



WHO ATTENDS OUR FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSES? A PRELIMINARY LOOK INTO THE PROFILE OF LEARNERS OF CHINESE

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ABSTRACT: This article takes a look into the profile of students enrolled at elective foreign language (FL) courses at German universities. Two surveys on their study biography show that learners of Chinese have on average learned more previous foreign languages than learners of Spanish. As more experienced FL learners, they draw on more FL learning strategies and more sources for transfer, a psycholinguistic process observed in FL learning. Based on contrastive theories, possible sources for transfer into and out of Chinese are suggested to contribute to the successful teaching of Chinese.

Keywords: *Chinese; Foreign language learning; Learner biography; Transfer*

1. INTRODUCTION

Chinese has become an established elective subject at many German universities and enhancing China competence is a declared target for education and research in Germany since the MERICS report (Stepan et al. 2018) came out in 2018 (Frenzel and Godehardt 2021). The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a more successful teaching of Chinese based on a better understanding of learners' background and previous knowledge, which will help building up more China competence in Germany. Although some basic information on the state of Chinese as a subject at schools (Guder 2005, Guder et al. 2021, Shahar-Büchsel and La Mela 2019) and universities (Klötter 2016) are available, there are to our knowledge no detailed analyses of these learners' profiles that would contribute to improving the teaching of Chinese for a certain target group.

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The article briefly touches upon key findings of studies into transfer in foreign language learning since this is a common process extensively investigated (Angelis and Selinker 2001, Reinfried 2017). Two surveys into learners' foreign language learning strategies and their study biography are presented that shed light on the profile of students learning Chinese, here in contrast to learners of Spanish. Taking a thorough study of transfer between Romance languages as basis (Eibensteiner and Müller-Lancé 2021), some contrastive thoughts on European languages commonly offered at universities offer possible areas for transfer into and out of Chinese, which ultimately leads us to suggestions for future research.

2. TRANSFER IN ADDITIONAL FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ITS ROLE FOR LEARNING CHINESE

Language systems of one and the same speaker influence each other. The first language, possible second languages and additional foreign languages show these effects of influence in all linguistic areas such as phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax, pragmatics, and others. Influence can be seen during the process of language production and in the resulting produced language.¹ Since it looks highly unlikely that no effects of transfer will be observed in foreign language learning, a quest for possible sources for positive effects in learning Chinese is certainly promising. Transfer naturally has an interfering effect, and this can also be explained to learners so as to avoid negative effects or at least to raise awareness of this possible negative influence.

There was a long debate over whether the first language (Na Ranong and Leung 2009) or the first foreign language (Bardel and Falk 2007) plays a dominant role in transfer. Sources for transfer may generally be found among psycholinguistically related languages (Rothman 2010), and learners might perceive genetically unrelated languages as typologically related. These psycholinguistic relations seem to be highly individual at might be difficult to investigate on a broad basis. Typologically related previously studied languages (that are genetically related) are unlikely to be available for German learners of Chinese. A possible source of transfer might be found in whatever language shares a comparable structure with the one to be learned (Westergaard et al. 2017). The Spanish preposition “de” indicating possession might evoke comparisons with the Chinese possessive particle 的 due to orthographic, semantic, and also phonetic similarities, in this case most likely resulting in negative transfer due to the syntactic differences (where the possessor and the possessed are used exactly in the opposite positions). Questions for ongoing investigations into the matter include whether transfer is holistic (as a complete

¹ The reader shall be referred to (Angelis 2010) for further literature.

language system being transferred), whether it may be positive and/or negative, and what the sources of transfer may be (Puig-Mayenco et al. 2020).

Foreign language instruction in the field of Romance language has long asked for the application of the concepts of multilingualism in the classroom (Meißner and Reinfried 1998). This is based on the possibility to develop receptive competences very quickly and easily between closely related languages. Is there no way to accelerate learning distant languages based on phenomena of transfer? To help answer this question, we need to understand these learners' language learning profile.

3. SURVEYS ON THE NUMBER OF PREVIOUSLY STUDIED FOREIGN LANGUAGES

In an intervention study to be published elsewhere, participants gave details about their study history. 187 students enrolled in Spanish and Chinese courses at universities mainly in northern Bavaria indicated, how many foreign languages they had studied before enrolling in the current course. The results are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Number of previously studied languages (intervention study)

| Language currently studied | N | Mean | SD |
|----------------------------|-----|------|-------|
| Chinese | 51 | 2.76 | 1.210 |
| Spanish | 136 | 2.12 | 0.826 |

A Levene Test for homogeneity of variance shows that variances are not homogeneous: $F(185)=14.791$, $p<0.001$. A Welch-Test for independent samples shows that there is a significant difference between the two groups ($T(68.420)=3.524$, $p<0.001$). Students of Chinese enrolled in elective courses at German universities had on average learned more foreign languages previously than students of Spanish.

Supplementary figures are drawn from an investigation into foreign language learning (FLL) strategies. In an online survey, learners of Chinese at German educational institutions were asked to give insight into their FLL strategies. Participants were recruited through the Association for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in German-speaking countries. An email was sent to all the members of this association who teach Chinese. Their learners thus include students at secondary schools, universities for applied sciences, universities, Confucius Institutes, and other institutions. The target group is fundamentally different, yet to our knowledge there are no other data on learners' biographies available at this point. Purely for comparison, we will investigate these data as

well. In this survey, learners were also asked to indicate how many foreign languages they had studied before studying Chinese, giving them single-choice options. The responses are summarized in table 2.

Table 2. Number of previously studied languages (strategies study)

| Number of languages studied previously | N | % |
|--|----|------|
| One | 7 | 8.8 |
| Two | 36 | 45.0 |
| Three | 20 | 25.0 |
| More than three | 11 | 13.8 |
| No reply | 6 | 7.5 |

The great majority had studied two or more than two languages before Chinese. It must be kept in mind that these learners studied Chinese at different types of educational institutions. The information on where they learned Chinese is given in table 3.

Table 3. Institutions where learners studied Chinese (strategies study)

| Institution | N | % |
|--------------------------------|----|------|
| Normal University | 31 | 40.0 |
| University of Applied Sciences | 8 | 10.0 |
| Secondary School | 31 | 38.8 |
| Other type of institution | 4 | 5.0 |
| No reply | 5 | 6.3 |

The relatively high number of learners at secondary schools as well as a number of learners at other institutions and missing replies may have contributed to a comparatively low number of respondents who indicated that they had studied more than two foreign languages before, since at German secondary schools it is extremely rare that students would learn more than three languages at all, and because “other types of institutions” may not require entrance qualifications as tertiary educational institutions do and thus receive a relatively high number of learners with a lower educational degree and a

less profound foreign language learning background in general. At German secondary schools, almost exclusively “Gymnasien”, Chinese can be chosen as second, third or so-called “late” foreign language, the latter including it as a third foreign language several years after the second foreign language or as a fourth, additional foreign language that may substitute the first or second foreign language. To our knowledge, there are no figures on how many students in Germany learn Chinese as a fourth language at grammar school. A probably not very representative study (Guder et al. 2021) shows that out of 40 teachers of Chinese at state schools, two teach it at primary schools, two at fifth grade, four at sixth grade and another four at seventh grade, where it is no more than the second foreign language (30%). Furthermore, eight teach Chinese at eighth grade, three at ninth grade, eight at tenth grade and nine at eleventh grade, where it might be the third or fourth foreign language (70%).

Taken together, these figures show that at secondary schools, Chinese may be more than the second foreign language and that with 38.8%, the participants in the survey on FLL strategies who had studied more than two foreign languages previously also tend to show a profile of more experienced foreign language learners. This shows that they generally have a variety to “choose”² from as a source of transfer, and that as comparatively experienced FL learners, they might have more FL strategies to apply when they start learning this distant language.

4. TRANSFER INTO AND OUT OF CHINESE: WHERE TO LOOK

To mention just one investigation into its usefulness, Eibensteiner and Müller-Lancé (2021) show how German secondary school students transfer knowledge about aspect between Romance languages. It does not seem too unlikely that based on an identification of difficult structures of Chinese for German learners, analogous strategies can be identified and tested to see how active transfer into a typologically distant language (Guder 2008) may show effect. Contrastive analysis (Lado 1957) or rather the identification of marked structures in contrast (Eckman 2008) as well as error analysis (Gebhard 2016, 2020) will show where to transfer, and a comparison of Chinese with widely studied foreign languages at secondary schools and universities will show from where to transfer. Furthermore, a look at other foreign languages will show where to transfer from Chinese as a source.

² Transfer is mostly silently understood to be an unconscious psycholinguistic process (cf. assumptions in Rothman et al. 2019), although some authors conceive it as a conscious targeted strategy (Eibensteiner and Müller-Lancé 2021), at least to some extent (Oxford 1989).

At first glance, the Chinese script, lexical tones, and some grammar features such as its aspect system or relatively flexible word classes and the use of adjectives as predicates may come to mind as challenges for German learners. There are some heritage languages spoken among German students that use other, but alphabetic scripts, such as Russian, which is also a subject at secondary schools, or Arabic. Transfer possibilities seem limited, given the structural differences between phonologically based scripts and those that show more morphological traits³. Lexical tone as a category itself may only be found among rare heritage languages. However, a look at phonetically similar structures in the native language or any previously learned foreign language at sentence level might be worth a thorough analysis since negative influence from these sources have already been observed (e. g. Jin 2013). Furthermore, adjectives (“tired”) can serve as predicates without a copula (“be”) in Chinese, a trait shared with some heritage languages (Turkish, Russian, Arabic and some Southeast Asian languages). A grammatical peculiarity of English, conversion (the change of word class without formal changes, e. g. the use of color adjectives as nouns in “the green” or nouns as verbs in “to microwave sth.”) might serve to show learners that the lack of morphology so typical of Chinese has its (albeit remote) similarities in well-known languages.

With English and Romance language being well established at secondary schools and universities, the topic of aspect (a grammatical category of the verb system that may express how something is seen in or over time but independent of tense) shall be focused on in the following.

Eibensteiner and Müller-Lancé (2021: 69ff) show how different aspect systems in previously learned languages show different effects in the target language, depending on whether the form and meaning of aspect are consciously noticed. Transfer may happen between languages that share similar aspect systems but will be inhibited if differences are too big or remain unnoticed. It is true that the categories of say Spanish imperfective and perfective past tenses do not map the Chinese categories of aspect particles such as 了 *le* (perfective), 过 *guo* (experiential), and that the English progressive form (-ing) is different from the Chinese continuous particle 着 *zhe*. However, the topic of aspect as a grammatical category of Chinese itself may well be introduced in a focus-on-forms approach using these examples from previously studied languages.

Some suggestions for the application of transfer from Chinese into other languages concern Chinese characters (transfer into Japanese), lexical tones (into Vietnamese and other Chinese languages such as Cantonese), isolating traits (into Indonesian and Malaysian), to name just a few interesting foreign languages from the point of view of

³ See Guder 2009 on phonological traits of the Chinese script.

Economy/Business and Globalization. Especially lexical similarities in highly frequent items (such as numbers) might offer interesting insights into related Chinese languages and dialects and even other East Asian languages.

The above are merely suggestions based on loose comparisons of some language structures quite apparent to the learner's eye.

5. CONCLUSION

The study found that students who learn Chinese at German educational institutions, mainly universities, have learned more foreign languages previously than learners of Spanish, so they are more experienced in foreign language learning. This means that their language learning strategies may be further developed and actively applied for successful learning. Since these learners have a broader basis of previously learned foreign languages and thus sources for transfer, active transfer methods seem to make for a good contribution to successful learning of Chinese. Possible language structures for this transfer might be conversion (from English), grammatical aspect (from Romance languages), non-Latin scripts (from Russian and other languages), and non-copula predicates (from Turkish, Russian, Arabic and Southeast Asian languages such as Vietnamese). Further suggestions for the application of transfer from Chinese into other languages concern Chinese characters (transfer mainly into Japanese), lexical tones (into Vietnamese and other Chinese languages such as Cantonese), isolating traits (into Indonesian and Malaysian).

Suggested opportunities for transfer will be confirmed through research in the form of intervention studies and interviews with successful learners. Furthermore, with a more thorough look into the study biography of learners of Chinese and their awareness of transfer, we will have a better understanding of this target group to better cater for their needs and develop methods and media suitable to support their successful learning.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Christian Alexander Gebhard is wholly responsible for the whole paper.

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