



外语·文化·教学论丛

An Empirical Study of the Internal Factors  
Influencing Chinese Learning of Foreign Students in China

# 影响来华留学生汉语学习的学习者内部因素实证研究

刘凤阁 著

Liu Fengge



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## Abstract

The process of second language acquisition is extremely complex, involving a lot of internal and external factors that influence the language acquisition process and results. For this reason, the study of various learner characteristics like motivation, language anxiety, self-regulation and self-efficacy is not only an important research topic in psychology and education, but also a prominent area and active research field of applied linguistic investigations for the past years.

In the same way, the factors that affect the foreign students' Chinese learning in China are various and complex, too. Therefore, based on an empirical survey of the internal factors that are important to the Chinese learning of the international students who study Chinese in China, this study aims to understand theoretically and empirically the structure of motivation, their L2 Motivational Self System and other internal factors, including Chinese learning anxiety, self-efficacy and self-regulation. In addition, the relationship between those internal factors and the related pedagogical implications will also be the research objective.

Driven by the research objectives, this study raises nine specific research questions, which involve the exploration of the internal factors that are important in the learning process of the foreign students; the internal structure of motivation; the L2 Motivational Self System; the relationship between motivation, learning anxiety, self-regulation and self-efficacy and the related pedagogical implications.

The research instruments include five questionnaires. All the questionnaires have been developed based on domestic and foreign literature. The reliability and validity of each research instrument have been tested and

found satisfactory.

Among the questionnaires sent out to 260 foreign students from eleven universities in southeast of China, 230 of them were collected and 217 questionnaires were taken into the statistical procedures. After data were collected, they were analyzed by statistical packages of SPSS 22.0 or LISREL 8.8.

The major findings in this book are as follows:

(1) Nine factors have been extracted from the internal structure of the motivation, including willingness to communicate, evaluation of teacher, learning environment, self-confidence, personality, valence, personal need and social requirement, cultural interest and certificate motive.

(2) There are significant correlations between the Ideal L2 Self, Ought to L2 Self, Second Language Learning Experience and the motivational intensity of foreign students. Each component of L2 Motivational Self System contributes significantly to the motivational intensity of foreign students' Chinese learning. There are statistically significant differences in terms of their L2 Motivational Self System among foreign students for different lengths of time in China. Generally speaking, the longer length of time the foreign students spend studying Chinese in China, the more important role the L2 Motivational Self System plays in motivating the foreign students in their Chinese learning. In other words, the length of time the foreign students spend in China serves as an important mediator for the function of L2 Motivational Self System.

(3) There exists a significant correlation relationship between language learning anxiety, self-regulation, self-efficacy and their motivational intensity of studying Chinese in China. Learning anxiety, self-regulation and self-efficacy all contribute significantly to Chinese learning motivational intensity of the foreign students. Among the three factors, students' self-regulation and self-efficacy contribute positively to motivational intensity while learning anxiety contributes to motivational intensity negatively. In addition, the longer the foreign students stay in China learning Chinese, the stronger their learning motivation intensity, learning self-efficacy and self-regulation abilities are. However, language learning anxiety has no linear relationship with the length of time.

(4) Based on the research results in this study, some pedagogical strategies are also recommended, with an aim to make the best use of all the internal factors of the foreign students to stimulate and enhance their Chinese learning motivation.

The significance of this book lies in that it tries to test empirically the internal structure of motivation and the relationship between motivation, self-efficacy, anxiety and self-regulation among the foreign students in China. The findings will be of some reference value to the study and teaching of Chinese to foreign students in China.

**Key Words:** internal factors; motivation; internal structure of motivation; anxiety; self-regulation; self-efficacy; L2 Motivational Self System; pedagogical implications; foreign students studying Chinese in China.

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# **Chapter 1 Introduction**

Many factors affect second language acquisition (SLA) (or foreign language learning), because it is well accepted that the process of second language acquisition is very complex, involving a lot of internal and external factors that influence the results of second language acquisition. So the second language acquisition research has always been a broad and active research field and attracted many researchers.

The factors affecting the foreign students' Chinese learning in China are also various, and the acquisition process is very complicated, too. This research selects some internal factors that influence foreign students' Chinese learning as the research topic, and carries out an empirical study on the internal factors through questionnaires, interviews and other research tools.

## **1.1 Research Background**

Though people do not exhibit substantial individual variation in native language acquisition, the learning of a second language or foreign language is just the opposite (Dörnyei, 2009a). In both the quality and the quantity of the attained L2 knowledge and skills and many other non-linguistic variables, we can see dramatic person-to-person disparity. For this reason, the study of various learner characteristics—such as language aptitude and motivation—has been a prominent area of applied linguistic investigations for the past few decades (Dörnyei, 2009a: 180). Thus internal factors like motivation have always drawn the attention of language researchers.

One of the reasons for the difference of acquisition of L1 and L2 or even

L3 is that in most situations people begin to learn a second language or foreign language consciously; that is to say, they have developed their cognition and affect to such an extent that their cognitive language learning and emotion are interwoven.

That is why C. R. Rogers (1969) emphasized the importance of humanistic education with special emphasis on emotion, because cognitive activities are always accompanied by certain emotional factors, and any creative activity is the unity of cognition and emotion. When the emotional factors are repressed or even obliterated, people's creative potential cannot be developed and realized. Thus internal factors like language anxiety, self-efficacy have also drawn the attention of language researchers.

The research results in the field of education and psychology provide a strong foundation for this study.

Anxiety, as an important emotional factor, influences learning, and is naturally related to humanistic education. In addition, Emotional Psychology also believes that cognitive activities are driven by emotions; emotions either organize or disrupt the role of cognitive activities (Fan, 2007). Influenced by Emotional Psychology, an emotion adjustment teaching model was put forward, which involves four kinds of emotional factors—interest, pleasure, curiosity and anxiety—and emphasizes the dynamic function of the four.

Self-regulation is also involved in many research fields of psychology. And it is not only an issue at the cognitive level in the intelligence field, but also a research problem at the will level in the field of personality and of self-consciousness science. With more and more emphasis on self-education and autonomous learning education, self-regulation study is becoming more and more prominent (Yu, 2004).

In the research field of general education, the focus of study has been transferred from learning strategies to another associated concept of self-regulation. That is, learners monitor their learning in their learning process and adjust their learning strategies, so as to cultivate their ability to become active participants with strong regulation ability in the learning process. Dörnyei believes that second language acquisition researchers should follow the transformation and orientation of this research. Moreover, since the focus

of self-regulation research has shifted from the product of second language acquisition (learners' mastery of learning strategies) to the whole process of second language acquisition, the vision of research field should become more open (Xu, 2013).

The research results in the field of second language acquisition also provide a strong foundation for this study. In the 1960s and 1970s, influenced by humanistic psychology, foreign language teaching shifted from “how to teach” to “how to learn”. Researchers realized that learners' affective factors are one of the key factors for the success of second language acquisition.

Stern's second language acquisition research framework (Stern, 1999) suggests that the factors that influence the final results of the study include social environment, learner factors, learning conditions and learning process, among which the learner factors include physiological factors (such as age), cognitive factors, psychological factors and personality factors (such as anxiety); learning process includes strategy (such as self-monitoring) and skills, etc. Bachman's communicative language theoretical framework holds that communicative language competence includes linguistic competence, strategic competence and physiological mechanism. The Bachman strategic competence refers to the ability of metacognitive strategies, including goal setting, planning and assessment; physiological mechanism includes age, attitude, motivation, language learning anxiety in second language acquisition (Bachman & Palmer, 1999).

Spolsky (2000) listed 74 second language acquisition conditions, among which the 33rd condition holds that some learners produce language anxiety when they are learning and using the second language, which affects the learning effect. However, Spolsky also mentions that though second language anxiety explains the results of the study very well in some cases, in others it is not significant. Therefore, further empirical data are needed to test these theories.

Tseng, Dörnyei & Schmit (2006) also found the function of self-regulation in the second language acquisition research. They even developed a research tool to measure students' self-regulated ability of vocabulary learning; their project strived to reflect the general trend and tendency of



student learning, rather than specific learning behavior. Their confirmatory studies and factor analysis support the theoretical model of this self-regulation study. Accordingly, they put forward the following point of view: the real objective of teaching is to help learners achieve self-regulation, rather than simply help them learn some specific learning strategies (Xu, 2013).

Self-efficacy is the subjective assessment of the individual's ability to do something; it is the process of the individual's inner self-consciousness. Good language learning self-efficacy shows one's self-confidence in his/her own abilities to engage in L2 communication, both comprehension and production, efficiently and fluently. Elias & MacDonald (2007), Mills et al. (2007) and Woodrow (2006) found evidence to prove that self-efficacy plays an important role in students' learning. As one of the most important factors in the development of individual cognition, self-efficacy influences thinking, motivation, behavior and emotion.

## 1.2 Research Significance

It can be seen above that the internal factors like motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, self-regulation, etc. are not only an important research topic in psychology and education, but also a hot topic in the research area of second language acquisition. Therefore, it is of important theoretical significance to study the internal factors of the foreign students that influence their L2 acquisition, that is, Chinese learning in China.

The research on motivation, language acquisition anxiety, self-efficacy and self-regulation is not only of great significance in terms of the research literature contribution in this field, but also in terms of pedagogical implications. Especially the empirical research of these internal factors has important practical significance to the teaching of Chinese as a second language to the foreign students, who face tremendous challenges in the process of learning Chinese in China; cognitive challenges as well as psychological disorientation. For the foreign students, learning Chinese as a second language is not only a process of knowledge accumulation and