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Learners' Motivation towards Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language in the General Education System of Sri Lanka

斯里兰卡国民教育体系中汉语学习者对汉语学习动机研究

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Abstract

The “One belt one road initiative” has strengthen Chinese Sri Lankan - bilateral relations considerably during last few years. As a result of it, a vast number of Sri Lankan students are motivated to learn Chinese language based on its significant impact on contemporary Sri Lankan society. Chinese language is now one of the main languages studied among other foreign languages in Sri Lanka's education system. Learning a language is influenced by various factors. One of the most important factors is the learner's motivation towards the target language. This paper studies the motivational factors of Chinese language learners in a foreign language learning environment in Sri Lanka's general education system. The research instruments used in this study consist of interviews and questionnaires. The random sampling method was used to select 72 participants for the study. The questionnaire focused on their motivation towards learning Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL), and how those motivational factors impact Chinese language learning. Regarding the overall level of motivation, the findings of this study showed that the learners had a high level of motivation towards learning Chinese. According to findings, both instrumental and integrative motivation significantly impacted the motivation level of the student-respondents. A majority of school learners are motivated by factors such as future travel in China, immersing themselves in Chinese language and culture, obtaining scholarships to study in China amongst other factors. Finally, the study introduces some pedagogical implications that would help to enhance learners' motivation.

Keywords: Chinese, General education, Learner, Motivation, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka and China have upgraded bilateral relations to a strategic cooperative partnership. Sri Lanka's relationship with China has evolved through Buddhism, trade, and aid to more strategic ties based

on infrastructure development and global connectivity. A language is a tool that enables mutual communication among people. The necessity of learning foreign languages has become essential in the modern world due to the development of advanced

science & technology, trade, transportation, and military factors. Chinese is becoming more and more popular in Sri Lanka and there is a high tendency among students to learn Chinese.

In 1972, teaching Chinese as a foreign language was introduced as a certificate course at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Hence, the University of Kelaniya was recognized as the pioneering institution for Chinese language education in Sri Lanka. At present, five universities, 45 schools, and four Confucius institutes engage in Chinese language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. According to the statistics issued by the Department of Examinations in year 2019, 302 Chinese language learners are presently engaged in Chinese language learning in Sri Lanka's general education system. The Chinese language curriculum of the schools mainly consist of Chinese language, grammar, culture, and literature.

This study mainly focuses on school-level Chinese language learners' motivation for learning Chinese. This is done to better understand if existing foreign language policies satisfy the learners' needs. Ellis (1997) argues that both internal and external factors play an integral role in learning a foreign language. External factors such as the social milieu in which learning takes place include the opportunities learners may have to hear and speak the target language. Internal factors, however, include the attitudes that learners develop towards the target language, and seem to have a much stronger effect on language learning. In the Sri Lankan Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) context, the learners' views, favours, and disfavours towards Chinese language should be clearly understood as they affect the learners' motivational intensity of learning Chinese. Gardner (1982) states that if we know the learner's

motivation towards the target language, then we can predict the way he or she behaves towards the so-called target language. Hence, Gardner hypothesized that L2 learners with positive motivation towards the target culture will learn the target language more effectively than those who do not have such a positive attitude and motivation.

Objectives

The research objectives are as follows:

- i. To examine the motivation of Sri Lankan students towards learning Chinese as a foreign language in general education;
- ii. To examine the factors that affect student motivation towards learning Chinese.

Literature review

Studies on motivation towards foreign language learning

As Benson and Gao (2008, p. 27) state, since language learning strategies seem to be “malleable”, there have been many studies focusing on the effect of other individual differences such as motivation on this variable (Chang, 2005; Sheikh Al Eslami & Khayer, 2006; Ziahosseini & Salehi, 2007; Yin, 2008). According to Gardner (1983) and Wilkins (1972), there are two main types of motivation, namely, instrumental and integrative motivation. They have explained and clarified “integrative motivation” as: “learning a language because the learner wishes to identify himself with or become integrated into the society of the target language”. In other words, a learner is motivated when they learn a language to integrate with the culture and values of the foreign language group, to make contact with the speakers of the language, or to live in the country concerned. It is believed that students who are most successful when

learning a target language are those who like the people that speak the language, admire the culture, and have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which the language is used. Gardner (1983) defines instrumental motivation as “learning a language because of someone or less clearly perceived utility it might have for the learner” (ibid, 1983, p. 203). In other words, a learner is instrumentally motivated when they want to learn a language to pass an examination, to use it in one's job, to use it during a holiday in the country, as a change from watching television, or because the educational system requires it (Wilkins, 1972).

Benson and Gao (2008) classified individual differences of learners into two categories: first, supposedly innate attributes like age, gender, aptitude as well as learning styles; and second, supposedly acquired attributes such as motivation and attitudes. Concerning the relationship between motivation and language learning strategies, Yang (1999) showed that high motivation and learners' beliefs resulted in the use of strategies, and this, in turn, reformed learners' beliefs and elevated motivation. Moreover, strategy training, as McDonough (2005) stated, has positive effects on learners' motivation via increasing self-confidence or self-esteem. Wenden (1991) also suggested that strategic instruction fosters learners' autonomy, a key factor in reaching optimal motivation. The logic behind using language learning strategies is due to factors such as the learner's age, career orientation, gender, attitude, aptitude, and motivation (Oxford, 1986). Besides, the interaction of motivation and learning strategies is obvious in Rubin's representation which states that knowledge and beliefs have five components: task knowledge, self-knowledge, beliefs, background knowledge, and

strategy knowledge. In this model, there is a reciprocal relationship between strategy knowledge and self-knowledge that consists of style and motivation (Rubin, 2005).

The factors affecting the motivation in language learning

Combs (1965) state that a positive teacher is an essential element in creating a supportive classroom. A self-confident teacher normally displays classroom management behaviour that promotes positive pupils and motivates them towards learning. Sternberg & William (2002) state that students are not motivated to learn when their teachers resort to traditional methods of teaching. They need to create a positive environment and develop activities that allow students to practice the language in a meaningful context. Hamidah et al. (2017) state that students with positive attitudes will have better motivation levels and be more successful compared to those with negative attitudes. Jeynes (2005) revealed the fact that academic achievement scores for students whose parents were highly involved in their education were substantially higher than those with less involved parents. The purpose of this study was also to explore the motivation towards the Chinese language learning while examining the learning attitudes, teaching methodologies and other factors which affect the Chinese language learners' motivation.

Methodology

Sampling

The purpose of this study is to find out the motivational factors of Chinese language learners in a foreign language learning environment in Sri Lanka's general education system and explore the factors that

affect motivation. A survey-based questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used as research instruments. The research sample was recruited from 72 students (female and male) who engage in Chinese language learning in 24 schools in Sri Lanka representing Western, Sabaragamuwa, and Southern provinces.

Instrument

To select the participants of the present study, a simple random sampling method was used. The survey-based questionnaire comprises of Likert scale questions (each of them has five options i.e. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D), and Strongly Disagree (SD)) and open-ended questions which cover the study's objectives. The participants selected for this study are between 16 and 18 years old. All of them were native speakers of Sinhalese who are learning Chinese as O/L and A/L students in the schools. Almost all the students who participated in this study had six months to two years' experience in learning Chinese. The questionnaire was adapted from Gardner's (2004) international version of "Attitude/Motivation Test Battery" (AMTB) to assess the participants' motivation. A questionnaire with four parts was used for this study. The first part of the questionnaire was related to the demographic information of the participants. The second, third, and fourth parts of the questionnaire consisted of a Likert scale. The three parts in the Likert scale dealt with the students' motivation and the factors which affect the motivation towards learning Chinese. The questionnaire was checked for validity or reliability fulfilment.

10 students among the sample were also interviewed to find out what are their attitudes and motivation

towards learning Chinese at school. The purpose of the interview was to fill the gaps in information collected through the questionnaire. The selection of the interview sample was made based on their responses to certain items in the questionnaire. After the theme and scope of the study were introduced and presented to the participants, the interviews were conducted with one participant at a time between 10 minutes to derive the results of the survey and explore students' motivational factors towards learning Chinese. During the interview, the respondents were allowed to express their opinions freely and elaborate more clearly on their viewpoints. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Results

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	25	34.72%
	Female	47	65.28%
Grade	10	24	33.33%
	11	18	25%
	12	11	15.28%
	13	19	26.39%

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Learning Chinese language and culture is very interesting.	22.22%	37.5%	31.94%	8.33%	-
2	Learning Chinese will help me to get a good job.	52.78%	27.78%	12.5%	6.94%	-
3	It's very difficult to communicate in Chinese.	9.72%	16.67%	37.5%	25%	11.11%
4	Learning Chinese characters is very difficult.	20.83%	23.61%	31.94%	12.5%	11.11%

5	I like to learn more practical than theory related to Chinese.	26.39%	22.22%	44.44%	6.94%	-
6	I watch Chinese movies and videos very often	8.33%	18.06%	37.5%	23.61%	12.5%

Note: SA=Strongly Agree; A=Agree; N=Neutral; D=Disagree; SD=Strongly Disagree.

Table 2. Learners' general attitudes towards learning Chinese as a foreign language at schools

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	To travel or study in China	26.39%	50%	9.72%	6.94%	6.94%
3	To communicate with Chinese friends	12.5%	22.22%	37.5%	20.83%	6.94%
4	Interest in Chinese language & culture	29.17%	38.89%	19.44%	4.17%	8.33%
5	To participate in Chinese cultural events	20.83%	23.61%	34.72%	12.5%	8.33%
6	To be able to pass the exams	9.72%	12.5%	38.89%	26.39%	12.5%
7	To get a good job	20.83%	33.33%	29.17%	12.5%	4.17%

Table 3. The motivation of the Chinese language learners in schools

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Lack of confidence when I have to speak in Chinese.	15.28%	12.5%	36.11%	9.72%	26.39%
2	I practice Chinese every chance I get.	11.11%	9.72%	31.94%	27.78%	19.44%
3	My teacher	29.17%	16.67%	13.89%	34.72%	5.56%

	encourages me to speak in Chinese in class.					
4	Teacher helps me during my learning struggles.	16.67%	24.61%	40.28%	9.72%	9.72%
5	Teacher allows us to do activities in class to practice Chinese.	11.11%	19.44%	37.5%	20.83%	11.11%
6	Teaching content and methods of the study program are very interesting.	13.89%	16.67%	33.33%	29.17%	11.11%
7	My parents encourage me to speak in Chinese.	9.72%	18.06%	23.61%	31.94%	16.67%
8	My parents encourage me to do a Chinese-related job in the future.	15.28%	22.22%	33.33%	23.61%	5.56%

Table 4. The analysis about the factors that affect the motivation of the learner

Discussion

As shown in table 2, the majority of undergraduates held positive attitudes while learning Chinese. A majority agreed that learning Chinese would enhance their employment prospects in the future. They believe that if they can communicate well in Chinese, they will easily get a job related to the tourism or translation fields in the country. China is the main investor in Sri Lanka at present, therefore, knowing Chinese would be helpful for their

future career advancement. According to the point of view of 59.72% of Sri Lankan school learners, learning Chinese is very interesting. But, the interview data reveals that a considerable extent of school learners also believe that learning Chinese is not that easy as they lack considerable exposure or access to learning Chinese at school level. According to the learners, learning Chinese characters and sound are the most difficult learning areas of Chinese language. Hence, although the undergraduates feel interested in learning Chinese, most of them show a negative attitude towards learning Chinese characters. During the interview, students provided various reasons why characters are hard to learn. The majority of them are unable to remember the characters, similarly, most of them believe that character recognition is harder than writing. The data also revealed that 46.61% of Chinese language learners also like to learn Chinese through practical lessons rather than theoretical knowledge. Data also reveals that school learners are motivated by activity-based learning such as group activities, games, Chinese cultural activities which create a 21st century student-centered atmosphere in the classroom. 26.33% of students still want to develop their Chinese language skills by watching Chinese movies and videos.

As shown in table 3, the data reveals that the item in which the Chinese language learners of Sri Lankan schools showed the highest level of agreement is in item 1, “travel or study in China”, which reflects 76.39%. According to the data analysis, a majority of students are learning Chinese in Sri Lanka so that they can master the language to travel to China or they can obtain a scholarship to continue higher studies in China. 68.06% stated that their initial motivation to begin learning Chinese was due to their desire to understand the culture of Chinese food, Chinese festivals, and Chinese customs. 54.16% of learners are motivated by the fact that after they learn Chinese they can achieve a stable and good job either in the government or private sector. Thus, most students are learning Chinese in Sri Lanka so that after they master the language, they can be employed in Chinese-related companies (port city,

Huawei, China Bank, etc.) where they can be Chinese language translators or interpreters in Sri Lanka. Since Chinese companies are expanding very fast and those who can speak Chinese do not struggle to secure employment. The factor of participating in Chinese cultural events such as “Chinese bride competition” and “summer camp” was also cited as the motivation by 43.99% of learners. The least number of learners are motivated by the factor which states, “I learn Chinese just to be able to pass the exams”. For the overall level of motivation, the findings of this study showed that the Chinese language learners in school had a high level of motivation towards learning Chinese. According to the data analysis, it also appeared that both instrumental and integrative motivation significantly occurred on the motivation level of the student – respondents.

As shown in table 4, the study revealed that learners' factors, teachers' factors, as well as parental factors play a significant role in learning Chinese. During the interviews, a majority of students agreed that the teachers' influence is essential. A majority of students admitted that they are more motivated when teachers create an authentic learning environment in the classroom. 63.89% of students favour their teachers in encouraging them to speak in Chinese, giving them more opportunities to practice the language while helping them to solve language problems in the classroom. Brophy (2000) believed that teachers should provide guidance and assume a supportive role in assisting students to develop understanding because they influence student's education. Therefore, it is recommended to present a favourable learning environment to school learners and share their motivation in a better way to make the learner secure and confident in a learning environment. Xu and Huang (2010) stated that the teacher's role is influential and critical in the learning process; a teacher who can build a warm environment in the classroom can lead to a decrease in motivation, on the other hand, teacher as a facilitator can address students' psychological feelings, help students enjoy the class and actively participate. Chinese language teaching in Sri Lanka's general education

system should be student-centered and this can be managed through the implementation of 21st-century approaches and technologies used in teaching. Stimulating positive attitudes towards the target language is a key factor of success in the foreign language teaching and learning process. Therefore, the teachers should promote a good relationship with students positively and passionately. Language teaching in schools must cater to the potential careers, learners' future aspirations, and needs. Hence, the teachers must understand what the learners' motivational factors are and which factors affect their perceptions of the learners to arouse and maintain them through successful teaching strategies. Further, when designing a curriculum or syllabus for TCF into schools, consideration of students' variety of learning needs and interests is strongly recommended.

The results of the study also showed that the parents have a moderate influence on students' motivation towards learning Chinese. Jeynes (2005) showed that parental involvement is associated with student achievement and that it emerged consistently regardless of measures. Parental encouragement is also considered one of the most important factors of learning Chinese as a foreign language. The parents encourage students to learn the target language better as they want to prepare their children for a better future. Consequently, the students who have positive attitudes and influences will be highly motivated and devote more effort to achieve their goals. The above recommendations will help school learners to be successful in their learning and such a positive environment would lead them to put greater effort into developing 21st-century skills related to Chinese language learning.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the factors that motivate Chinese language learners in schools, and to use the findings of the study to better equip teachers of TCFL in designing and implementing various techniques and teaching approaches which would improve the quality of Chinese language learning at school level. This study used

both quantitative and qualitative data to address the issue of attitudes and motivational factors towards learning Chinese. Generally, Sri Lanka's school learners have a positive attitude towards learning Chinese. Both instrumental and integrative motivations are evident in the student respondents. It also concluded that the students have a desire and interest in learning the Chinese language and its culture for many reasons and situations wherein there is a need for them to learn and use the target language effectively.

With the awareness of the significance of learning Chinese, Chinese language school learners in Sri Lanka believe that learning Chinese will provide opportunities to travel or study in China which implies a high level of motivation. Also, they believe that learning Chinese will bring them job opportunities after completing their school education which implies a higher level of motivation. Furthermore, the students are interested in Chinese culture which is considered a positive motivation in learning Chinese. Although most of the students are highly interested in Chinese culture and are motivated to acquire communicative skills, their motivation to read and write is not that high.

Wang (2006) regarded foreign language learning to be a complex process influenced by various internal and external factors. In other words, external factors such as parents' encouragement and teachers' strategies play as key influential factors in learning a foreign language.

Limitations

This research is based on a limited sample of 72 students representing three provinces but does not depict a representative distribution of the population. The present study focuses on the motivation of learners in TCFL in secondary schools in Sri Lanka. Teacher's attitudes and motivational strategies have not been explored in this research study. To shed more light on this issue, future research on Chinese language learning in secondary education in Sri Lanka should consider the teachers' motivational strategies in more detail. Such studies would

enable us to design appropriate ways of developing TCFL education in Sri Lanka.

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