

Success Expectancy and Chinese Language Learning Motivation: Case Study of Zimbabwean Students at Various Universities across China

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Abstract

Success expectancy—the belief in one’s ability to achieve desired outcomes—is critical to second language (L2) learning motivation. This article explores how learners’ expectancy for success in Chinese proficiency exams (HSK) shapes their learning motivation and persistence in acquiring Chinese as a second language. The main objective was to expose the reasons for the high dropout rate among Zimbabwean students who enroll at universities across China to further their studies in the Chinese language. To provide a basis for understanding the nature and structure of L2 learning motivation as well as the role that success expectancy plays, the study incorporates theoretical frameworks such as the L2MSS, the Socio-Educational Model of SLA, and the Expectancy-Value model. Data was collected through a questionnaire survey, complemented by qualitative data from random interviews and discussions. The research findings highlight that the high attrition rate is an indication of avoidance behavior, which has been found to be due to a weakened sense of efficacy, a result of negative affect associated with the sudden increase in task difficulty, and amplified by the evaluative nature of the proficiency exams. L2 instructors are therefore recommended to prioritize strategies that enhance learners’ success expectancy and subsequent learning motivation.

Keywords: success expectancy, L2 acquisition, learning motivation, self-efficacy, expectancy-value theory

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Introduction

In recent years, the Chinese Language Proficiency Test (HSK) results have been widely used as an evaluation tool for students studying the Chinese language as a foreign (second) language. The test results are generally accepted as a proficiency/competence measure for the language, such that failing to attain pass marks for a certain HSK level is considered to be not yet reaching that proficiency level. In other words, the HSK test results are being employed as a yardstick for progress in learning the Chinese language. However, little attention has been given to how such evaluative tests impact students' learning motivation. Over the years, studies on learning motivation have argued that second language (L2) learning can arouse strong negative affective reactions that hinder student's learning motivation (Samimy & Tabuse, 1992; Wen, 1997).

Motivation is a critical factor in second language acquisition (SLA), influencing learner's effort, persistence, and success. Several key theories explore various aspects of motivation in explaining how it affects L2 learning. Below are some of the theories considered relative to the current study.

Socio-Educational Model of SLA (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, 1985)

Also known as the integrative-instrumental approach, the Socio-Educational Model of second language acquisition (SLA) is considered one of the earliest theories of L2 learning motivation. The model emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of L2 learning, proposing that one's initial motivation to learn the language comprises integrative and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation is defined as the desire to learn a language to connect with and integrate into the target language community, and it is considered to overlap with SDT's intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, instrumental motivation is learning driven by the desire to access practical benefits that come with mastering a foreign language (e.g., job opportunities and scholarships to study abroad). It is considered to be similar to extrinsic motivation (Noels, 2020). The model suggests that motivation influences L2 achievement through effort and persistence.

Gardner's early studies associated integrative motivation with long-term sustained motivation and success. A learner with high integrative motivation would put more effort into practicing and engaging more with native speakers, aiming to attain fluency and integrate into the target language community. On the other hand, instrumental motivation was considered more utilitarian and short-term, inadequate to sustain learning persistence (Gardner & Lambert, 1972, 1985). In their later studies, however, Gardner and McIntyre (1991) found that instrumental motivation was also an effective factor in L2 learning, and integrative motivation may not necessarily be superior to instrumental motivation. Thus, as much as integrative motivation is

considered to sustain interest in learning the language longer (Gardner, 1985; Dornyei, 1990, 2009), it may not necessarily be the main drive of students' learning motivation.

L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS) (Dornyei, 2005, 2009)

Dornyei expanded Gardner's model, integrating self-concept and future identities into language learning, shifting focus from social integration to personal vision and identity. The L2MSS suggests L2 learning motivation to consist of three key components as follows. The first component is the "Ideal L2 Self", which is the learner's mental image of themselves as a successful L2 user in the future. Like integrative motivation, the ideal L2 self resembles intrinsic motivation (Al-Hoorie, 2017). A strong conviction that the "Ideal L2 Self" is attainable (strong intrinsic motivation) leads to greater effort and persistence in L2 learning (Dornyei & Chan 2013). The second one is the "Ought-to L2 Self", which holds L2 mastery as one attribute one believes one should possess to meet external expectations. Similar to instrumental motivation, it is driven by the desire to access utility benefits such as better job opportunities and scholarships (extrinsic motivation). The third component is the L2 learning experience, which emphasizes aspects of the immediate learning environment that affect learning engagement and persistence (e.g., teachers, peers, curriculum, and evaluation criteria).

In the context of Chinese language learning, instrumental motivation has been widely employed, as benefits like scholarships are being offered on the merit of attaining a certain proficiency level. Specified score requirements for each language proficiency level are clearly laid out as a prerequisite for certain scholarships to study the language abroad (see Table 1). In this context, a student's expectations of both the learning task and the outcome are important factors of learning motivation (Wen, 1997). This is mainly because the task involved in learning Chinese is quite different from that of learning other common languages like English or French.

Table 1: Proficiency Level and score requirements for Confucius Institute Scholarships (<http://cis.chinese.cn>)

| | HSK | HSKK |
|---|---------------|-------------------|
| Masters in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of other Languages (MTCSOL) | Level 5 (210) | Intermediate (60) |
| 1-year Chinese Language Scholarship | Level 3 (270) | Elementary (60) |
| 1 semester Chinese Language Scholarship | Level 3 (180) | Elementary (60) |

Whereas this form of extrinsic motivation, to a certain extent, has been effective in attracting more international students to choose to study the Chinese language, its hidden psychological

drawbacks on students' L2 learning motivation have, however, been generally ignored. In recent years, many international students have been awarded scholarships to further study the Chinese language in China, with the aim of getting trained to teach the language in their respective countries. The idea is that they would acquire much of the language and proceed to graduate with a Masters's in Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages (MTCSOL), then return to their respective countries to participate in formal language teaching and cultural communication. It has been worrying, however, that most such students tend to drop out after just one academic year of studying in China, many of them choosing to divert to graduate courses that don't require Chinese language proficiency for entrance. In a pilot survey with Zimbabwean students at universities across Beijing, almost 85% reported choosing graduate courses other than the Chinese language, indicating such an unimaginably high attrition rate among Chinese language learners.

Therefore, The current research explores why such a large percentage of international students are choosing to discontinue their Chinese language learning before or at an intermediate level. Empirical studies based on the models mentioned above suggest that to sustain learning persistence, learners need to have strong intrinsic motivation (vivid ideal L2 self) (Dornyei & Chan, 2013; Taguchi et al., 2009). Taguchi et al. (2009) conducted a large-scale study across Japan, China, and Iran and found the "ideal L2 self" to be the strongest contributing factor to learning L2 motivation. In addition, Dornyei and Chan (2013) found that university students with vivid ideal L2 selves showed higher persistence and grades. On the other hand, those whose motivation is more extrinsic (i.e., with more of an "ought-to self") were found to be more prone to negative affective factors such as anxiety and burnout (Dornyei & Chan, 2013).

Both the Socio-Educational Model and the L2MSS suggest negative affective factors associated with L2 learning (e.g., exam anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, fear of failure, etc) to be some of the factors that hinder learning motivation. The learning process and evaluation criterion of the Chinese language, in particular, presents unique challenges that can trigger such factors as anxiety, frustration, and demotivation. On the one hand, Chinese language learning involves logographic writing, which alphabetic-language learners reported to be insurmountable, as it is difficult to memorize and lacks phonetic cues (Shen, 2013). Yet, the literature suggests that learners who attribute failure to "Chinese being too hard" showed higher dropout rates (Xie, 2019). On the other hand, the curriculum is more exam-focused as learners' proficiency is evaluated on the basis of HSK level and scores attained, which essentially exposes the learners to exam anxiety (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zheng, 2021). Yet, Wang (2022) found that exam-focused learners (e.g., HSK test-takers) tend to experience burnout. Thus, Chinese language learners tend

to be exposed to various negative affective factors that might be the reason for the high attrition rate.

The evidence from these recent empirical studies is consistent with some preliminary studies investigating L2 learning motivation. Particularly, Samimy and Tabuse (1992) reported that learning less commonly taught languages (LCTL) can produce strong negative affective reactions from the learners, hindering their learning motivation. The high difficulty level of the learning task, which students might be unaware of at the beginning of their language study, may be one factor leading to the decline in learning motivation as students progress through the proficiency levels. According to U.S. Foreign Service Institute data, it takes English-speaking people at least three times longer to learn Chinese than French or Spanish.

Supporting the argument by Samimy and Tabuse, Wen (1997) also suggested that students tend to be fascinated with the language in their early stages, as they would be learning using pinyin (Chinese romanization) and are not required to memorize the logographic writing (Chinese characters). This might make them fail to realize the amount of effort required to understand Chinese characters. Consequently, when students get to the intermediate stage, where they will be suddenly required to understand and know how to write Chinese characters, without being psychologically prepared for such difficult learning task demands, they tend to become frustrated, and their motivation may decrease. Thus, based on that proposition, Wen went further to categorize Chinese language learning motivation into two levels: the *initial motivation* and the *persisting motivation* (motivation that inspires students to continue with their study in the Chinese language).

The original notion is that factors that affect initial motivation may be varied, but the most critical is the motivation to persist with learning the language. In this regard, studies have posited *expectancy for success* to be positively correlated to *persisting motivation* and strongly predict overall *performance* in various domains, suggesting that high success expectancy predicts increased *learning persistence* and vice-versa (Wen 1997; 2013; Muenks et al., 2018; Aceves et al., 2020). In other words, if the level of learning task and amount of effort required for one to attain desired outcomes seem to be extremely higher than the students expected, then they may have a negative affective reaction to the learning of the language, resulting in low persisting motivation which eventually makes them choose to discontinue learning the language.

More recent studies also suggest learner's expectancy for success to be one of the key drivers of L2 learning motivation (Zhou & Wang, 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2019; Mills, 2014; Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Csizer & Dornyei, 2005). Particularly, the study by Zhou and Wang reported that high-expectancy

learners showed greater persistence even in complex tasks such as Chinese language learning. In addition, the meta-analysis of 40 L2 studies by MacIntyre and colleagues found expectancy for success to predict motivational intensity (i.e., time spent studying and persistence in difficult tasks). Moreover, Hsieh and Kang investigated the achievement motivation of Korean EFL students and reported that learners with high expectancy earned higher TOEFL scores, even after controlling for prior ability. They argued that learners with higher success expectancy reported greater task engagement and lower anxiety. Furthermore, Csizér and Dornyei's study suggests expectancy for success to mediate the link between "ideal L2 self" and effort in Hungarian learners. Thus, expectancy for success is proposed to be a strong predicting factor for L2 learning motivation.

However, expectancy for success has been found to adversely correlate with the negative affective factors associated with L2 learning, especially in the context of such non-alphabetic languages as Chinese. A study by Hao (2020) reported that the predominant feeling among alphabetic-language learners that Chinese tones and logographic writing are insurmountable undermines their expectancy for success. Consistent with Hao's study, Saito et al. (2018) also argued that the high perceived task difficulty associated with logographic writing essentially crashes learners' expectancy for success, making them feel overwhelmed. Yet, learners with low success expectancy tend to exhibit avoidance behaviors, reduced effort, and higher dropout rates (Woodrow, 2011; Wang, 2016).

This is due to the fear of negative evaluation associated with failure to attain the desired outcome. Feeding into this notion, Wigfield and Eccles (2000) found that students avoid academic tasks and situations that are likely to make them feel bad about themselves in an attempt to maintain a positive self-concept. Related literature also suggests that when an individual perceives low expectancy for success on tasks regarded as a measure of relative competence, they tend to avoid the tasks to protect their sense of competence (Covington, 1992; 2009; Muenks et al., 2018). In other words, students might actually decide to discontinue learning the language due to fear of failure to attain the language's standard evaluation.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the current study, therefore, is to investigate the factors that affect students' persisting motivation with regard to Chinese language learning beyond the beginner level, dwelling more on the role that success expectancy plays in shaping L2 learning motivation, using the case of Zimbabwean students currently studying at various universities across China. This study revolves around the following two questions:

- 1) What are the reasons behind the high attrition rate observed among Zimbabwean Chinese language learners?
- 2) Why do some students persist in Chinese language learning while others do not?

In an attempt to establish an understanding of the nature and structure of L2 learning motivation, the study referred to both the Socio-Educational Model of SLA and the L2 Motivational Self Systems (L2MSS). Additionally, the study also makes reference to the Expectancy-Value (EV) theory in trying to explore the mechanisms through which success expectancy may influence L2 learning motivation.

Expectancy-Value (EV) theory (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Wigfield, 2002)

Eccles and her colleagues focus on how socio-psychological factors influence individuals' choice and persistence in different achievement activities. The model posits that people engage in tasks that they perceive to be valuable and believe they can succeed in (high expectancy for success) and are less likely to engage in tasks they think they are going to fail (low expectancy for success) (Muenks et al., 2018; Wigfield et al., 2016; Eccles, 2005; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). According to the model, performance is a product of engagement and persistence, *which are all products of expectancy beliefs.*

In the framework of the EV theory, expectancy for success is conceived of as an individual's beliefs about how well they can/will do on a certain task (Wigfield, 1994). In other words, expectancy for success can be considered an expression of one's self-efficacy. Bandura (1977), in his discussion of self-efficacy and its influences on motivation behavior, distinguished two types of expectancy beliefs: *outcome expectations*, which are expectations that a given behavior can produce a certain outcome, and *efficacy expectations*, which refer to an individual's expectation that he or she can execute the behavior needed to produce the outcome. *Outcome expectations* indicate one's belief that it is possible for s/he to attain the desired outcome, while *efficacy expectations* are a reflection of one's conviction that one's learning ability and strategies can produce the desired outcome. *Expectancies for success* are, therefore, the combination of the two. Thus, high expectancy implies that one's belief that they know what needs to be done to attain the desired performance and hold high confidence in personal competences and learning strategies to produce the desired performance.

To apply expectancy models to L2 learning, it is assumed that the value of learning outcomes, the expectancy of learning ability (efficacy expectations), and probability of obtaining the desired

outcomes (outcome expectations) greatly influence students' learning motivation. However, the results of the pilot study with Zimbabwean students studying Chinese language at universities in Beijing suggested a possible gap between these two expectations, as much as both are always in the same direction. The hypothesis is that outcome expectations (one's belief that it is possible for s/he to attain the desired outcome) may be higher than efficacy expectations (one's conviction that one's learning ability and strategies can produce the desired outcome). The current research also explores whether this gap exists or not and if it affects the overall learning motivation.

Research Hypotheses

Drawing from the review of the theoretical and empirical literature, the main hypothesis of the current study is that the negative affective factors associated with Chinese language learning and evaluation hinder learning motivation by weakening learners' expectancy for success.

H₁: As they get to the intermediate level, learners suddenly realize the high level of task difficulty involved in learning the language beyond that stage;

H₂: it is this sudden increase in perceived task difficulty that amplifies the negative effect of learning the language, leading to an "efficacy crash";

H₃: It is also expected that the initial motivation of most Zimbabwean students is more extrinsic, and their intrinsic motivation towards learning the Chinese language is not strong enough to feed into the persistence needed to continue learning the language beyond the intermediate level.

Research Methodology

Participants

The current study used a case study of Zimbabwean students who are currently studying at various universities across China. The focus was on students currently studying or once studied the Chinese language. Within the time frame scheduled for data collection, 72 out of an estimated 97 students completed the survey, giving a response rate of 74%.

Measures

A Questionnaire investigating learning motives, expectations of learning outcomes, expectations of learning strategies and efforts, and negative affective factors was developed and used for this survey. The questionnaire was developed in two steps. First, second-year students studying Chinese language at the University of Zimbabwe (the host of Chinese language learning center in Zimbabwe) were asked to outline a list of both factors that attracted them to start learning the language and the learning outcomes they strongly desired to attain. The frequencies of the factors and outcomes listed were then calculated, and those with the highest frequencies were then developed into the final questionnaire. Negative affective factors that constitute the emotional costs associated with L2 learning, such as fear of failure, stereotype threat, negative evaluation, and anticipated exam anxiety, were also included in the final questionnaire. Lastly, the questionnaire was tested through a pilot survey with Zimbabwean students at universities across Beijing, and all the scales attained Cronbach's alpha coefficient above 0.70.

The final questionnaire consisted of 18 items divided among initial motivation, value of learning outcomes, efficacy expectations, outcome expectations, learning attitude, and negative affective factors. The first scale tested learning motives on a 5-point scale, and Cronbach's alpha was 0.76. Integrative motivation was measured through 4 items, and 5 items represented elements of instrumental motivation. Respondents were to indicate whether or not these items constituted why they chose to study the language. The analysis focuses on whether the students' initial motivation elements are more of intrinsic or extrinsic orientation.

The second scale tested the value students put on the learning outcomes from their language classes. 7 items reflecting the desire to attain fluency in the language, gain an understanding of Chinese culture, get high scores in HSK exams, and get scholarship opportunities were also tested on a 5-point

Likert scale; the Cronbach's alpha was 0.85. Efficacy and outcome expectations were measured on a probability scale of 0 to 100. The last scale measured the 4 negative affective factors also on a 5-point scale, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.94.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using SPSS online. On the foundation of descriptive analysis, correlation analysis was performed using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient (PPMCC) to explore how key variables relate to each other. Preliminary analysis focused on investigating the factors that attract Zimbabwean students to study the Chinese language (initial motivation). Correlation analysis sought to establish factors affecting persisting motivation among this group of students.

Procedure

The study used an online data collection platform, so the survey link was posted on various social media (WeChat and WhatsApp) groups in which Zimbabwean students currently studying in China are active. After the lapse of the data collection period, all the data received was coded to facilitate statistical analysis. Lastly, random interviews and in-depth discussions were conducted to complement survey results.

Results Presentation and Discussion

Demographics

This survey involved 72 Zimbabwean students currently at various universities across China, of which 42% once studied Chinese language but later chose other majors for master's, and 58% are currently undertaking Chinese studies at the intermediate level or below. 58% were females, and 42% were males (see **Figure 1a**), and with regards to age, 56% fell in the range of 18-25 years old, 36% in the range of 26-30 years old, and only 6% were above 30 (see **Error! Reference source not found.b**).

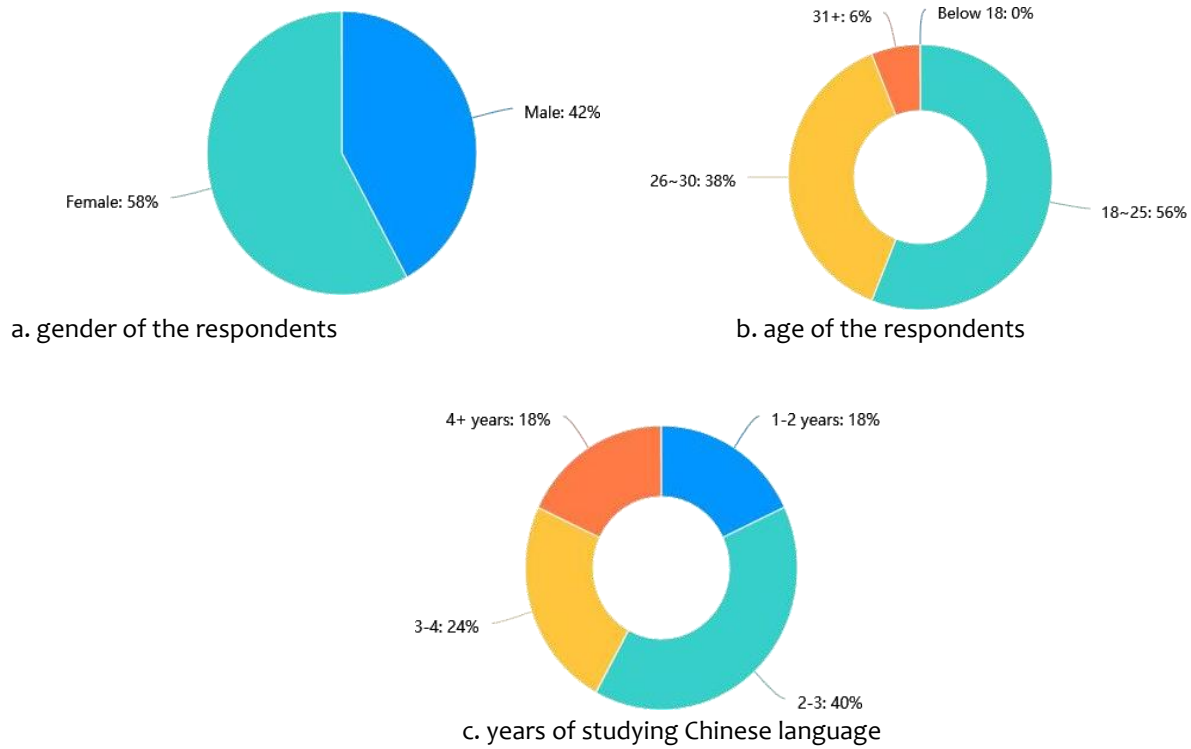


Figure 1: Demographics

In terms of the number of years the respondents had studied the Chinese language, 64% had studied for 2-4 years, 18% for less than 2 years, and 18% for more than 4 years, among which the majority had graduated with a BA in Chinese Language in Zimbabwe before coming to further their studies in China (see **Figure 1c**). With regards to language proficiency, only 14 % had attained HSK level 5, and just 2% had attained level 6; the majority attained level 4 and below (see **Error! Reference source not found.** below), though 74% indicated the desire to attain HSK level 6 (**Figure 3**).

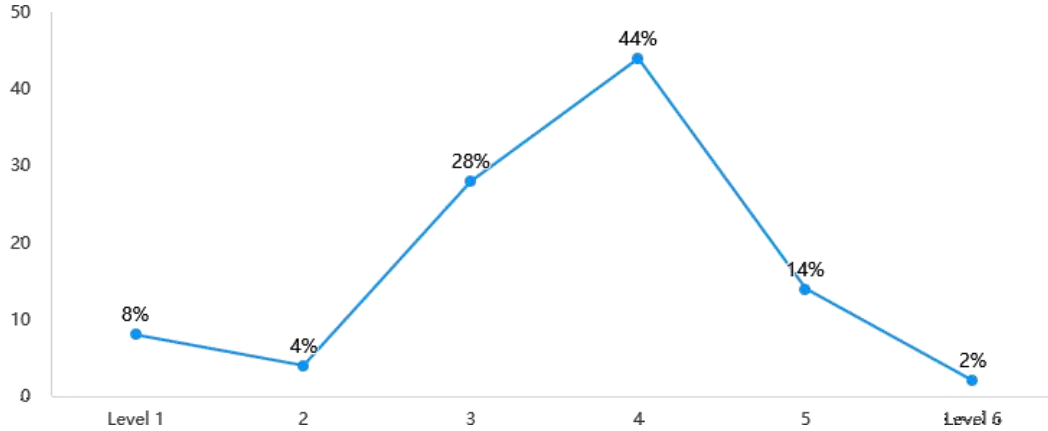


Figure 2: HSK level attained. Level 1-2 is classified as elementary; 3 & 4 is intermediary; 5-6 is advanced

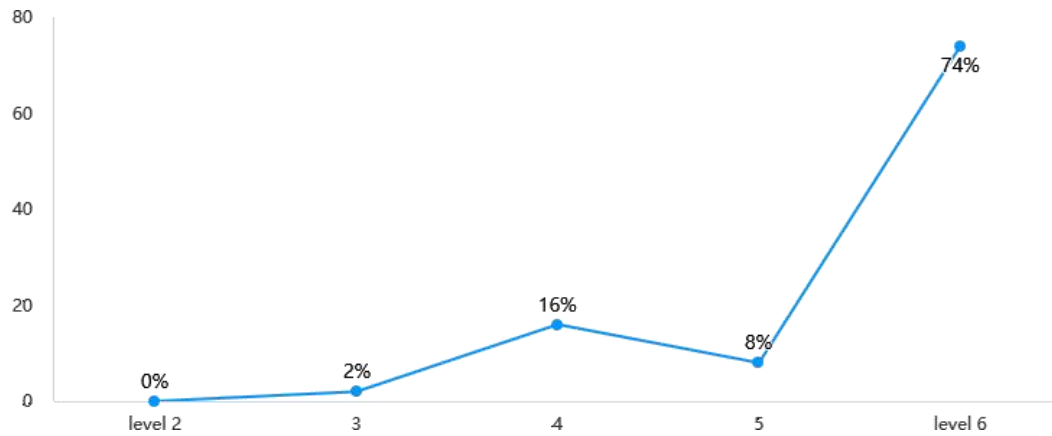


Figure 3: Highest HSK level aimed

Initial Motivation

According to the descriptive statistics, the results confirm the hypothesis of this study, as they show that the student's initial motivation is more extrinsic relative to intrinsic. Figure 4 below shows the results from analyzing factors that constitute the students' initial motivation to study Chinese language.

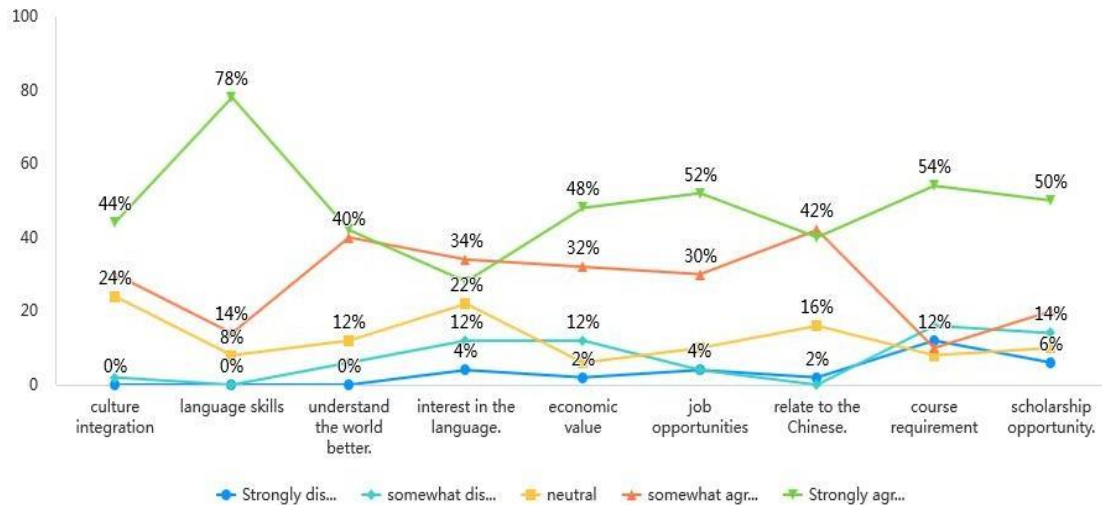


Figure 4: Factors that constitute the initial motivation for learning Chinese language

As can be observed from the results above, the greater majority of the respondents desire to acquire language skills, with 78% reporting their aspiration to speak the language fluently. However, this was not for integration but for the utility benefits of mastering the language. In terms of the orientation of the students’ initial motivation, the results show that all the indicators of extrinsic (instrumental) motivation scored higher than that of intrinsic orientation. 48% of the respondents admitted to having been attracted by the economic value of the Chinese language; 52% perceived the language to be useful in getting a good job; and 50% strongly agreed to have been attracted by the opportunity to study abroad that comes with studying the language. Yet, the desire to better understand Chinese culture and relate with Chinese-speaking friends (integration) scored 44% and 42%, respectively. Of interest is the indication that for 54% of the respondents, studying the language was not a free choice but a requirement they needed to fulfill. This means the choice was not really out of interest for the majority, as indicated by a very low score of 22% for interest in the language as a factor of initial motivation. Such results conform to a proposition by the Expectancy-Value theory that the subjective value of the outcome is one of the core elements of the initial attraction to the task (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

These results on the structure of students’ initial motivation are also consistent with the value students put on the learning outcomes, which showed both language skills and achievement to have higher scores compared to elements of culture integration (see Figure 5 below).

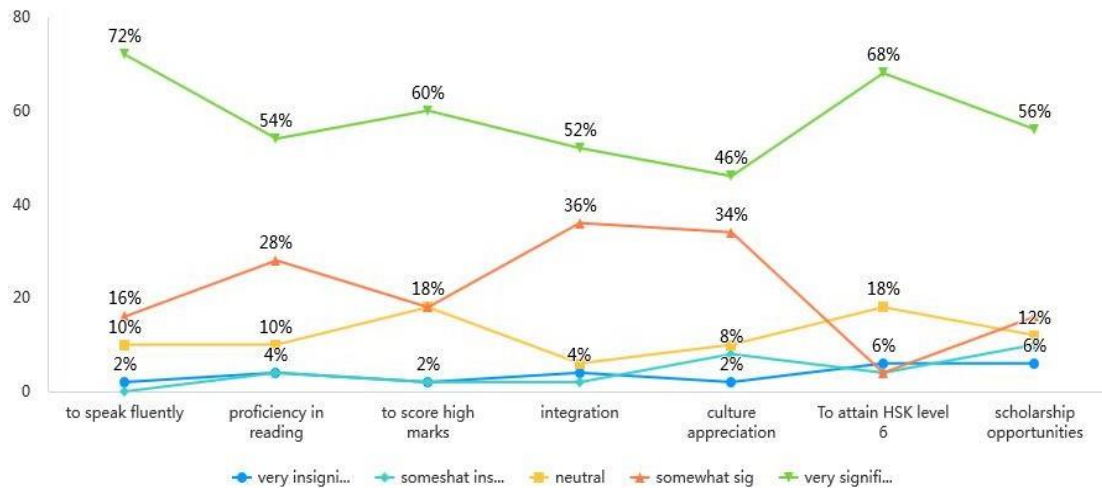


Figure 5: Value of learning outcomes

Aligning to the hypothesis of the current study, speaking the language fluently (72%) and attaining HSK level 6 (68%) were the most valued learning outcomes. This may be because these two are the key to accessing opportunities that comes with learning the language. That is, for one to use Chinese to get a job or apply for a scholarship, one must pass the corresponding HSK exam and attain fluency in the language. Therefore, based on the results, it can be deduced that Zimbabwean students are attracted more by the instrumental value of studying the Chinese language, implying that their motivation is more extrinsic.

Analysis of Expectancy for Success and Learning Attitude

Regarding expectancy for success, the descriptive results show that the respondents generally expressed positive and moderately high expectancy for success, with both outcome expectations and efficacy expectations scoring high (see Figure 6). However, interest indicates that *outcome expectations* scored a higher mean (79.13%) than *efficacy expectations* (77.52%). This corresponds to the propositions of the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1977), underscoring that as much as the students may perceive a high possibility of attaining the desired learning outcomes when it comes to how much their competences and strategies can guarantee the attainment of the outcomes they become less positive. Thus, though the difference may seem small, this indication supports the hypothesis that about Chinese language learning, outcome expectations may be higher than efficacy expectations.

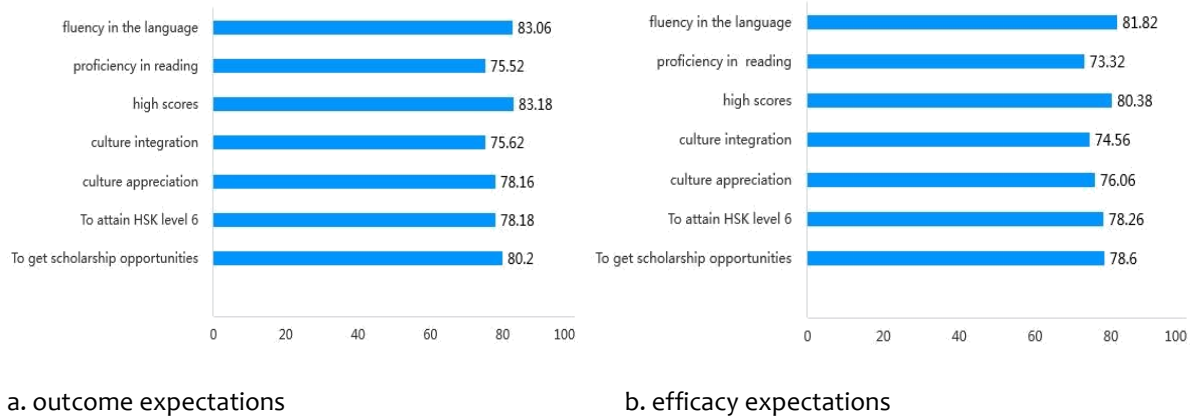


Figure 6: Success Expectancies

The students generally reported a positive learning attitude and high learning engagement concerning learning attitude and engagement. 62% reported that they enjoy learning the language. 80% positively participate in class activities, volunteering answers as much as possible. 82% reported that they spent significant time studying and practicing after class, among which 58% studied for over 6 hours and 28% for an average of 4 hours weekly. 60% would even try to speak the language outside the classroom. These statistics indicate that students have generally developed a positive attitude towards learning the Chinese language and are highly engaged both during and after classes, eliminating negative attitudes towards the language as the possible reason for the high dropout rate.

Persisting motivation

The survey set out to explore the possible reasons the majority of Zimbabwean students, after studying Chinese language for 3-4 years, would choose to drop out, opting for English-taught graduate programs. Drawing from our review of the existing literature, persisting motivation regarding Chinese language learning is expected to be influenced by three main factors: *outcome expectations*, *efficacy expectations*, and *negative effects* related to the learning and evaluation process. Elements of initial motivation, such as the perceived value of learning outcomes, attract the students to choose to learn the language, but are often not enough to sustain the motivation to continue beyond the intermediate level. The main reason, as established in the review, is that students at an intermediate level, having studied the language for 2-4 years, would have become more aware of the level of task difficulty related to learning the language. Thus, at this stage, students are expected to be more realistic about their expectancy for success.

To check whether this hypothesis holds, the current study analyzed how the length of study and level of HSK attained would correlate with aspects of negative affect related to increased task difficulty. The analysis results show that most students who indicated increased task difficulty to be a concern were at or beyond the intermediate level (see Figure 7). Specifically, 85.72% of those who had attained HSK level 3 and 75% of those with HSK 4 expressed the increased task difficulty as a hindering factor to learning motivation. In terms of length of study, over 75% of those who had studied the Chinese language for 2-4 years expressed such a concern. Thus, as can be observed from these results, students at and beyond the intermediate level are more aware of the task difficulty involved in continuing with Chinese language learning, and so can be expected to be more realistic about their expectancy for success.



a. Years of learning and Anticipated task difficulty b. HSK level attained and Anticipated task difficulty

Figure 7: Correlations between the level of proficiency and anticipated test difficulty (choices 4 & 5 show agreement)

Related to this was the hypothesis that the sudden realization of the high level of task difficulty involved in learning the language beyond the intermediate level amplifies the negative effect that pushes students to withdraw. Results on aspects of negative affect being factors that lead to diminishing motivation to persist with learning the language beyond intermediate level show that indeed increased task difficulty (with mean of 80%), increased exam anxiety (68%), fear of failure (70%), and fear of negative evaluation (82%) were all reported to be significant contributors (see Figure 8), and all scored highest among students at intermediate level (Figure 9). Thus, the survey results strongly support the study’s hypothesis.

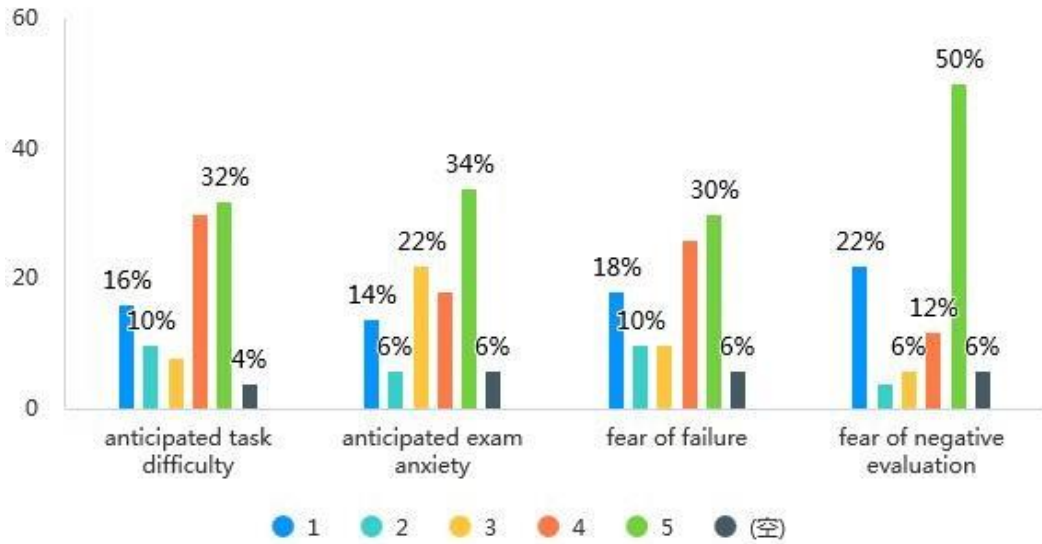
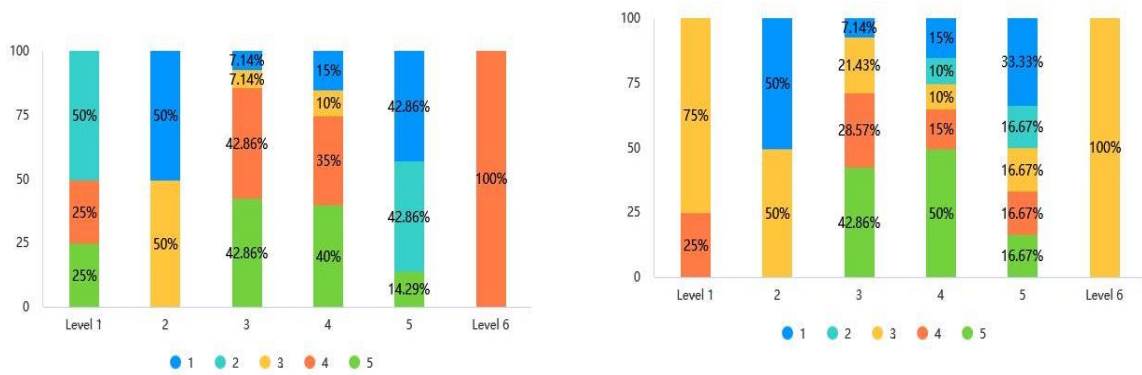
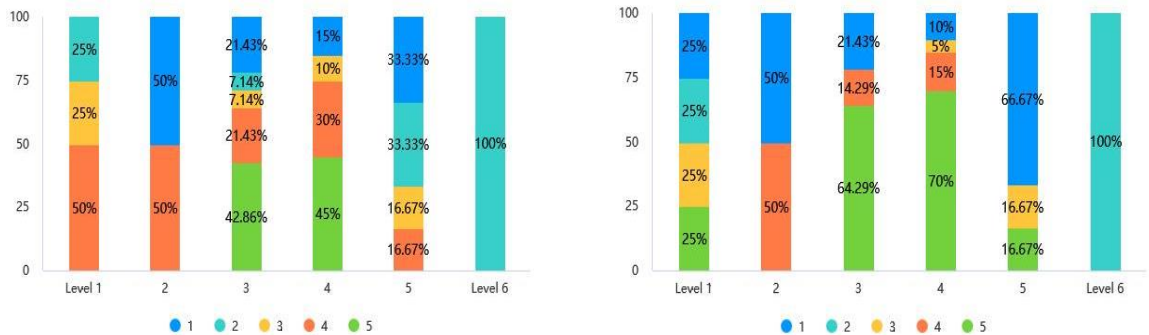


Figure 8: Aspects of negative affect being factors that lead to diminishing persisting motivation



a. HSK level attained and Anticipated Test Difficulty

b. HSK level attained and Anticipated Exam Anxiety



c. HSK level attained and Fear of Failure

d. HSK level attained and Fear of Negative Evaluation

Figure 9: correlation between proficiency level attained and aspects of negative affect

Among these four indicators of negative affect, fear of negative evaluation scored highest. This corresponds to the propositions in the existing literature that, in order to protect a sense of competence and maintain a positive academic self-concept, students tend to avoid academic tasks that would bring them negative evaluation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000; Covington, 1992; 2009; Muenks et al. 2018). Thus, such results support the hypothesis that fear of negative evaluation that comes with failing to attain the language's standard evaluation may be one of the major reasons leading the majority of Zimbabwean students to discontinue learning the Chinese language at an intermediate level.

Furthermore, consistent with the existing literature (Liu & Jackson, 2008; Zheng, 2021), the results also demonstrate a strong association between the obligation to get high exam scores and anticipated exam anxiety, fear of failure, and fear of negative stereotypes (see Table 2 below). This suggests that, due to students' awareness about the effort required to attain passing scores in HSK exams, the option of continuing with Chinese language learning, which by design ends with taking the next level HSK exam, literally spells unavoidable pressure and anxiety. That is, as proposed in the existing literature, such exam-focused tasks undermine learners' success expectancy, eventually hindering persisting motivation. Thus, considering the indication that the initial motivation of the majority is more extrinsic, suggesting them to be prone to the negative effects, the nature of the Chinese language curriculum being exam-focused, and the evaluative nature of the exams may amplify the negative effect experienced by learners, eventually weakening their persisting motivation, leading to high dropout rates.

Table 2: Need to get high scores and associated negative affective factors

| | High exam score | anticipated task difficulty | anticipated exam anxiety | fear of failure | fear of negative evaluation |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| High exam score | 1 | | | | |
| anticipated task difficulty | 0.148 | 1 | | | |
| anticipated exam anxiety | 0.331* | 0.824** | 1 | | |
| fear of failure | 0.345* | 0.737** | 0.872** | 1 | |
| fear of negative evaluation | 0.280* | 0.835** | 0.797** | 0.868** | 1 |

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

On the same note, indicating that “fear of failure” is a literal translation of weak success expectancy is important. That is, the obligation to get high exam scores coupled with the realization of the increasing difficulty in the learning task involved amplifies the negative effect experienced by learners, eventually undermining the expectancy for success. Yet, the literature suggests that learners that perceive weaker success expectancy tend to lack learning persistence (Zhou & Wang, 2021; Hao, 2020; MacIntyre et al., 2019), and exhibit avoidance behaviors, reduced effort, and higher dropout rates (Muenks et al., 2018; Wang, 2016; Woodrow, 2011; Covington, 1992; 2009).

Drawing from these results, it can be deduced that it is the negative effect amplified by the nature of the Chinese language curriculum, the sudden increase in task difficulty coupled with the evaluative nature of the HSK exams that eventually crashes learners’ expectancy for success, making them feel overwhelmed, and pushing them to drop out. As posited by Ryan and Deci under their STD theory, ego-involving tasks (performance-oriented) undermine the sense of competence and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2016). Thus, due to the evaluative nature of the proficiency tests, most students simply choose to withdraw from learning the language to protect their sense of competence and avoid the embarrassment and stereotype that comes with failure.

Results from the follow-up interviews supported such indications as the majority expressed that, as much as they desire to further their studies in Chinese language, they generally do not have enough confidence to attain the proficiency level requirements set for graduate and postgraduate programs. Yet, the EV theory posits efficacy expectations as direct predictors of persisting motivation (Muenks et al., 2018; Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Students with low perceived efficacy, perceiving that their strategies and efforts might not be enough to attain the desired outcome, would probably choose to withdraw. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) also concluded that if a student does not know how to attain the desired learning outcome, they tend to be less motivated to continue with the learning. Thus, again, showing a weakened sense of efficacy regarding HSK exams is a significant contributing factor to diminished persisting motivation.

The main concern among those considering further Chinese language learning tends to be the 210 HSK level 5 score prerequisite for most graduate courses. Only a few expressed confidence that they knew how to work their way to attain that score. The rest expressed that the effort level required to attain such a score is higher than their current learning ability. Thus, they could not be certain whether their efforts and learning strategies would guarantee the desired outcome, so their persisting motivation tend to be lower than those with better efficacy expectations. And due to the low success expectancy,

the students generally admitted to the fear of negative stereotypes consequential to failure in HSK exams, yet the easiest way of avoiding this is withdrawing (not exposing oneself to the evaluation). Thus, the high attrition rate among Zimbabwean students may be due to the weakened success expectancy as a result of amplified negative effects.

Conclusion

The current study set off to explore the possible reasons for high attrition rates observed among Zimbabwean Chinese language learners, and the main focus was on the role that success expectancy plays in shaping L2 learning motivation. In an attempt to establish an understanding of the nature and structure of L2 learning motivation, the study referred to both the Socio-Educational Model of SLA and the L2 Motivational Self Systems (L2MSS). In addition, the study also made reference to the Expectancy-Value (EV) theory in trying to explore the mechanisms through which success expectancy may influence L2 learning motivation. The study's main hypothesis is that the negative affective factors associated with Chinese language learning and evaluation hinder learning motivation by weakening learners' expectancy for success.

The results showed the orientation of the initial motivation of the learners to be more extrinsic relative to intrinsic, suggesting them to be more prone to negative affective factors associated with L2 learning. Yet, persisting motivation was hypothesized to be influenced by learners' expectancy for success and such negative affective factors. The results on the learners' success expectancy profiles showed both outcome and efficacy expectations to be moderately high, although outcome expectations scored slightly higher than efficacy expectations. In addition, students reported positive attitudes towards and high engagement in learning the Chinese language, eliminating negative attitudes towards the language as the possible reason for the high dropout rate. Thus, these findings imply that there is not really a low success expectancy, nor is there a negative attitude towards the language leading to a high dropout rate. Hence, further analysis explored the influence of negative affective factors.

The hypothesis was that the sudden increase in the task difficulty involved with learning Chinese beyond the intermediate level, coupled with the obligation to attain specified scores in HSK exams, would amplify the negative effect experienced by learners, undermining persisting motivation. The results on aspects of negative affect being factors that undermine persisting motivation show that

increased task difficulty, exam anxiety, fear of failure and the consequential negative stereotype were all reported to be notable contributors, and all scored highest among intermediate-level students. The results also highlighted strong associations between the obligation to get high exam scores and all the negative affective factors, consistent with the propositions in the existing literature and supporting the study's hypothesis.

Thus, overall, the current study's findings underscore the negative effect associated with the learning process and the evaluation criterion of the Chinese language to be the underlying reason for the observed high dropout rate among Zimbabwe learners. The findings suggest that the sudden increase in perceived task difficulty at intermediate level coupled with the evaluative nature of the HSK exams amplifies the negative affect experienced by learners, making them feel overwhelmed, weakening their expectancy for success, and eventually pushing them to drop out. The findings also highlight that the anticipated negative stereotype consequential to failure to pass HSK exams threatens learners' sense of competence; hence, learners might choose to withdraw from Chinese language learning to protect their sense of competence. Thus, the study proposes that the negative effect, both experienced and anticipated, undermines learners' persisting motivation and leads to high attrition rates.

These findings reflect some similarities with the conclusions from a study by Wen on Chinese language learning motivation for students with Asian backgrounds, which also reported evidence of weakened efficacy among students at an intermediate level. This implies that, regardless of differences in ethnic and cultural background, the negative affect associated with the learning process and the evaluative nature of HSK exams similarly affect learners' success expectancy and learning motivation.

Implications

The findings of the current study present two implications. First, students are not getting enough awareness regarding the task difficulty involved in learning the Chinese language at the beginning of their learning. This implies that they are not prepared enough for the increased task difficulty that suddenly hits them as they advance in learning the language, yet the negative effect resulting from this unexpected increase in task difficulty is weakening their persisting motivation. This is a popular case among students who started learning the language outside of China and then went to China to further their studies. The main reason is variations in teaching methods and the level of task difficulty related to these different teaching methods.

Most Chinese language learning centers outside of China normally simplify language learning by using grammar-translation teaching methods coupled with Chinese romanization (pingyin) throughout the elementary phase. Now, the sudden introduction to logographic writing (characters) coupled with the direct method of teaching common in Chinese universities spell an unexpected increase in task difficulty for such students. Thus, there may be a need for instructors to find ways to close the gap between levels of task difficulty associated with various methods of teaching, in the same process, helping students prepare for the increase in task difficulty involved in continuing to learn the language.

The second implication, directly related to the first one, indicates that the negative effect of studying the Chinese language and the evaluative nature of the proficiency exams affect students' efficacy expectations adversely. The negative effect on the sense of efficacy may be amplified by a lack of confidence in one's strategies. It may be helpful, therefore, for language learning centers to equip students with effective learning and exam-taking strategies necessary for each proficiency level, thereby strengthening their sense of efficacy.

L2 instructors should, therefore, prioritize strategies that enhance learners' success expectancy—such as equipping them with effective learning and exam-taking strategies. Additionally, conscientizing learners of the language acquisition process they must go through to master the language may prepare them for the increase in task difficulty across proficiency levels, ultimately helping them develop strong, persisting learning motivation. Future research could further explore the interplay between other aspects of L2 acquisition and learning motivation with different samples to refine pedagogical approaches in diverse learning contexts.

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