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# Understanding students' motivation in translation learning: a case study from the self-concept perspective

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## Abstract

To meet the increasing needs for translators and interpreters, Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) program was launched in Chinese universities. Discussion on how to cultivate MTI students who are supposed to be excellent users of foreign language except their mother tongue attracts many Chinese researchers, while little is done from the perspective of students, the main stakeholders of the program. Therefore, this case study, informed by self-concept theories, tracked one MTI student in a Chinese key university, to investigate factors influencing students' learning motivation and their response towards the influence. Using the student's diaries reflecting on daily translation training and the semi-structured interviews, the study found significant others, self-perceived ability, curriculum, and coursework played significant roles in the ebbs and flows of translation learning motivation. The findings also reveal the dynamic interaction among students' self-representations (including the ideal self, the ought self, the actual self, and the feared self) in the dynamic context. This paper not only provides a new understanding to the translation education by incorporating students' voice into professional training, but also offers advice for MTI program management.

**Keywords:** Motivation, Self-concept, MTI, Translation education

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in the study of professional translation education (e.g. Davitti & Pasquandrea, 2014; Jääskeläinen et al., 2011; Li, 2018; Washbourne, 2014). In the context of China, translation, which was once “an elitist programme taught at a small number of highly specialised colleges and institutes” (Y. Zhong, 2017, p. 19), develops into a full-grown discipline at bachelor, master, and doctoral levels in an array of universities and colleges within several decades (for a historical review, see Tao, 2016). In 2007, Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI), the latest form of translation education, was introduced to train advanced, practice-oriented and professional translators and interpreters (China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre, Ministry of Education, 2007). Over the past decade, the program has expanded from initial 15 universities to 215 higher education institutions in 2017, attracting significant attention from an array of scholars. One prominent research conclusion is that the quality of MTI graduates is not satisfactory (Kong & Wang, 2011;

Zhao & Xu, 2017; W. Zhong, 2017). To identify and solve the problem, a substantial number of researchers have examined the design of this professional program and its actual implementation from different perspectives. One line of research (Liu et al., 2017; Ma, 2017; Peng, 2017) took a specific university as an example to identify its achievements and problems in MTI program building. Another line of studies (He, 2009; He, 2011; Wen & Mu, 2009; Wang, 2011) compared MTI programs with professional translator training modes in overseas universities. Still another line of inquiries (Mu & Wang, 2011; Yang, 2012; Xu & Cao, 2017), from a market perspective, analyzed the requirements of translation industry for MTI graduates. However, previous studies were conducted mainly from the perspectives of program leaders, translator trainers, or employers while scant attention has been paid to the students, who are the main stakeholders of the program.

For learners, their academic performance is, indubitably, closely related to their motivation to learn, attracting continuous research interests (e.g. Yusuf, 2011). One prominent line of inquiry has focused on language learning motivation (for a review, see Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015). Phenomena investigated are autonomous learning (e.g. Zhou et al., 2009), students' engagement in class (e.g. Yin & Wang, 2015), and willingness to communicate (e.g. Yashima, 2015), among other topics. Most of the attention, however, has concentrated on motivation in foreign language learning, for example, English as a foreign language writing (e.g. Lee et al., 2018). Limited studies have addressed the learning motivation behind translation which is an integral part of language learning (Pym et al., 2013). This issue is of importance because if translation trainers pay insufficient attention to students' motivation and fail to understand it, it is difficult for teachers to select the most suitable pedagogy that facilitates students' study. In return, students will be at a loss as to how to sustain their motivation or tackle their anxiety, which might reduce study interest. Therefore, a clear examination of translation motivation influences the performance of translation trainers and students, and consequently the overall quality of the MTI program.

Motivation explains "why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity, and how hard they are going to pursue it" (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 7). It affects learners' learning performance, decides how much effort they would like to devote to learning task (Dörnyei, 2005) and then predicts their success in learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2001). Motivation can be approached from diverse theoretical frameworks including the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), the expectancy-value theory (Eccles, 1983), the attribution theory (Weiner, 1974), and so on. Among current research paradigms of motivation, self-concept (SC) represents the latest trend in learning motivation research over the past decades (Marsh et al., 2012; Pajares, & Schunk, 2002; Wentzel & Wigfield, 2009). In a broad sense, SC can be defined as "a person's self-perceptions formed through experience with and interpretations of his or her environment" (Marsh & Hattie, 1996, p. 58). This definition implies three major features of SC. First, SC is formed both through interpersonal (external environment) and intrapersonal (internal environment) interactions (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Second, since human experience is dynamic in nature, the self-perceived image of an individual is prone to change as well (Valentine et al., 2004). Third, selves can be positive or negative subject to personal interpretation (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Other futures of SC are also pronounced in the literature, for example, the distinction between domain-specific self-concepts and global or general

ones (Young & Mroczek, 2003). The importance of SC in human life cannot be ignored. As Markus & Wurf (1987) rightly put, “it has become increasingly apparent that the representations of what individuals think, feel, or believe about themselves are among the most powerful regulators of many important behaviors” (p. 308). Especially, the influence of SC in human behavior is partly materialized by reducing or enhancing motivation, as indicated in empirical studies (Hamman et al., 2010; Marsh et al., 2006; Sommer & Baumeister, 2002).

Incorporating dynamic multidimensional self-concepts, researchers have attempted to formulate frameworks explaining the formation of various self-representations and their impact on human behavior and affect. Groundbreaking is the possible selves theory proposed by Markus & Nurius (1986) which “opened up a window on psychology’s most compelling problems” (Markus, 2006, p. xi). Possible selves include “individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). Among all the possible selves (e.g. the hoped-for selves, the feared selves, the not-me selves, the ideal selves, the ought selves) listed by Markus & Nurius (1986, p. 954), two major categories of self-perception (feared self and expected or hoped-for self) can be conceptualized in terms of positivity and negativity, a fundamental distinction which has guided several empirical studies (Hock et al., 2006; Oyserman et al., 2006; Patrick et al., 2002; Ruvolo & Markus, 1992). Feared self refers to what individuals are afraid of becoming, indicating the future worst or feared situation. Expected or hoped-for self explains what people would like to become and are expected to generate and strengthen positive effects (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006). The two types of selves are ideas held by an individual and concern future situation people could imagine, thus acting as future self-guides to “explain how someone is moved from the present toward the future” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 11).

Another theory that goes deep into different selves is the self-discrepancy theory formulated by Higgins (1987). Markus & Nurius (1986) simply mentioned ideal self and ought self in their study. Higgins (1987) used these self-concepts as “precisely defined technical terms in his more general theory of motivation and self-regulation” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 13). Higgins’ theory (1987) is composed of the actual self, the ideal self, and the ought self. The actual self represents the self-image someone actually possesses at the present. The ideal self, like the expected or hoped-for self in Markus & Nurius’ (1986) theory, refers to the ideal situation associated with hopes, aspirations, or wishes. The ought self is the situation one believes he or she ought to possess due to the sense of duties, obligations or moral responsibilities. Higgins (1987) also introduced the motivational effect produced by the discrepancy between different selves. For example, the disparity between actual self and ideal self produces positive outcome like motivation while that between actual self and ought self generates negative effect related to agitation (Higgins, 1987).

Overall, individual perception of his or her images is dynamic and multidimensional with different selves in different properties. Notably, the interaction between an individual’s multiple selves like feared, actual, ideal, and ought ones are inextricably associated with human motivations (Yuan et al., 2016). As such, informed by SC theories, especially possible selves and self-discrepancy frameworks, the present study takes the case study approach and examines what (de)motivates MTI students and how they behave

in response to the (de)motivators with data from an MTI student's diaries and interview transcripts. It can be of significance in the following two aspects. First, by unveiling the factors that influence study efforts, this study can inform the program leaders at both university and nation levels of MTI students' perception of the MTI program and the possible problems, so that improvement could be made. Second, this study could also enrich the current understanding of translation motivation, especially in the Chinese postgraduate study context, and thus sheds light on the motivation of English language learners at a higher level.

### MTI program

After China's entry into the World Trade Organization, growing intercultural communication requires more high-quality translation and interpreting services. In this situation, CADGEDC (China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre, Ministry of Education) approved the establishment of MTI program in 2007 which aims to train professional, advanced, and practice-oriented translators and interpreters. Unlike traditional translation programs which focus on teaching theory, MTI training pays more attention to imparting practical translation and interpreting skills and keeping students updated with the current translation industry. The basic information about MTI program is illustrated in Table 1.

At the experimental stage in 2007, only 15 universities were allowed to conduct MTI training. Until 2017, 215 universities and colleges have established the MTI program (including various languages like English, French, and Japanese). By January 2017, up to 44,111 students have been admitted into MTI program and over 27,000 graduated (W. Zhong, 2017). According to a study (Cui et al., 2017), 70 out of 90 surveyed companies and organizations were satisfied with the overall ability of MTI graduates, reflecting social recognition about the program. However, the survey also identified the weaknesses of these graduates, among which are insufficient professional knowledge, inadequate language proficiency, and deficient translating training (Cui et al., 2017). Other researchers also found MTI students were not competent advanced translators and interpreters after two years of professional training (e.g. Peng, 2017; Wang & Peng, 2012; Zhao & Xu, 2017). To figure out what contributed to this situation, researchers have identified problems in MTI program building: first, the curriculum design of MTI program in some universities directly adopts the principles and methods for research degree programs, incorporating no features of its application-oriented training (Chai, 2010; Ping, 2016; Xu, 2017); second, little attention is paid to the integration of MTI training and translation industry, which is harmful for students' employability (Xu &

**Table 1** Profile of the MTI program

	Program Requirements
Admission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bachelor degree holders, especially those having a cross-disciplinary background</li> <li>• National Postgraduate Entrance Examination</li> </ul>
Period of study	2–3 years for full-time students and 3 years for part-time students
Graduation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 150,000 words translation practice or 600 h interpreting training</li> <li>• Completion of required courses with more than 38 credits</li> <li>• One-semester internship</li> <li>• Qualified translation project report</li> </ul>

Source: CNCTIE (China National Committee for Translation and Interpreting Education), 2011

Cao, 2017; Wen & Mu, 2009; Yang, 2012); third, professional translation training is not necessarily be guaranteed as instructors may not be qualified trainers of practical skills (Chai, 2010; Wang & Peng, 2012); and finally, internship programs are underdeveloped, contributing to students' ignorance about the real working conditions (Kong & Wang, 2011; Ping, 2016). In response to these problems, researchers have suggested: to form a team of qualified teachers who are active in the market of translation services (Ping, 2016); to recruit students proficient in Chinese and another language (Wang & Peng, 2012); to combine translation training with each college's specialized discipline like law in a political and law university (Mu & Wang, 2011); to make translation training in line with the market demands (Xu & Cao, 2017); and to increase students' participation in accreditation tests for translators and interpreters (Chai, 2010).

## **Methodology**

### **Research objectives**

To analyze the learning experience of MTI students, the present study adopted the method of the case study (Yin, 2002) which "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 13). Case study is particularly suited to address "how" or "why" questions that concern the phenomenon under research (Yazan, 2015, p. 138). The present study, therefore, draws on data from personal diaries and semi-structured interviews both of which provide a situated understanding of the student's learning motivation. Informed by SC theories, this case study focuses on MTI students' learning motivation and proposes two research questions for guidance.

RQ1. What (de)motivated MTI students and how?

RQ2. How did the (de)motivators influence the MTI students' study behavior?

### **The participant**

The participant in the study, Jimmy (pseudonym; ethical approval was obtained from the participant before the study started.), is a first-year student enrolled in the MTI program (Chinese-English) at one of the key universities in China. This university, together with other 116 universities, was allowed to award MTI degree starting from 2011. According to the university's MTI training program, students, during the two-year study, have to finish 150,000 words translation practice from English to Chinese, a six-credit task that plays a vital role in the conferment of the master degree. In the first academic year, MTI students in this university have 17 courses, totaling 35 credits.

Jimmy was admitted in 2017 without taking national graduate entrance exams (only for excellent undergraduates) and was among the few top students in his cohort (based on GPA). Jimmy obtained a B.A. degree in Business English which requires more attention to commerce-related subjects than to translation, while he had a great interest in translation and interpreting (inferred from the interviews and his diaries) and performed well in business translation courses, which might influence his choice to take MTI for further study. This study took place during the first three months in the second semester of Jimmy's freshman year. It looked into his motivation and behavior during the intensified translation training. Jimmy volunteered to participate in this study because he was interested in sorting out his learning experiences and, especially,

took this opportunity to vent out his feelings and confusion encountered during the study. Jimmy has developed the habit of keeping diaries as a reflective record of his study. In addition, he had the right to send the part of his diaries that he was willing to share, as he also records some private affairs in his diaries. Therefore, Jimmy did not regard keeping diaries as a burden. Finally, it is acknowledgeable that Jimmy as an excellent student might not be a representative case of the MTI students group. His case could still cast light on the how contextual factors shape MTI students learning owing to the case-study design which can inform interaction between contextual factors and the specific case through detailed description.

### **Data collection and analysis**

The research draws on data from the participant's personal diaries and online interviews. In the diaries (one piece per day), Jimmy recorded feelings and thoughts about what happened in his translation training. Jimmy submitted his dairies once a week and, at the end of the research, the dataset consisted of eighty-eight pieces of diary (totaling over 33,000 words) spanning three months from February 5 to May 4 (no diary reported on February 22). These diaries were representative of Jimmy's personal thoughts and experience. To have a deeper understanding of Jimmy's personal reflection, semi-structured interviews were held every two weeks in a conversational manner through WeChat (a WhatsApp-like App in China) for convenience consideration. All interviews (1000–1500 words each) were first concerned with the overall learning experience of Jimmy and then tried to elicit Jimmy's attitude towards MTI program by inviting him to comment on specific events identified in his diaries, for example, peer feedback about his translation. Both diaries and interviews were in Chinese as it would be easier for Jimmy to express ideas in his mother tongue. Additionally, during the data collection, the second author engaged in personal communication with Jimmy through WeChat and informal meetings. Although this type of data was not included in the data analysis and interpretation, it shed light on the personal experiences and learning motivation of Jimmy. Especially, informal communication helped to establish rapport between the researchers and Jimmy, thus allowing him to share his feelings and thoughts in a candid and free manner.

Both diaries and interviews provided rich data for the motivation of the participant, but only information relevant for the study was translated into English by the first author and was sent to the participant for his comments which were taken into consideration in the data interpretation.

The study adopted a qualitative inductive approach for data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). Both open coding and axial coding were used. First, during the line-by-line open coding, the diary data was broken down into segments to which codes were assigned after several rounds of reading. Codes with low frequencies (less than 2) and little relevance to the study were screened out. From the rest of the codes were distilled several themes relating to Jimmy's motivation (e.g. course content, curriculum, teaching style, workload, teachers, supervisors, peers, and language proficiency). The following axial coding looked into the relationships between themes and further identified four major categories (i.e., curriculum, coursework, significant others, and self-perceived ability, for more information, see Table 2). These categories were analyzed with reference to theories and relevant research on students' motivation and self-perception (e.g.



**Table 2** Major categories in the diary

Categories	Frequencies (%)
Significant others	52 (31%)
Self-perceived ability	49 (29%)
Coursework	43 (26%)
Curriculum	23 (14%)
Total	167

Dörnyei, 2005; Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). The interview transcript which elicited Jimmy's comments on major events identified in his diaries was used to triangulate and validate the coding results. In order to further enrich and validate the study, the data interpretation results were sent back to the participant for his comments.

### Findings

The analysis of Jimmy's diaries and interviews data revealed four main reasons (significant others, self-perceived ability, coursework, and curriculum) that could explain the (de)motivation of Jimmy during his translation study. The effects of each (de)motivator on his learning behavior are then illustrated with special attention on his self-conceptions. Interviews are referred to as *Int* (e.g. *Int2* short for the second interview) and diaries are referred according to the date (e.g. *Apr5* meaning diary on April 5).

#### a. Significant others

In terms of frequency (see Table 2), significant others (teachers, supervisor, and peers) exerted the most prominent influence on Jimmy's motivation through immediate interaction.

Before entering the university, Jimmy had a great interest in translation and projected himself as a future professional translator, an ideal situation that would be achieved after MTI program training (*Int1*). However, after several months of study, Jimmy found most MTI instructors in this university were inactive in the translation and interpreting market and their research interests were mainly in literature, education, or applied linguistics. Those inexperienced translation trainers triggered Jimmy's worry about his learning outcome:

Few teachers are active translators in the market. Most of them are just college teachers who put much emphasis on theoretical studies while little on applicable skills... so the problem is that our teachers don't have work experiences in translation. (*Int4*)

As suggested in Jimmy's diaries, MTI program instructors should be experienced in translation and interpreting. With such professional knowledge, they could impart "applicable skills" and prepare students to be translators, which actually represented the original attraction for Jimmy to enroll in the MTI program. However, the lack of professional competence among program instructors increased Jimmy's anxiety about his actual identity as a student who could not learn desired knowledge. Jimmy associated this unfavorable actual situation with his feared future as an unqualified translator and

was afraid that, if the current situation continued, his feared self would come true. As a result, he refused to be a negative receiver in class. He performed irrelevant activities in courses where instructors failed to provide deep insight into translation. For example, Jimmy read books or worked on his translation assignments in Chinese Language and Culture of which the instructor had a research interest in Italian literature.

Nevertheless, Jimmy admitted his admiration for certain instructors because of their in-depth understanding of translation (*Mar7*). Interestingly, these teachers have been working part-time in the translation services market for years. With extensive experience in the market, they became role models for Jimmy because, from them, Jimmy could see his ideal self as a translator more vividly. For example, Jimmy wanted to be able to analyze texts as deep as one professor did. Experienced trainers also enhanced Jimmy's motivation through encouragement. Their recognition motivated Jimmy who believed the value of recognition from others, especially program instructors (*Int5*). On one occasion, Jimmy was praised by one of the teachers he admired:

I'm in a good mood today. Professor Li praised me for my word selection in translation. I changed “良心” in a Chinese translation of Social Contract to “道义”. Professor said he was confused by this sentence but my revision made it clear. (*Apr4*)

Experienced teachers shared useful translation principles and methods which were adopted by Jimmy to guide his translation. One example could be found in his translation of the title of an advertisement. He thought some words were meaningless in Chinese and there was no need to translate them into English because, according to the teacher of Translation Criticism, “attention should be paid to the essence of meaning rather than its form” (*Mar22*). Besides, teachers' recognition of Jimmy's translation ability enhanced his confidence and strengthened his ideal self as a future translator, thus bringing about his active participation in class. One example is that, in Applied Translation, after the teacher praised his trick to translate ironic expression by adding quotation marks, Jimmy's active participation in this course was sustained in the following weeks.

Supervisor is another significant other that affected Jimmy's learning. According to the training guidance provided by China National Committee for Translation and Interpreting Education (2011), MTI students are required to complete translation work no less than 15,000 words or interpreting training more than 600 h. To ensure students reach the target both in quantity and quality before their graduation, the coordinator of the MTI program in Jimmy's university required students to routinely hand in their translation. Jimmy's supervisor, an associate professor, asked him to formulate a plan describing the amount of work he would finish every month. Jimmy seemed to become anxious because of the expectation from his supervisor:

This afternoon I suddenly realized the translation target set by my supervisor. I have to translate 40,000 words of English into Chinese during the winter holiday! I must start to work otherwise I will fail his expectation. (*Feb5*)

Only half a month left. I have translated only 7,000 words, far from the target 20,000 words... I have to work harder! (*Feb18*)



The target set by himself strengthened Jimmy's ought self (an obedient student who meets the deadline), thus encouraging him to perform his translation task on time. In order to stick to the monthly plan, Jimmy further set sub-target for each week and regretted if he failed to reach the target. For example, one day Jimmy felt "shameful" when he had not met the weekly target for translation (7000 works).

Although supervisor set a target for translation training, Jimmy found he paid insufficient attention to the quality of the work, which made Jimmy worried about whether he could get a master degree with this self-perceived poor translation. On one occasion, Jimmy asked his supervisor for approval about his translation work before he submitted it to the program coordinator:

He didn't check my translation work and approved it immediately. I would prefer he did so because of my poor translation, but how can I get my degree and work as a translator in the future with such poor translation? (*Mar5*)

The possibility of failing the translation quality standard strengthened Jimmy's feared self (an unqualified translator) by threatening his ideal self (a professional translator). Jimmy believed he could do nothing to keep himself away from this dreadful future situation because the translation quality could not be guaranteed through his solo effort. As a result, he adopted an indifferent attitude towards his translation quality. For example, he just translated a sentence word by word when confused by the original text, which obviously influenced the quality of his work. Another example is that he handed in his translation work to the supervisor without proofreading, suggesting his lack of care about the quality of work.

Peers also had influence on Jimmy's study. During interviews (*int4*, *int5*, and *int6*), Jimmy expressed his disagreement about the attitude of his classmates towards translation training. Jimmy believed some of them did not treat the training seriously. For example, Jimmy suspected they might use automatic translation tools to do their coursework. On the contrary, Jimmy perceived himself as a diligent learner who recognized the value of practice:

Some of my classmates still made grammar mistakes in their translation. They just used Google translator to finish their coursework. I was confused. How could they do this? [...] I would say I tried my best (in translation training) [...] Some teachers praised me for my quality coursework. (*Int5*)

The attitudinal difference between Jimmy and his peers contributed to his superiority in translation both mentally and technically because he finished each assignment with a high score and studied translation by himself after class (*Int6*). The self-perceived current image as a diligent student enhanced Jimmy's confidence in his translation competence. In this situation, Jimmy often made comments about the learning behavior and translation ability of his peers. For example, Jimmy expressed strong disagreement about the peer comments on his translation because he believed they did not take the work seriously and might misunderstand the original text. Besides, he criticized the ignorance about parallel text and corpus in translation among his peers while he frequently used parallel text for references when doing translation.

### ***b. Self-perceived ability***

The second factor that influenced Jimmy's motivation toward translation learning is his ability regarding language proficiency and disciplinary knowledge. In his translation practice, Jimmy found the limitation of his linguistic proficiency. For example, he mentioned his trouble in finding the most suitable words when translating "approach" in an academic article (*Feb12*). The self-perceived low language proficiency was further demonstrated in his confusion about word choice, grammar, and other language-related problems. It was worth noting that Jimmy believed both his Chinese and English proficiencies need improvements:

Now I find my English so poor. I can't call myself an English major. Word choice, word collocation, and tense all make me struggle! (*May4*)

My Chinese is terrible. I like to put unnecessary information into translation. Too much translation practice deteriorates my language ability? I just can't speak authentic Chinese and English! (*Mar29*)

With such poor language proficiency, Jimmy worried about his possibility of becoming a competent translator in the future. This worry strengthened his feared self (an unqualified translator) and helped him know more clearly about his actual self as a language learner. The desire to avoid the feared situation urged Jimmy to improve his language ability. For instance, in view of the western style in his Chinese writing, Jimmy decided to read authentic Chinese novels. He also followed the advice from his interpreting instructor who suggested a large quantity of reading input to improve his English proficiency. However, the self-perceived poor language proficiency unfolded its adverse effects by gradually contributing to Jimmy's low criterion in translation quality. It seems that he naturally regarded language obstacles as unavoidable and hold inactive attitude to handle these problems. For example, when he encountered difficulties in translating, Jimmy believed his language proficiency set the limitation, and finally decided to leave these problems behind, which then possibly reduced the overall performance of his translation training.

Jimmy also expressed his limited knowledge about certain fields of study, especially technical terms. During the program training, he had to complete translation assignments covering topics like tourist information, civil engineering, and law. When translating these unfamiliar texts whether from Chinese to English or in reverse, Jimmy regarded himself as a layman who knew little about the specific domain in terms of writing style, terminology, or background knowledge. For example, when translating a text dealing with translation quality assessment from genre analysis, Jimmy frequently vented in diaries his difficulties understanding the article because of his lack of knowledge about genre. On one occasion, Jimmy had difficulties translating "mark", a term used in linguistics:

The major obstacle is "mark". Is it about word marking? The previous section didn't mention any research method. It is a little strange to suddenly mention a term in statistics. And what does it mean by "marked negatively"? It may be another expression in statistics (Jimmy probably regarded "mark" as a statistical concept) (*Mar17*).

The difficulty in understanding academic or professional articles added vividness to Jimmy's current self-conception as a translation learner. As revealed in his diaries, Jimmy put continuing efforts in handling his lack of disciplinary knowledge in view of the gap between the ideal image as a professional translator and the actual one as a translation learner. For example, when translating the above text associated with genre analysis, Jimmy found that reading relevant Chinese journal articles was helpful in forming a general picture of a specific field. Another example is that he built his own term base during translation.

### **c. Coursework**

As an application-oriented program, MTI education emphasizes increasing students' ability to handle real-world translation projects. According to China National Committee for Translation and Interpreting Education (2011) program guidance, project-based instruction should be introduced into class, and translation practice should be the main theme throughout the training. Following the guidance, the MTI program of Jimmy's university highlights the importance of coursework which, in most cases, is translation practice. For Jimmy, coursework posed mixed influence on his motivation in translation training. Negatively, Jimmy believed the amount of workload was more than he could handle. The heavy workload seems to cause his struggle and grow his demotivation in training. In one diary entry, Jimmy complained about the amount of homework he had finished within a week:

I want to have a colorful graduate life instead of struggling with coursework! Last week, I translated a Chinese tourist text (over 1,000 words) into English, wrote a book report, prepared the presentation for Chinese Language and Culture [...] I'm sick of coursework. (*Apr10*)

As indicated in his diaries, Jimmy wanted to live a graduate life of pleasure and enjoyment. However, the heavy workload consumed a significant part of his time and reduced the possibility to realize his ideal situation as a "carefree student", giving rise to his actual self as a student overburdened with coursework. The negatively projected actual self-representation contributed to Jimmy's unfavorable behavior in translation study. For example, he admitted his neglect of reading and analyzing the original text when translating a piece of tourist text from Chinese to English because, if he did not do so, to complete this coursework would consume much more time. However, as suggested in the diaries, Jimmy still attempted to meet the deadline for each assignment, which could probably be explained by his awareness of the obligation to be an obedient student.

On the other hand, Jimmy admitted the benefits that translation practice after class could promise. He thought coursework provided opportunities and helped him understand more about translation both theoretically and technically. For one thing, Jimmy gradually formed a reader-oriented translation principle when performing his tasks and he attributed the formation of this mindset to his previous out-of-class training. For another, Jimmy believed that he acquired certain practical skills in translation like using parallel texts. The benefits brought by translation practice helped Jimmy find the positive side of training, which then enhanced his interest in learning:

I think the most obvious change is that I have got used to doing translation on computer [...] and I know the importance of parallel texts in translation and will search relevant texts in foreign searching engines [...] And the improvement of my translation awareness. I used to focus on the translation speed and would strictly follow the original text. Now I would appropriately modify the original and even add notes to explain culturally loaded words, which indicates my awareness towards readers [...] So, I think, after several months of study, at least I have acquired useful tools helpful in my translation even though my translation proficiency might remain unchanged. Of course, I acquire these skills through my self-study not the instruction from teachers because a lot of my classmates still know nothing about parallel texts or term bases. (*Apr21*)

Coursework produced a positive influence on Jimmy's learning behavior because he believed, through translation practice, he could improve professional competence, thus ideally becoming a translator. The gradually strengthened ideal self encouraged Jimmy to follow the principles and methods he learned from coursework to guide his translation. For instance, he found academic journals were reliable sources to check the translation of terms and employed this method in his other translating work. With the help of practical skills, Jimmy felt confident about his translation proficiency and found improvement in his perception of translation. For instance, during the peer assessment, he pointed out translation errors of his classmates and suggested these errors could be avoided through careful translation.

#### ***d. Curriculum***

Jimmy's motivation was influenced by both the quantity and quality of courses. According to the training program designed by the school, Jimmy was supposed to complete eight courses totaling 17 credits during the second semester of his freshman year. Like the attitudes towards workload, Jimmy held a negative emotion in the number of courses he had to attend each week. The diaries suggested that the tight curriculum repeatedly triggered Jimmy's reluctance to study, thus causing demotivating effects during the program training. The following quote expressed his fatigue in the first month of the new semester, and also his ideal self as a carefree student:

One word to describe the previous month: tired, both mentally and physically. I have eight courses a week with a heavy load of coursework. I have to study without pause [...] I really admire those who could indulge themselves in watching movies, TV series... (*Apr1*)

The heavy course load demotivated Jimmy and created obstacles to the realization of his ideal self as "a carefree student" who fully enjoyed graduate life, thus widening the gap between his ideal image and the current situation. He was tired of rushing around on courses and tried to change the situation but failed. For example, the program coordinator asked students their suggestions about the program building. Jimmy suggested that the program curriculum need improvements. However, he wondered the meaning of making these suggestions because he believed the limited voice of students

would be considered in the decision-making process. He believed there was little he could do about the curriculum design and had to accept the reality. The only way out for him was to complain in his diaries. When he could not cope with the tight timetable, he questioned the training program and even thought he “would absolutely refuse to take this program if given another chance” (*Apr18*).

Another aspect of courses that demotivated Jimmy was the casual instruction style of teachers. Indeed, Jimmy held a high expectation for these courses at the beginning of the semester with an aspiration to “acquire some practical skills” (*Mar7*). However, after several weeks of study, he gradually realized that he probably could not learn anything he wanted from class and believed he was a student who “wasted time in class”. For example, the influence of teaching style on the feelings of Jimmy could be illustrated by following excerpts from his diaries:

It seemed the teacher didn't prepare for the course. He casually directed the course to whatever subjects coming into his mind. I don't know what I can learn from him. (*Apr17*)

I also worried about my future in the last semester. I am completely wasting my time in class [...] How can I become a good translator after graduation? (*Apr26*)

The unsatisfactory teaching method elicited another negative response from Jimmy. Jimmy aspired to be a professional translator through program training. However, the realization of his actual self as a student wasting time in class was in collision with his ideal self, which might reduce the possibility of achieving his dream job after graduation. Since these courses were useless, Jimmy decided to pay selective attention in class. When noticing that teachers strayed from the lesson plan, Jimmy would stop listening and performed irrelevant activities in the class, for example, reading novels. In this way, the unexpected teaching style probably led to a poor learning outcome.

## Discussion

Informed by SC theories, the study conceptualizes translation learning as a dynamic process in which different self-conceptions emerge and interact with one and another, extending the language learning motivation that has focused on L2 motivation. Furthermore, the study attempts to understand translation learning motivation from the mental process of the learner and identifies four key factors (i.e. significant others, self-perceived ability, coursework, and curriculum) that explain the ebbs and flows of motivation, providing insight into the motivational process of language learning at an advanced level.

Significant others are the immediate context influencing students by means of interpersonal interactions. The study reveals that program instructors, supervisor, and peers all play roles in shaping students' self-image and thus introducing motivation changes.

First, program instructors influenced Jimmy's learning attitude because of their expertise. For one thing, the unsatisfactory qualification of some instructors generated contradiction between Jimmy's actual learning experience and the ideal self (a professional translator), which made Jimmy afraid that he would end up as “an unqualified translator”, thus

generating demotivated emotions and behavior (Higgins, 1987; Yuan et al., 2016). Such feared image of his future harmed Jimmy's attitude towards the program, reflecting the mediating role of self-concept in learning. It is worth noting that Jimmy believed MTI teachers should be experienced translators with practical skills. This view coincides with that of Zhang & Chen (2012) who argued translation instructors should "possess outstanding ability in translation, and broad knowledge about the current market of translation services" (p. 70). In this study, experienced teachers serve as role models and help Jimmy see more clearly what his ideal future would look like, thus strengthening his motivation in learning. The vividness of self-image is a strong indicator of its power in influencing human behavior. As Dörnyei (2009, p.19) put it, "the more elaborate the possible self in terms of imaginative, visual and other content elements, the more motivational power it is expected to have". Since MTI program is designed to train future translators and interpreters, active translators teaching in school could be good examples and equip students with essential skills and knowledge for their entry into the job market. Although several studies emphasized the importance of teachers' expertise in MTI education (Chai, 2010; Ge et al., 2011; Yang, 2012; Zhang & Chen, 2012), they failed to notice the role modeling demonstrated by teachers and its influence in shaping students' ideal self and motivation towards professional training. The current research further elaborates that translation trainees' self-image towards their future profession is closely associated with teachers who, in the view of students, might be positive role models or negative ones due to their background.

Second, the role of supervisors in mediating MTI students' learning behavior is highlighted in the study. To meet the monthly requirements, Jimmy felt the need to work faster because he was supposed to be an obedient student who met the deadline, which is a culture trait in Asian learning environments (Taguchi et al., 2009). The study shows that the ought self formed during goal-setting generates anxiety but also motivates students to engage in learning, which is similar to the findings of Ueki & Takeuchi (2012) who pointed out that the ought self is positively related to learning anxiety. Although the role of supervisors in translation training has been recognized in previous studies (Liu et al., 2017; Peng, 2017), the present study deepens this understanding by finding that insufficient feedback from supervisors about translation work demotivates MTI students. In the words of Dörnyei (2001), feedback plays "the most salient role in bringing about changes in [...] learning behaviours" (p. 122). Without sufficient feedback on his translation competence, Jimmy felt the increasing possibility of failing the conferment requirements for the master degree, which provoked his anxiety and strengthened the feared situation as an unqualified translator. Such feared future self-representation will eventually lead to students' demotivated behavior (Carver et al., 1999).

Third, peers are another immediate factor that influences MTI students' motivation in learning. An array of studies partly attributed the predicament in MTI education to students' limited abilities (He, 2011; Kong & Wang, 2011; Wang & Peng, 2012). The current study agrees that some students in this university have inadequate language proficiency and learning attitude. Besides, different from previous studies (e.g. Lewis & Sullivan, 2007) on peer influence that found peer often cause negative influence on motivation, the study finds that students may turn an active attitude towards learning despite the fact that most peers are reluctant to study. The reason probably lies in the highly efficacious self-image of students under positive reinforcement like high scores



on courses or teachers' praise, which encourages them to devote more effort and persistence to tasks (Schunk, 1990).

In addition, with the self-perceived inadequate language proficiency, Jimmy worried that he could be an unqualified translator, which represented his feared situation and harmed his motivation in translation training. From the perspective of MTI students, the present study reveals that language proficiency both in Chinese and English hinders students' motivation in training, echoing certain studies (e.g. Wen & Mu, 2009) which suggest the need to enhance MTI students' language proficiency. Furthermore, limited disciplinary knowledge, unlike language proficiency, contributed positively to Jimmy's learning behavior. The reason probably lies in the different combinations of self-images formed by disciplinary knowledge and language proficiency. In view of his lack of knowledge in certain fields, Jimmy felt the need to put more efforts to fill the gap between his actual self (a translation learner) and ideal self (a professional translation). This pair of selves lived in harmony and equally interacted with each other. The same situation, indeed, also happened between the feared self (an unqualified translator) and actual self (a language learner) formed by the perceived language proficiency. However, as motivation is "a dynamically evolving and changing entity" (Dörnyei & Ottó, 1998, p. 43), the motivated behavior may be reversed when the conflicting relationship between different selves changes. It is revealed in the study that if the feared image of students gains overwhelming position, students will accept their unpleasant future. In this sense, each self varies not only in nature but also in degree. The power relations between different selves may be also at play in generating motivating/demotivating effects.

Curriculum and coursework constitute a general context since they are directives from administrative bodies like CNCTIE and, in most cases, are norms in universities conducting MTI education (Kong & Wang, 2011; Ping, 2016). This contextual layer is relatively fixed and unchallengeable due to its mandatory nature, influencing the formation of students' self-perception and their behavior against motivators or demotivators.

For one thing, a tight curriculum would demotivate translation trainees. As indicated in the findings, Jimmy wanted to live an enjoyable graduate life, which represents his ideal self as "a carefree student". However, the packed curriculum strengthened his actual situation as "a fully-occupied student" and reduced the possibility of realizing his ideal way of living. With a limited voice in the general curriculum context, Jimmy was unable to improve his situation and encountered the collision between his ideal image and the actual self, resulting in undesirable behavior. Although previous studies (e.g. He, 2011) argued the curriculum for MTI training need improvements to make it more practice-oriented, they failed to pay attention to the packed syllabus which could harm students' interest in learning. According to the curriculum guidance issued by CNCTIE, full MTI students have to finish their courses totaling no less than 38 credit hours within two years. In Jimmy's university, especially, he had to obtain 46 credits from 19 courses and additional 150,000-word translation practice. Such heavy curriculum shaped his negative self-concept and demotivated him in translation learning. Additionally, the present study reveals that the casual instruction style causes anxiety in students, which speaks to previous studies (e.g. McCroskey et al., 2006) that found student motivation was associated with teaching style. The teacher's style of instructing would influence student learning experience, perceptions of the teacher, and then their motivation to study.

Coursework exhibited its dual role in mediating students' self-conceptions. Trained in an application-oriented approach, Jimmy was supposed to perform a large quantity of translation practice after class in order to achieve his ideal situation as "a qualified translator" after graduation. However, when the overall burden of assignments was more than he could handle, Jimmy felt "sick of assignments" and reacted negatively towards training. In this scenario, the actual self as a student overburdened with coursework was formed during rounds of complaints about assignments and further reduced his learning motivation, suggesting that the vividness of self-image is an important factor to arouse motivational response (Dörnyei, 2009; Higgins, 1987). Although researchers (Kong & Wang, 2011; Wen & Mu, 2009; Yang, 2012) have suggested that MTI training should put emphasis on practical training, the present study finds that excessive translation task would threaten students' motivation, suggesting that workload for MTI students should be kept within a reasonable amount in order to sustain students' motivation in learning. On the other hand, the importance of coursework in polishing translation competency should not be overlooked. It also represents a source of motivation if students believe they could benefit from practice, which confirms the significance of one suggestion that MTI students would acquire practical skills from training (Xu & Cao, 2017).

Self theories argue that self-conceptions are dynamically formed in different natures (positive or negative) and generate motivational consequences through interaction between selves (Markus & Wurf, 1987). The study has found that translation learners construct various self-images through the interaction both within the outside socio-cultural context and the inner mental world. Motivational variables (significant others, self-perceived ability, coursework, and curriculum) influence students' motivation in learning translation, and further generate actions from students along with the congruence and disparity among different selves. This study not only extends previous studies that attempt to investigate the MTI program by incorporating students' voice, but also provide illuminations on motivational variables behind translation learning.

### **Conclusions and implications**

Informed by research on learning motivation and self-concept theories (e.g. Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986), the present study reveals what motivates or demotivates MTI students during program training and how these factors influence their learning behavior. To answer the first question, four major categories are identified: significant others, self-perceived ability, coursework, and curriculum. To answer the second question, the congruence and disparity among the different selves are analyzed to interpret the motivated and demotivated behaviors. These findings showcase both pedagogical and theoretical implications.

For one thing, MTI policy-makers, program coordinators, and teachers need prepare students to manage the motivators and demotivators they might encounter during professional training. First of all, it is important that MTI instructors can possess work experience in translation and interpretation so that students could acquire practical professional skills through training and also picture a vivid image of their future career, thus strengthening their ideal self and motivating themselves in the study. Besides, the role of supervisors in MTI education should not be overlooked, especially their requirements and feedback on students' translation practice. Second, due to its professional nature, MTI program should put more emphasis on enhancing students' translation-related skills like

terminological competence. At the same time, MTI degree providers are suggested to develop translation training for specific purposes and equip students with specialized knowledge, which might contribute to positive affect and behavior because of trainees' increased confidence about their future. Third, both coursework and curriculum should draw administrative attention to its quality instead of quantity. Since MTI training is supposed to be practice-oriented, learners need more opportunities to engage in real-world translation projects instead of being trained in the classroom context. The project-based training mode should become an integral part of MTI training.

For another, the study contributes new knowledge to the investigation of learning motivation by extending motivational selves theories to the field of translation education. For translation education, the student's perspective adopted in the study advances the understanding of previous research about MTI education that was confined to standpoints at the authoritative level like administrative bodies, program leaders, or employers. For self-concepts theories, the study suggests that the context mediating students' self-representation could be general socio-cultural, immediate, or internal contextual entities, thus emphasizing the dynamic nature of context and offering a new understanding of the contextual factors shaping students' self-images and motivation in learning.

To conclude, the study advances the current understanding of translation education, especially MTI education in the context of China, by investigating factors influencing MTI students' (de)motivation and their following responses from the perspective of self-concept. The case study, while not generalizable, provides insightful interpretation for the professional translation education at master level in China. Future research could go deeper into translation learning motivation by adopting mixed methods and involving a larger sample of participants. Besides, as the present study only tracks Jimmy's motivation changes in three months, researchers could further explore the dynamics of motivation in learning translation through a longitudinal research paradigm.

#### **Abbreviations**

CADGEDC: China Academic Degrees & Graduate Education Development Centre, Ministry of Education; CNCTIE: China National Committee for Translation and Interpreting Education; MTI: Master of Translation and Interpreting; SC: Self-concept

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#### **Authors' contributions**

LC was a major contributor in writing the first draft. YC proposed the topic and designed the study. YC proofread and reviewed the manuscript. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

#### **Competing interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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