

Perceptions and Experiences of First Year International Students About Chinese Language Class: A Study of One Normal University in China

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Abstracts

The purpose of this study is to find out the perceptions and experiences of first year international student about Chinese language class in a normal university in china. The descriptive survey research was adopted, qualitative research method was used, the researcher purposefully select five (5) respondents, interview was used to collect the data, data obtained was analyzed using thematic coding on the following sub-theme; experiences: teachers' characteristics, classroom organization, timing of the class, instructional ,materials, language partner and structure of the language; perception: difficult language, class size adequacy (number of classes per week), willingness to learn the language and challenge. The researcher concluded The findings reveal that most of the respondents are learning Chinese for the first time, and they think that Chinese language is the most difficult language they have encountered and also it was found out that respondents with language partner are doing better than those without language partners, the respondents also feels that the teachers were not using adequate instructional material that can aid learning a language.

Keywords: Perceptions, Experiences, Chinese language.

1.0. Introduction

Every year, thousands of young people leave their home to pursue tertiary education oversea. The number of international students choosing China as their study destination has been increasing steadily over the years. Statistics from the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2016) indicate that the total number of foreign students as of 2015 was 397,635 up by 5.46% from the 2014 total of 377,054. The number of international students from Africa rose from 8,115 in 2014 to 49792 in 2015, a 12.41% increment. According to this report, about 40,600 foreign students enjoy Chinese government scholarships. In 2015, the number of international students receiving government scholarships increased by 9.9% from 2014. It is clear from the above statistics that China is also increasing its financial support towards international students in a bid to internationalize its higher education and strengthen ties with other countries.

Researchers such as Brown (2009) and Hunt (2011) have used the term perceptions when the purpose of the study has been to describe students' views on topics related to language learning. The focus has been on the students' responses rather than on constructing a framework or defining a concept. The word perception can be defined as "awareness or consciousness", "view" or "a belief or opinion, often held by many people and based on how things seem" (Collins English Dictionary 2015, Cambridge English Dictionary 2015). Language courses in university are not always available for the students at an optimal time and they might not provide enough support for the increasingly heterogeneous groups of students (Jalkanen and Taalas 2015: 65).

Banks, 2003 opined that Language learning is not merely about being able to use a language properly. By learning a language, one unavoidably learns something about the country in which the particular language is used, its culture and its customs, which will ideally facilitate understanding, tolerance and respect for each other, as Wenden (1986) pointed out, learner beliefs about language learning may have an important impact on how they go about it, then it is essential for teachers to know learners' perceptions concerning how L2 should be acquired.

Chinese language course is one of the compulsory public courses that all new international student of a normal university must do. The purpose of this study is to carry out a survey to know the perceptions and experiences that the new international students have on the course and also to know their view on how the program can be improved. Perceptions vary from person to person, revealing the different levels of experience that people have.

1.1. Research Questions

The following research questions were posed to guide the conduct of this study.

- What are the perceptions of first year international student on Chinese language course?
- What are the experiences of first year international student on Chinese language course?

2.0. Literature Review

Research has examined many personal and or situational variables that are related to second language anxiety. Students with high level of anxiety share a number of characteristics. A study, conducted by Onwuegbuzie,

Bailey and Daley (1999) with university language students, revealed that they share at least one of these characteristics: they are usually older, high achievers, had never visited a foreign country, had not taken high school language courses, had low expectations of their overall average for their current language course, had a negative perception of their scholastic competence, or had a negative perception of their self-worth. All these factors are all true as regards to majority of international student.

According to Probertson et al. (2000) they surveyed staff's experiences with international students. The findings indicated that the staff was not empathetic due to the students' language proficiency. They criticized international students for not taking responsibility for their academic advancement. Many studies have also discussed students' challenges in language and their new life in the US. Liu (2011) used her own experiences as an example to discuss her struggles as an international student in Canada. Liu expressed that her lack of English proficiency became a barrier for successful participation in host community. She could not understand what her instructors and classmates were talking about in her graduate-level classes. She even had difficulty solving everyday problems, such as taking the correct buses, grocery shopping, or asking for help. Some researchers were of the opinion that distinguishing between peer interaction with fellow foreign language learners and native speakers, Philp, Adams and Iwashita. Present an extensive framework of how peer interaction dynamics impact foreign language acquisition. The scenario of completing collaborative work in an academic setting is a type of peer interaction (Philp, Adams & Iwashita, 2014). Peer interaction is "any communicative activity carried out between learners, where there is minimal or no participation from the teacher" (Philp et al., 2014). Philp et al. quote Philp and Tognini (2010), suggesting that peer interaction maybe an important component of second language acquisition, potentially making collaborative work an opportunity to experiment with language, and therefore modify and develop communication competence. Through peer interaction with native speakers and non-native speaker peers, foreign language learners can experiment with language and correct grammar and vocabulary weaknesses. By practicing their English language skills with peers, learners are forced to actively think about how to convey meaning. However, foreign language improvement is often achieved through corrective feedback by peers. There are two different kinds of feedback, namely, implicit and explicit correction. Depending on the nature of the feedback and group dynamics, foreign language learners modify their output. Furthermore, peer interaction also helps foreign language learners acquire knowledge in regards to coherence and accurate and appropriate language use. As a result, "through joint construction, novice learners are able to do what they would not be able to do on their own" (Philp et al., 2014, p. 41). This, in return, leads to a gradual transition to enhanced autonomy among foreign language learners. Furthermore, Philp et al. report that more recent research focusing on foreign language acquisition in peer interaction contexts suggests that age also plays a role in whether peers give each other feedback. Adult foreign language learners are more likely to give feedback than children (Philp et al., 2014). A clear set out target of foreign language learners is to achieve fluency. Fluency is defined as "production as automatic procedural skills" (Philp et al. 2014, p. 59) and is directly linked to automatization. Cheng and Erben (2012) state the greatest difference between young and adult foreign language learners is the ability to achieve fluency: "Native-like mastery of the target language is not the usual outcome for second language learners, especially for adult learners who seldom achieve native-like unaccented speech" (Cheng & Erben2012, p. 478). Overall, in their conclusion, Philp et al. attribute lower likelihood of improvement "to learners' limited linguistic and attentional resources, as well as sociolinguistic factors such as face-saving measures and the desire to focus on communication rather than grammatical accuracy" (Philp et al., 2014).

3.1. Methods and study process

Five participants were purposefully selected out of the 73 students who were the taking the language course. They are in graduate programs in the Normal University. Purposive sampling techniques were used.

Qualitative research method was used, the participants were interviewed Each interview lasted 30 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped. The interview questions are related to international students' perception and experiences in the Chinese language course.

The researcher adopted the semi-structured interview in this study; and it was thematically coded.

s/n	Pseudonyms	Gender	Program	Major	Continent
1.	Mr. Garba	Male	MA	Education	West Africa
2.	Mr. Chopra	Male	MA	Education	Southeast Asia
3.	Mr. John	Male	PhD	Environmental science	East Africa
4.	Mrs. Mary	Female	PhD	Environmental science	North Africa
5.	Miss Gladys	Female	MA	Psychology	East Africa

Pseudonyms of the participants

3.2 Findings and Discussion

The findings of this study were presented below.

3.2.1. Experiences

These are what the students go through during the Chinese course, during the analysis the following sub-theme emerged under the following; class organization, teacher characteristics, timing of the class, instructional materials, language partner, and structure of the language.,

a. Teacher Characteristics

These are the personal characteristics that the teacher exhibits during the class. This is in line with Hunt, et al, 2005; Wu, 2003; Djigunovic, (2009) The kind of activities and teachers' Methodology play a very important role in the emergence of positive attitudes and motivations towards second language learning.

This is what a participant says.....

"...the teacher is teaching well, my teacher for example she is trying to be good and patient because she knows she is teaching beginner and she is making it to be as simple as possible so that we can understand..." (Mr. John)

b. Classroom Organization

This refers to the arrangement and organization of the class. Wilson, (1996), opined that the term 'classroom' is used to refer to the space where students and teachers interact with each other and use a variety of tools and information resources in their quest for students' learning Classrooms represent complex contexts for the learning process (Wright, 2005). The ethos of the classroom environment and the interactions in the classroom can affect the manner through which students learn (McRobbie, Roth and Lucas, 1997).this is in line with what the participant says

"...The class is ok, the teacher is trying her possible best to carry everyone along, but we are too many and some people end playing at the back. At times the teacher will ask us to pronounce some words after her and she will not leave you until you get it..." (Mr Garba)

Another student was also of the opinion that ...

"...the class is ok and I think the teacher is trying her best to carry everyone along, at times she ask us to read some passage in the textbook by ourselves..." (Mr. John).

c. Timing of the Class

This is timetable that the language course is scheduled to hold but some students found it inappropriate as stated by the participants.

"...Then the organization of the class and the class timing is also not good, the class is always in the evening and I hate evening class, like now we are in the winter by 4:00pm everywhere is dark and then I have to go to class by 5:30 pm it feels as if I am taking night class, so I am always tired..." (Mr. John)

Another participant also said...

"...It's just twice a week and it's always in the in the evening, so you see am already tired before I even go to the class..." (Mrs. Mary)

This is in line with (Young, 1991) he points out that some teachers think that they should be doing all of the talking in the classroom due to the belief that group work may contribute to the class getting out of control. They take on the role of a drill sergeant rather than a facilitator in the teaching learning process (p. 428). This approach can cause anxiety among L2 learners (Young, 1991:248).

d. Instructional Materials

These are materials that aid in teaching of a subject. According to Agun (1992) he defined instructional materials as those materials which are helpful to the teachers and students and which maximize learning in various areas.

Here is what some participants say about it...

"...They need to provide more audio, more instructional materials so that it will aid us in learning the language..." (Miss Gladys)

"...The instructional material is not enough, you see we just have one textbook to follow, no sounds, no videos and what have you that will assist us in learning the language..." (Mrs. Mary)

But Mr. Chopra have different opinion on this, here is what he said

"...Their teaching aids are very good compared to my country, so if they provide more resources like for the sounds it will be much helpful...."

e. Language Partner

Students of Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM) scholarship have language partner and while those on Chinese scholarship council (CSC) students do not have, the language partners were Chinese native speakers and they are also a student in NENU this is line with Philp and Tognini (2010),they suggest that peer interaction maybe an important component of second language acquisition, potentially making collaborative work an opportunity to experiment with language, and therefore modify and develop communication competence. Those with language partners said the language partners help them in practicing their Chinese language, these is what they had these to say.....

".....My language partner helps me in practicing my Chinese once (every Saturday) she teaches me

the language and if I can't understand she translates it in English and then I try to memorize it....." (Mr. Chopra)

".....She has really helped me in improving my Chinese a bit, like I said earlier Chinese in my own opinion is the most difficult language I have encountered....."(Mrs. Mary)

Those without language partner did not have people to help them in practicing their language. According to one of the participants...

".....But it will be great if they can give us language partner too like they gave the MOFCOM scholarship student in education economics and management....." (Mr. John).

And another participant with a Chinese friend said.....

".....I have a Chinese friend that helps me with my Chinese language....."

f. Structure of the Language

This contains the arrangement and phonological order of the language. The Chinese mandarin consists of the pin yin and also the Chinese characters. Chinese language follows Subject + Verb e.g. "nǐ chī"
"Nǐ" means "you" and "chī" means "to eat ." So this means "you eat."

These are what the participant said as regard the structure...

".....they have the so called pin yin and Chinese characters; it is kind of difficult compare to other language...." (Mr. John).

".....another thing is the Chinese character the teacher is teaching us how to write but there is no specific rule to follow like the English alphabets..." (Mrs. Gladys)

3.2.2. Perceptions

These are thoughts and feelings that the participant has, as regards the Chinese language course. Sub-themes were identifies such as; difficult language, class size too big, importance of learning the language, adequacy (number of class per week), willingness to learn the language, future plan and challenges.

a. Difficult language

The participants feel that Chinese language is the most difficult language they have ever encountered. This is line with Singleton's (1989) generalization, that adult learners perceive little difficulty in recognizing and assimilating the grammatical system of an L2.

Yeh and Inose (2003), citing Mori (2000), note that language difficulties seem to be the most significant issue not only in terms of the effect on academic performance but also on social interaction. Morita (2009) in a detailed case study highlights the difficulty a post-graduate student faces when trying to 'gain access to oral practices...not only inside but outside the classroom' (ibid: 456). This is what the participant says...

"... It is so difficult to comprehend unlike English. The tones; that is single word having different meaning depends on how you pronounce it ..." (Mrs. Mary).

Another participant also had this to say....

".....I think Chinese is the most difficult language, I have learnt other languages too in my university life, but out of all this Chinese is the most difficult one...." (Mr. Chopra)

b. Class size

This is the total number of people in a single class that the teacher has to teach, according to Gardner (1985) he mentions that "language learning is a social psychological phenomenon and it is very important to consider fully the conditions under which it takes place". The participants were of the opinion that the class size is one of the factors inhibiting their learning the Chinese language. These are what they expressed;

"...we are more in the class and the teacher is not able to attend to the individual differences..." (Mr. Chopra).

".... we are too many and if you are teaching language for grown-ups like us I think it should be small class where the teacher can monitor us because of individual differences..." (Mr. John).

c. Importance of Learning the Language

The importance of learning a new language cannot be over emphasized. As Singleton (1989) summarized:

"Real" communication presumably refers to using the target language to interact in ways similar to those in which one interacts in one's native language, that is to say, using the language for the sake of relationships to be maintained, business to be transacted, information to be exchanged or aesthetic pleasure to be received or given, rather than for the sake of forms to be practiced. In this sense, real communication can actually occur within the classroom, as the entire literature on communicative language teaching makes clear. Here is what one participant says....

".... I think I have to improve on my Chinese to be able to communicate very well, because if you don't speak the language (Chinese) you will always feel the impact of you been out of your country....." (Mr. Garba).

This is what another participant has to say

"..... I think the Chinese language course is a very good idea at least we are learning the basic communication skills, and we can do few things on our own without looking for interpreter so the

language course is really helpful especially to me.....” (Mrs. Mary).

d. Adequacy (number of class per week)

This relates to the number of time the class is been held in a week. Some of the participants felt that taking the class twice a week is not enough. Here is what they said....

“.....But learning language twice a week and you expect us to speak the language after four month I don’t think it is possible....” (Mr. John)

“.... I intend to go beyond the classroom language course because that alone is not enough for me to learn the language to speak the language and beside the class is just one semester....” (Mrs. Mary)

Another participant feels the class is adequate....

“..... I am doing other courses and it’s the only one that we are having twice in a week all others are once in a week....” (Mr. Garba)

e. Willingness to learn the language

This is thoughts and feeling that the students have before commencing the Chinese language class, some are willing to learn the language and some are just doing it because it is a requirement. Here is what the participant had to say...

“...I don’t really have much intention, am doing it because it’s one of the basic requirement and also to get the basic communication skill...” (Mr. Garba).

Another participant had this to say....

“I love learning the language it’s kind of my hobby”. (Mr. Chopra)

“I intend to go beyond the classroom language course because that alone is not enough for me to learn the language and speak it” (Mrs. Mary)

f. Challenges

These are the problems that were encounter in the cause of taking the Chinese language course; all the participants were of the opinion that their major challenge in the Chinese language course is pronunciation of the words and getting the correct tone and also the timing of the class. Here are their expressions...

“...difficulties in pronouncing words unlike my mother tongue and English language Chinese have tones and this are a very big problem because if you make mistake the word will means another thing....” (Miss Gladys)

“...the class is always in the evening and in this cold winter it’s a very big challenge to me because my dormitory is far from the class area....” (Mrs. Mary)

Conclusion

The findings reveal that most of the respondents are learning Chinese for the first time, and they think that Chinese language is the most difficult language they have encountered and also it was found out that respondents with language partner are doing better than those without language partners, the respondents also feels that the teachers were not using adequate instructional material that can aid learning a language.

Recommendations

In light of the findings above the following recommendation were made:

- I. The school of Chinese language should work with the university authority to ensure that all freshman students that will take the language course are given language partners, as this will also lessen the burden of the classroom teachers.
- II. Provision of adequate instructional materials like audios, videos etc. to enhance the teaching and assimilation of the language
- III. The timing of the class should also be put in to consideration. For example since the class is twice in a week one of it can be put in the morning.
- IV. There should also be more avenue for Chinese and international students to come together for socialization; this will help them in language exchange

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