

Language Teacher Motivation in Online Contexts: The Evolution of Possible Language Teacher Selves


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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the motivation of language teachers through the lens of possible language teacher selves (Kubanyiova, 2009) in the context of online teaching, exploring how motivation evolves over time. Using a longitudinal qualitative approach, the study utilised semi-structured interviews and teaching diaries with 14 secondary school language teachers in China. Findings reveal that teachers' motivation towards online teaching was multifaceted, with all participants establishing well-elaborated future self-images and nurturing expectations for their roles in future online teaching contexts. The study highlights the temporal dimension of teachers' motivation, focusing on the evolving, dynamic shifts in the transformative patterns of possible language teacher selves. Notably, agency developed as a result of the evolving motivational change between participants' ideal, ought-to, and feared selves, driving teachers to take agentive steps toward online pedagogy and inclusive educational practices. This process created a reinforcing cycle, where agency not only emerged from the transformation of possible selves but also reciprocally influenced the development of participants' possible selves. The findings suggest that possible language teacher selves could serve as a theoretical framework for designing teacher professional development programmes, emphasising the cultivation of ideal selves and the transformation of feared and ought-to selves in order to enhance teachers' agency.

Keywords: teacher motivation, possible language teacher selves, online teaching, teacher agency

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, significant developments and new challenges have arisen for language teachers due to the integration of new technologies and online teaching, spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this context, language teacher motivation in respect to online teaching can come under threat given the demands placed on teachers due to the requisite technical and pedagogical skills (Hubbard & Levy, 2006). However, at the same time, the digital shift has also provided novel professional avenues for language teachers to embrace and leverage online teaching methods.

Against the backdrop of this evolving digital language teaching landscape, the *possible language teacher selves* construct (Kubanyiova, 2009) offers rich potential for examining how language teachers' future-oriented self-conceptions can influence their motivation in respect to online teaching. While a small body of studies have explored language teacher motivation through the lens of possible language teacher selves in different sociocultural contexts (e.g., Aslan, 2022), including online contexts (White & Ding, 2009), the dynamism and interactions among possible selves over time and their impact on teachers' behaviour in such settings have not yet been examined. This study aims to explore the complexity and dynamism of language teachers' motivation by exploring how their motivation toward online teaching may change over time by employing the possible language teacher selves framework as a lens.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Language Teacher Motivation

In this paper, we understand language teacher motivation in terms of Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2021) conceptualisation, according to which it has four key elements. First, it encompasses an intrinsic element linked to the initial motivation to pursue teaching (e.g., Watt & Richardson, 2008). Second, motivation is linked to social-contextual factors, including the educational environment and social recognition of the profession. Third, motivation is viewed as a long-term endeavour for professional growth; and, lastly, a number of demotivating factors (e.g., insufficient career infrastructure) exist that threaten the nature of the teaching profession. This four-part framework is

particularly relevant to the context of this study, as it captures the heightened interplay between intrinsic interest and external pressures. Its focus on social-contextual factors can reveal the societal expectations faced by Chinese teachers, while its emphasis on long-term growth can reflect the degree of participants' aspirations to enhance their digital literacy.

Agency plays a central role in navigating these motivational complexities, which is both shaped by and contributes to motivation (Code, 2020). Agency is defined in this study as "the power to initiate action" (Bandura, 2006, p. 5), reflecting teachers' capacity to manage and direct their motivation and actions in response to personal and contextual factors (Code, 2020). Intrinsic goals and long-term professional growth empower teachers to act, while external pressures, such as societal expectations, often stimulate or inhibit agentic responses (Rahmati et al., 2019).

Research on language teacher motivation in respect to online teaching has only started recently, but is growing rapidly (e.g., Kulikowski et al., 2022). Specifically, a small body of studies has investigated the relationship between teacher motivation and online teaching, adopting various theoretical frameworks including self-determination theory (e.g., Arslan, 2021; Li, 2021), the second language motivational self system (Truong & Murray, 2019), and job characteristics theory (e.g., Kulikowski et al., 2022). Drawing on Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2021) conceptualisation of language teacher motivation and the possible language teacher selves construct (Kubanyiova, 2009), the current study explored language teacher motivation towards online teaching. Combining these two lenses allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the complex, temporal, within-person, and dynamic evolution of teachers' motivation, linking teacher motivation with their subsequent behaviour and exercise of their agency (Kubanyiova, 2009).

Possible Language Teacher Selves

Possible selves theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986) suggests that the cognitions that influence behaviour are shaped not only by social reality but also by future-oriented self-visions. In language motivation research, Kubanyiova (2009) adapted this theory to introduce the possible language teacher self construct, integrating ideas from possible selves

theory (Markus & Nurius, 1986), the second language motivational self system (Dörnyei, 2005), and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987). This perspective incorporates both personal and socially constructed cognitive representations of language teachers' evolving professional identities. Kubanyiova's framework consists of three components:

(1) *Ideal language teacher self*, which is teachers' aspirational, internalised vision of their professional goals. They are motivated to bridge the gap between their current and ideal selves.

(2) *Ought-to language teacher self*, which relates to teachers' professional obligations and external expectations from students' parents, colleagues, institutions, and cultural norms.

(3) *Feared language teacher self*, which includes negative identity a teacher seeks to avoid, arising from failing to meet ideals or external obligations.

Possible selves profoundly influence teachers by shaping their cognition, motivation, and professional growth, which subsequently affect their teaching practices (Kubanyiova, 2009).

A particular strength of the possible language teacher selves framework is that, "it unravels individual complexities in how a teacher's motivation may be affected by contextual conditions" (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021, p. 231). Also, according to Kubanyiova (2009), the framework can shed light on the relationship between cognitive, motivational, and contextual factors that interact within the dynamic and complex, socially constructed process of language teacher development. Thus, it offers a comprehensive lens for understanding how teachers' future-oriented self-conceptions can influence their motivational experiences and identity development within professional contexts.

Among previous studies, only a small number (e.g., Hiver, 2013) probed language teacher motivation through the possible language teacher selves construct. For example, Kubanyiova (2009) introduced the construct through a teacher development course for in-service English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in Slovakia, emphasising future-oriented aspects of teachers' cognition and motivation, including their professional aspirations. Similarly, Hiver (2013) examined how possible teacher

selves influenced the professional development choices of seven in-service South Korean English teachers. He identified clearly constructed possible selves, particularly the ideal self as an expert English language user. Gao and Xu (2014) identified social mobility and English proficiency as key drivers of language teachers' ideal selves, motivating their pursuit of teacher education programmes. Notably, White and Ding (2009), in a longitudinal qualitative study, demonstrated how socially mediated experiences shape teachers' possible selves, which strongly motivate them to engage in e-learning and professional growth.

However, there is little research that explores how possible selves develop over time. This process is especially interesting in respect to online teaching contexts, where the rapid and unpredictable shifts have created unique conditions that demand an understanding of how the evolution of possible selves shapes teacher motivation and adaptation to challenges. Thus, the current study aims to investigate the longitudinal changes of language teacher possible selves over time in the online teaching context. The following research questions guided this study:

1. What is the motivation of EFL teachers from the perspective of possible language teacher selves in the context of online teaching in China?
2. How does this motivation develop over time in the context of online teaching in China?

METHODOLOGY

Since teachers' understandings are subjective and reality is inherently multidimensional and dynamic, interpreting teachers' expressions qualitatively provides a more effective means of uncovering their nuanced meanings. Accordingly, this study adopts an interpretivist approach (Creswell, 2013) to explore the "interpretations of the social life-world" (Merriam, 2015, p. 52). More specifically, a qualitative longitudinal methodology was selected to capture teachers' evolving subjectivities (Mercer, 2023) and their motivational shifts regarding online teaching within their professional contexts.

Context and Participants

This study is part of a larger project investigating language teachers' motivation and demotivation in a Chinese context. This research involved language teachers from three public secondary schools in Jiangsu province during the COVID-19 pandemic. The initial stages of the pandemic posed challenges as teachers navigated intermittent periods of online and hybrid teaching. Initially, professional support lagged behind the immediate demands of remote education, but, over time, specialised training and resources helped them adapt to online teaching.

Purposive sampling (Merriam, 2015) was used to recruit participants to obtain a cross-section of the teacher population and a representative sample. Three secondary schools were selected based on geographical location, student population size, and teacher experience to ensure a

diverse sample that captures a range of contextual variations in online teaching adaptation. Initially, emails were sent to all EFL teachers in these schools outlining the research objectives and methodology. Interested teachers ($n = 20$) contacted the first author, who provided further details and conducted informal interviews to collect demographic information. Ethical procedures, including written informed consent, anonymity, and data confidentiality, were strictly followed. To ensure a diverse sample, 14 teachers were selected based on two criteria: (1) maximum variation in age, gender, and teaching experience (e.g., novice: 0–10 years, mid-career: 11–30 years, experienced: over 30 years) and (2) demographic balance across these attributes. The final sample comprised five novice, five mid-career, and four experienced teachers. Table 1 presents an anonymised summary of participants' biographical data.

Table 1. *Participants' Profiles*

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Years of teaching experience	Academic degree
Ariel	24	Female	3	Bachelor's
Benjamin	57	Male	35	Bachelor's
Cathy	28	Female	5	Bachelor's
David	26	Male	4	Bachelor's
Dani	37	Female	15	Bachelor's
Devin	55	Male	33	PhD
Flora	54	Female	32	Bachelor's
George	53	Male	28	Master's
Gloria	30	Female	5	Bachelor's
Grace	58	Male	36	Master's
Jane	43	Female	24	Bachelor's
Mike	29	Male	4	Master's
Michelle	45	Female	21	Bachelor's
Sara	45	Female	25	Bachelor's

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and teacher diaries over three months (September–December 2022) to capture the temporality of participants' experiences and explore the evolution of their motivation.

Individual Semi-Structured Interviews

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted over three months—one at the beginning (September 2022), the other

at the end (December 2022) of the first semester of the school. The interview protocol focused on three aspects of teachers' possible selves (Kubanyiova, 2007): (1) ideal, (2) ought-to, and (3) feared language teacher selves. The two rounds of interviews were designed to explore changes in teachers' motivation and career trajectories related to online teaching as schools transitioned from implementing online/hybrid teaching to fully operating under a mix of home-schooling and in-person hybrid instruction. Interviews were conducted online in the participants' first language, Chinese, with the 28 sessions (45–60 min each) totalling 24 hours of data (179,666 words). Author 1 transcribed the interviews, assigned pseudonyms for

confidentiality, and translated them into English. To ensure accuracy, a back-translation method was applied, with Author 2 reviewing translations and participants clarifying potential ambiguities.

Teacher Diaries

All 14 participants submitted 3 monthly teaching diaries, resulting in 42 entries (approximately 100 words each). The semi-structured format included a guiding prompt: *“Please, describe your motivation toward online teaching during this period. You may reflect on recent experiences, feelings, and perspectives on the future of online teaching.”* This approach encouraged personal reflection on motivational development while capturing teachers’ evolving professional narratives and dynamic shifts in their teaching experiences (Creswell, 2013).

Analytical Approach

The interview and diary data were analysed using NVivo 14 through multiple coding rounds to explore participants’ lived professional experiences (Saldaña, 2021). Magnitude coding (Saldaña, 2021) was applied to enhance the analytical depth of qualitative data by assigning numerical values to qualitative codes, enabling systematic comparisons across different time phases. This study used magnitude coding to explicitly represent the degree of internalisation and intensity of three possible selves. The magnitude values assigned to the transcripts were as follows:

1. Weak (1): low alignment between teaching practice and a possible self. For instance, teachers felt disconnected from their ideal self (lacking professional aspirations), exhibited low identification with the ought-to self (external expectations were not a driving force), or experienced little concern for their feared self (not feeling significant anxiety about failure).

2. Moderate (2): partial alignment between teaching practice and a possible self. For instance, teachers showed some aspiration toward their ideal self (but without sustained effort), acknowledged external expectations (but did not fully internalise them), or were aware of feared outcomes (but not highly influenced by them).

3. Strong (3): strong alignment between teaching practice and a possible self. For instance, teachers actively pursued their ideal self (clear professional goals), strongly identified with the ought-to self (aligning their actions with external expectations), or were highly driven by their feared self (taking action to avoid negative teaching outcomes).

To track longitudinal shifts, assigned magnitude values were analysed to reveal evolving patterns in participants’ possible selves over time.

To ensure researcher reflexivity, a reflexive journal was kept to document interview contexts, researcher positionality, and potential biases to enhance interpretive transparency (Merriam, 2016). Member checks were conducted by inviting participants to review and provide feedback on the analysis to validate our interpretations. Most participants ($n = 13$) confirmed its accuracy, with one suggesting refinements (e.g., clarifying ambiguous diary extracts), strengthening the rigour, transparency, and trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

FINDINGS

The first section provides an overview of the evolving motivational changes the participating English language teachers experienced in their professional lives regarding online teaching. It then discusses how interactions among the three possible selves over time shaped their agency.

Motivational Changes Towards Online Teaching

Over three months, teachers experienced dynamic and nuanced changes in their possible selves. At the beginning of the semester, there was a weak alignment between participants’ teaching practices and ideal selves, with 12 out of the 14 participants expressing a lack of clear ideals for online teaching (e.g., Table 2, Extract 1). In contrast, there was a strong alignment between participants’ teaching practices and ought-to and feared selves, as all 14 participants reported feeling external pressure to meet students’ academic performance expectations and experiencing anxiety about their competence in online teaching (e.g., Table 2, Extract 7). As participants adapted to online teaching, their self-conceptions evolved. Over time, their teaching practices became more aligned with their ideal selves, as participants increasingly focused on

professional growth-related goals. Meanwhile, the influence of ought-to and feared selves diminished as external pressures and fear-based motives became less dominant (see Table 2). By the end of the semester, all 14 participants reported a more balanced sense of self, with the

ideal self being the most strongly internalised, reflecting their aspirations to innovate and grow as educators. The extracts presented in Table 2 are analysed in the subsequent sections.

Table 2. *Magnitude Codes of Excerpts Depicting Changes of Possible Language Teacher Selves*

	Beginning (Month 1)	Middle (Month 2)	End (Month 3)	Total change (from Month 1 to Month 3)
Ideal language teacher self	Weak (1, $n = 12$): e.g., "I know online teaching could be valuable for improving my skills, but right now, online teaching is daunting. I teach in a very mechanical way. I did not really have any goals and ideals." (Extract 1, Cathy)	Moderate (2, $n = 14$): e.g., "I'm starting to explore new tools, and I feel more promising creating online lessons." (Extract 2, Cathy)	Strong (3, $n = 14$): e.g., "I've now discovered online classes can serve as a highly convenient supplementary tool, this gave me a sense of satisfaction. I see online teaching as a very important part of my professional growth." (Extract 3, Cathy)	+2 (Strengthened)
Ought-to language teacher self	Strong (3, $n = 14$): e.g., "I am expected to ensure my students' academic performance in any case. This is the responsibility I must fulfil to my students as a teacher." (Extract 4, George)	Moderate (2, $n = 12$): e.g., "I'm beginning to see that online teaching can also align with my personal goals, not just external expectations." (Extract 5, George)	Weak (1, $n = 11$): e.g., "I carry out online teaching not because I 'need' to do it, but more because I have found it to be my ideal professional development direction." (Extract 6, George)	-2 (Weakened)
Feared language teacher self	Strong (3, $n = 14$): e.g., "I am very worried about using new online teaching platforms because I am not very familiar with them. My big concerns are how students might perceive me and judge my competence." (Extract 7, Benjamin)	Moderate (2, $n = 12$): e.g., "I have been learning through online courses from colleagues because of my worries, which is helping me feel less anxious and less fearful." (Extract 8, Benjamin)	Weak (1, $n = 11$): e.g., "Now, I consider myself a professional user of the online teaching platform. I do this more for my future plans and professional development, rather than from fear." (Extract 9, Benjamin)	-2 (Weakened)

Increasing Alignment With the Ideal Language Teacher Self

Participants' ideal language teacher selves initially showed low alignment with their teaching practices (Weak/1; $n = 12$), as reflected in their reluctance toward online teaching and lack of articulated professional goals (e.g., Table 2, Extract 1). Over three months, this alignment increased (Moderate/2; $n = 14$) as participants demonstrated a greater willingness to explore digital teaching methods. This shift was evident in their reports of experimenting with new tools and gradually associating online teaching with professional

growth (e.g., Table 2, Extract 2). By the end of the semester, all participants ($n = 14$) described a greater sense of alignment (Strong/3) between their teaching practices and professional aspirations (e.g., Table 2, Extract 3). Two distinct patterns emerged: (1) Ideal self as an educator with professional recognition, and (2) Ideal self as an educator in professional development.

Ideal Language Teacher Self as an Educator With Professional Recognition. The pandemic created a challenging context, forcing teachers to quickly adapt to online instruction with minimal preparation. Initially, participants expressed uncertainty and disengagement, describing online teaching as a mechanical and uninspiring task rather than an opportunity for professional growth. For instance, Cathy initially stated that she “felt constrained by the rigid nature of online teaching” and struggled to “see its long-term value” in her professional development (Cathy, Extract 10, 1st interview, September). However, as she became more proficient in hybrid teaching, her self-perception evolved, shifting toward a vision of professional recognition and contribution in an emerging technological field:

I have gradually grasped hybrid teaching. I can see the light of my future. I want to contribute both educationally and professionally in an emerging technological field. (...) I am gaining a feeling of control; this makes me feel satisfied and appears vital to my future online teaching. I see it as a very important part of my professional growth. (Cathy, Extract 11, 2nd interview, December)

Cathy’s ideal self developed from a low alignment between her teaching practice and ideal self in September to a strong alignment in December, illustrating a transition from reluctance to self-driven professional identity formation. This evolution was reinforced by positive emotions, such as satisfaction, a sense of achievement and control, which strengthened her commitment to digital teaching. Ultimately, her internalised ideal self functioned as a powerful incentive and standard for future teaching, as evidenced by her aspiration to “contribute to an emerging technological field” (Cathy, Extract 11, 2nd interview, December).

Similarly, Dervin, Gloria, and Jane developed an increasing sense of pride during this process. They emphasised the central role of student perceptions in shaping their ideal teacher selves, transitioning from an initial state of demotivation to feeling “inspired and motivated” (Jane, Extract 12, 2nd interview, December). This transformation is evident in Dervin’s reflections: “Compared with last month, students are expressing increasing interest. This shows the effectiveness of my online teaching and makes me proud of myself” (Dervin,

Extract 13, 2nd diary, November). In a later reflection, Dervin’s ideal self became more internalised, as shown by his shift from viewing online teaching “as a task” to aspiring to be recognised as a “professional educator.”

Since my online teaching has been effective so far, I aspire to be admired by my students. It would be pleasant to be acknowledged and respected by students as a professional educator in online teaching. (Dervin, Extract 14, 3rd diary, December)

This strong sense of being “admired by students” also shaped teachers’ online teaching goals, facilitating students’ learning in lessening discrepancies between participants’ ideal and actual language teacher selves. By extension, participants transformed from not realising or valuing the importance of being a role model to having “a strong sense of themselves as role models” for students (Flora, Extract 15, 2nd interview, December). With students at the core, this ideal self with appreciation and recognition motivated teachers to improve online teaching methods.

Ideal Language Teacher Self as an Educator in Professional Development. Initially, teachers showed little alignment between their teaching practice and ideal selves. However, eight participants gradually experienced a stronger alignment between their teaching practice and ideal self, which became central to their engagement with online teaching. Sara’s reflections illustrate this transformation:

I don’t have the knowledge required for online, hybrid teaching. This area is very new and challenging to engage with and find value and goals in the online mode. (Sara, Extract 16, 1st interview, September)

Sara initially lacked a clear goal for her future and saw little purpose in online teaching. Over time, her perception shifted, recognising its role in expanding professional development opportunities:

I have transformed my attitude because online teaching enabled me to access educational materials and webinars from various sources; it has opened up more avenues for professional development and extended my network. I currently aspire to become knowledgeable and enhance my professional digital skills through various professional trainings to make

innovations. (Sara, Extract 17, 2nd interview, December)

Sara's journey reflects a clear shift from no alignment to strong alignment between her teaching practice and ideal self, demonstrating how engagement with online teaching fostered professional growth and goal-setting. Similarly, by the end of data collection, Benjamin, Mike, and Dani developed their ideal selves by expressing eagerness to engage with various professional development opportunities including conferences, seminars, projects, and training sessions, which reinforced their aspirations to become goal-oriented professionals.

Notably, although initially lacking expertise in digital literacy, some participants ($n = 12$) gradually developed strong ideal selves centred on digital literacy proficiency. Specifically, they demonstrated a strong willingness to acquire diverse digital skills including online platforms and Artificial Intelligence (AI) in practical use. For instance, Cathy explained initially: "I am unfamiliar with using the computer because I think it is what young people did, this demotivated me a lot" (Cathy, Extract 18, 1st interview, September). However, her perspective shifted in the second interview:

When figured out technical problems, now, I would gradually like to become an expert, who is a proficient and confident user of online teaching tools. I'm starting to explore new tools, and I feel more confident creating engaging lessons. I've realised online classes are a convenient supplementary tool, giving me a sense of satisfaction. I now see online teaching as part of my professional growth. (Cathy, Extract 19, 2nd interview, December)

The developed ideal self as an expert of online teaching also brought positive emotions (e.g., satisfaction) to Cathy as incentives for mastery of online teaching. Even though some teachers ($n = 10$) lacked digital literacy and encountered technical difficulties, they managed to overcome the dilemma between their ideal and actual selves.

Decreasing Alignment With the Ought-to Language Teacher Self

Initially, there was a strong alignment between teaching practice and participants' ought-to language teacher selves

(Strong/3; $n = 14$), shaped by external pressures from students, parents, and school managers. These pressures shaped participants' ought-to selves in two key ways: (1) Ought-to self as a teacher to promote students' academic performance, and (2) Ought-to self to receive positive feedback from students, students' parents, and school managers. Over three months, this external-driven self-concept weakened (Moderate/2; $n = 12$) and eventually became less internalised (Weak/1; $n = 11$), as participants redefined their professional identity by incorporating external expectations into their ideal teacher self (see Table 2). This transition was accompanied by emotional shifts moving from predominantly negative (e.g., "frustration," "stress") to more positive affect, including "satisfaction," "meaningfulness," and "energetic."

Ought-to Language Teacher Self to Promote Students' Academic Performance. Most participants ($n = 12$) indicated that promoting students' academic performance was crucial in forming their ought-to selves as responsible teachers, with an awareness of addressing student needs in new online teaching modes. This dissonance between their actual self and ought-to selves created pressure to conduct online teaching effectively. George exemplified this initially, as evidenced by his strong sense of responsibility to ensure students' academic performance despite the challenges:

I should at least ensure students are not influenced too much by the pandemic. I am expected to ensure my students' academic performance in any case. This is the responsibility I must fulfil for my students. (George, Extract 4, 1st interview, September)

George initially engaged in online teaching due to external expectations and responsibilities. However, as he continued, he gradually mitigated his ought-to language teacher self and partly transitioned it to an internalised ideal language teacher self for professional development:

Now I get used to and quite enjoy online teaching. I do online teaching not only because I need to do it, but more because I have found it to be my ideal professional development direction. Due to its convenience, I believe it is the future trend in the post-pandemic era. (George, Extract 6, 2nd interview, December)

This transformation occurred as George acclimated to online teaching, actively utilised it, and integrated innovation into his practice. Notably, even without an explicit ideal language teacher self initially, an ought-to self appeared to function as an initial guiding force, which, over time, was integrated and transformed into a more autonomous ideal self, as described in their interviews ($n = 2$). Though Mike did not possess a clear ideal self initially, he experienced a gradual decrease in his ought-to language teacher self, which ultimately evolved into an ideal language teacher self as an expert in online pedagogy:

Initially, I was not interested in online teaching because I was forced to do it well and I have the duty. Though I found it a bit frustrating, anxiety-inducing, and demotivating at first because I didn't do well. (Mike, Extract 20, 1st interview, September)

The more I became involved in online courses, the more I viewed technology as a solution to challenges. For example, using the ClassIn app for flipped teaching is convenient. Now, after some breakthroughs, I feel a sense of achievement and am motivated. Online teaching is an opportunity and platform for me to become a teaching expert in various online pedagogies in the future. (Mike, Extract 21, 2nd interview, December)

The development from an ought-to self to an ideal self in Mike's two interviews is evident. During this process, he experienced negative emotions, such as "frustration," "anxiety," and "disappointment" due to the discrepancy between his actual language teacher self and his ought-to language teacher self. As his ought-to self transitioned to ideal self, positive feelings like a sense of achievement emerged. This transformation also shifted him from demotivation to motivation.

Ought-to Language Teacher Self to Receive Positive Feedback From Students, Students' Parents, and School Managers. Participants ($n = 13$) indicated that they were initially motivated largely by external expectations and endeavoured to meet them even if they did not personally identify with them. These expected ought-to selves were shaped by teachers' sociocultural and educational contexts. They included socially constructed images of how educators should behave in an online teaching mode, the

kind of relationships they should have with learners, the digital materials they should use, and the objectives behind them. Meeting these expectations involved considering perspectives from students, school managers, and students' parents. For instance, Ariel and Jordan stated their initially ought-to selves from these perspectives:

Right after the move to online teaching, students are going to expect me to do as well as I can and create a stress-free online learning atmosphere. Also, managers from the school would hope teachers to prepare well. (Ariel, Extract 22, 1st interview, September)

My motives toward online teaching are shaped by the broader societal expectation. I feel a responsibility to integrate cutting-edge teaching methods not just because they're effective, but because students' parents view them as essential for preparing students for the future workforce. (Jordan, Extract 23, 1st interview, September)

Ariel and Jordan exhibited strong alignment between their teaching practice and ought-to selves, conducting online teaching primarily to meet external expectations. Over time, positive feedback on their teaching boosted their motivation, shifting their focus beyond external factors. This progression gradually internalised aspects of their ought-to selves into ideal selves:

I have received more students' positive feedback. My ambition has increased, and I am not only motivated by external expectations. Instead, I now have my own confidence, interests, and ideals for my future professional development in online teaching. (Ariel, Extract 24, 2nd interview, December)

As I have grown more like an expert in online teaching, instead of focusing on the recognition and feedback from students' parents, I now concentrate more on improving my teaching. I have my own ideals and receive recognition from inside rather than from outside. I aim to fulfill my ideals as an expert in online teaching. (Jordan, Extract 25, 2nd interview, December)

It is evident that Ariel and Jordan have progressed in their teaching careers, gradually shifting their focus from seeking external recognition to aligning their efforts with their internal professional aspirations and ideals. Overall,

teachers initially emphasised externally driven moral, societal, and professional duties. Over time, their ought-to selves evolved into ideal selves guided by intrinsic aspirations for growth.

Decreasing Alignment With the Feared Language Teacher Self

Another dynamic aspect of possible selves were teachers' feared language teacher selves. Initially, all participants were driven to engage and improve their online teaching primarily to address their perceived inadequacies, mainly to avoid their (1) Feared self as an inexpert teacher unable to adapt to online teaching, and (2) Feared self as an emotionally volatile teacher. There was a strong alignment between their teaching practice and feared selves (Table 2, Extract 7), accompanied by intermittent negative emotions until they were gradually faded and partly transformed into ideal selves. To mitigate such feared selves, participants sought agentic strategic solutions both on an affective level (preventing being demotivated and anxious towards online teaching) and a pedagogical level (improving digital literacy).

Feared Language Teacher Self as an Inexpert Teacher Unable to Adapt to Online Teaching Mode.

Initially, all participants reported fears concerning their digital literacy. That is, they recognised their weaknesses in technology-related teaching knowledge, and they were motivated to take action to avoid being perceived as lacking in the skills required for online teaching, including “unadaptable,” “outdated,” “incompetent,” “possess poor digital literacies,” and being “traditional and strictly bound to conventional teaching methods.” Negative emotions, such as “shame,” “fear,” and “anger” resulted from the activation of these feared selves.

Additionally, some participants ($n = 5$) worried they might not meet perceived student needs. Michelle tried not to be assessed by students as being less capable of “building strong relationships with students through the online platform” (Michelle, Extract 26, 1st interview, September). Other participants seemed to believe that their students might judge them critically for their digital literacy skills if they cannot adapt to new technologies, as Benjamin's case illustrates:

I am worried about using new online teaching platforms because I am not very familiar with them. My concerns are how students might perceive me and judge my competence. Sometimes this made me feel anxious and embarrassed. (Benjamin, Extract 7, 1st diary, September)

Benjamin initially experienced worries related to his students, accompanied by anxiety and embarrassment. Over time, his feared language teacher self gradually partly transformed into an ideal language teacher self for inclusive teaching:

Learning through online courses from colleagues has eased my worries and reduced my anxiety. Mastering online teaching now fills me with pride and enjoyment, and I see myself as a skilled user of the platform. My focus has shifted to future plans and professional growth, driven by aspirations rather than fear. With new teaching opportunities and ideas, I'm eager to educate more students online and work towards my dream of supporting disadvantaged learners. (Benjamin, Extract 8, 3rd diary, December)

During this phase, the primary driving force for Benjamin to engage in online teaching was repairing his perceived self-inadequacies. Facing these challenges, he then implemented strategies through online courses to enhance his digital skills. Consequently, his feared language teacher selves transformed into ideal language teacher selves for professional development.

Additionally, most participants ($n = 11$) elaborated on their fears stemming from perceived discrepancies, challenges, and tensions between their actual and ideal selves due to a shortage of adequate training opportunities for online platforms. They gradually recognised the need for more systematic teacher training through various platforms (e.g., teacher associations or educational institutions) to enhance their online pedagogy skills and address the gap between their current and feared language teacher selves. Such training could build a positive self-image as skilled teachers and enhance their willingness to tackle challenges in an evolving educational environment. As Flora reflected initially: “Being in my middle age, I worry about being left behind by society or becoming outdated due to insufficient online teaching experience” (Flora, Extract 27, 1st diary, September). However, Flora shared her experiences after three months:

Over the past few months, the school provided training opportunities, and now I have mastered basic online teaching skills. The worries before seem to have disappeared to a large extent. That's the importance of regular professional training in using different online platforms. I believe in the post-pandemic era, online teaching is more important than ever. This drives me to pursue more professional training courses to strengthen my abilities. Though I am still worrying sometimes, I can say I do this more for my ideals. (Flora, Extract 28, 2nd interview, December)

For Flora, professional training opportunities helped mitigate her feared self and transformed her worries into an envisioned ideal self, fostering further professional development. This process enabled her to achieve a relative balance between her ideal and feared selves.

Feared Language Teacher Self as an Emotionally Volatile Teacher. At an affective level, participants ($n = 9$) initially expressed concerns and aimed to avoid being “stressed,” “discouraging,” “uninspired,” “reaching a breaking point,” and facing “emotional exhaustion” when dealing with difficulties in online teaching, particularly when encountering technological problems in online classes or assessments. As Michelle reflected on the initial insecurity she faced when she could not achieve certain goals: “I’ve noticed some teachers are emotionally fluctuating most of the time. I am afraid to become this type and sometimes feel insecurity” (Michelle, Extract 29, 1st interview, September).

Though harbouring a feared language teacher self, Michelle applied emotional adjustment strategies to cope with online teaching, eventually partly transforming these feared selves into clearly defined ideal selves for designing online platforms:

I am keeping up and striving to be a professional teacher by learning and adopting professional strategies. I used adjustment strategies like gaining online teaching experience from peers to overcome my fears. My efforts paid off, as evidenced by positive feedback from students and their good performance. I now realise I have broadened my career pathways, and my depression has transformed

into positive emotions. In the future, I hope to design and adapt a new promising online teaching platform. (Michelle, Extract 30, 2nd interview, December)

Here, Michelle emphasised the importance of employing agentic strategies to manage the risk of burnout, which motivated her to act in goal-directed ways and positively transformed her emotions. She regulated her emotions by transforming her feelings of depression and inferiority into professional growth through collegial support. Now, she views the online and hybrid teaching modes as promising. Additionally, as the alignment between participants’ teaching practices and ideal language teacher selves strengthened, the alignment between their teaching practices and feared selves diminished in response, as evidenced by reduced anxiety and increased confidence in online teaching. As Michelle reflected: “Despite my concerns, having a clearer vision drives me to overcome my fears and master new technologies” (Michelle, Extract 31, 2nd interview, December). The results indicate that these teachers eventually developed a balance between the positive, internally defined ideal self and the negative feared self, which served as their main motivator for online teaching.

Development of Agency in Online Pedagogy Through the Evolution of the Three Possible Selves

The findings above reveal longitudinal shifts in the language teachers’ possible language teacher selves in relation to online teaching. These shifts played a pivotal role in shaping participants’ agency by influencing how they engaged with online pedagogy. As the ideal language teacher self-strengthened, teachers became more intrinsically motivated to reduce the gap between their actual teaching practices and professional aspirations, leading them to take more intentional and self-directed actions in their pedagogical decisions. Concurrently, the weakening of the ought-to and feared selves removed external constraints to a large extent, reducing anxiety and obligation-driven motivation, thereby fostering a greater sense of professional ownership. With fewer psychological barriers, teachers developed increasing agency across two key dimensions: (1) creative online teaching and (2) inclusive educational practices. This process created a reinforcing cycle, where agency not only emerged from the transformation of possible selves but also further

strengthened the ideal self, solidifying teachers' professional identity with online teaching.

Increasing Agency in Creative Online Teaching

A majority of participants ($n = 11$) reported a growing sense of agency throughout the semester. This development was driven by the strengthening of the ideal self and the weakening of the ought-to and feared selves, which reduced pressures and self-doubt while fostering a stronger alignment between their actual teaching practices and professional aspirations. As a result, teachers became more proactive in adopting innovative online teaching strategies. Benjamin's case illustrates this transformation. Initially, he struggled to create an interactive online environment, stating: "I don't have the initiative and cannot create the interactive environment I usually have in the real classroom" (Benjamin, Extract 32, 1st diary, September). However, as his alignment with the ideal self strengthened, he began to perceive online teaching as an opportunity for professional growth rather than a constraint. At the same time, the weakening of his feared self (Table 2, Extract 9) reduced his anxiety and uncertainty, enabling him to gain more control over his decision-making. By the end of the semester, he reflected:

Online teaching now portrays a significant part of me; it is no longer intangible but is crucial for communicative methods, like using the Chatroom. I feel less constrained and anxious and no longer feel like I must do it. It now truly embodies my developed aspirations, so I want to do more and actively adapt and evolve because of that. (Benjamin, Extract 33, 2nd interview, December)

This shift illustrates how agency emerged through intentional engagement with online teaching. Over time, Benjamin transitioned from viewing online teaching as limiting to actively shaping it to fit his pedagogical aspirations. His strengthened ideal self and diminishing external pressures allowed him to be more willing to adopt agentic teaching strategies to reduce the discrepancies between actual self and ideals, such as "creating more interactive lessons" and striving to "break away from conventional teaching methods" (Benjamin, Extract 34, 3rd diary, December).

Additionally, eight participants demonstrated an increased sense of agency in developing online assessments, recognising their potential to "alleviate administrative workload" (Dani, Extract 35, 3rd diary, December) and provide "faster feedback for learners and a more streamlined grading process" (Jane, Extract 36, 3rd diary, December). Mike's experience illustrates this transformation. Initially, he struggled with online teaching: "Online teaching is so restrictive for me. It's hard to get initiative" (Mike, Extract 37, 1st diary, September). However, he reframed his perspective later, recognising the advantages of e-assessments and embracing online tools with greater confidence and agency:

I noticed a shift in students' preference towards e-assessments. I now feel it is my willingness and a good opportunity to fully embrace online classes, as they offer advantages in assessment methods. ... There is no need to be anxious. Recognizing this, I began to take ownership of incorporating online tools more confidently into my teaching. (Mike, Extract 38, 3rd diary, December)

This shift highlights how Mike's agency evolved as he moved from perceiving online teaching as restrictive to actively engaging with it. The weakening of his initial anxiety allowed him to integrate online assessments more intentionally, aligning with his evolving pedagogical goals. Beyond Mike's case, other participants also developed agency in navigating technological innovations, particularly the integration of AI in teaching. Grace, for instance, reflected on how she actively sought to utilize AI tools, like ChatGPT, to engage in continuous learning: "I gradually actively utilise the newest AI tools, like ChatGPT to help me design my teaching" (Grace, Extract 39, 2nd interview, December). These experiences suggest that teachers' evolving agency was not only influenced by their internal motivation but also shaped by "student preferences" and "technological affordances." As participants gained confidence in their digital competencies and developed ideals, they actively adapted assessment strategies and integrated new tools.

Increasing Agency in Inclusive Educational Practices

Ten participants developed agency to incorporate inclusive perspectives in their online pedagogy, particularly focusing

on equity, diversity, and social justice. This transformation was driven by the strengthening of their professional visions and the weakening of external stress. As a result, participants agentically sought to foster more inclusive learning environments through online teaching. Cathy's case illustrates this shift. Initially, she struggled to integrate technology into her teaching, feeling disengaged and powerless: "The multitude of tools and platforms are confusing. I struggle to integrate technology into lessons and feel disengaged in adapting to them. This has left me feeling increasingly powerless" (Cathy, Extract 40, 1st interview, September). However, over time, she began leveraging online teaching for social justice, fostering inclusive discussions:

I have become familiar with these tools. I now have a goal to adapt to the new era and create an inclusive teaching environment that contributes to making the world a better place. The pressure and concerns are almost gone. I now actively leverage online teaching for social justice, enabling students to explore diverse issues on Blackboard and fostering inclusive discussions that resonate with varied backgrounds. By integrating bilingual activities, I honour students' language and culture. (Cathy, Extract 41, 2nd interview, December)

Cathy's agency evolved from uncertainty to proactive engagement, leading her to implement bilingual activities that foster connections among learners from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The strengthened confidence and ideals and the weakening of her initial concerns and external pressures allowed her to envision and construct an inclusive online environment, ensuring "fairness, accessibility, and trust between learners and teachers" (Cathy, Extract 42, 2nd interview, December).

As Cathy's agency increased, it also reinforced her ideal self, demonstrating a reciprocal relationship between agency and self-concept:

I am doing more with online teaching because it provides a space where all aspects of our gender identities can be acknowledged and celebrated. I created an Inclusive Storytelling workshop where students discuss gender issues and exchange ideas. The more I do this, the more I grow in my mission and ideals. My ideal is that my students would not

only study knowledge mechanically. (Cathy, Extract 43, 2nd interview, December)

Through this developed agency, Cathy used online teaching as a tool for critical engagement with topics, such as race and gender, in different cultural contexts in order to "break[ing] down patriarchal discourses embedded in education" (Cathy, Extract 44, 2nd interview, December). Such agency was linked to her ideal self that she aspired to become as "a socially conscious educator," moving her away from her feared selves as an ineffective teacher. In this way, her agency empowered her to act in line with approach (ideal) and avoidance (feared) motivation. Consequently, Cathy's ideal self was further strengthened, reinforcing her commitment to gender-inclusive education through multimodal platforms.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this paper was to investigate a group of English language teachers' longitudinal motivational development in respect to online teaching in China through the lens of the possible language teacher selves construct (Kubanyiova, 2009). Although a small-scale study, the findings highlight the diverse and multifaceted forms of possible selves envisioned by teachers. The study's findings also align with Kubanyiova's (2012) claims emphasising the pivotal role of the participants' well-defined and evolving ideal, ought-to, and feared language teacher selves as powerful motivators by addressing the discrepancies between their possible and actual selves during their online teaching experiences.

At the heart of the current research is the dynamism of the teachers' possible selves during their online teaching careers. This study highlights the temporal dimension of motivation and focuses on the evolving shifts in the transformative patterns (e.g., Table 2, Extract 6) of possible language teacher selves. As teachers transitioned to online teaching, they encountered various challenges while gradually adapting to the new environment. Through actively addressing challenges and reflecting on their teaching practices, teachers gradually developed a stronger alignment with their ideal selves, while the alignment with their ought-to and feared selves weakened. Also, teachers' possible selves functioned in an evolving network, where the ideal, ought-to, and feared selves played shifting

motivational roles, where they develop and transform into each other (e.g., the ought-to self transitioning to the ideal self). Drawing on self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), the presence of an ideal language teacher self motivated teachers to bridge the gap between their current teaching practices and their aspirational self-concepts. This process also contributed to a shift in their self-perceptions, as aspects of their ought-to and feared selves were gradually transformed into their ideal language teacher selves (e.g., Table 2, Extracts 7 and 8). This is similar to Hiver's (2013) study where participants focused on enhancing their actual selves towards ideal selves. Furthermore, the transition of the teachers' weak ideal self from the beginning to a strong ideal self with professional recognition confirms Aslan's (2022) study, in which participants viewed their ideal images as 'professional language educators.' Additionally, this study also emphasises the impact of the online teaching context on teacher motivation, particularly the pivotal role of technology in shaping teachers' professional trajectories. Although the shift to online teaching introduced several technological challenges initially, such as mastering new digital platforms and managing virtual classrooms, it also created opportunities for professional growth and the acquisition of new teaching skills. Given the complexity of the dynamic development of possible language teacher selves, we argue that this is an area ripe for further exploration within different geopolitical contexts in the future.

Furthermore, the teachers' possible selves aligned with existing theoretical claims (Kubanyiova, 2007), namely, that they are deeply socially constituted, shaped by societal discourses and interactions within the teaching context. Language teachers' possible selves do not function in isolation, there exists a dynamic network of possible selves that are situationally and temporally sensitive and can lead to changing combinations of selves playing different motivational roles depending on the intrapersonal and socio-contextual conditions at the time. For instance, in the current research, the ought-to language teacher selves were driven by contextual demands and external expectations at different levels in their social environment, including how social perspectives influence teachers' motivation. This aligns with Kubanyiova's (2007) concept of context-related ought-to language teacher selves. Additionally, participants' ideal selves with professional recognition highlighted the evolving central role of students and the classroom

environment. Teachers expressed a desire to be seen as role models valued by their students, which led them to place greater emphasis on student learning. This aligns with the findings of Tardy and Snyder (2004, p. 122), where teachers emphasised students' "moments of learning" as instrumental in shaping their ideal selves in teaching practice. However, this stands in contrast with Kubanyiova's and Watzke's (2007) research, where the aspiration to support student learning was not a central focus for language teachers. Hence, future research could explore whether this contradiction arises from the specific sociocultural characteristics of the contexts investigated. Notably, one particular line of studies (e.g., Rahmati et al., 2019) has noted the interrelation of various manifestations of teachers' possible selves. As Wenger (1998) describes, shaping possible selves involves "a mixture of being in and being out" (p. 12) meaning language teachers may simultaneously reconcile different possible language teacher selves as they evolve over time in different contexts.

Additionally, this study introduces a new theme, namely, the gradual emergence and development of agency resulting from the evolving motivational changes between participants' ideal, ought-to, and feared language teacher selves. Such a sense of agency in the context of online pedagogy and inclusive educational practices could reciprocally shape and influence participants' possible selves. The evolving teacher selves served as driving forces for teacher agency in online teaching. For instance, when teachers were both motivated to reduce discrepancies and achieve their developed ideal selves and ought-to selves, their motivation was translated into active agency and accompanied by specific plans and strategies for becoming these possible selves. Such agency for online teaching was dynamically shaped and sustained not only through intrinsic interest and drive, but also through heightened awareness and interactions with others (e.g., students and colleagues) (Bandura, 2006), as well as ongoing experiences within the online teaching context. In the present research, all teachers indicated gradually drawing on their agency, which enables various forms of action, such as "joining professional development training" (Sara, Extract 17, 2nd interview, December) and "investing in adapting online teaching methods" (Michelle, Extract 30, 2nd interview, December). Ultimately, by acquiring more professional knowledge and experiences in online teaching, teachers identified themselves as agentive educators in online pedagogies and

professional development, developing greater agency for future online teaching. In line with other studies, self-regulatory efforts to reduce the discrepancy between actual and possible selves are more likely to increase when teachers have desired future states (ideal selves) accompanied by well-defined ought-to or feared counterparts (Dörnyei, 2005; Kubanyiova, 2007; Oyserman et al., 2006). Besides, as teachers adapted to technology-assisted online teaching, their increasing sense of agency facilitated the enhancement of their ideal selves while simultaneously diminishing the influence of their feared selves.

Notably, emotional changes, particularly the shift from negative to positive emotions, play a crucial role in shaping teachers' possible selves and agency. This highlights how both positive and negative emotional states arise from conflicts or discrepancies (Hiver, 2013) and are closely tied to shifts within the three possible selves. This finding aligns with Hiver's (2013) study, which showed that language teachers' engagement in professional development is often driven by a mixture of negative and positive emotions. Emotions can act as a catalyst for both motivation and agency. In the current study, teachers initially experienced dissonance between their actual and ought-to selves, alongside consonance with their feared selves, leading to negative emotions and a sense of vulnerability regarding self-worth. However, as they recognised the dissonance between their actual and ideal selves and were motivated by their ideal selves, their emotional responses became more positive. With the growth of their agency and the strengthening of their ideal selves, positive emotions increased and emotional vulnerability decreased, allowing for potential positive self-enhancement and the fulfilment of professional goals in teachers' developmental pathways (Kelchtermans, 2005).

CONCLUSION

This study examines the three-month motivational trajectories of 14 EFL teachers in Chinese secondary schools through the possible language teacher selves construct (Kubanyiova, 2009), highlighting the positive reciprocal relationship between teacher possible selves and agency. The evolution of possible selves both shaped and was shaped by a growing sense of agency, creating a dynamic cycle that supported teachers' adaptation to online

teaching. Regarding methodological limitations and implications for future research, while we conducted member checks to enhance the credibility of the findings, we acknowledge that the retrospective self-reported nature of this qualitative research may still not fully capture participants' real-time motivational experiences. Future research could extend the exploration of both quantitative and qualitative dimensions to explore real-time possible language teacher selves within the online teaching context. Researchers can also consider the potential for additional categories beyond the widely recognised ideal, ought-to, and feared selves, such as the inclusion of constructs such as the 'relational self,' 'collective self,' and 'anti-ought-to self' (e.g., Crossley, 2001; Thompson, 2017; Wenger, 1998). This may offer valuable perspectives for expanding and refining the conceptualisation of possible language teacher selves. Also, we hope the investigation of the dynamism of different possible selves will be extended across various online teaching contexts longitudinally, such as diverse educational settings or cultural environments and different levels of technological access. Additionally, future research could ascertain whether measuring language teachers' possible selves could predict other variables, including the development of teacher professional identity, attrition, self-efficacy, and wellbeing, given that these factors are crucial for enhancing teaching effectiveness and positively influence student learning (Mercer, 2023). From the perspective of student motivation, future research could explore how the evolution of teachers' possible language teacher selves and agency influences the initiation and sustainability of student motivation and engagement in online learning environments.

Concerning implications for practice, since online teaching is increasing globally, the main stakeholder communities (e.g., policymakers, language teacher educators, programme developers, and institutions) could provide motivational support and develop strategies to guide teachers in exhibiting self-regulatory behaviours that foster the growth of their ideal selves or facilitate the transformation of feared and ought-to language teacher selves. For instance, teacher training programmes and mentoring initiatives could focus on building reflective practices and offering constructive feedback, which would benefit both novice and experienced teachers by enhancing their adaptability in evolving teaching contexts, thus benefiting their teaching practice. Furthermore, since our

participants underscored the necessity for professional technological support and training in the online teaching mode, we speculate that educational policy and teacher development initiatives could align with teachers' indicated professional goals and ideals. This could contribute to the development of effective guidelines for teachers in designing and delivering instruction within online

educational contexts, including emerging teaching environments, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs). Ultimately, this study underscores the transformative power of possible selves and their impact in shaping teachers' agency, demonstrating how motivational changes can drive professional growth and enhance online teaching practices.

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Authors' Contributions

HW (Author 1): Conceptualisation, Research Design, Methodology, Data Collection, Formal Analysis and Interpretation, Results, Writing – Original Draft, Review and Editing. QY (Author 2): Data Analysis, Analysis and Interpretation of the Result, Writing – Review and Editing. HW (Author 3): Data Analysis – Review and Editing. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Ethics Approval & Consent to Participate

This study was approved by the University of Edinburgh Ethics Committee, and consent to publish was obtained. All participants provided written informed consent prior to enrolment and data collection in the study.

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