

Factors Affecting Chinese Language Acquisition in a Multilingual Context at an International School in Nonthaburi: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper sought to identify the factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an international school in Nonthaburi. The mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative methods was used. The qualitative instrument was presented by a series of interviews to different four groups, including 1) twenty kindergarten children; 2) five Chinese teachers; 3) three administrative staff and 4) one principal. The questionnaire in quantitative method was used to collect the data from fifty parents. The researcher applied simple calculation in frequencies and percentage for the quantitative analysis and used descriptive analysis to analyze the data collected from the interviews. The findings of this research were 14 factors affecting Chinese language acquisition. They were: 1) school curriculum (50.00%); 2) parental factors (47.37%); 3) language environment (44.74%); 4) teachers' instruction (39.47%); 5) personality (15.79%); 6) age factor (13.16%); 7) learning Strategies (10.53%); 8) culture shock (10.53%); 9) native Language (7.89%); 10) different social context (7.89%); 11) cognitive development (5.26%); 12) investment on study (5.26%); 13) textbooks (5.26%) and 14) teaching facilities (2.63%). The top five factors were as follows: school curriculum (50.00%), parental factors (47.37%), language environment (44.74%), teachers' instruction (39.47%) and personality (15.79%). In addition, learning environment (44.74%) was the most common factor found in the top three listed in both the questionnaire and all interviews.

Keywords: Chinese Language Acquisition, Multilingual Context, International School in Nonthaburi

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Introduction

Language instruction in children may seem simple, but it has a great impact on their ability to acquire a foreign language. This is for children ages between three to five when their intelligence and personality initially form, once external stimulation and the correct guidance is received, children's language system would be improved (Wang, 2008). Several research projects present that the earliest years of a child's life are a crucial period of biological, neurological, psychological, social and emotional growth. Reasonable and suitable cultural context in second language environment enhance the process of language acquisition, thus make long-term positive outcomes for children (Wang, 2011). Inappropriate pronunciation and teaching methodology of the first language teacher for children interfere the language effect and even ruin the foundation of Chinese language acquisition (Xie, 2013). Therefore, early language education is the best gift for children, and if the language teachers ignore the importance of children language learning, they will possibly bring irreparable harm to children's future acquisition of a second language.

The popularity of Chinese language as a second language promotes the development of overseas Chinese teaching, providing more opportunities of Chinese language learners among different ages and cultural backgrounds. Many Chinese scholars agree that the teaching of the Chinese language as a second language should be focused overseas instead of solely interior teaching (Wu et al., 2014). The coverage of Chinese language education which keeps increasing makes Chinese language as the amity of China&Thailand (Hanban, 2017). Chinese language education can be found from Thai Chinese schools to traditional Thai schools (Cai, 2010). There is also a movement of Chinese language education towards the kindergarten level that cannot be neglected (Cai, 2010). But Chinese is still far less popular than English in Thailand (Observer, 2013). There is not much research on Chinese acquisition among kindergarten children in Thailand (Yao, 2012). Thus, the mission of Chinese teachers in Thailand should transcend the limitation of textbooks and guide young children to develop interest and curiosity from Chinese culture (Yuan, 2013). The process of teaching becomes monotonous and meaningless if there is no specific environment in which teachers try to teach and children are interested in learning (Ma, 2010). As a result, Chinese lessons turn out to be poorly effective to some extent and perpetuate the unique dilemma of children in Thailand treating Chinese learning as a task at school rather than a language that can be used in their daily lives. Offering Chinese courses of kindergarten levels at international schools in Thailand brings more significance for Thai children to acquire Chinese as a second language. It complies with public opinion as well especially for the families which have tight social connections with the Chinese society.

In conclusion, language learning is a more systematic and long-term life skill. It also has usability and environmental characteristics, which have a strong impact on Chinese language acquisition, even the entire learning process during the stage of being a student. This study aims to explore the main factors that affect Chinese language acquisition by analyzing the actual situation, teaching methods and learning effect in a multilingual environment at an international school in Nonthaburi, Thailand.

Objectives of the Study

To investigate factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an international school in Nonthaburi.

Scope of the Study

Type of Research

This research was conducted with qualitative and quantitative research. The former research method was presented by a series of interviews with different groups, including five Chinese teachers, one principal, three administrative staff and twenty kindergarten children. The latter research method is presented via questionnaire to fifty parents.

Location of the Research

The research was carried out in an international school in Nonthaburi, Thailand where the researcher worked as a Chinese teacher. Since this international school follows Singaporean curriculum which is popular for Chinese studies in Thailand, the data collected at the school is practical and the discoveries during the research is of considerable referential importance in researching the factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context.

Time Frame

The research was conducted during July 2017, including the distribution and collection of questionnaire, and the interview process. After the questionnaire and interview, the researcher extracted information from the questionnaire, in combination with records from interviews, to evaluate the findings of this research. This process of data collection took one summer session and one semester of the 2017 academic year.

Literature Review

The Factors

An environment can reflect the lives and activities of children and families by establishing positive identities in children's understanding. Some of the earliest

and the most fundamental relationships support the survival of a child's physical and emotional security on which their language skills can be built (Oates, 2007). Children who are always hungry and often ill do not learn easily regardless of their school attendance (Grantham et al., 2007). Well-to-do children gain access to better resources, while poor, orphans, disabled and other vulnerable groups of children tend to attain poor provision or even have no access at all (Penn, 2008). Thus, it is important to create conditions with which young children can thrive across poverty and inequality (Penn, 2008). According to UNESCO (2008), equal and balanced societies support children to achieve the best outcomes concerning their needs in health and education. Without security of health and education, children's cognitive and physical development is difficult to be realized, not to mention language acquisition.

In addition, the physical environment for children, both indoors and outdoors, encourages positive growth and development for children through opportunities to explore and learn (Grosjean, 2010). Safe, welcoming, warm, and accessible environments for children and adults, including those with additional needs, should afford opportunities to rest and play. Natural environment for outdoor play is essential for children to have healthy, physical and mental development. Learning is constrained and may be damaged if young children are required to sit still indoors, where adults do most of the talking and require children to follow their instruction (Bruce, 2011). Children need to be given play-based active learning opportunities to explore nature, create ideas, make decisions and engage in play, movement and dance and thus increase physical control over their bodies (Christopher et al., 2009).

Internal factors also affect their language acquisition. Children's responses to opportunities or demands to learn more than one language depends on their personality and other personality variables (Krashen, 1981) including motivation, learning styles, intellectual capacity, sensory abilities (Genesee et al., 2007). Little research has been conducted on the effects of these individual differences on the outcomes of alternative models for language in education.

Chinese Language Acquisition

Infants produce and learn the properties of language, including sounds and vocabulary, which are positively strengthened by the child's parents and other members of the child's community (Skinner, 1957). There is an emphasis on the impact of external conditions on the formation of children's language. Although the external environment plays an important role that cannot be underestimated in the process of Chinese language acquisition, this theory does not provide reasonable explanations for why only humans can acquire this complicated system and behavior.

The view of behaviorists on how children learn languages in the acquired environment and form language habits are different. In addition, the process of

forming language habits is a series of result in stimulus-response. The theory of behaviorism is the background of the acquired environment. The views of acquiring language emphasize different points and are not exactly the same. The internal differences can be divided into three groups of theories: imitation, reinforcement and mediation (Qi, 2011).

Multilingual Context

A child who learns one language from birth and second or additional languages later, usually after the age of three and that is considered as consecutive or successive multilingual context (Wang, 2010). When children are given chances to acquire an additional language within their first three years, then he or she may easily pick up two or more languages in simultaneous order (Reena, 2015). Studies about successive multilingualism mainly focus on some certain questions. One of them is whether young multilingual children learn the first and second language in the same sequence, i.e., acquisition order. The order reflects how second language learners acquire their target language in a “predictable and irrespective” way (Macaro, 2010). At least 14 bound morphemes exist commonly when children learn English as their native language (Brown, 1978). Following this finding, some researchers try to study the developmental sequences when children learn English as the second language. Researchers who study universal grammar, argue that there are fundamental differences in the two language acquisition processes because when first language (L1) learners have access to universal grammar, the second language (L2) learners do not (Ren&Xu, 2014). The complexity of morphemes changes depended on the children’s different native languages (Ren & Xu, 2014). Similarly, comparing with monolingual native English speakers, Chinese children’s L2 acquisition orders are different, e.g., plural form, various kinds of tense changes, etc. Hence, the influence of L1 system from multilingual children on the order of L2 acquisition cannot be overlooked regardless of common grammatical features in English have been identified (Hosseini, 2012). Macaro (2010) states that the errors are indicative when children try to build a native-like linguistic system. According to Li (2013), the errors can be acceptable and become a criterion of checking the language development of learners. Input fluency is one possibility that affects the acquisition order (Hosseini, 2012).

Research Methodology

In this research, the researcher applied the mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative methods for gaining research data and results. Questionnaire and interview have been adopted as the research instruments.

Population

This research population comprises five groups of people: Chinese teachers, principal, administrative staff, kindergarten children and parents of kindergarten children who are from one international school in Nonthaburi, Thailand. The researcher selected the population by both simple random sampling and purposive sampling method based on population's convenience and voluntary cooperation. In addition, the researcher applied quantitative research method on collecting the data from the questionnaire of the parents group, and adopted qualitative research method on the interviews of Chinese teachers, principal, administrative staff and kindergarten children.

Samples

The researcher selected the samples by using simple random sampling and purposive sampling method based on population's convenience and voluntary cooperation. The researcher prepared five different sets of questions for interviewing different groups of respondents as follows:

The first group of research sample was the parents, during which the data was collected in a quantitative way. The researcher adopted a convenient sampling method to select the participants of the questionnaire. As there are twenty students in K2, plus thirty in K1, all fifty parents were invited to finish fifty sets of questionnaires. Thus, all K1 and K2 students' parents were the participants of the questionnaires.

The second group of research sample was the Chinese teachers. Five Chinese teachers working with different levels of Chinese courses of the international school were invited to be the research volunteers and to answer questions in the interview session.

The third group of research sample was the principal. As there is only one principal managing the entire international school, thus principal was invited to be an interviewee.

The fourth group of research sample was the school administrative staff. Three staff members were chosen from the staff population of thirty for the interview. They are the members that have had the longest experiences of second language studies and their longevity would contribute as most reliable.

The fifth group of research sample was the students (kindergarten or K- students). There were twenty children from two K1 level classrooms who were chosen out of the population of thirty under the guidance of simple random sampling method. The researcher arrayed thirty children in alphabetical order, beginning with A and ending at Z, and randomly selected twenty students.

Data Collection

The researcher got relevant data from research sample: five teachers, one school principal, three staff, twenty kindergarten children and fifty parents, at school.

The researcher conducted this data collection during July 2017 and the same following academic year of 2017.

Research Instruments	Schedule
Questionnaire	During July of 2017
Interviews	During July, August and September of 2017

Data Analysis

In this research, the collected quantitative data came from the questionnaires to fifty parents both at school and online. The qualitative data came from the interviews to different groups, i.e., five Chinese teachers, one school principal, three staff and twenty children, at school.

As questionnaires were conducted, the data revealing one of the important factors from the parents, the frequency of applying second language by the parents at home was analyzed from the answers of YES or NO on the questionnaire. The data collected on the questionnaire is proceeded through graphical analysis and demographic data. The level of satisfaction of each question was manifested according to the 5 ranges of satisfaction levels, i.e., strongly agree, agree, neutral, strongly disagree and disagree.

As for the interview, the researcher recorded the comments of Chinese teachers, school principal, staff and children respectively. Descriptive analysis was used for describing the data recorded from the interviews of the different groups of interviewees.

Results of the Study

The researcher applied mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative methods in this research. The quantitative method was used to collect the data from fifty parents. A set of twenty questions was given to the fifty parents and was analyzed by using percentage. The qualitative method was presented through a series of interviews to four different groups of respondents, including five Chinese teachers, one principal, three administrative staff and twenty kindergarten children. The researcher used descriptive analysis to analyze the data collected from the interviews.

A. The Results of the Questionnaire

According to the data collected from the questionnaire conducted among fifty parents, the researcher found the following listed factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an international school in Nonthaburi as Table 1 shows. The researcher applied frequency and percentage calculating method in grouping and categorizing all the factors as follows:

Table 1 Factors found from the questionnaire

Factors No.	Factors from the Questionnaire	Frequency	Percentage
1	Parental Factors	11	45.80%
2	Language Environment	3	12.50%
3	Teachers' Instruction	3	12.50%
4	Investment on Study	2	8.30%
5	Learning Strategies	2	8.30%
6	Age Factor	1	4.17%
7	Teaching Facilities	1	4.17%
8	School Curriculum	1	4.17%

According to the Table 1, the researcher found eight factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an international school in Nonthaburi. Parental factor was ranked the top with the highest frequency (11) and percentage (45.80%), followed secondly by language environment, and teachers' instruction in parallelly with the same frequency (3) and percentage (12.50%). The factor of investment on study was ranked the third in parallelly with the factor of learning strategies (Frequency=2, 8.30%). Age factor, teaching facilities and school curriculum were ranked the last with the lowest number of frequency (1) and percentage (4.17%).

B. The Results of the Interviews

The results of the interviews were analyzed according to the transcripts from the interviews taken from four groups, including five teachers, one school principal, three staff, twenty kindergarten children at school of Nonthaburi, Thailand. Five questions were used to interview the teachers and staff; two questions were used to interview the principal; 32 short words&phrases were used to interview the children. The researcher grouped, categorized and calculated the data in order to investigate the factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an international school in Nonthaburi through frequency and percentage as follows:

Table 2 Factors from the interview with the teachers, staff, principal and children

Factor No.	Factors from the Interview with the Teachers	Frequency	Percentage
1	School Curriculum	9	36.00%
2	Teacher' Instruction	6	24.00%
3	Language Environment	3	12.00%

Factor No.	Factors from the Interview with the Teachers	Frequency	Percentage
4	Parental Factors	2	8.00%
5	Native Language	1	4.00%
6	Personality	1	4.00%
7	Different Social Context	1	4.00%
8	Cognitive Development	1	4.00%
9	Age Factor	1	4.00%
Factor No.	Factors from the Interview with the Principal	Frequency	Percentage
1	Teacher's Instruction	1	25.00%
2	Age Factor	1	25.00%
3	Chinese Curriculum	1	25.00%
4	Language Environment	1	25.00%
Factor No.	Factors from the Interview with the Staff	Frequency	Percentage
1	School Curriculum	9	24.32%
2	Language Environment	7	18.92%
3	Parental Factor	5	13.51%
4	Culture Shock	4	10.81%
5	Teachers' Instruction	2	5.41%
6	Personality	2	5.41%
7	Different Social Context	2	5.41%
8	Textbooks	2	5.41%
9	Native Language	2	5.41%
10	Learning Strategies	1	2.70%
11	Age Factor	1	2.70%
Factor No.	Factors from the Interview with the Children	Frequency	Percentage
1	Teachers' Instruction	3	23.08%
2	Learning Environment	3	23.08%
3	Personality	3	23.08%
4	Learning Strategies	2	15.38%
5	Age Factor	1	7.69%
6	Cognitive development	1	7.69%

C. All the Related Factors

According to the results from both the questionnaire and the interviews, the researcher found that the following 14 different factors were all the relevant factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an international school in Nonthaburi as shown in Table 3. School curriculum was in the highest frequency (19) and percentage (50.00%), followed secondly by parental factors (Frequency=18, 47.37%). Language environment was ranked the third (Frequency=17, 44.74%), teachers' instruction (Frequency=15, 39.47%) and personality (Frequency=6, 15.79%) in sequence as the top five factors. The factors were shown as follows:

Table 3 All the factors found from both questionnaire and interviews

Factor No.	Factors from All the Results	Frequency	Percentage
1	School Curriculum	19	50.00%
2	Parental Factors	18	47.37%
3	Language Environment	17	44.74%
4	Teachers' Instruction	15	39.47%
5	Personality	6	15.79%
6	Age Factor	5	13.16%
7	Learning Strategies	4	10.53%
8	Culture Shock	4	10.53%
9	Native Language	3	7.89%
10	Different Social Context	3	7.89%
11	Cognitive Development	2	5.26%
12	Investment on Study	2	5.26%
13	Textbooks	2	5.26%
14	Teaching Facilities	1	2.63%

Conclusion

According to the results of the questionnaire and the interviews, the researcher has found 14 different factors as the relevant factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an international school in Nonthaburi. The top five factors were: 1) school curriculum; 2) parental factors; 3) language environment; 4) teachers' instruction; and 5) personality respectively. In addition, the researcher emphasized the language environment as one of the most significant and common factors affecting Chinese language acquisition in a multilingual context at an

international school in Nonthaburi as ranking in the top three of all results from the questionnaire and the interviews. In the light of the research findings, it is concluded that both results from the interviews and the questionnaire provide inspiration to create a better language environment for the children, having a certain reference value.

Discussion

School curriculum was at the top of all the factors. It is concerned with opening Chinese courses, using appropriate textbooks, designing suitable syllabus, employing qualified teachers and so on at an international school in this research. The researcher found that it is necessary and meaningful to set up the Chinese courses at international schools for a better cycle of different parties concerned in the society. Moreover, sharing the same learning structure, contents and resources in the textbook as Singaporean local students is beneficial for upgrading Thai students' competitiveness in the Chinese language. Daily schedules concerning suitable syllabus from K1 to primary 6 levels enable students to practise their Chinese in an approach of continual spiral progression. A continuum and sequence of teaching in revisiting basic ideas across the contents should be reinforced (Bruner, 1960). As more contents, more learnings extend and more understanding grows in a rich breadth and broader depths. The researcher found that daily Chinese schedules improved the retention of repeated basic ideas among the students as well as the solidated concepts which keep moving upwards in a spiral track. As for employing qualified teachers, qualified international Chinese teachers need to comply with the criterion and standard based of 5 modules (Hanban, 2007), i.e., language knowledge&skills, cultural communication, second language acquisition theories & learning strategies, teaching methodologies and overall professional quality. The measure of fundamental importance for solving the problem of overall professional quality lies in the professional training program (Dai, 2017). As long as every teacher carries more responsibilities and effectiveness of second language teaching, atmospheric effectiveness can have the opportunity to improve and progress.

Parental factor was ranked the second significant factor. The result manifests the circumstance or fact that contributes to the performance of Chinese language acquisition. Parents had different concerns about the language expectation of their children, since parents' interference with their children's linguistic progress extended through their daily interaction with the children, their expectation is of strong impact on the literacy development of their children's mother tongues and the effectiveness of the children's second language acquisition (Li, 2013). A condition was identified referring to active parental commitment and involvement in children's linguistic progress, including daily conversations, explanations, family dialogue and outdoor

activities (Li, 2013). There is an agreement that young children's ability to learn languages and their reading&writing skills are affected by their social environment, including the language with which they are exposed and the language practices imitating from their parents (Pesco&Crago, 2008).

Language environment was ranked the third factor affecting children's Chinese language acquisition. The language environment extends largely to various circumstances, such as home, school and community. Childrens' exposure to language could help to develop their language skills and promote the level of their understandings of a language (VanPatten&Benati, 2010). The environment should be carefully planned to meet children's needs by providing them with the appropriate opportunities to work independently, to make choices, and solve problems (Munoz, 2008). The space should be inviting to children and organized into areas of interest to encourage different types of play (Ball, 2010). Local inexpensive & natural materials should be also inviting for the interest of children in creative and purposeful ways and can be accessed freely as well, a direct reflection and connection of authentic culture and daily real-life experiences (Liz et al., 2010)

The other factors found were in a smaller number of frequency and percentage, such as age factor, learning strategies, culture shock, native language, different social context, cognitive development, investment on study, textbooks and teaching facilities. However, they were also of reference value to guide the Chinese language acquisition from various aspects to the parties concerned.

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