

A Survey of Postgraduates' State of Language Learning at Graduate School, Chinese Academy of Social Science

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Abstract—Learning English has become a nationwide endeavor in China nowadays, and a great number of researches have been conducted to analyze the state of language learning mainly among undergraduates. This survey was done to investigate the postgraduates' state of language learning at Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Science in order to stand a better position to improve their language learning. The survey shows that postgraduates have strong motivations (intrinsic and extrinsic) to learn English and consequently they make investment (spend time, effort or money) in learning English. The survey also indicates that it seems unnecessary to worry about Chinese language and culture in the context of English fever at Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Science since postgraduates have a strong identity with their mother tongue --- Chinese and most of them deny that English learning has a negative effect on Chinese learning. Consequently, postgraduate schools should help students to maintain their motivation or even expand their intrinsic motivation to learn English without too much concern about the perception that Chinese will be undermined owing to the "craze" for English learning.

Index Terms—language learning, postgraduates, motivation, English, Chinese

I. INTRODUCTION

The language of language has gradually attained a "genuinely global status" with a "special role that is recognized in every country" as a national language, official language or priority foreign language (Crystal, 1997, p.2).

Learning English has become a nationwide endeavor pursued at all academic levels in China, which is no exception at the Graduate School of Chinese Academy of Social Science (GSCASS). By contrast, Chinese language, as the mother tongue of most Chinese, seems to be less significant than English and has practically been ignored by universities since there are barely any Chinese courses. The survey was conducted to find out what the state of language learning (e.g. attitude, motivation, need, and identity) is in order to stand a better position to understand and improve the language learning at GSCASS.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers have long been interested in the attitudes of the learner towards the target language. The study of language attitudes traces back to the work of Gardener and Lambert (1972). According to Gardener (1985), attitude is relevant to a person's values and beliefs in language learning. Gardener defined motivation as the combination of desire and effort made to achieve a goal which is associated with the learner's rationale for learning activity and degree of effort employed in achieving goals. Later Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) redefined motivation as a complex construct, which consists of three main components: "desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task" (p.2).

Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguished instrumental motivation, which occurs when a learner has a functional goal, and integrative motivation, which occurs when a learner wishes to identify with the culture of the L2 group.

While Gardner's regarded motivation as a static factor in the process of learning a second/foreign language, Deci and Ryan (1985) regarded motivation as a dynamic concept in the framework of self-determination theory. They distinguished amotivation, extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Students with amotivation consider it meaningless at all to learn a foreign language and are reluctant to spend any time on it. Extrinsic motivation is the result of any number of outside factors (e.g., the need to get English certificates). In contrast, intrinsic motivation originates from within the individual, (e.g., the learner's interest in the targeted language).

Peirce (1995) criticized conceptions of motivation raised by Lambert and Gardner (1972, 1985). She came up with a dynamic notion --- investment which means if learners invest in a second/foreign language because they believe that they could gain more symbolic and material resources, which would expand the value of their cultural capital. She then argued that this return on investment must correspond with the effort expended on learning the second/foreign language.

In the past ten years, many researches have been done to identify the motivation of language learning motivation, to explore the relationship between language attitude and language learning. Williams, Burden, and Lanvers (2002) examined the foreign language learners' motivation at the secondary school in the South-west of England. They found that girls' motivation was higher than boys' and that there was a negative correlation between age and motivation. Gan, Humphreys, and Hamp-Lyons (2004) suggested that different levels of success in EFL could attribute to a complicated and dynamic interaction of internal cognition and affect, external stimuli, and social setting. Chen, Warden and Chang (2005) investigated motivation constructs of foreign language learning in a Chinese cultural context in Taiwan. Csizér and Dörnyei (2005) employed structural equation modeling to assess a theoretical model which was concerned with the internal organization of the second language motivation complex and its effect on motivated behavior. Lamb (2007) conducted a longitudinal research into the Indonesian adolescents' attitudes toward learning English at junior high schools over the first twenty months. He revealed that the learners maintained the positive attitudes towards English and prospects of success during the period. Gao, Zhao, Cheng and Zhou (2007) explored the relationship between undergraduates' English learning motivation types and their self-identity changes in China. They found seven types of motivation including going abroad, social responsibility, immediate achievement, learning situation, intrinsic interest, individual development, and information medium. Pratt, Agnello and Santos (2009) found that the career benefit was the strongest motivation for starting to study Spanish, and the score was the strongest motivation for pursuing the study of Spanish in high school in the USA.

In the context of "English fever" in China, some worried that Chinese culture and identity will be eroded. Giles and Johnson (as cited in Gao, Li, & Bian, 2008) raised Ethnolinguistic Identity Theory and produced a set of criteria which could predict ethnic group's language vitality. According to their criteria, people will maintain their language and identity when they have a very strong identity with his ethnic group and have a weak identity with other groups, and believe that their native language is the important factor in the group.

Some also claimed that the international spread of English marginalizes the status of local languages as well as potentially undermining local culture. To understand of the wide spread of English in the world, Kachru (Bhatt 2001) conceived the idea of three concentric circles of the language. The "inner circle" (e.g., UK, USA) represents the traditional bases of English dominated by the mother tongue varieties of the language. In the "outer circle," (e.g., India, Singapore) English has been institutionalized as an additional language. The "expanding circle" (e.g., China, Japan) English is used as the primary foreign language. The inner circle is norm-providing, which means that English language norms are developed in these countries. The outer circle is norm-developing. And the expanding circle (much of the rest of the world) is norm-dependent in that it relies on the standards set by native speakers in the inner circle. Some claim that the international spread of English marginalizes the status of local and regional languages as well as potentially undermining or eroding local culture. Phillipson (2000) offered some valid criticisms of theory and practice in the spread of English and proposed linguistic imperialism which means "the dominance of English is asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other language" (p.46). He then analyzed how English language teaching contributes to the dominance of English worldwide which further erodes the local language and culture. However, Spichtinger (2000) rejected linguistic imperialism and argued that the global spread of English is better understood in the framework of appropriation --- English is used around the world for regional purpose. Tarling (2009, p14) suggested the term of "globalization" to replace "imperialism" which "seems to provide a better context for the study of the spread of English, its challenges and its achievements, and its deficiencies, than imperialism"

In summary, there are not so many researches done where English serves as a foreign language instead of a second language. And Chinese researchers (Wu, Liu, & Jeffrey, 1993; Wen & Johnson, 1997; Gao, Cheng, Zhao, & Zhou, 2003; Ma, 2005; Xu, Peng, & Wu, 2004; Zhou, Gao, & Zang, 2011) have mainly focused their research on the undergraduates' foreign language learning motivation and achievement. There is barely any research on Chinese postgraduates' state of language learning.

III. PRESENTATION OF DATA

The research was conducted by inviting postgraduates at GSCASS to complete an on-line questionnaire (<http://www.sojump.com>) (see Appendix B). The questionnaire was mainly concerned with students' state of language learning including language learning attitude, motivation, requirement and language identity.

Seventy one students participated in the questionnaire survey from November 13th to November 27th, among whom 63% were PhD candidates while 37% were Master students.

The overwhelming majority of participants (97%) considered learning English important (8%), very important (34%) or extremely important (55%) (fig.1). Meanwhile, 90% participants thought that the classmates around attached importance or much importance to learning English (fig.2). Only 3% thought that learning English at GSCASS is unimportant (fig.1).

In terms of learning time, 82% participants spent more than 2 hours per week in learning English except English class leaning and homework, among whom 38% spent more than 4 hours.

Whereas 70% participants thought that their English was average or poor, 73% showed self-confidence in learning English better. A significant number 65% claimed that they learned English mainly to learn the recent development of

their field abroad (fig.3). Interestingly, however, only 17% participants considered what they need to improve urgently is reading academic literature. 59% considered it necessary to hone their oral English and 48% claimed they needed to improve academic writing (fig.4).

When it comes to Chinese learning, 75% participants attached more importance to English than Chinese. However, 62% participants supported that GSCASS should establish Chinese as a compulsory course (fig.5) although 69% claimed that their Chinese are good or excellent.

99% of participants claimed that Chinese language is an integral part of the Chinese nation. And most of them (87%) would teach Chinese as their babies' first language suppose that they got married with an English language speaker (fig.6).

Only 14% participants strongly agreed that English learning has a negative influence on Chinese learning. And an even smaller number of participants (13%) thought that Chinese culture was eroded by western culture in the context of "English fever" (fig.7).

IV. ANALYSIS

Based on Gardner and MacIntyre's definition of motivation (1993), the majority of postgraduates attached much importance to English learning (fig.1 & fig.2), and consequently their desire to learn English is fairly strong, and most students had the self-confidence in learning English whose subsets included motivation according to Clement, Gardner, and Smythe (as cited in Peirce, 1995); nearly half of them spent a quarter of total learning time or even more in learning English and almost the same number of students enrolled up for an English training program and made an investment in improving their English, which could be regarded as learners' investment produced by Pierce (1995). Only a few students had amotivation defined by Deci and Ryan (1985) and they thought it was unimportant to learn English and practically the same proportion of students were reluctant to spend time in learning English.

Participants' motivation of learning English (fig.3) mainly originated from their individual, i.e. intrinsic motivation, for example, two fifths students learned English out of their interest and more than three fifth students with the motivation of catching up with the pioneering research abroad. A fair number of students also had the extrinsic motivation, for instance, the requirement of diploma and need for hunting a job, which could be classified as instrumental motivation produced by Gardner and Lambert (1972). A small number of students learned English in order to emigrate, which could be nearly regarded as the integrative motivation. It seems that Gardner and Lambert's distinction of motivation could not apply to Chinese students probably for a dearth of a second language ethnic group and setting in China.

In terms of language learning need, what postgraduates needed most to improve in learning English is speaking instead of academic reading skill, which do not match their leading motivation (to learn the pioneering research abroad) in that postgraduates might have equipped themselves with some academic reading skills over university education period, and also because China is lacking in authentic English communication environment.

Whereas most students attached more importance to English than Chinese and they claimed their Chinese were much better, they still insisted that GSCASS establish Chinese as a compulsory, which demonstrated students had a strong identity with their mother tongue.

The overwhelming majority of students believed that Chinese language is an integral feature of Chinese people. And most students showed strong loyalty to and identity with mother tongue since they preferred Chinese to be taught as their babies' first language if they got married with English native speakers. Hence, based on Giles and Johnson's work (as cited in Gao, Li, & Bian, 2008), we could predict our mother tongue's vitality. Most students did not believe that English learning has a negative influence on Chinese learning and the western culture is undermining the Chinese culture and language, which proved, from another perspective, students' confidence in mother tongue's vitality. Apparently, English dominance or empiricism could not apply to Chinese universities. For one thing, Chinese still maintain its vitality. For another, English is better understood in the framework of appropriation (Spichtinger, 2000) --- English is used merely for regional purpose, or to be specific, in the case of postgraduates, learning English is aimed to catch up with the pioneering research abroad as mentioned above.

V. CONCLUSION

This survey analyzed the postgraduates' state of language learning at GSCASS. It has been found that generally, postgraduates have a strong motivation to learn English since most of them consider English learning important or crucial and have confidence in learning English better; there are mainly two types of motivation among postgraduates: intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and the latter has a lot in common with instrumental motivations. Because of postgraduates' strong motivation in learning English, they invest much in it.

It seems unnecessary to worry about Chinese language in the context of "English fever" because a majority of postgraduates have a strong identity with Chinese and most of them deny that English learning has a negative effect on Chinese learning and that western culture is eroding Chinese counterpart.

According to the survey, GSCASS could help students to maintain their motivation or even expand their intrinsic motivation to learn English without too much concern about the idea that Chinese will be undermined owing to English learning “craze”.

Clearly, our survey was limited to a relatively small sample by time constraints, and a fuller research might modify our findings in various ways. And further researches could be done to analyze the relationship between postgraduates’ language learning motivation and their achievements.

APPENDIX A. FIGURES

In your opinion, learning English is _____.

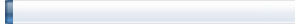
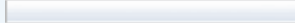
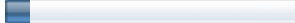
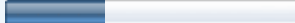

choices	n.	proportion
unimportant	2	 2.82%
less important	0	 0%
important	6	 8.45%
very important	24	 33.8%
extremely important	39	 54.93%
The number of participants	71	

Figure 1 Self-reported attitude towards English learning.

Students around you attach _____ to English learning.

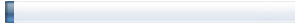
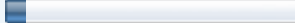

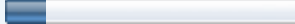
choices	n.	proportion
no importance	2	 2.82%
little importance	5	 7.04%
importance	54	 76.06%
much importance	10	 14.08%
the number of participants	71	

Figure 2 Other students’ attitude towards English learning from observation.

You learn English in order to _____. You could choose more than one answer.

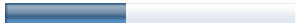
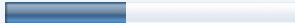
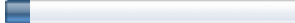
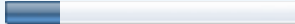

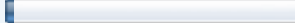



choices	n.	proportion
out of interest	29	 40.85%
to meet the requirement of degree	29	 40.85%
to earn the certificate of English test	6	 8.45%
to further the study abroad	13	 18.31%
to learn the recent development of your field abroad	46	 64.79%
to emigrate	2	 2.82%
to travel abroad	3	 4.23%
to hunt for a better job	18	 25.35%
others	4	 5.63%
The number of participants	71	

Figure 3 Motivations to learn English.

What do you think you need to improve most? (You could choose more than one answer.)

choices	n.	proportion
listening	33	46.48%
speaking	42	59.15%
academic reading	12	16.9%
academic writing	34	47.89%
translation	5	7.04%
cultural and social background	6	8.45%
the number of participants	71	

Figure 4 English learning need.

Suppose GSCASS establishes Chinese as a compulsory course. You_____ of it.

choices	n.	proportion
strongly agree	20	28.17%
agree	24	33.8%
disagree	22	30.99%
strongly disagree	5	7.04%
the number of participants	71	

Figure 5 Attitude towards the establishment of Chinese as a compulsory.

If you got married with an English native speaker, what language would you give priority to while teaching your baby to speak?

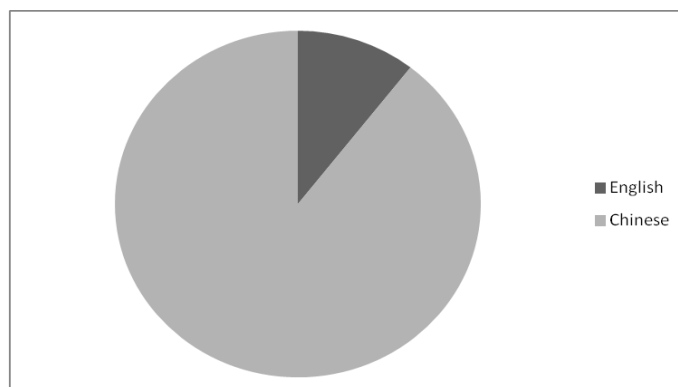


Figure 6 Attitude towards mother tongue.

choices	n.	proportion
strongly agree	9	12.68%
agree	22	30.99%
disagree	30	42.25%
strongly disagree	10	14.08%
the number of participants	71	

Figure 7 Attitude towards the idea that western culture is eroding Chinese culture.

“Owing to English fever, western culture is eroding Chinese culture.” You_____ with it.

APPENDIX B. QUESTIONNAIRE

Tick one box ☐ if there is no specific emphasis.

1. Your gender: ☐male ☐female

2. Your age:

☐15-20 ☐21-25 ☐26-30 ☐31-35 ☐36-40 ☐41-50

3. Your major is

- ☐History ☐literature ☐Management ☐Economics ☐Law ☐Philosophy ☐Others
4. You are pursuing:
☐Master's degree ☐Doctorate degree
5. You are:
☐a first-year student ☐a second-year student ☐a third-year student
6. In your opinion, learning English is _____.
☐unimportant ☐less important ☐important
☐very important ☐extremely important
7. Your classmates around attach _____ to English learning.
☐no importance ☐little importance ☐importance ☐much importance
8. Except for learning time in class, you spend _____ in learning English every week.
☐never ☐less than 2 hours ☐2 hour to 3 hours
☐4 hours to 6 hours ☐more than 6 hours
9. Except for learning time in class, the time in learning English accounts for about _____ of total learning time.
☐Less than 1/5 ☐1/5 ☐1/4 ☐1/3 ☐1/2 ☐3/4 ☐more than 3/4
10. You have _____ in learning English.
☐much confidence ☐confidence ☐little confidence ☐no confidence
11. You learn English_____ (You could choose more than one answer.)
☐out of interest
☐to meet the requirement of degree
☐to earn the certificate of English test
☐to further the study abroad
☐to learn the recent development of your field abroad
☐to emigrate
☐to hunt for a better job
☐for other purposes
12. In your opinion, your English is _____.
☐excellent ☐good ☐fair ☐poor
13. You need urgently to improve English _____. (You could choose more than one answer.)
☐listening ☐speaking ☐reading academic literature
☐academic writing ☐to Chinese translation ☐socio-cultural background knowledge
14. Have you signed up for English training program?
☐No, and I am not going to. ☐No, but I plan to.
☐Yes, once. ☐Yes, more than once.
15. You _____ read Chinese literature (e.g. fictions).
☐never ☐occasionally ☐usually ☐always
16. In your opinion, your Chinese is _____.
☐Excellent ☐Good ☐Fair ☐Poor ☐Very poor
17. What is your classmates' attitude towards English and Chinese learning?
☐They attach more importance to Chinese .
☐They attach more importance to English.
☐They attach almost the same importance to both.
☐They attach almost the same importance to neither.
18. Do you know about HSK?
☐Not at all. ☐A little. ☐A lot. ☐I took it once.
☐I took it more than once.
19. Do you know about IELTS?
☐Not at all. ☐A little. ☐A lot. ☐I took it once.
☐I took it more than once.
20. Learning English at GSCASS is _____.
☐extremely important ☐very important
☐somewhat important ☐not very important ☐not at all important
21. Suppose GSCASS establishes Chinese as a compulsory course. You _____ of it.
☐strongly approve ☐approve ☐disapprove ☐strongly disapprove
22. Chinese language is an integral part of the Chinese nation.
☐strongly agree ☐agree ☐neither agree or disagree
☐disagree ☐strongly disagree
23. If you got married with an English native speaker, what language would you give priority to while teaching your baby to speak?
☐Chinese ☐English

24. English learning has a negative influence on Chinese learning. You _____ with it.
☐ strongly agree ☐ agree ☐ disagree ☐ strongly disagree
25. "Owing to English fever, western culture is eroding Chinese culture." You _____ with it.
☐ strongly agree ☐ agree ☐ disagree ☐ strongly disagree
26. What opinions or suggestions would you give about language learning at GSCASS?
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