

## Research on the Influence of Affective Factors to Ethnic Chinese Student's Chinese Acquisition: Take the Ethnic Chinese Students in Fiji as an Example

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### Abstract

Krashen's affective filter hypothesis plays an important guiding role in the second language teaching and acquisition. Based on the data got from the survey of ethnic Chinese secondary school students in Fiji, this paper selects affective factors such as attitude, motivation and Chinese cultural identity and analyzes the influence of those affective factors to Chinese acquisition. Some teaching strategies are also proposed in order to provide inspiration for Chinese teaching overseas.

**Key words:** Affective filter hypothesis; Ethnic Chinese students; Chinese acquisition; Chinese teaching overseas

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### INTRODUCTION

According to the Collier's Encyclopedia 6, Chinese language is the principal member of the family of languages. It is also the language of Han Chinese people, which forms one of the two branches of the Sino-Tibetan and Indo-Chinese language. It is spoken by at least ninety percent of more than one billion inhabitants of China and its system of writing has been used for centuries in neighboring countries, such as Japan and Korea, whose

languages are unrelated to Chinese. The standardize form of spoken Chinese is known as "Putonghua" or more commonly, Mandarin, which is based on the Beijing dialect. Mandarin is also the official language of the People's Republic of China; therefore mandarin is taught all over China. It is the most common type of Chinese language taught in the world.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis is an important theory in second language acquisition. The affective factors include several aspects such as attitude, motivation and so on which are essential parts influencing second language acquisition. Most of the research focuses on the influence of English acquisition. There still exist many unsolved issues in the field of teaching Chinese as second language. In this paper, we take the ethnic Chinese students in Fiji as an example and try to find out how much affective factors influence the ethnic Chinese student's Chinese acquisition so as to improve methods of Chinese teaching overseas. Suggestions for future Chinese teaching are also proposed.

### THEORY FOUNDATION

Early in 1870s, Dulay and Burt had proposed the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Later, Krashen put the theory into five central hypotheses in second language acquisition, namely, the Acquisition-learning Distinction; the Natural Order Hypothesis; the Monitor Hypothesis; the Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. Affective Filter prevents language learners from absorbing comprehensible input completely. This comprises of affective factors such as attitudes to language, motivation, self-confidence, anxiety and so on. The learners who have a low filter may lead to a favorable attitudes and self-confidence. Those who have high filters may lead to unfavorable attitudes and high anxiety. The affective filter influences the process of second language learning and acquisition.

## RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Two hundred ethnic Chinese secondary school students in Fiji participated in this survey. Ninety percent of the ethnic Chinese students have learnt eight to ten years of how to read and write Chinese. Ten percent of the Chinese have learnt Chinese for eleven to thirteen years. Most of them can speak Cantonese, and are second or third generations of Chinese who have immigrated abroad. Schools allow students to use either simplified Chinese or traditional Chinese. We used the Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (Gardner, 1985), Abbreviated Multidimensional Acculturation Scale (Zea et al, 2003) and Gardner's other research findings of motivation to design a questionnaire, which included twenty questions relating to the influence of affective factors in Chinese learning and acquisition. Two hundred questionnaires were distributed to ethnic Chinese students. One hundred and eighty seven questionnaires, which were valid for the research, were returned. The content of questionnaire is about the learning attitude, learning motivation, Chinese culture identity and other influencing factors of Chinese learning and acquisition. The results received from the questionnaires were converted into data using the social statistics software SPSS to carry on the data processing.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Affective factors attitude and motivation have a close relationship with the effects of language acquisition. In the questionnaire, we investigate the attitude, motivation

**Table 1**  
**Chinese Learning Attitudes**

| Emotional experience | Curiosity | Initiative | Examination | Planning |
|----------------------|-----------|------------|-------------|----------|
| 3                    | 2.8       | 2.4        | 2.7         | 2.6      |

Survey data shows that emotional experience is the most important factor among the five aspects of learning attitude. This is decided by Chinese cultural identity. Students believe that their mother tongue is a connection to their origin, so if a person does not respect his or her mother tongue, it simply means that person is humiliating him or herself. Their mother tongue also makes them feel unique. Most of the ethnic Chinese students know they are Chinese, but they have almost entirely integrated with local social community. So learning Chinese is a way for them to experience the Chinese emotionally. From table 1, we also see that the data of initiative is the lowest. There are about thirty five percent of the students with a negative attitude towards their language. These students believe that their language is boring and complex. This phenomenon has a close relationship with learning motivation. The negative attitude towards Chinese makes them learn Chinese unconsciously and usually get low marks in Chinese examinations.

So the attitude of learning Chinese really influences the effects of Chinese learning. Those who hold a positive

and Chinese cultural identity of ethnic Chinese students in order to find the rate of influence that the affective factors had on them. From the result we have received, some measures on how to enhance the initiative of Chinese students will be propose so as to make Chinese teaching more successful.

A. Attitudes of ethnic Chinese students towards their mother tongue

Attitude here mainly refers to learning attitude. Learning attitude generally refers to a stable psychological tendency to the students shown in learning and learning situation. It is an active, positive or negative, reaction the learners hold to studying.

According to the questionnaires that the one hundred and eighty seven ethnic Chinese students answered, it was found that about sixty five percent of the students have a positive attitude towards their language. They believe that their language is interesting and should be respected. Ethnic Chinese students seem to know the full benefits of studying and learning their mother tongue. They believe that by knowing their mother tongue they can understand more about their origin and culture. While some believe that by knowing their mother tongue they can read and write their language fluently, which can benefit them when they go back to their homeland.

We mainly investigated the learning attitude of ethnic Chinese students from the aspects of emotional experience, curiosity, initiative, examination and planning. The types and proportion of ethnic Chinese student's Chinese learning attitudes are concluded as follows:

attitude always have a high level of Chinese and those who have negative attitude usually get low marks on Chinese examinations. Learning attitude decides whether a person learns the language consciously or not, and influences the effects of learning a foreign language. Changing the attitude towards a foreign language is very important for learners in second language acquisition.

B. Chinese learning motivation of ethnic Chinese students

Motivation is considered to be one of the most important affective factors, which affect the learner's language input and intake. It is the process by which goal-directed behavior is stimulated in language learning. The ethnic Chinese student's Chinese learning motivation mainly includes Integration motivation, instrumental motivation, achievement motivation, teaching motivation and Chinese culture identity. According to the data received from the questionnaires, we concluded the types and proportion of ethnic Chinese student's Chinese learning motivation are as follows:

**Table 2**  
**Chinese Learning Motivations**

| Integration | Instrument | Achievement | Teaching | Chinese culture identity |
|-------------|------------|-------------|----------|--------------------------|
| 2.99        | 2.7        | 2.81        | 2.8      | 3.1                      |

Statistic data shows that one of the most important learning motivations of ethnic Chinese students is based on Chinese cultural identity. Although the ethnic Chinese students are easy to identical with Chinese culture instinctually based on blood, this simple identity is not enough. They must consider the actual needs of Chinese. For Chinese students, learning Chinese is not only for vocational pursuit, but also to adapt to the Chinese social language life and family, and to communicate with domestic relatives as well as friends. According to the questionnaires the ethnic Chinese students answered, eighty percent of the students believe that learning Chinese is useful. There are many reasons for why learning Chinese is useful, but one common reason that the students have given is that a lot of Chinese are born abroad, but they don't have access to their language and culture, so it is wise to learn Chinese.

A small proportion of students chose instrument motivation. There are about twenty percent of the students that chose "learning Chinese is useless" as their answer. Their common reason for choosing this answer is because they believe that ones language can only be prefect if he/she practice or learn it in their homeland. Most of the Chinese children lack impetus, initiative and positive of learning Chinese. For the ethnic Chinese students, they are not fully aware of the necessity of learning Chinese and learning Chinese becomes a burden to them. The majority of students believe that Chinese is not a compulsory course. It's not necessary for them to spend much time on it and Chinese has nothing to do with their own vital interests. The majority of the students choose the Chinese course because they like the Chinese language. In some schools, the higher the grade is, the fewer students choose Chinese.

From the research that has been done, about ninety percent of ethnic Chinese students believe that parents should teach them Chinese apart from teachers. In the research, the majority of the student's reason for choosing parents is that parents are blood related, so therefore it is much easier to understand when asking them questions. Another reason is that they believe that it is the parent's responsibility to educate them. Some students chose their elder brothers and sisters to teach them Chinese. Parents are an important impetus and motivation for their children to learn Chinese. For Chinese parents immigrating abroad, they urgently demand their Children to master Chinese; on the other hand, they put little efforts on their children's Chinese studying.

The reasons for the above situation are as follows: Firstly, the difficulty of Chinese is one reason for middle school students showing a low interest to Chinese. Secondly, ethnic Chinese students in Fiji and

Chinese students are in different educational system and educational environment, and they don't understand the usefulness of learning Chinese. Thirdly, to the Chinese children born and grown overseas, a big challenge in learning Chinese for them is lack of language environment. Children in kindergarten or school spend most of time with foreign friends and communicate with others in English. Even in some Chinese family, all the family members prefer to use English for communicating. So learning Chinese is just like learning a foreign language to those children. Chinese studying will undoubtedly add heavy psychological burden to them, which can reduce or even eliminate their interest in learning Chinese. Finally, Fijian people have casual, relaxed, tolerant character, which influences the ethnic Chinese students a lot. Schools in Fiji pay more attention to students on learning happily, less on examination results. Therefore, students can learn Chinese without any pressure.

Motivation of learning a language is an important topic in the field of second language acquisition. This topic has been studied by many scholars in recent years.

#### C. Chinese cultural identity

Cultural identity refers to ones sense of belonging to a particular culture or ethnic group. People consciously identify themselves with a group that has a shared system of symbols and meaning as well as norms for conduct. Chinese cultural identity greatly affects ethnic Chinese student's motivation of learning Chinese and thus affects every aspect of Chinese learning.

According to the questionnaires answered by the ethnic Chinese students, it was found that sixty five percent of the students speak Chinese at home. Their reason for speaking Chinese at home is because they want more practice with their mother tongue, and because they believe that speaking their mother tongue is a respect to their culture. About twenty five percent of the Chinese students speak both Chinese and English at home. The reason for this is because they use English to communicate with their siblings and use Chinese to communicate with their parents. There are only ten percent of the Chinese students who speaks only English at home. This category is the lowest. The reason for them to speak English at home is because majority of their family members only understand English. Speaking Chinese at home is a representation of Chinese cultural identity.

Statistic data shows that Chinese cultural identity is a vital factor influencing student's Chinese learning. Most of the students believe that learning and understanding their own mother tongue is a respect to ones culture and identity. As mentioned in the previous sections, students believe that their mother tongue is a connection between

them and their origin. The majority of the students chose "learning Chinese is necessary" for their answer because they believe that language is part of their culture. Without language outsiders might not know one's culture or identity just by the appearance. Their mother tongue also shows who they really are; it gives them a sense of existence.

The second language learners prefer to the mainstream of society on the identity of culture, ethnicity and values. They can easily ignore or abandon the culture, ethnic identity and values of their native country. They are subtractive bilinguals, rather than additive bilinguals. So it is important for Chinese educators to reinforce the Chinese culture identity teaching apart from Chinese language teaching.

In Chinese teaching, we should enhance the depth of Chinese language maintenance and should not only emphasize the improvement of listening, speaking, reading and writing Chinese language. What's more important is to achieve the identification of mother tongue community through the maintenance of mother tongue. Positive identification can affect the attitude to native language countries and groups and narrow the gap between ethnic Chinese and their native country.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

In summary, Affective Filter Hypothesis has significant implications for Chinese teaching. A low filter should be created for the effective Chinese teaching. We found that affective factors work on the ethnic Chinese students well in Chinese language acquisition. Ethnic Chinese students in Fiji show many differences in emotional attitude, motivation demand, recognition orientation and so on. Their Chinese learning motivation and learning attitude are only on the average level, but Chinese cultural identity is at a high level. The process of learning Chinese is the process of Chinese cultural identity. Most of them clearly know he or she is "ethnic Chinese". Although they have a high level of Chinese cultural identity, they know little about the cultural meaning and connotation of these acts, in spite of following Chinese culture.

In Chinese teaching as second language, we should follow the rules of language and pay attention to the importance of affective factors. Firstly, the ethnic Chinese student's attitude of learning Chinese should be changed.

A good learning attitude leads to a positive motivation of learning Chinese. Secondly, a Chinese cultural atmosphere is needed to make students learn more about Chinese culture. We should take some measures to stimulate their interest of learning Chinese and convert these measures into better learning motivation strategies. Thirdly, we should enhance their sense of Chinese national belonging which can make them choose to learn Chinese consciously. For example, we can open Chinese culture courses and take every chance to introduce Chinese culture in Chinese language courses. We argue that the combination of Chinese teaching and the cultivation of sense of Chinese national belonging are very important. This is not only because Chinese cultural education is different from other aspects of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, but also it is the responsibility and historical mission of our Chinese educators.

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