

Research Article

Learner's Attitudes and Motivational Factors towards Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language in Sri Lankan Universities

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Abstract: “One belt one road initiative” concept caused to strengthen China–Sri Lanka bilateral relations considerably during last years and 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 one of the outstanding languages among other foreign languages in Sri Lankan universities. Therefore, learning a language is influenced by various factors. One of the most important factors is learner's attitude and motivation towards the target language. This paper studies the attitudes and motivational factors of Chinese language learners in a foreign language learning environment in Sri Lankan university education system. The paper analyses the result of the survey on 64 undergraduates who studying Chinese in University of Kelaniya in Sri Lanka. The survey focused on their attitudes and motivation towards learning Chinese as a foreign language and how those attitudes impact on Chinese language learning. Results of the analysis showed that the learners' attitudes towards Chinese language learning, curriculum designing, teaching methodologies are both negative and positive. Finally, the study would introduce some pedagogical implications that would help to enhance learners' attitudes and motivation.

Keywords: Chinese, Learner's attitudes, Motivational factor, Sri Lanka, University education.

1. 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. Language is a tool that enabling a mutual communication among the people. The necessity of learning foreign languages has turned out to be an obligation due to the development of advance science & technology, trade, transportation, military etc. According to the survey studies Chinese is the most popular language taught as a foreign language and more than 100 million people all over the world are learning Chinese.

In 1972, teaching Chinese as a foreign language was commenced as a certificate course study in University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. Hence, University of Kelaniya was recognized as the pioneer institution for Chinese language education in Sri Lanka. And also, university of Sabaragamuwa offers Chinese as a major subject for the degree program. In 2007, a Confucius institute was established attached to the University of Kelaniya, this was in order to promote, expand and deliver Chinese language teaching and learning to Sri Lankans who wanted to learn Chinese language. At present, 5 universities, 40 schools and 4 Confucius institutes engage in Chinese language teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. The Chinese language education of higher education institutes in Sri Lankan can be mainly divided as TCFL education of the University and TCFL education of Confucius institute. In the

University education system, Chinese language is taught as 3 years general degree program, 4 years special degree program, Certificate course program, optional course program, external degree program and currently it has uplifted to MPhil degree program as well. The Chinese language curricular of the universities mainly consists of Chinese grammar, culture & civilization, literature and Chinese speaking.

It has indicated that the second or foreign language learning is a social-psychological phenomenon. Therefore, it's important to consider the conditions under which it takes place. The main aim of this study is to highlight the university Chinese language learners' attitudes and their motivation for leaning Chinese to ensure that the foreign language policies satisfy the leaners' 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 opportunities learners may have to hear and speak the target language. Internal factors, however, include the attitudes learners develop toward the target language and seem to have a much stronger effect on language learning.

Gardner (1982) stated that if we know the learner's attitudes towards the target language, then we can be able to predict the way he or she behaves towards the so-called target language. Hence, Gardner hypothesized that L2 learners with positive attitudes toward the target culture will learn the target language more effectively than those who do not have such positive attitudes. In Sri Lankan TCFL context, the learners' views, favors and disfavours towards Chinese language should be clearly understood as they affect the leaners' motivational intensity of learning Chinese. The university Chinese language learners' attitudes towards learning Chinese is really important as those attitudes can cause either success or failure in pursing future career of them. This study also investigates the influencing factors of the Chinese learning attitudes of target learners such as the classroom environment, teachers' attitudes and Chinese teaching approaches at the university.

Hence, the research objectives are as follows:

- 1) To examine the attitudes and motivation of Sri Lankan undergraduates towards learning Chinese as a foreign language.
- 2) To examine the factors affect the motivation towards the learning Chinese in Universities, Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies on attitudes towards foreign language learning

Gardner's argument led Wenden (1991) to present a comprehensive definition of the attitude concept. He classified the term "attitude" into three interrelated components namely, cognitive, affective and behavioral. The cognitive component involves the beliefs, thoughts or viewpoints about the object of the attitude. The affective component refers to the individual's feelings and emotions towards an object, whether he/she likes or dislikes.

The behavioral component involves the tendency to adopt particular learning behaviors. Ellis (1986) clarifies that attitude is sets of beliefs about factors as the target language culture, their own culture and, in case of classroom learning, of their teachers, and the learning task they are given. Expression of positive or negative feelings toward a language may reflect impression of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degrees of important, social status, etc. (Richards, 1985).

Pickens (2005), stated that while attitude is defined as a mindset or tendency to act in a particular way according to individual's experience and temperament which includes thoughts, feelings, and action, it also helps us define our behavior towards the situation or object we encounter. Recently, De Bot *et al.*, (2005) assert that language teachers, researchers and students should acknowledge that high motivation and positive attitude of students facilitate second language learning. Thus, if a learner does not have the interest and tendency in acquiring the target language to communicate with others, this learner will possess a negative attitude and will not be motivated and enthusiastic in language learning. Therefore, learners' attitudes could incorporate in language learning because it may influence their performance in acquiring the target language. Spolsky (1969) argues that in a second language learning scenario, one of the most important attitudinal factors is the attitude of the learner toward the target language and toward its speakers. A learner who has a positive attitude toward the target language group will exhibit a strong desire to learn that language as compared with a learner with a negative attitude toward that language.

Ellis (1994) claims that learners' attitudes have been identified as one set of variables of major importance. The attitudes are shaped by the social factors mentioned, which, in turn influence learner outcome. There are both negative and positive attitudes towards the L2 being learnt. The positive attitudes are typically connected to the speakers of the language in question and the culture represented by its speakers. Such positive attitudes can be expected to enhance learning, since learners can be expected to want to be able to communicate with native speakers of the language they are learning. In other words, if students are interested in the countries where the languages are spoken, they may be more motivated to learn the language. Lin (2013), stated that, However, when it comes to attitudes towards language learning, several variables come into play to name a few, those variables are attitudes towards the language itself, teacher's teaching methods, students' gender and educational program, parents' opinions and concern on their children's foreign language learning, and students' family backgrounds. The purpose of this study was also to explore the attitudes towards the Chinese language learning and while examining the effects of teaching methodologies, educational program of the university on those attitudes of the learners.

2.2 Studies on Motivation towards foreign language learning

As Benson and Gao (2008, p. 27) stated, 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 versus integrative motivation. They have explained and clarified the '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 integratively motivated when s/he learns a language because s/he wants to know more of the culture and values of the foreign language group, to make contact with the speakers of the language, 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 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 s/he wants to learn a language in order to pass an

examination, to use it in one's job, to use it in holiday in the country, as a change from watching television, because the educational system requires it, (Wilkins, 1972)".

Benson and Gao (2008) classified individual differences 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. With regard to 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 factor that is very determining in reaching optimal motivation. The logic behind using language learning strategies is due to so many 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 of knowledge and beliefs in which he viewed knowledge and beliefs of having 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).

3. Methodology

3.1 Sampling

The student sample was recruited from 64 undergraduates who engage in Chinese language learning in University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka. To select the participants of the present study, a simple random sampling method was used. The participants selected for this study, are between 20 and 22 years old. All of them were native speakers of Sinhalese who learning Chinese as first, second, third and fourth year students in the University. Almost all the students who participated for this study had three months to three years' experience in learning Chinese.

3.2 Instrument

The research instruments used in this research study consists of questionnaires of 64 undergraduates and the interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from Gardner's (2004) international version of 'Attitude/Motivation Test Battery' (AMTB) to assess the participants' attitudes and motivation. The questionnaire with four parts were developed for this study. The first part of the questionnaire was related to the demographic information of the participants. (Table 1). The second, third and fourth part of the questionnaire comprised on a Likert scale each of them had five options, i.e. Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Neutral (N), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD). The three parts in the Likert scale dealt with the students' attitudes, motivation & learning strategies and the factors which affect the attitudes and motivation towards learning Chinese (Table 2-4). 10 students among the sample were also interviewed to find out what are their attitudes towards learning Chinese in the university. The purpose of interview was to fill the gaps in information collected through the questionnaire.

The selection of the interview sample was made on the basis of their responses to certain items in the questionnaire. Data was also observed through observation. The observation involved assessing the students' behavior in classroom, the use of learning and teaching methods and assessing the classroom environment and setting.

3.3 Data analysis procedure

The data from questionnaires, interview and classroom observation were gathered and analyzed to make sense of the themes, ideas, relationships and categories that emerge from the data. By listing the themes, ideas and concepts, coding categories were developed. The data was coded and sorted out on the coding categories, from which conclusions were made.

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	16	25%
	Female	48	75%
Year	1 st	21	32.81%
	2 nd	27	42.19%
	3 rd	11	17.19%
	4 th	5	7.81%

4. Results and Discussion

The first part of questions of this study investigated what are the learning attitudes in TCFL classroom of university. Table 2 shows the top 6 general attitudes of the participants towards learning Chinese.

Table 2. Learners’ general attitudes towards learning Chinese as a foreign language at the University

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	Learning Chinese is very interesting.	23.44%	34.38%	14.06%	18.75%	9.38%
2	Learning Chinese will help me to get a good job.	26.56%	42.19%	14.06%	6.25%	10.94%
3	It’s very difficult to communicate in Chinese.	10.94%	20.31%	23.44%	17.19%	28.13%
4	I like to learn Chinese from a native Chinese teacher.	17.19%	21.88%	29.69%	18.75%	12.5%
5	Learning Chinese characters is very difficult.	7.81%	26.56%	32.81%	14.06%	18.75%
6	I like to learn more practical than theory related to Chinese.	18.75%	21.88%	35.94%	17.19%	6.25%

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

*The findings of the research reveal that the majority of undergraduates held positive attitudes while learning Chinese. Majority agreed that learning Chinese is very interesting. The great number of undergraduates learn Chinese because they believed it would enhance their employment prospects after the graduation. They believe that if they can communicate well in Chinese, they will easily get a job related to tourism or translation field in the country. China is the main investors in Sri Lanka at present, therefore, have knowledge in Chinese would be helpful for future career advancement.

According to the point of view of 45.32% of Sri Lankan undergraduates, communicate in Chinese is not difficult. But, the interview data reveals that, considerable extent of undergraduates also think learning Chinese is not that easy as they lack considerable exposure or access to learning Chinese at the university. Although both local and a Chinese native teacher are arranged to engage in TCFL in university, it was found during the

classroom observation that, the local Chinese teacher plays a vital role by more and more interacting with students. But the data reveals that student have a positive attitude towards the native Chinese teacher than the local Chinese teacher in TCFL process. The students stated during interviews that, they can practice communicative Chinese more often when they interacting with Chinese native teacher. Although the undergraduates feel interested in learning Chinese, but most of them show negative attitude towards learning Chinese characters. During the interview, students provided various reasons why characters are hard to learn. Majority of them do not find any clue to remember the character writing, similarly, most of them think, character recognition is harder than writing. According to the undergraduates, they also like to learn Chinese through practical than theory knowledge. Interview data revealed that, undergraduate are motivated by activity based learning such as group activities, games, Chinese cultural activities which create a student centered atmosphere in classroom.

Table 3 shows the Chinese language learners’ motivational factors towards the learning Chinese.

Table 3. Motivational factors of the Chinese language learners in the university

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	To travel China	26.56%	21.88%	35.94%	9.38%	6.25%
2	To study in China	10.94%	31.25 %	29.69%	15.63 %	12.5%
3	To communicate with Chinese friends	25%	14.06%	23.44%	21.88%	15.63%
4	Interest in Chinese culture	23.44%	25%	29.69%	9.38%	12.5%
5	Interest in Chinese language	29.69%	26.56%	17.19%	12.5%	14.06%
6	To achieve the employment sector	18.75%	23.44%	34.38%	12.5%	10.94%
7	To be able to graduate	12.5%	9.38%	34.38%	29.69%	14.06%

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

*Although the Sri Lankan undergraduates who are learning Chinese are in different stages, their responses are to what motivates them in learning Chinese did not differ very much from each other. For the overall level of motivation, the findings of this study showed that the undergraduates of university of Kelaniya had high level of motivation towards learning Chinese. According to the data analysis, it was also appeared that both instrumental and integrative motivation significantly occurred on the motivation level of the student-respondents.

The majority of undergraduates are motivated by the fact that after they learn Chinese they can achieve a stable and good job either in 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 where they can be Chinese language translators, interpreters in Sri Lanka. Since Chinese companies are expanding very fast and those who can speak Chinese do not struggle to secure employment. The Confucius institute annually grants scholarship for studying Chinese in China for six months, one year or for postgraduate studies. Therefore, a considerable amount of undergraduates also stated that, they learn Chinese as they would like to get a scholarship and pursue further studies in China. During the interview, some undergraduates stated that they learn Chinese just because they are interest in Chinese sounds and pronunciation system. Also, some of the undergraduates stated that their initial motivation to begin learning Chinese were Chinese culture and desire to

understand the culture of Chinese food, Chinese festivals, Chinese customs etc. Several students also indicated that they learn Chinese because they want to travel in China after graduation. The factor of “communicate with Chinese friends” was also cited as the motivation by more than 39% undergraduates.

During the interview, they stated that, they want to strengthen friendship or relationship with Chinese. Therefore, they believed that, learning Chinese would make them easier to strengthen the friendship with their Chinese friends. Some of the students are motivated by the fact that, “I learn Chinese just to be able to graduate”. In Interview, it was revealed that, there is an attitude of thinking learning Chinese would help to graduate easily with high grades in the university. This would imply that 21% undergraduates have a high instrumental motivation which is also synonymous to their integrative motivation.

Table 4 displays the factors that contribute to attitudes and motivation in learning Chinese as a foreign language parental influence, teachers’ influence as well as students’ own attitudes towards learning Chinese language. Hence, this data analysis displays which factors affect the attitudes and motivation in learning Chinese in the university.

Table 4. The analysis about the factors affect the learning attitudes and motivation of the learner

No.	Statement	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	I will continue studying Chinese even after my graduation.	21.88%	17.19%	34.38%	18.75 %	7.81%
2	I lack confidence when I have to speak in Chinese.	25%	15.63%	29.69%	17.19%	12.5%
3	I practice Chinese in every chance I get.	12.5%	34.38%	26.56%	12.5%	14.06%
4	My teacher encourages me to speak in Chinese in class.	14.06%	29.69%	28.13%	20.31%	7.81%
5	Teacher helps me during my learning struggles.	6.25%	21.88%	29.69%	31.25%	10.94%
6	Teacher allows us to do activities in class to practice Chinese.	10.94%	12.5%	35.94%	29.69%	10.94%
7	Teaching content of the study program is very interesting.	14.06%	15.63%	28.13%	20.31%	21.88%
8	My parents encourage me to speak in Chinese.	4.69%	10.94%	28.13%	35.94%	20.31%
9	My parents encourage me to do a Chinese related job in future.	20.31%	18.75%	39.06%	9.38%	12.5%

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

*This study revealed that, learners’ factors, teachers’ factors as well as parental factors play a significant role in learning Chinese. Majority of students admitted that they are more motivated when teachers create an authentic learning environment in classroom. During the interviews, the majority of students agreed that, the teachers influence is essential. Most of them favor 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

classroom. Brophy (2000) believed that teachers should provide guidance and assume a supportive role in assisting students' to develop understanding because they have an influence in student's education. When observing the TCFL classroom, the author found that most of the teachers in the university are non-native speakers of Chinese, and their teaching methods are differ from one another. However, based on the results of this study, even though the teachers did not use the activity based teaching very often in classroom, they should balance the teaching methods in order to reach the leaners' comfort levels in learning. Based on findings, most of the undergraduates have a positive attitude towards Chinese learning, but they feel that they lack confidence when speaking in Chinese. This is a very common factor that the author observed in TCFL class in university even though the leaners want to improve their Chinese proficiency level. Jeynes (2005) which showed that parental involvement is associated with higher student achievement and that it emerged consistently regardless of measures. Therefore, parental encouragements which also considered as one of the most important factors of learning Chinese as a foreign language. The results of the study also showed that, the parents have a moderate influence on students' motivation towards learning Chinese. They encourage students to learn the target language better as they want to prepare their own children for a better future.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, the aim was to assess the attitudes, motivational factors and the probable factors influencing these attitudes among undergraduate who learn Chinese in order to contribute knowledge to teachers who engage in TCFL in Sri Lankan universities for designing and implementing various techniques and teaching approaches which can change learners' attitudes towards target language positively. This study used both quantitative and qualitative data to address the issue of attitudes and motivational factors towards learning Chinese. Generally, Sri Lankan undergraduates have a positive attitudes towards learning Chinese. Both instrumental and integrative motivations are being characterized by the student respondents. It also concluded that the students have a desire and interest in learning the Chinese language in many reasons and situations where in there is a need for them to learn and use the target language effectively.

The student in the present study believe the importance of learning Chinese as it is now considered as an essential language for an individual eager to enter the global market. Therefore, they do not consider it as a waste of time which shows their consciousness of this issue. With the awareness in the significance of learning Chinese, Sri Lankan undergraduates believe that learning Chinese will brings them job opportunities after the graduation which implies high level of motivation. Furthermore, the undergraduates would like to have Chinese friends which is considered as a good way of communicating in Chinese in natural manner. Although the students in university education find interesting in learning Chinese, but they also have negative attitudes such as fear to communicate in Chinese. University students have a tendency to learn Chinese by using variety of learning tools such as stories, games, song etc. It indicates that Sri Lankan undergraduates get more aware of the benefit of different learning methods. This also can consider as a positive attitude among Chinese language learners at university.

Similarly, the target sample seem to get more conscious of the insufficiency of the learning materials in classroom. This issue has been found as one of the negative factor which influence the learning attitudes of the leaners. Although all the students are highly interested in Chinese culture and motivated to acquire communicative skills but their motivation to read and write is not that high as mentioned in the interviews.

Wang (2006) regarded second language learning to be a complex process influenced by various internal and external factors. In other words, external factors such as parents' encouragements and teachers' strategies play as key influential factors in learning a foreign language. All those factors can have certain influences in learning process, increasing or decreasing the level of success by changing the attitudes of the learners towards learning Chinese positively or negatively. The attitudes should not be imprisoned by negative prejudice which influence the real progress in target language learning. It is recommended to present a favorable learning environment to undergraduates and share their attitudes and motivation in a better way in order to make the learner secure and confident in learning environment.

Xu and Huang (2010) stated that the teacher's role is influential and critical in 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. The Chinese language teaching in Sri Lankan university education system should be student-centered and this can be managed through approaches and technology used in teaching. Stimulating positive attitudes towards 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 with an understanding state of mind. Language teaching in university must cater to the potential carriers, learners' future aspirations and needs. Hence, it is important that the teachers understand what are the learners' attitudes and motivational factors and which factors affect their perceptions of the learners in order to arouse and maintain them through successful teaching strategies. Further, when designing curriculum or syllabus for TCFL in university, take in to consideration of students' variety of learning needs and interest is strongly recommended. This will help to strengthen students' learning motivation and encourage them to devote more and more efforts to achieve their goals. The above recommendations will help undergraduates to be successful in their learning and such positive environment would lead them put greater effort in developing the skills related to Chinese language learning. It is a limitation of this study that the present study focus on the attitudes and motivational factors of the students in higher education system of Sri Lanka. It is thus suggested that the future researches should survey the attitudes of the Chinese language learners in general school education system in Sri Lanka. The differentiated and larger sample with different variables should be considered in order to obtain a more inclusive and overall picture of attitudes and motivation of learners in TCFL classroom in Sri Lanka.

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Conflicts of interest

There is no conflict of interest of any kind.

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