

Perceptions, Attitudes, and Chinese Language Proficiency: A Qualitative Case Study of a Third-Grade Learner in a Dual Language Immersion Program

Zaozao Wang

Columbia University, New York, USA

This qualitative case study explores the relationship between a young learner's perceptions and attitudes toward learning Chinese as a second language (L2) and his Chinese language proficiency within a dual language immersion program in New York City. Focusing on a third-grade, non-Chinese heritage student who demonstrated markedly higher Chinese proficiency than his peers, the study draws on multiple data sources, including classroom observations, informal student interviews, parent interviews, and analysis of student work and assessment results. Findings indicate that the learner's positive yet largely unarticulated perceptions of Chinese learning, strong intrinsic motivation, and integrative orientation toward the target language and culture contributed significantly to his advanced proficiency. Parental language ideologies and a supportive, non-pressuring home environment further reinforced the learner's agency and engagement. The study highlights the reciprocal relationship between affective factors, learning behaviors, and language outcomes, and underscores the importance of fostering learner agency and positive affective experiences in early Chinese immersion contexts. Implications are discussed for bilingual education and Chinese dual language immersion programs, particularly in relation to curriculum design and teacher awareness of affective variables in second language acquisition.

Keywords: dual language immersion, Chinese as a second language, learner perceptions, attitudes, bilingual education, qualitative case study

Introduction

Since the 1990s, dual language immersion programs have experienced rapid growth across the United States, particularly in large metropolitan areas characterized by linguistic and cultural diversity. These programs aim to promote bilingualism, biliteracy, academic achievement, and cross-cultural understanding by providing sustained instruction in two languages (Thomas & Collier, 1997; Torres-Guzmán, 2002). Among various immersion models, Chinese-English dual language programs have gained increasing popularity due to China's global influence and growing interest in Chinese language learning among non-Chinese heritage families.

Despite the expansion of Chinese immersion education, teachers and researchers have observed significant variation in students' Chinese language proficiency, even among learners with similar instructional exposure. In many immersion classrooms, some students struggle with basic oral communication and character recognition,

while others demonstrate unexpectedly high levels of proficiency. This phenomenon raises important questions regarding the factors that contribute to differential outcomes in second language acquisition, particularly among young learners.

Previous research suggests that affective variables—such as learners’ perceptions, attitudes, and motivation—play a crucial role in second language learning (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 1990). However, relatively little qualitative research has examined how these factors operate in Chinese-English immersion programs, especially for young, non-Chinese heritage learners. This study addresses this gap by examining how the perceptions and attitudes of a third-grade learner of Chinese as a second language relate to his Chinese language proficiency in a dual language immersion context.

The guiding research question for this study is: How do the perceptions and attitudes of a third-grade learner of Chinese as a second language in a dual language immersion program relate to his Chinese language proficiency? By focusing on a single, information-rich case, the study seeks to provide insight into the complex interplay between affective factors, learning behaviors, and language outcomes in early immersion education.

Literature Review

Learner Perceptions in Second Language Learning

Learner perceptions refer to individuals’ beliefs and understandings about language learning, instructional practices, and their own abilities as language learners. Research has shown that learners’ perceptions influence how they engage with learning tasks, respond to challenges, and interpret their own progress (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Importantly, even young language learners are capable of forming and expressing beliefs about language learning processes.

Chamot and El-Dinary (1999) found that students in immersion settings demonstrated metacognitive awareness by articulating their learning strategies and reflecting on their language learning experiences. Similarly, Psaltou-Joycey and Sougari (2010) reported that young learners held definite beliefs about language learning and had clear expectations regarding instruction. These findings suggest that learner perceptions emerge early and can shape engagement and outcomes in second language acquisition.

Gardner’s socio-educational model emphasizes that learners’ perceptions of the target language, its speakers, and the learning environment contribute significantly to motivation and achievement (Gardner, 1985; 2000). Learners who perceive language learning as meaningful and connected to real-life contexts are more likely to invest sustained effort, which in turn supports proficiency development.

Attitudes, Motivation, and Integrativeness

Attitudes toward language learning have long been recognized as a central affective factor in second language acquisition. Gardner and Lambert (1972) distinguished between integrative attitudes, characterized by openness toward the target language community and culture, and instrumental attitudes, oriented toward pragmatic or utilitarian goals. Numerous studies have demonstrated that positive attitudes toward the target language and learning context are associated with higher levels of language proficiency (Chambers, 1999; Saracaloğlu, 2000).

Motivation is closely related to attitudes and plays a critical role in sustaining learners’ engagement. Deci and Ryan’s (1985) theory of intrinsic motivation highlights the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering deep and sustained learning. In language learning contexts, intrinsically motivated

learners tend to seek meaningful communication opportunities and persist in the face of difficulty, which facilitates language development.

Parental Influence and Home Environment

Parental attitudes toward language learning and multilingualism significantly influence children's perceptions and experiences. Gardner (1985) argued that parents shape their children's attitudes toward second languages both directly, through encouragement and support, and indirectly, through modeling and language ideologies. Research has consistently shown that parental involvement and positive home environments are associated with improved language learning outcomes (Desforjes & Abouchaar, 2003).

In Chinese immersion contexts, where learners may have limited exposure to Chinese outside school, parental support can play a particularly important role in reinforcing positive perceptions and sustaining engagement. Understanding parental influence is therefore essential for interpreting learners' attitudes and proficiency development.

Research Gap

Although previous studies have examined attitudes, perceptions, and motivation in second language learning, relatively few qualitative studies have focused on Chinese-English dual language immersion programs, particularly among young, non-Chinese heritage learners. This study contributes to the literature by providing an in-depth qualitative examination of how affective factors relate to Chinese language proficiency in an early immersion setting.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative case study design to explore the relationship between learner perceptions, attitudes, and Chinese language proficiency. A case study approach allows for an in-depth examination of a single learner within a specific educational context, capturing the complexity of affective, behavioral, and contextual factors that influence second language acquisition.

Research Context and Participant

The study was conducted in a private dual language immersion school in Manhattan offering Chinese-English immersion instruction from early elementary grades. The focal participant, referred to by the pseudonym Jack, was a third-grade, native English-speaking student with no Chinese heritage background. Despite having similar instructional exposure as his classmates, Jack demonstrated significantly higher Chinese language proficiency, making him an information-rich case for examining affective factors in Chinese immersion learning.

Data Collection

Data were collected over a seven-week period and included:

- Classroom observations during Chinese immersion instruction;
- Informal interviews with the focal student;
- Semi-structured interviews with the student's parents;
- Analysis of student work samples and school-wide Chinese language assessments.

These multiple data sources provided a comprehensive view of the learner's perceptions, attitudes, learning behaviors, and language outcomes.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved iterative coding and thematic analysis. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and assessment results were triangulated to identify recurring patterns related to learner perceptions, attitudes, and proficiency. Themes were refined through constant comparison across data sources to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.

Findings

Analysis of the data yielded three major themes illustrating the relationship between learner perceptions, attitudes, and Chinese language proficiency.

Active Engagement and Positive Learning Behaviors

The focal learner consistently demonstrated high levels of engagement in Chinese learning activities. He actively participated in classroom discussions, frequently volunteered responses, and used Chinese to communicate with teachers and peers whenever possible. During unstructured time, he often chose to read Chinese texts or use Chinese language learning applications, indicating sustained interest beyond required tasks.

School-wide assessment data confirmed his advanced proficiency relative to classmates, particularly in oral communication and character recognition. These behaviors reflected a positive orientation toward learning Chinese and a willingness to invest sustained effort in language learning.

Learner Agency and Unarticulated Attitudes

Although the learner's behaviors suggested strong interest and motivation, interviews revealed that he had difficulty explicitly articulating his attitudes toward learning Chinese. Rather than expressing a clear passion for the language, he described Chinese learning as "challenging" and "interesting". This discrepancy suggests that young learners may not always be consciously aware of their positive perceptions, even when these perceptions strongly influence their learning behaviors.

The learner's agency was evident in his preference for challenging tasks and communicative activities. He appeared motivated by the learning process itself rather than by external rewards or recognition, consistent with characteristics of intrinsic motivation.

Parental Language Ideologies and Support

Interviews with the learner's parents revealed a home environment that valued multilingualism and cultural openness. Both parents had experience learning multiple languages and emphasized learning as a process of personal growth rather than a means to specific instrumental outcomes. They supported their child's Chinese learning while avoiding excessive pressure, allowing him to maintain autonomy and enjoyment.

This supportive yet non-intrusive parental stance appeared to reinforce the learner's positive perceptions of Chinese learning and reduce anxiety, contributing to his sustained engagement and proficiency development.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that learner perceptions and attitudes play a critical role in shaping Chinese language proficiency in a dual language immersion context. Consistent with Gardner's (2000) socio-educational model and Deci and Ryan's (1985) theory of intrinsic motivation, the findings suggest that positive affective orientations, learner agency, and supportive environments contribute to successful second language acquisition.

Importantly, the study highlights that young learners may not always explicitly articulate their positive attitudes toward language learning, even when these attitudes strongly influence learning behaviors. For educators, this underscores the importance of attending to students' actions and engagement patterns rather than relying solely on verbal self-reports.

Parental language ideologies emerged as a significant factor, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between home environment, learner perceptions, and language outcomes. In Chinese immersion programs, fostering supportive home-school partnerships may be particularly beneficial.

In conclusion, this case study contributes to the growing body of research on Chinese dual language immersion education by illuminating the affective dimensions of early second language learning. The findings have implications for educators and researchers seeking to design learning environments that support learner agency, positive perceptions, and sustained engagement in Chinese language learning.

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