supporting Dutch as a second language for their son. These responses indicate that learning Dutch was perceived not simply as an individual educational goal, but as a means of participating more fully in the linguistic and social worlds of significant others.

Family relationships also motivated participants whose children or other relatives lived in the Netherlands. One participant explained that they wanted to learn Dutch because their daughter lived in the Netherlands and they visited her frequently. Another participant referred explicitly to the

relationship between language and parenthood in the quote “My girlfriend is from the Netherlands, and we have a three-year-old son, and I don’t want my son to have to ask his mum why his dad doesn’t speak Dutch”. Such responses suggest that language learning could be connected to participants’ sense of responsibility toward their children and to their desire to participate in family interactions without relying on others to accommodate them linguistically.

The data further show that this motivation sometimes involved a desire to overcome the limitations of communicating in English. One participant whose husband was Belgian explained that, when visiting his family, they spoke Flemish (Belgian Dutch) and very little English. For this participant, learning Dutch was therefore motivated not only by the partner’s linguistic identity but also by the practical need to participate in family communication.

All in all, participants expressed a sense of obligation and adaption, suggesting an orientation towards accommodating perceived expectations from partners or family members. The subtheme can be interpreted as an externally regulated motivation associated with the ought-to L2 self, reflecting expectations from significant others.

In previous research on language learning motivation, the ought-to L2 self was not considered a motivator for adult LOTE learners (D’Orazi & Hajek, 2021; Howard & Oakes, 2021). Other studies have shown the opposite. Mendoza and Phung (2019) state that the ought-to L2 self was a strong predictor of motivated behaviors in studies on LOTEs in Asian countries (see also Wang & Fisher, 2023). Huhtala et al. (2019) point out that university students in Finland mentioned influence and/or pressure from family and friends having influenced their motivation to study a LOTE, albeit only initially. Additionally, Ivaska’s study (2017) showed that there is no positive correlation between students’ likelihood of succeeding in their language studies and their wish for social connections with people. Students who began their language studies primarily for intrinsic personal reasons, and not because of a wish to connect to other people, were likely to put in more effort and do better in their language studies.

Henry & Liu (2023) point out that it is not clear to which degree a language learner internalizes the beliefs and expectations of relevant others and for that matter, the range of other people who might yield an influence, suggesting not only people with whom the learner is closely related might serve as an influence. Nevertheless, research on motivation associated with a romantic partner remains limited. Further investigation is needed in LOTE research to determine whether such externally regulated motivation can be internalized by language learners in ways that sustain engagement over time.

5.2.2 Relationships at the workplace

A further motivation related to building relationships involves the opportunity to connect with colleagues in the workplace. Several participants referred to their professional context as a reason for learning Dutch, particularly when this created opportunities to communicate with Dutch-speaking colleagues or other people in their professional environment. One participant explained, “Because I work in IT support for our company, which has users in the Netherlands. It would be great to learn and talk to my colleagues in their native language.” Here, the motivation is explicitly relational: the participant already has a professional context involving Dutch-speaking users and sees learning Dutch as a way of communicating with them in their native language.

The data suggest that the workplace can therefore function as an important social environment for language learning. In these responses, Dutch is not primarily valued for increasing employability or securing future employment, but for enabling participants to participate more fully in interactions with colleagues and other people encountered through their work. The motivation is thus grounded

in the desire to establish or strengthen social connections through communication. Although English may generally suffice in international workplaces, the opportunity to use Dutch with colleagues or other workplace contacts can nevertheless provide an additional incentive to learn the language.

This motivational theme cannot readily be associated with the ought-to L2 self, in contrast to the theme of Relationships with a romantic partner or family. The participants do not refer to external expectations to learn the language, but rather express a desire to become more capable and confident Dutch users in their workplace interactions. The motivation can therefore be understood as oriented toward the ideal L2 self, insofar as participants appear to envision themselves as competent language users who can communicate more effectively and naturally with others in their professional environment.

5.3 Career asset

This theme comprises students' motivation for studying Dutch as a career asset or to improve their future employment opportunities. Unlike the motivation described in the previous section, the focus here is not on communicating with colleagues or building workplace relationships, but on the instrumental value of Dutch for employment, professional mobility, and career development.

Several participants referred explicitly to future employment opportunities. For example, one participant stated, "I need to prepare myself to be able to apply for work in the Netherlands." Here, Dutch is viewed as a competence that may facilitate access to the labor market in a Dutch-speaking context. The motivation is therefore prospective and career-oriented: learning the language is part of preparing for future employment rather than primarily a means of communicating with particular people at work.

Other participants viewed Dutch as an additional competence that could broaden their professional profile without identifying a specific career path. One participant described having "plans to work at an international company" and regarded having basic knowledge of several languages as "a great asset" for their future career. In this case, Dutch is positioned alongside other languages as one competence that may increase the participant's competitiveness in the labor market. Similarly, another participant explained that they already spoke French and were learning Dutch in connection with their work for Brussels Airlines. Here, the value of Dutch appears to lie in expanding an existing linguistic repertoire and professional skill set rather than in developing relationships with Dutch-speaking colleagues.

The data indicate that, for many participants, Dutch is perceived as a general career asset rather than as preparation for a clearly defined occupation. Knowledge of Dutch can broaden participants' linguistic and professional profiles and potentially create opportunities for employment or geographical mobility. This distinguishes the theme from Relationships at the workplace, where the primary motivation concerns communication and social connection with colleagues or other workplace contacts. In the career-asset theme, by contrast, Dutch is valued principally for what it may contribute to participants' future employability, professional mobility, or career development.

In connection to the L2MSS framework and the ideal L2 self, Busse's study (2013) showed that instrumental orientation, i.e., a desire to achieve career goals, can be important for students' visions of their future selves (cf. instrumentality Dörnyei, 2009). It is interesting to note that students' comments about Dutch as a Career asset in this study did not include any additional comments about how they enjoyed the language, the people or the culture. Lastly, this instrumental motivation

can in some cases be connected to the ideal multilingual self in this study, as opposed to the ideal L2 self, as an important future possible self which is evident from the excerpt above. Henry (2017) states that the construal of the ideal multilingual self tends to be abstract and distant in how the learner imagines their future self as a language user (cf. Self as a language collector), whereas the ideal L2 self is more strongly associated with emotional engagement (cf. Self as part of the Dutch language and culture). This seems to be partly reflected in this theme through the way students describe their motivation for enrolling in the course, focusing on specific career goals.

5.4 Migration

Motivation to learn Dutch before moving to the Netherlands or Belgium, or while already residing there with plans to remain, emerged as another theme in the data. For some participants, learning Dutch was part of preparing for a planned move. One participant explained, “I want to move to the Netherlands in the future, and I thought it would be a good idea to start learning the language beforehand.” Similarly, another participant stated that they were planning to move to Belgium within the next two years and therefore saw the language course as a good opportunity to start learning the language. These responses suggest that Dutch was viewed as an important part of preparing for future residence in a Dutch-speaking environment.

For participants who were already living in the Netherlands or Belgium, learning Dutch was sometimes motivated by the intention to establish a more permanent connection with the country. One participant explained, “I’m currently studying abroad in Amsterdam and thinking about potentially moving here.” Another participant reported living in The Hague and currently speaking only English, while wanting to learn Dutch. Similarly, a participant living in Amsterdam simply stated that they wanted to learn Dutch. In these cases, residence in the Netherlands provides an immediate context for language learning, while the prospect of remaining in the country gives the motivation a longer-term orientation.

The data also include participants whose motivation was connected to both current residence and future settlement. For example, one participant explained that they wanted to learn Dutch because they were in Belgium frequently, while another wanted to learn the language because they intended to settle in the Netherlands later in life. These responses indicate that geographical mobility can operate at different stages: Dutch may be learned in anticipation of a move, during an initial period of residence, or as part of a longer-term intention to establish a life in a Dutch-speaking country.

Migration surprisingly seems to be less oriented towards complete integration. Darwin and Norton (2023) observe that, in the 21st century, “conceptions of mobility have become more fluid, dynamic and multidirectional” (p. 33). This is reflected in the following quote, where the prospect of returning to Sweden from the Dutch language area emerges as a motivating factor for studying Dutch “I lived in Belgium for 22 years and have just moved back to Gothenburg with my family, and speak and write Dutch intelligibly, but not correctly. I hope to get better at it through this course”. Hence, migration from the Dutch language area, coupled with a perceived need to further develop proficiency in Dutch, is identified as a motivating factor for course enrolment. In the context of contemporary globalization, migration within the European Union, including movement to and from smaller language areas, constitutes an increasingly viable and relevant possibility.

Within the L2MSS, the alignment of this theme remains ambiguous. It is not evident whether it corresponds more closely to the ideal L2 self or to the rooted L2 self (cf. Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017). Consequently, further research is required to determine which self-guide is dominant.

6. Discussion

This study explored university students' motivations for learning Dutch in a Swedish academic context. The findings reveal diverse motivations, including personal, relational, future-oriented, and career-related aspirations. The discussion below considers the methodological limitations of the study and its implications for higher education.

6.1 Methodological limitations and suggestions for future studies

The study has some methodological limitations that are relevant to discuss. Firstly, the timing and mode of data collection mean that the responses primarily capture students' initial motivations and expectations rather than motivations shaped by sustained engagement with the course and its learning environment. As the questionnaire was distributed during the first two weeks of the beginner's course, students had not yet experienced the immediate learning environment in its entirety, including the influence of teachers, peer groups, and the course curriculum. Consequently, the third component of the L2MSS, the L2 learning experience, cannot be fully explored in the present study. At the same time, enrolling in a language course and gaining access to a learning environment can itself be motivating, and engagement with other students studying the language may potentially sustain motivation over time (cf. Palmieri, 2017; Huhtala et al., 2019; D'Orazzi & Hajek, 2021).

Secondly, participation was voluntary and relied on students responding to an online invitation and reminder, which may have resulted in self-selection bias. Students who were particularly motivated, engaged, or interested in the course may have been more likely to participate, meaning that the responses may not fully represent the motivations of all registered students. The two-week response period and reminder may have encouraged participation but cannot eliminate this potential bias.

This study provides a first mapping of students' motivation to study Dutch in a Swedish academic context. Further research would benefit from in-depth interviews exploring the motivations underlying the four overarching themes discussed in Section 5. A longitudinal design would also allow researchers to examine how students' motivation develops, fluctuates, or changes over time and in relation to their experiences of the learning environment. This could involve conducting interviews and/or distributing questionnaires at several points, for example during the first and second semesters of the language program. Such an approach could provide greater insight into the development of the L2 learning experience and into whether students' initial motivations are sustained, transformed, or weakened through their engagement with the course.

6.2 Implications for higher education

Studying Dutch and other foreign languages at university level in Sweden entails more than merely learning the language. A university program in a foreign language encompasses not only language acquisition but also literature and linguistics, often introduced already in the first semester. Moreover, this is clearly stated in the curriculum and in various other documents available beforehand to students. Therefore, the question on motivation in the survey was not phrased in reference to learning Dutch. Nevertheless, only a handful of the responses on motivation in this study contain the word studying Dutch in contrast to learning Dutch, which occurred 119 times in the answers. It seems commonplace to "study communication" at the university or "study [for] a semester in Maastricht" (comments by two students in the questionnaire). Learning a language, although this is the most common way it is expressed, might serve to deceive students in their understanding of the Dutch language program, i.e., their expectations might not be in line with the

language program offered at university level. Furthermore, this may explain why many students drop out of the course mid-semester, realizing that studying a language at university level entails more than simply language acquisition. Still, the module on language acquisition at beginner's level could benefit from considering the themes discussed in Section 5 when revising the Dutch curriculum in order to tap into students' motivation.

Students expressing an interest in mastering several languages, as reflected in the subthemes *Self as a language collector* and *Career asset*, may benefit from developing cross-linguistic awareness. Angelovska and Hahn (2014), define cross-linguistic awareness as “a mental ability which develops through focusing attention on and reflecting upon language(s) in use and through establishing similarities and differences among the languages in one's multilingual mind” (p. 187). Building on this perspective, Johansson (2018, 2019) suggests that multilingual learners' cross-linguistic awareness can be used as a didactic resource in the classroom, as well as a resource that learners can draw upon themselves. In the context of the present study, learners' existing knowledge of other languages could therefore be explicitly activated when learning Dutch, for example by drawing attention to similarities and differences between Dutch and languages that students already know. Such activities may help learners recognize the linguistic resources they already possess and make connections between their existing multilingual repertoires and their developing knowledge of Dutch.

The findings also point to the importance of supporting students in developing a concrete vision of themselves as future language users. Rocher Hahlin and Granfeldt (2025) propose visualization as a didactic tool for fostering vivid images of learners' future selves as language users. In the present context, this could involve encouraging students to envision specific situations in which they want to use Dutch, such as communicating with family members, participating in workplace interactions, living in the Netherlands or Belgium, or using Dutch as an additional professional competence. Formulating realistic and personally meaningful goals around such situations may help learners connect their motivations with concrete learning objectives and thereby support the maintenance of motivation over time. Importantly, however, future-oriented visions and goals need to be translated into action. Targeted classroom activities that allow students to practice language in situations related to their anticipated future use of Dutch may help bridge the gap between imagined future selves and present learning experiences.

7. Conclusions

This qualitative study advances the understanding of students' initial motivation to study Dutch as a foreign language in higher education. The findings are partly context-specific to the Swedish higher education system, in which students are not required to commit to a full language program but may instead complete a single semester. Moreover, the limited opportunities to study Dutch in Sweden contribute to the recruitment of a diverse student cohort, some of whom may not be fully oriented toward a long-term academic engagement with the language.

The study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of motivation for learning minor LOTEs. The findings indicate that initial motivation can be related to the ideal L2 self, the ideal multilingual self, and the ought-to L2 self. On the one hand, a clear desired self-image is reflected in the subthemes *Self as part of the Dutch language and culture* and *Building relationships at the workplace*, both of which align with the ideal L2 self. Many students expressed motivation grounded in personal interest in the language, the Dutch language area, and the ability to communicate in Dutch. On the other hand, the subthemes *Self as a language collector* and to some extent *Career asset* reflect the ideal multilingual self, suggesting a broader aspiration to become multilingual rather than a solely language-specific interest. Finally, the ought-to L2 self is evident in

the subtheme Building relationships with a romantic partner or family, where perceived expectations from significant others shape possible future selves.

In sum, two self-guides within the L2MSS, alongside the ideal multilingual self, are evident in learners' initial motivation to study a minor LOTE such as Dutch. However, further research is needed to examine how such motivation—and subsequent engagement—is sustained over time.

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Appendix A. Final coding manual, including the overarching themes and subthemes, and percentage of coded excerpts

Overarching theme	Subtheme	Example motivation	Percentage of coded excerpts*
1. Getting closer to one's desirable self	Self as a language collector	Interest in languages; enjoyment of learning languages; learning Dutch as a personal challenge	31%
	Self as a part of the Dutch language and culture	Interest in Dutch culture; becoming part of Dutch society; identity; feeling at home; understanding culture	15%
	Total Theme 1		46%
2. Building relationships	Relationship with a romantic partner or family	Communicating with partner, spouse, children, in-laws, relatives	29%
	Relationships at the workplace	Speaking with colleagues, customers, professional interactions	5%
	Total Theme 2		34%
3. Career asset	—	Employment opportunities, career advancement, translation, future studies, professional development	12%
4. Migration	—	Moving to the Netherlands/Belgium, integration into society, living abroad	20%

**Frequencies represent the number of coded excerpts assigned to each theme and subtheme. Individual responses could receive multiple codes; therefore, totals exceed the number of participants and percentages do not sum to 100%. The frequencies are presented only to indicate the relative prominence of themes within the dataset and should not be interpreted statistically.*