

The Importance of Learning Chinese Outside Classroom (A Study of Good Chinese Learners at The University of Hong Kong)

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This is the author's second consecutive year of doing the research. As the economy of China is booming, there is a rapid increase in the number of foreign students coming to The University of Hong Kong to learn Chinese. As Chinese is one of the popular subjects for them to choose, in 2019, there are around 1000 foreign students (undergraduates or exchange students) learning Chinese as a foreign language course. A language teacher is a facilitator and an instructor of Chinese learning for foreign students. However, in the real world, there are always some good language learners and some less talented language learners in one classroom. So, what is the secret of the good Chinese learners? What can the language instructors do in order to support good Chinese learners and help the less talented learners to learn Chinese? In the TESOL field, there are a lot of researches have been done by scholars. In the early 1970s, several researchers isolated and defined the concept of good language learner. But in teaching Chinese as a foreign language field, there are relatively fewer researches. So, from January 2017 to May 2019, I conducted a survey about good Chinese learners in CHIN9503 and CHIN9504 classes. The survey consisted of an interview with several questions and the author will discuss the result of a survey and its implications in this paper. This research is done in a macro way rather than micro way. Thus, this holistic research focuses on finding good Chinese learners rather than focusing on learners' individual differences.

Keywords: inner factors, outside factors and settings, features of good Chinese learners, levels of proficiency, implications of curriculum design

Introduction

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Successful Language Learners

In the TESOL field, there is a model of successful language learners which is called Learner Self-Management (LSM) (Rubin, 2005). It is an interactive one and in which there is a continuous interaction between the learner's control mechanism and the learner's knowledge and beliefs. LSM is actually referring to the ability to deploy procedures and to access knowledge and beliefs in order to accomplish learning goals in a dynamically changing environment. Within the LSM system, there are five procedures: planning, monitoring, evaluating, problem-solving, and implementing. LSM mainly focuses on individual learner's difference and their characters. Most of these characters cannot be changed by outside force. But in the real world, foreign language learning involves individual inner factors and outside settings:

Table 1

Good Language Learner Inner Factors

1. Good planning
2. Monitoring
3. Evaluation
4. Problem-identification and problem-solution
5. Knowledge and beliefs
6. Learning style
7. Motivation
8. Learning strategy
9. Background knowledge
10. Other factors

Table 2

Outside Factors and Settings

1. Classroom learning
2. Syllabus
3. Location
4. Outside classroom learning
5. Language environment
6. Support from others
7. Teaching methodologies
8. Others

Good language learners and bad language learners study in one classroom, so what can the language instructors do in a macro way in order to support good language learners and brush up bad language learners? So this research is focus on outside factors and settings.

Target Students

At The University of Hong Kong, Chinese Language Center offers eight levels Chinese language courses for foreign learners. The eight Chinese courses are shown as follows:

- (1) CHIN9501 Level one → (Basic: zero beginners),
- (2) CHIN9502 Level two → (Basic),
- (3) CHIN9503 Level three → (Basic),
- (4) CHIN9504 Level four → (Intermediate),
- (5) CHIN9505 Level five → (Intermediate),
- (6) CHIN9506 Level six → (Higher-Intermediate),
- (7) CHIN9507 Level seven → (Advanced),
- (8) CHIN9508 Level eight → (Advanced).

This research is done by choosing students in level three and level four courses. Now, let us look at what the good Chinese learners did in my classroom at The University of Hong Kong. The survey of good Chinese learners is conducted by the following questionnaire:

问卷调查 Questionnaire		
姓名： 国籍： 班级：		
Name:	Nationality:	Class:
Q1: 你在中国住过吗？ 哪里？ 几年？ Have you ever lived in China before? Where? How many years?		
Q2: 你有中国朋友吗？ Do you have Chinese friends?		
Q3: 你常常用中文吗？ 什么场合？ 什么时候？ Do you often use Chinese? In what situation? When?		
Q4: 说说你学习汉语的经历： Could you tell me your experience of learning Chinese?		

Figure 1. Questionnaire.

By observation during the class for six weeks and assessments which include dictations, quiz, in-class activities, and mid-term test, I will select target students in level three and level four Chinese classes. The target students must perform very well in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Then in the final oral test, I will ask the target students above questions in order to find out the secret of their Chinese study.

Demographic of Students in the Research

There are totally 39 students being interviewed in the research; among these students, 33 students are Koreans, a student is from Finland, a student is from Russia, a student is from British/Japan, a student is India, a student is from Sweden, and a student is from The Republic of Kazakhstan.

Table 3

Demographic of Students

Finland	1	2.5%
Russia	1	2.5%
British/Jap.	1	2.5%
India	1	2.5%
Sweden	1	2.5%
Kazakhstan	1	2.5%
S. Korea	33	85%

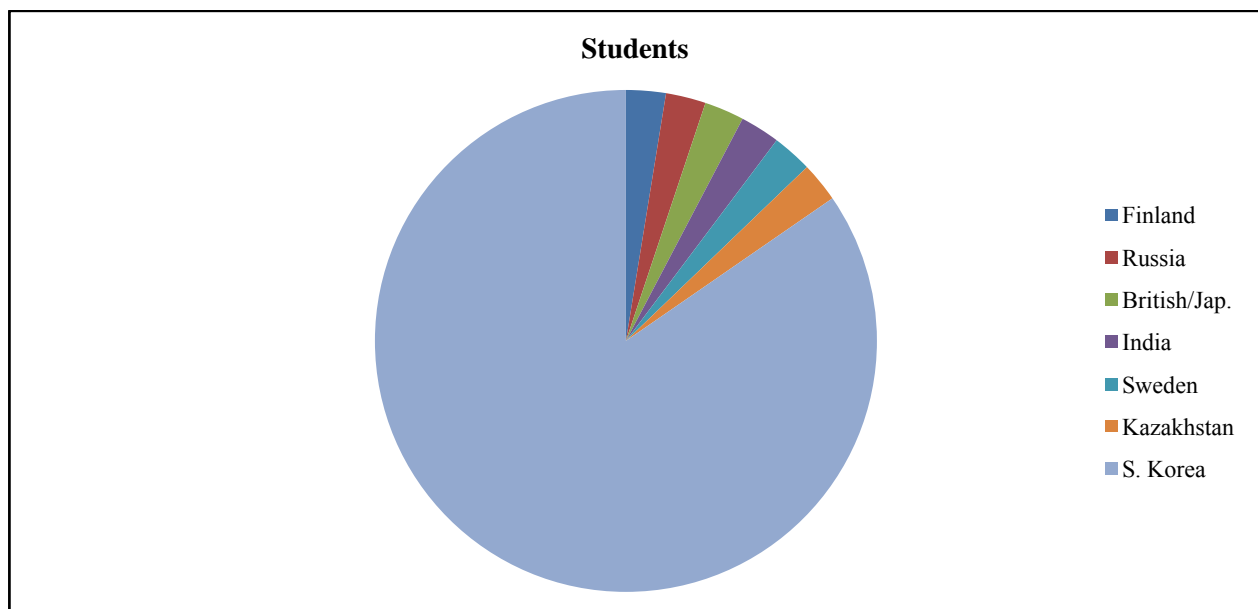


Figure 2. Demographic of students.

It is obvious that South Korean students are the majority among the target students. This is due to in recent years a colossal amount of South Korean students lived in China during secondary school time. They come to The University of Hong Kong for tertiary education after secondary school.

Features of Good Chinese Learners

Firstly, according to the interview, 32 students lived in Mainland China or Taiwan for more than one year before. The range is from one year to 12 years. They lived in different cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Dalian, Qingdao, Shenzhen, Nanchang, Zhuhai, Shandong, and Taipei. Only seven students lived and studied in other countries or Hong Kong and never lived in China or Taiwan before. Among those students who lived in Mainland China or Taiwan before, one of them (2.5%) stayed for only six months. Four students (11%) stayed for one year. Three students (7.5%) stayed for two years. Four students (11%) stayed for three years. Eight students (20%) stayed for four years. Three students (7.5%) stayed for five years. Two students (5%)

stayed for six years. Two students (5%) stayed for seven years. Three students (7.5%) stayed for 10 years. One student (2.5%) stayed for 11 years. One student (2.5%) stayed for 12 years.

Table 4

Years Stayed in Mainland China or Taiwan

Year(s) stayed in Mainland China or Taiwan	No. of students	% of total students who stayed in Mainland China or Taiwan before
0	7	18%
Less than 1 year	1	2.5%
1	4	11%
2	3	7.5%
3	4	11%
4	8	20%
5	3	7.5%
6	2	5%
7	2	5%
8	0	0%
9	0	0%
10	3	7.5%
11	1	2.5%
12	1	2.5%
Total	39	100%

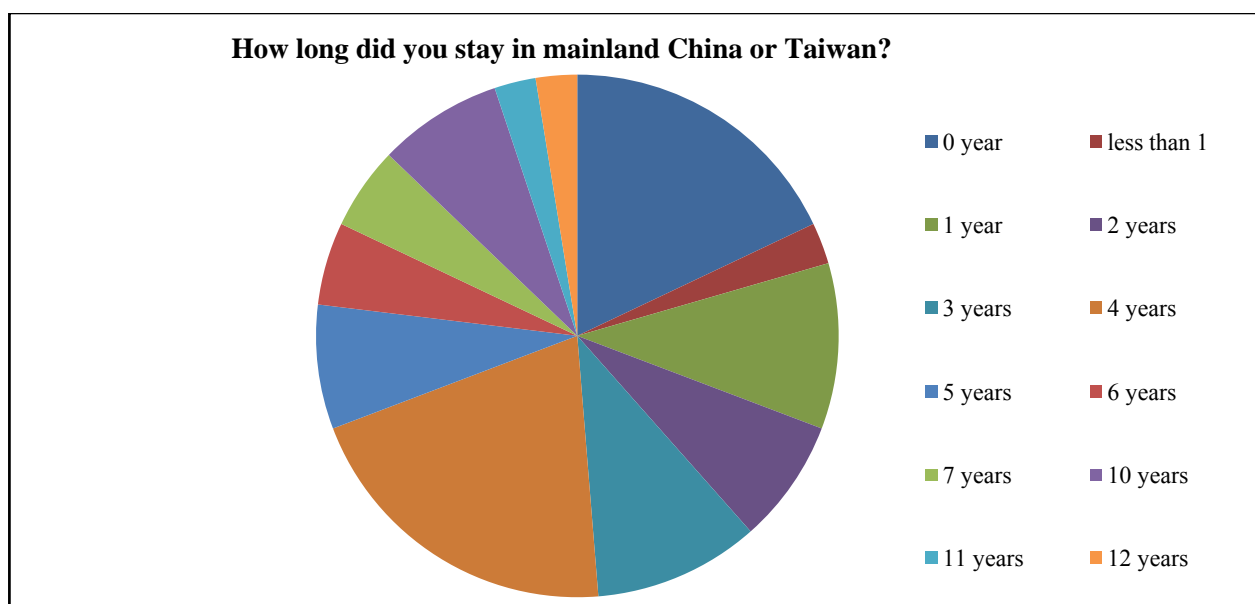


Figure 3. Years stayed in Mainland China or Taiwan.

Secondly, 33 students said that they have Chinese friends and they often have conversations in Chinese. There are six students who do not have Chinese friends. However, they lived in China before. One of the students is from South Korea. He lived in Beijing for 11 years and studied in Beijing British School but he only used Chinese in restaurants for ordering food. Another student is from Finland. She lived in Shanghai for four years and studied in Changning International School. She only used Chinese when she went to restaurants with friends in Shanghai. Apparently, both of them have lived in China for a period of time, their oral Chinese proficiency level is not as good as the other target students.

Thirdly, four male students had Chinese girlfriends before which help them to improve their Chinese proficiency.

Fourthly, two students attended Chinese local primary or secondary schools before. Their Chinese spoken ability is the best among the target students.

Fifthly, three students have Chinese roommates at The University of Hong Kong. They always speak Chinese at the hall of residence.

Sixthly, we look at seven students who have never lived in China or Taiwan before: One student said she had Chinese friends when she studied in high school. One student said she did not have Chinese friend but she studied in Malaysian high school and studied Chinese for one year. One student said he has a Chinese schoolmate who helps him to study Chinese at HKU. One student said he does not have Chinese friend but he has a Korean friend who has lived in Beijing for a long time and he helps my student to study Chinese. One student said she lived in Malaysia for seven years and in Malaysia she had several Chinese friends who helped her to study Chinese. One student said he had never lived in China but after he came to Hong Kong, he made some Chinese friends and they helped him to study Chinese. The last student is from Korea. She has never lived in China before but she has a friend from China and a friend from Taiwan. Her Taiwan friend introduces more friends to her and now she has many Taiwanese friends.

In a conclusion, most of good Chinese learners either have lived in China for a period of time or have Chinese friends to help him/her to learn and speak Chinese. If a student has never lived in China or Chinese speaking countries before, then making a Chinese speaking friend is crucial.

Levels of Proficiency of Good Chinese Learners

Within good Chinese learners, I also found their difference in the proficiency of Chinese. This difference may be due to individual difference in motivation, learning style, personality, gender, strategies, autonomy, beliefs etc. I put them into five levels. From Level 5 (the highest) to Level 1 (the lowest):

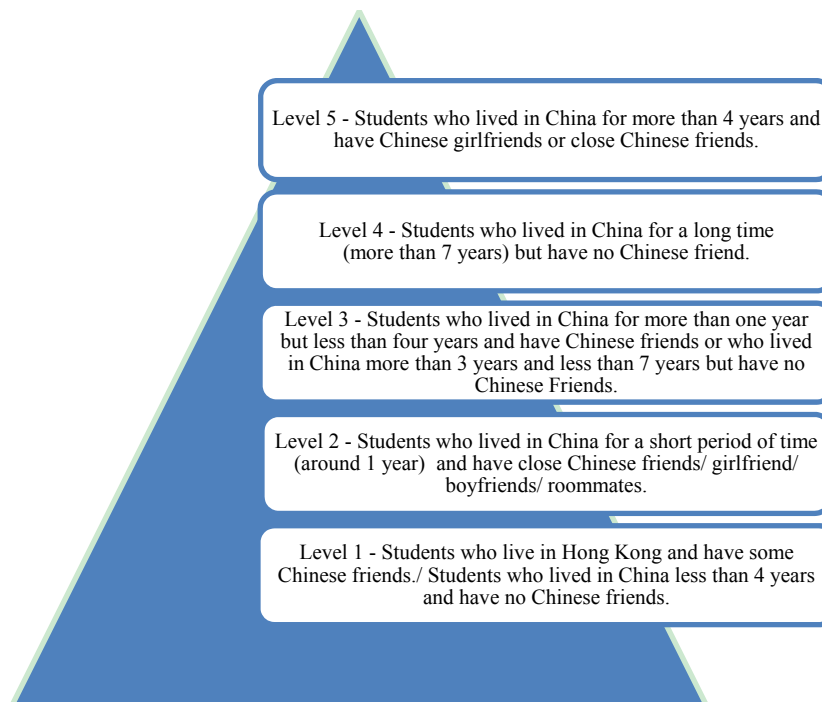


Figure 4. Levels of proficiency of good Chinese learners.

Learning a foreign language involves learning in a language classroom and language acquisition in the target language environment. From the above Figure 4, we can see the importance of appropriate language environment for the language learners to learn a target language. Meanwhile, interaction with native speakers also plays an important role in learning a target language. These two important factors give us some indications in the curriculum design of teaching Chinese as a foreign language courses.

Implications of Curriculum Design

Language learning at times has been put into two categories: the monastery and the market-place approaches. The monastery approach refers to organized language learning in a classroom with students and a teacher following a formal rule-based plan while the market place approach would involve being in a context where the target language is spoken. The best language learners combine these two approaches into a perfect self-directed curriculum.

From Figure 4, we can see the importance of language environment in learning Chinese. Meanwhile, making Chinese friends also accelerates learning Chinese. From the figure, if a foreign student lived in China for more than two years and had Chinese friends, the foreign student's overall Chinese performance is better than those who lived in China for more than seven years.

When we design Chinese curriculum, we can integrate the following courses or activities into our program:

- Exchange program (at least six months) with universities in mainland China or Taiwan. The program should be the longer one the better one.
- Also ask exchange partner to arrange one-on-one language exchange program after school.
- Set up Chinese corner in home university.
- Help students to find language exchange partner(s).
- Encourage students to live in hall of residence to find a Chinese roommate or hallmate.
- Help students learn Chinese beyond the classroom: using technology, internet, television, video...

Improvements in the Future

The limitation of the study lies upon the small sample size and levels of students. Unfortunately, this limitation is tied to my teaching levels; I only teach Level 3 and Level 4 at my university. Thus, I cannot reach students in other levels to include them into the research. Also it is hard to find western students in higher learner groups in the present study. The research would be better if a good-sized sample of learners at higher Mandarin proficiencies can be sourced.

Besides, Benson (2001) outlines five principles for achieving autonomous learning:

1. Active involvement by students in their own learning,
2. Providing options and resources,
3. Offering choices and decision-making opportunities,
4. Supporting learners,
5. Encouraging reflection.

Arranging immersion Mandarin courses and encouraging students to find language exchange partners can help students achieve autonomous learning. Yet, we still encourage reflection for students during learning Mandarin and improve curriculum to improve other principles.

Conclusion

I hope this research project can be carried on in the future to collect more samples of good Chinese learners. Theory and practice in Chinese teaching has traditionally been the main focus when learning in classroom. Thus the focus has been on the design of syllabuses, methods, and materials etc. However, a complementary perspective emerged in the 1980s in TESOL field with the notion of learner autonomy, which shifted the focus from the teacher to the learners. Students are encouraged to make decisions about what they learn. Yet as professional language teachers, we should know the shortcut of learning a target language with the best result and least effort. This is what we should do to as facilitators. We should support students in their autonomous language learning and become a good Chinese learner.

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