

A Study of Good Chinese Learners at the University of Hong Kong

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Abstract

This is my third consecutive year of doing the research. As the economy of China is booming, there is a rapid increase in the number of foreign students coming to The University of Hong Kong to learn Chinese. As Chinese is one of the popular subjects for them to choose. Despite COVID-19, from 2020 to 2021, there are still around 520 foreign students (undergraduates or exchange students) come to the University of Hong Kong to learn Chinese as a Foreign Language courses. A language teacher is a facilitator and an instructor of Chinese learning for foreign students. However, in the real world, there are always some good language learners and some less talented language learners in one classroom. So what is the secret of the Good Chinese Learners? What can the language instructors do in order to support good Chinese learners and help the less talented learners to learn Chinese? In the TESOL field, there are a lot of researches have been done by scholars. In the early 1970s, several researchers isolated and defined the concept of Good Language Learner. But in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language field, there are relatively fewer researches. So from January 2017 to December 2021, I conducted a survey about good Chinese learners in CHIN9503 and CHIN9504 classes. The survey consisted of an interview with several questions and I will discuss the result of a survey and its implications in this paper. This research is done in a macro way rather than micro way. Thus this holistic research focuses on finding good Chinese learners rather than focusing on learners' individual differences.

Keywords: Inner Factors, Outside Factors and Settings, Features of Good Chinese Learners, Levels of Proficiency, Implications of Curriculum Design

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Introduction

As the economy of China is booming, there is a rapid increase in the number of foreign students coming to The University of Hong Kong to learn Chinese. For the past decade, Chinese is one of the popular subjects for them to choose. Despite COVID-19, from 2020 to 2021, there are still around 520 foreign students (undergraduates or exchange students) come to the University of Hong Kong to learn Chinese.

A Chinese language teacher is a facilitator and an instructor of Chinese learning for foreign students. However, in the real world, there are always some good language learners and some less talented language learners in one classroom. So what is the secret of the Good Chinese Learners? What can the language instructors do in order to support good Chinese learners and help the less talented learners to learn Chinese? In the TESOL field, there are a lot of researches have been done by scholars. In the early 1970s, several researchers isolated and defined the concept of Good Language Learner. But in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language field, there are relatively fewer researches. So from January 2017 to December 2021, I conducted a survey about good Chinese learners in CHIN9503 and CHIN9504 classes. The survey consisted of an interview with several questions and I will discuss the result of a survey and its implications in this paper. This research is done in a macro way rather than micro way. Thus this holistic research focuses on finding good Chinese learners rather than focusing on learners' individual differences. The survey consisted of an interview with several questions (table 1) and I will discuss the result of a survey and its implications in this paper. This research is done in a macro way rather than micro way and the research help teachers to build up a good Chinese learners' strategy repertoire. Meanwhile, the implication of the research will support both *curriculum design* and *learner training* to achieve learner autonomy in learning Chinese.

Successful language learners

In the TESOL field, there is a model of successful language learners which is called Learner Self-Management (LSM) (Joan Rubin 2005). It is an interactive one and in which there is a continuous interaction between the learner's control mechanism and the learner's knowledge and beliefs. LSM is actually referring to the ability to deploy procedures and to access knowledge and beliefs in order to accomplish learning goals in a dynamically changing environment. Within the LSM system, there are five procedures: planning, monitoring, evaluating, problem-solving and implementing. LSM mainly focuses on individual learner's difference and their characters. Most of these characters cannot be changed by outside force. But in the real world, foreign language learning involves individual inner factors and outside settings:

Good Language Learner inner factors

1. Good planning
2. Monitoring
3. Evaluation
4. Problem-identification and problem-solution
5. Knowledge and beliefs
6. Learning style
7. Motivation
8. Learning strategy
9. Background Knowledge
10. Other factors

Outside factors and settings

1. Classroom learning
2. Syllabus
3. Location
4. Outside classroom learning
5. Language environment
6. Support from others
7. Teaching Methodologies
8. Others

Good language learners and bad language learners study in one classroom, so what can the language instructors do in a macro way in order to support good language learners and brush up bad language learners? So this research is focus on outside factors and settings.

Target students

At the University of Hong Kong, Chinese Language Center offers eight levels Chinese language courses for foreign learners. The eight Chinese courses are shown as follows:

- (1) **CHIN9501** **Level one** (basic: zero beginners)
- (2) **CHIN9502** **Level two** (basic)
- (3) **CHIN9503** **Level three** (basic)(target group)
- (4) **CHIN9504** **Level four** (Intermediate)(target group)
- (5) **CHIN9505** **Level five** (Intermediate)
- (6) **CHIN9506** **Level six** (Higher-Intermediate)
- (7) **CHIN9507** **Level seven** (Advanced)
- (8) **CHIN9508** **Level eight** (Advanced)

This research is done by choosing students in level three and level four courses. Now, let us look at what the good Chinese learners did in my classroom at the University of Hong Kong.

The survey of good Chinese learners is conducted by the following questionnaire:

问卷调查 Questionnaire		
姓名: Name:	国籍: Nationality:	班级: Class:
Q1:你在中国住过吗? 哪里? 几年? Have you ever lived in China before? Where? How many years?		
Q2:你有中国朋友吗? Do you have Chinese friends?		
Q3:你常常用中文吗? 什么场合? 什么时候? Do you often use Chinese? In what situation? When?		
Q4:说说你学习汉语的经历: Could you tell me your experience of learning Chinese?		

Table 1: Questionnaire

By observation during the class for 6 weeks and assessments which include dictations, quiz, in-class activities and mid-term test, I will select target students in level three and level four Chinese classes. The target students must perform very well in reading, writing, speaking and listening. Then in the final oral test, I will ask the target students above questions in order to find out the secret of their Chinese study.

Demographic of students in the research

There are totally 48 students being interviewed in the research, among these students, 39 students are Koreans, one student is from Finland, one student is from Russia, one student is from British/Japan, one student is from India, one student is from Sweden, one student is from The Republic of Kazakhstan, one student is from British/ Philippine, one student is from France, one student is from Italy.

Finland	1	2%
Russia	1	2%
British/Jap.	1	2%
India	1	2%
Sweden	1	2%
Kazakhstan	1	2%
British/Philippine	1	2%
France	1	2%
Italy	1	2%
S.Korea	39	81%
Total	48	100%

Table 2: Students Nationality

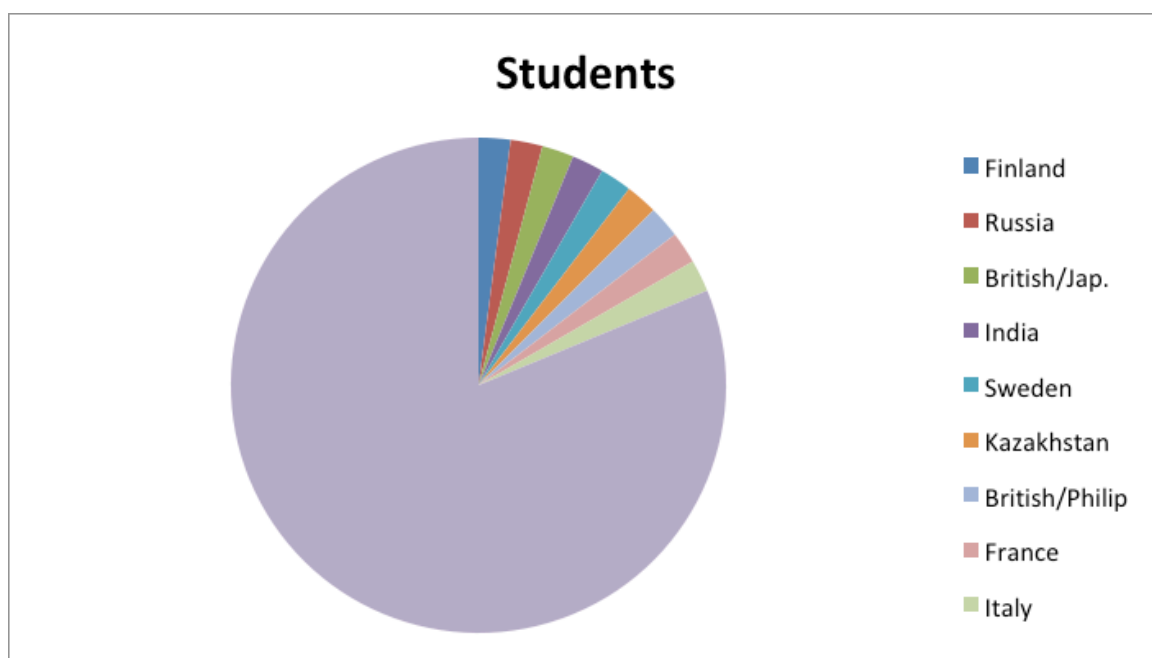


Figure 1: Student Nationality

It is obvious that South Korean students are the majority among the target students. This is due to in recent years a colossal amount of South Korean students lived in China during secondary school time. They come to The University of Hong Kong for tertiary education after secondary school.

Features of good Chinese learners

Firstly, according to the interview, within 48 students, 38 students lived in Mainland China or Taiwan for more than one year before. The range is from 1 year to 12 years. They lived in different cities: Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chengdu, Dalian, Qingdao, Shenzhen, Nanchang, Zhuhai, Shandong and Taipei. Only 10 students lived and studied in other countries or Hong Kong and never lived in China or Taiwan before. Among those students

who lived in Mainland China or Taiwan before, one of them (2%) stayed for only one month. Another student (2%) stayed for only six months. Five students (10%) stayed for 1 year. Three students (6%) stayed for 2 years. Four students (8%) stayed for 3 years. Eight students (17%) stayed for 4 years. Three students (6%) stayed for 5 years. Two students (4%) stayed for 6 years. Two students (4%) stayed for 7 years. Two students (4%) stayed for 8 years. Two students (4%) stayed for 9 years. Three students (6%) stayed for 10 years. One student (2%) stayed for 11 years. One student (2%) stayed for 12 years.

Year(s) stayed in Mainland China or Taiwan	No. of students	% of total students who stayed in Mainland China or Taiwan before
0	10	21%
Less than 1 year	2	4%
1	5	10%
2	3	6%
3	4	8%
4	8	17%
5	3	6%
6	2	4%
7	2	4%
8	2	4%
9	2	4%
10	3	6%
11	1	2%
12	1	2%
Total	48 students	100%

Table 3: How long did you stay in mainland China or Taiwan?

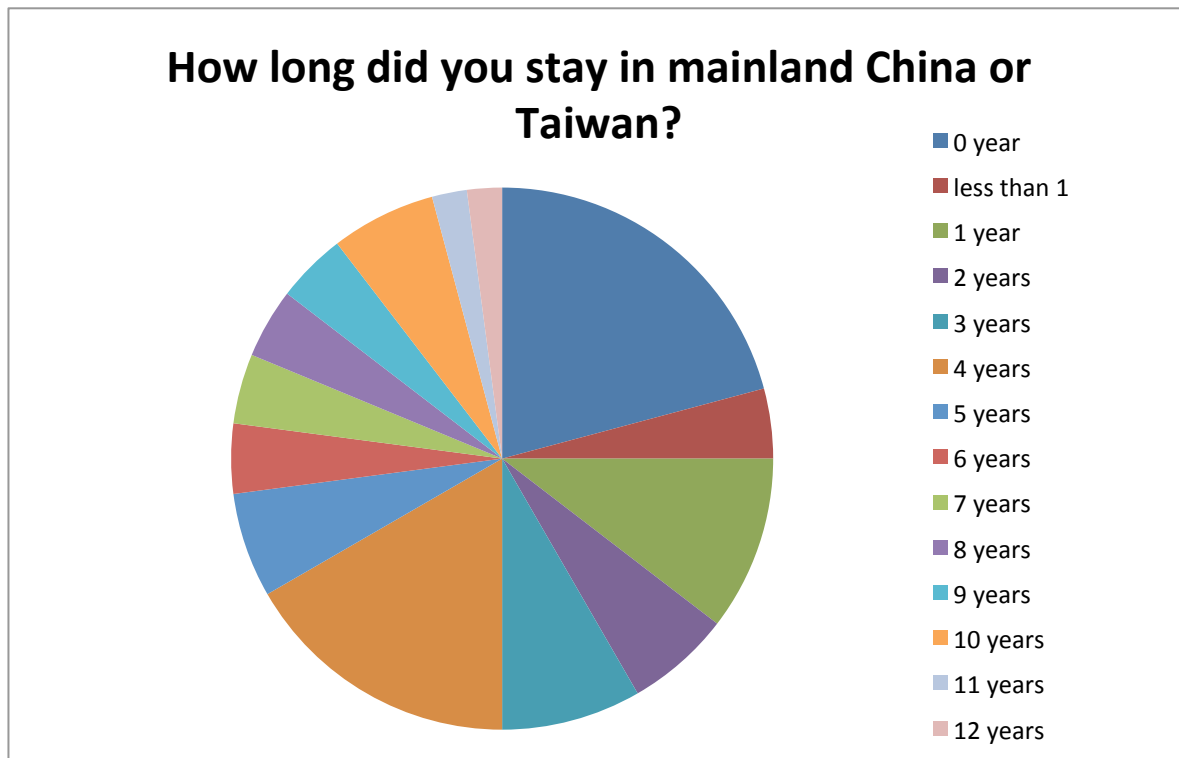


Figure 2: How long did you stay in mainland China or Taiwan?

Secondly, 42 students said that they have Chinese friends and they often have conversations in Chinese. There are six students who do not have Chinese friends however they lived in China before. One of the students is from South Korea. He lived in Beijing for 11 years and studied in Beijing British School but he only used Chinese in restaurants for ordering food. Another student is from Finland. She lived in Shanghai for 4 years and studied in Changning International School. She only used Chinese when she went to restaurants with friends in Shanghai. Apparently, both of them have lived in China for a period of time, their oral Chinese proficiency level is not as good as the other target students.

Thirdly, 4 male students had Chinese girlfriends before which help them to improve their Chinese proficiency.

Fourthly, 2 students attended Chinese local primary or secondary schools before. Their Chinese spoken ability is the best among the target students.

Fifthly, 3 students have Chinese roommates at the University of Hong Kong. They always speak Chinese at the hall of residence.

Sixthly, if we look at 10 students who have never lived in China or Taiwan before, one student said she had Chinese friends when she studied in high school. One student said she does not have Chinese friend but she studied in Malaysian high school and studied Chinese for one year. One student said he has a Chinese schoolmate who helps him to study Chinese at HKU. One student said he does not have Chinese friend but he has a Korean friend who has lived in Beijing for a long time and he helps my student to study Chinese. One student said she lived in Malaysia for 7 years and in Malaysia she has several Chinese friends who help her to study Chinese. One student said he has never lived in China but after he came to Hong Kong, he made some Chinese friends and they help him to study Chinese.

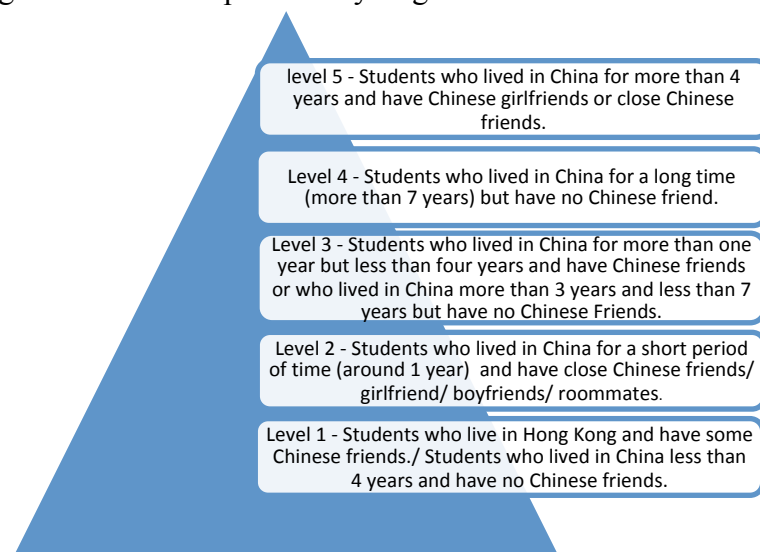
One student is from Korea. She has never lived in China before but she has a friend from China and a friend from Taiwan. Her Taiwan friend introduced more friends to her and now she has many Taiwanese friends. One student is from Italy. She has never lived in China or Taiwan before but in Italy she has a Chinese roommate who helped her to learn Chinese for 3 years. Another French student also has a Chinese roommate from China. They lived together in Paris and they often play Mahjong and drink alcohol together. His roommate taught him Chinese for many years. Besides the French student also has other Chinese friends in France. They always hang out together. The last student is from Korea. She lives in Hong Kong for 5 years. She had many Chinese friends in high school and they often helped her to study Chinese. At HKU, she also has two Chinese friends and they help her to learn Chinese.

In a conclusion, most of good Chinese learners either have lived in China for a period of time or have Chinese friends to help him/her to learn and speak Chinese. If a student has never lived in China or Chinese speaking countries before, then *make a Chinese speaking friend* is crucial.

Levels of proficiency of good Chinese learners

Within good Chinese learners, I also found their difference in the proficiency of Chinese. This difference may be due to individual difference in motivation, learning style, personality, gender, strategies, autonomy, beliefs etc. I put them into five levels. From level 5 (the highest) to level 1 (the lowest).

Figure 3: Levels of proficiency of good Chinese learners



- *level 5 (highest) - Students who lived in China for more than 4 years and have Chinese girlfriends or close Chinese friends.*
- *Level 4 - Students who lived in China for a long time (more than 7 years) but have no Chinese friend.*
- *Level 3 - Students who lived in China for more than one year but less than four years and have Chinese friends or who lived in China more than 3 years and less than 7 years but have no Chinese Friends.*
- *Level 2 - Students who lived in China for a short period of time (around 1 year) and have close Chinese friends/ girlfriend/ boyfriends/ roommates.*
- *Level 1 (lowest) - Students who live in Hong Kong and have some Chinese friends./ Students who lived in China less than 4 years and have no Chinese friends.*

Learning a foreign language involve learning in a language classroom and language acquisition in the target language environment. From the above table (Table 4), we can see the importance of appropriate language environment for the language learners to learn a target language. Meanwhile, interaction with native speakers also plays an important role in learning a target language. These two important factors give us some indications in the curriculum design of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language courses.

Implications of curriculum design

Language Learning at times has been put into two categories: the monastery and the market-place approaches. The monastery approach refers to organized language learning in a classroom with students and a teacher following a formal. Rule-based plan while the market place approach would involve being in a context where the target language is spoken. The best language learners combine these two approaches into a perfect self-directed curriculum.

From Table 4, we can see the importance of language environment in learning Chinese. Meanwhile, making Chinese friends also accelerates learning Chinese. From the table, if a foreign student lived in China for more than 2 years and have Chinese friends, the foreign student's overall Chinese performance is better than those who lived in China for more than 7 years.

When we design Chinese curriculum, we can integrate the following courses or activities into our program:

- Exchange program (at least 6 months) with universities in mainland China or Taiwan. The program should be the longer one the better one.
- Also ask exchange partner to arrange one-on-one language exchange program after school.
- Set up Chinese corner in home university.
- To help students to find language exchange partner(s).
- Encourage students live in hall of residence to find a Chinese roommate or hallmate.
- To help students learn Chinese beyond the classroom: using technology, internet, television, video.....

Learner Training

Of course, learners do not achieve autonomy by being told to. Autonomy is achieved slowly, through struggling towards it, through careful training and careful preparation on the teacher's part as well as on the learner's. Basing on the research, we can summarize the strategies used by those good Chinese learners into following ways:

- Living in China or Taiwan.
- Living in other Chinese speaking countries.
- Finding Chinese speaking friends.
- Falling in love with Chinese speaking girlfriend/boyfriend.
- Often hanging out with Chinese speaking people.
- Having Chinese speaking language exchange partner(s).
- Having a Chinese speaking roommate/hallmate.
- Immersing themselves in an authentic Chinese language environment.
- Watching Chinese TV programs/ Singing Chinese songs.

Actually, good language learners are flexible and vary their learning strategies; and an

autonomous learner is capable of taking charge of his/her learning for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. Language instructor is a counselor and a facilitator to assist those students in achieving learner autonomy. The training process of learner training should include the following steps:

- (1) To know individual differences and different learning styles among students.
- (2) To help students to determine short-term goals.
- (3) To help students selecting strategies and tasks to achieve the goals.
- (4) Helping students to do self-assessment and evaluation of learning progress and strategies, then make choices.
- (5) To build up students' own strategy repertoire and know how to vary strategies according to the context.
- (6) To let students take charge of their own learning.
- (7) To encourage students go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond.

Improvements in the future

The limitation of the study lies upon the small sample size and levels of students. Unfortunately, this limitation is tied to my teaching levels, I only teach level 3 and level 4 at my university. Thus, I cannot reach students in other levels to include them into the research. Also it is hard to find western students in higher learner groups in the present study. The research would be better if a good-sized sample of learners at higher Mandarin proficiencies can be sourced.

Besides, Benson (2001) outlines five principles for achieving autonomous learning:

1. Active involvement by students in their own learning
2. Providing options and resources
3. Offering choices and decision-making opportunities
4. Supporting learners
5. Encouraging reflection

Arranging immersion Mandarin courses and encourage students to find language exchange partners can help students achieving autonomous learning. Yet, we still to encourage reflection for students during learning Mandarin and improve curriculum to improve other principles.

Conclusion

Hopefully this research project can be carried on in the future to collect more samples of good Chinese learners. Theory and practice in Chinese teaching has traditionally been the main focus when learning in classroom. Thus the focus has been on the design of syllabuses, methods and materials etc. However, a complementary perspective emerged in the 1980s in TESOL field with the notion of learner autonomy, which shifted the focus from the teacher to the learners. Students are encouraged to make decisions about what they learn. Yet as professional Language teachers, we should know the shortcut of learning a target language with the best result and least effort. This is what we should do to as facilitators. We should support students in their autonomous language learning and become a good and autonomous Chinese learner.

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