

## **Why do Chinese High School Students Learn German as a Foreign Language? – An empirical motivation study**

### **1. Introduction**

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the number of people learning German has been decreasing worldwide (see Auswärtiges Amt (ed.) 2015, p. 6). However, the situation is different in China. In 2000, 19,190 Chinese people were learning German (see Ständige Arbeitsgruppe DaF 2000, p. 19) and this number increased to 117,487 in 2015 (see Auswärtiges Amt (ed.) 2015, p. 10). This article focuses on learning German in schools, which has developed rapidly throughout this century, and in particular in the last decade. Until 2000, German courses were only offered at seven foreign language schools nationwide. Thanks to the initiative “Schools – Partners of the Future” (PASCH), 12,200 Chinese were learning German in 327 schools 15 years later (see Auswärtiges Amt (ed.) 2015, p. 10). Nowadays, German is the second most frequently learned European language in Chinese high schools after English (see *ibid.*, p. 29). It is also highly likely that the number of German learners in China will continue to grow in the coming years, as German will become one of the subjects to be recognized by the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China as of September 2018.

Why do Chinese high school students learn German? Which motivational factors play a role in their decision? What are these motivational factors based on? This paper, which draws on empirical research conducted at four high schools located in Zhejiang Province in 2015, aims to investigate and reveal the primary motivational factors for learning German among high school students in China. Socio-cultural influences from Chinese society are analyzed when discussing the potential contributions to students’ motivation for learning.

### **2. Background information**

#### **2.1 Motivation: Theoretical background**

In the field of foreign language learning, motivation is one of the socio-psychological factors that determine the learning process and exert a significant influence on the speed and success of learning a target language (Riemer 2010, p. 219). Motivational factors can be classified into different types: instrumental/integrative or intrinsic/extrinsic etc.

Research on motivation is a recurring topic of foreign language studies worldwide. Research on the German language in China can be traced back to the early 1990s (Mitschian 1991; Hess 1992), but usually focuses on learners at universities. Junior and senior high school students constitute the largest share of the Chinese population who are learning German, but little attention has been paid to this young learning community.

#### **2.2 Subjects**

The following study focuses on the situation of learning German in Zhejiang, an eastern coastal province of China. Compared to other regions of China, the economy here has developed faster and more dynamically in recent decades. In 2015, 306 high school stu-

dents from Hangzhou Foreign Language School, Hangzhou Entel Foreign Language School, Hangzhou Greentown Yuhua School and Jinhua Foreign Language School, who were learning German as a second foreign language, participated in the study. Of the participants, 194 were junior high school students (grades 7–9) and 112 were senior high school students (grades 10–12). The selected schools include traditional and newly established foreign language schools, as well as public and private schools. In addition, both foreign language schools and general schools are represented in this study.

### 2.3 Methods

Questionnaires were used for the data collection process. In consideration of the language level of the subjects, the questionnaire was designed in Chinese. In total, 10 possible motivational factors for learning German were listed. Students were to choose up to three types of motivational factor that best describe their situation. In addition, an open-answer option provided the subjects with the opportunity to include their own specific motivation.

After the questionnaire survey, 20 guideline interviews were conducted in Chinese. Four students and one German teacher from each school participated in this step. Interviews mainly focused on the educational background, some unspecified special motivational factors named by the students, as well as motivation from the perspective of careerplanning. These interviews were not transcribed word for word, but will be cited in the following discussion where necessary.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

### 3.1 What motivates Chinese high school students to learn German?

The results indicate that intrinsic interest is the most important motivational factor for learning German. Two thirds of all subjects learn German because they are interested in German-speaking countries and nearly half of all subjects are interested in language learning. A great number of students attach importance to a correlation between German and pragmatic reasons, for instance, studying abroad (47%), living in German-speaking countries (22%) or finding a better job (35%) in the future. It is worth mentioning that these factors play different roles for junior and senior high school students respectively. In total, 28% of the juniors chose “studying in German-speaking country” as one of their reasons for learning, while that item is in first place in the seniors’ motivation list (79%). The main reasons for this are both the age of the two groups of subject and their educational background. A large proportion of senior high school students were participants in the DSD program, which is oriented towards preparing students to study in Germany. These students had already decided to study abroad when they chose the program.

A total of 48% of the junior and 16% of the senior high school students learn German in order to learn about German-speaking countries in the native language. However, 29% of all subjects admitted that they only attend German classes because they need additional “credits” to graduate. The selected schools require students to learn a second foreign language after English. German and other languages such as French and Japanese are offered, but due to organizational reasons including classcapacity, some students who would like to learn another language may be assigned to a German class. These students usually lack

motivation to learn German and, according to teachers' experiences, are hard to motivate during their learning process. Other extrinsic motivational factors that also prompt some students to learn this language include parental aspirations (33%) and a German language environment in the family (5%). Furthermore, 15% of the subjects mentioned motivational factors that were not listed in the questionnaire; for example, travelling, nice teachers, effective management of family business, peer effect and love of German football teams etc.

### 3.2 Why is "interest in German-speaking countries" so influential?

Interest among young people can be primarily awakened through daily contact with German-speaking countries, especially if it is related to a favorable impression of Germany. The relationship between China and Germany in the field of economics, politics, science and culture etc. is becoming increasingly close. Under these circumstances, German technology and products become a "window" to Germany in China. Chinese not only think German are conscientious, steady, dutiful and punctual, which are partly stereotypes, but also appreciate the courage of the German nation to critically deal with its mistakes in history. This positive impression is largely attributed to the positive reports about Germany in Chinese media. From another point of view, the importance of the interest factor reflects a personality trait of the younger generation in today's China. As Li (2016, p. 104) stated, they are curious, courageous independent and confident.

### 3.3 Why is to "study in a German-speaking country" so attractive?

Chinese always attach considerable value to education. With the improvement of living standards, studying abroad – especially in developed countries – is becoming increasingly popular nowadays. In the period from 2000 to 2015, the number of Chinese overseas students has risen sharply from 39,000 to 413,900, according to the data of the Chinese Ministry of Education. The first choice for studying abroad was and still is English-speaking countries such as the USA, UK and Canada. In recent years, the attractiveness of Germany has largely increased because of its low tuition fees and good reputation for education.

Studying abroad is also an alternative to the national college entrance examination in China, which is highly stressful. In contrast to the application procedure for a bachelor's degree program in English-speaking countries, German colleges and universities require different grades of entrance examination from Chinese applicants. It diminishes the appeal of studying in Germany to some extent. However, with the introduction of the DSD program to China, this situation is changing.

### 3.4 Why is vocational motivation not that important?

Against the background of a more extensive and profound bilateral cooperation between China and Germany, it has been predicted that career related motivational factors will become more and more critical to German learners. Surprisingly, this reason was only given by less than a third of the subjects. This may, on the one hand, be due to the age of the subjects or, on the other hand, be caused by the dominance of English as lingua franca. For most German enterprises in China, English is a must and German is a plus (see Wang 2007, p. 224).

#### 4. Conclusions

In short, the subjects chose German as their second foreign language because of both intrinsic/extrinsic and instrumental/integrative motivational factors. “Interest” (including in German-speaking countries and language), “study abroad” as well as “a better career prospect” are the three most important factors. However, this study only provides an overview of Chinese high school students’ motivation for learning German in one single province. Whether its results are representative for other learning communities remains unclear.

#### References

- Auswärtiges Amt (ed.) (2015): Deutsch als Fremdsprache weltweit. Datenerhebung 2015. Berlin.
- Hess, Hans-Werner (1992): Die Kunst des Drachentötens: zur Situation von Deutsch als Fremdsprache in der Volksrepublik China. München: Iudicium.
- Li, Yuan (2016): Motivation zum Lernen des Deutschen als zweiter Fremdsprache in China. In: Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen 2. Pp. 93–107.
- Mitschian, Haymo (1991): Chinesische Lerngewohnheiten. Evaluierungen für den Deutsch-als-Fremdsprachenunterricht in der Volksrepublik China. Frankfurt a.M.: Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation.
- Riener, Claudia (2010): Motivation. In: Barkowski, Hans/Krumm, Hans-Jürgen (eds.): Fachlexikon Deutsch als Fremd- und Zweitsprache. Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto. Pp. 219–220.
- Ständige Arbeitsgruppe Deutsch als Fremdsprache (2000): Deutsch als Fremdsprache. Erhebung 2000. Berlin u.a.
- Wang, Jingping (2007): Die Rolle der deutschen Sprache in Unternehmen aus deutschsprachigen Ländern in China. In: Ammon, Ulrich/Reinbothe, Roswitha/Zhu, Jianhua (eds.): Die deutsche Sprache in China. Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunftsperspektiven. München: Iudicium. Pp. 223–230.