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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## A Study of Chinese learners' Beliefs, Strategy use and Proficiency in Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language

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| ABSTRACT

This research is a mixed-methods study that examined Chinese learners' beliefs and strategies used in language learning in the context of their achieved proficiency. To investigate the relationship existing between these variables, two survey questionnaires, a Chinese proficiency test (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi: HSK 4), and an interview item were constructed. In total, one hundred and twenty international students were conveniently sampled for the BALLI and SILL questionnaires, as well as a Proficiency Test, and six out of the one hundred and twenty were selected to respond to the interview. The results revealed that learning beliefs about learning and communication strategies and metacognitive strategies in learning strategies were frequently used among these participants. The study also showed that a strong positive correlation exists between learning beliefs and the strategies used, while a weak positive and statistically significant correlation exists between their Chinese proficiency, learning beliefs about the language, and the strategies used. However, the regression analysis conducted showed that the regression model is statistically significant ( $F=70.63$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), indicating that the beliefs and strategies used have the potential to statistically predict their learning proficiency. The study concluded with suggestions on how to address negative learning beliefs and build adequate learning strategies to improve their Chinese proficiency.

| KEYWORDS

Chinese language learners, learning beliefs, learning strategies, Chinese proficiency

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in how L2 learners learn their second language, the learning beliefs, perceptions, or ideas, and strategies used in learning the second language. Language belief has become a prominent area of second language acquisition/learning which has grown widely in the last decades and spans into interdisciplinary fields like psychology, linguistics, and education. It has become an interesting area of second language learning which has been significantly studied by prominent scholars like Horwitz (1987), Wenden (1987), Yang (1999), and a host of others. Learners' beliefs can simply be referred to as the perception of people in any learning situation that they find themselves in, and it is believed that those beliefs affect the actual performance of the learners in that area in which learning takes place.

Learning strategies are another prominent area in second/ foreign language acquisition. Numerous research has shown that most second/ foreign language learners employ various kinds of strategies when learning the target language. Ghani (2003) defined language learning strategies as "specific actions, behaviours, steps or techniques that students frequently use to improve their progress in L2 developing skills; these can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval or use of the new language" (56).

In human life, different individuals have various preconceived presumptions and beliefs when it comes to things around them. Therefore, learning a new or foreign language that is quite different from their mother tongue is not exempted since it requires "using the language to interpret and express the real-life messages" (Lee & Vanpatten, 2003:6). Various second language learners

have preconceived ideas that they might have seen or heard about the target language. Some learners have the biological presumption that age is an important factor when learning a foreign language since it is easier for children to learn any kind of language without much difficulty than adults. Some learners believe that the L2's natural environment plays a crucial role in the mastery and competent use of the language, while some believe that there is no connection between learning environment but based on the strategies employed in learning the language. Some L2 learners have the beliefs that learning any foreign/second language involves learning and focusing on the various linguistic levels of the language; phonetics (the study of speech sounds), morphology (the study of words), syntax (the study of grammar) and semantics (the study of meaning). Some learners believe that in learning a foreign language, having a positive belief about strategies used is crucial, while some L2 learners do not have such perceptions.

This shows that understanding the L2 learners' beliefs and strategies is crucial because it enables the teachers and tutors in studying the preconceived beliefs the students had before teaching the class and also devise some positive strategies for enhancing such beliefs since these beliefs have become more important and they affect some language learning strategies (Zare-ee, 2010). Therefore, this research aims to explore the relationship between learning beliefs and strategies used by Chinese language learners. To also identify the correlations between the beliefs and strategies held by Chinese language learners allows potential Chinese learners to adapt to learning within the natural environment, increasing the likelihood of proficient learning and measuring the range of beliefs and strategies held by Chinese learners to identify correlations and make predictions about the combinations of belief and strategy that most support Chinese learners.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Language learning beliefs**

In the field of second/Foreign language learning, the belief system has been a subject of concern for researchers for more than two decades. Learners' beliefs play a significant role in L2 acquisition, and to buttress this significance, Hortwitz (1987) states that "teachers in their classes often encounter students' resistance to some of their instructional activities, and this causes lots of problems for teachers to deal with such situations" (675). To show the significant role learners' beliefs play in learning, White (2008) argues that "in terms of language learning, the domains of beliefs which are acknowledged as relevant are the beliefs learners hold about themselves, about the language and language learning and about the context in which they participate as language learners and language users" (p.21). This shows that the beliefs L2 learners of any target language have about language learning can affect how these learners go about learning the language.

There has been controversy giving a clear-cut definition of what learners' beliefs are. Some scholars have defined and described it from different perspectives and different fields of study. Learners' beliefs, according to Borg (2001), is a "proposition which may be consciously or unconsciously held, is evaluative in that it is accepted as true by an individual and therefore imbued with emotive commitment; further serves as a guide to thought and behaviour" (p.186). From the language learning perspective, Huang (1997) described learners' beliefs as "preconceptions language learners have about the task of learning the target language" (p.29). Huang's (1997) definition was similar to Horwitz, (1988) who is regarded as one of the pioneers of research on language learning and defined beliefs as "students' opinions on a variety of issues and controversies related to language learning" (p.248). These definitions show that second/ foreign language learners have some preconceived beliefs when learning the target language. Some of these preconceived beliefs can be influenced by the learner's previous experiences as a language learner, which could be positive or negative. Learners' cultural background and individual personalities can also consciously and unconsciously shape the language learning beliefs of L2 learners, thereby creating difficulties for the language teacher to successfully administer their instructional activities without any resistance. Therefore, learners' beliefs can be seen as the preconceived ideas, notions, and mindsets that learners have about the target language that can easily impede or enhance the learning of the target language.

#### **2.1.1 Approaches to the investigation of Language Learning Beliefs**

There are several approaches used to investigate beliefs in the field of Second Language Acquisition. According to Kajala (1995), human beliefs can be approached from two dimensions, namely: the discursive and the mainstream approach. The discursive approach to beliefs is seen as socially constructed that varies from one individual to another and from one context to another. This kind of approach to language learning belief takes into account the role of beliefs which are investigated in writings and talks. The mainstream approach, on the other hand, deals with the description of beliefs as fallible, stable as well as cognitive entities in the learners' minds. Barcelos (2000) highlighted three different approaches to beliefs studies, which are; the normative, metacognitive, and contextual approaches. The normative approach to learning beliefs deals with beliefs as a set of pre-determined statements. Researchers using this kind of approach either make use of BALLI, adapt or modify it or develop their own questionnaires to study language learning beliefs. Unlike the normative approach that adopts, modifies, or develops questionnaires to study learning beliefs, the metacognitive approach uses self-reports and interviews since researchers of this kind of approach believe that beliefs are defined by metacognitive knowledge. The contextual approach to learning beliefs entails the contextual observation and

interpretation of the students' beliefs. Researchers of this kind of approach do not employ the use of questionnaires or interviews since they see students' beliefs as socially constructed, which emerge from interactions and communication with others and non-cognitive and social in nature.

## **2.2 Language learning strategies**

In the last few decades, there has been a massive interest in research on second /foreign language learning strategies. In language acquisition and educational achievement, learning strategies are considered as one of the key determinants. Ellis (1994) writes that "the study of learning strategies holds considerable premises, both for language pedagogy and for explaining individual differences in second language learning" (558). To enhance and improve the language proficiency of second language learners, various scholars, researchers and teachers have devised various learning strategies to help L2 learners improve their language proficiency.

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990) language, learning strategies are "the techniques and devices used by second language learners for remembering and organizing samples of the second language ...become actively involved in controlling their own learning using strategies such as thoughts and behaviours that learners use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information" (p.1). Cohen (1998) states that language learning and language use strategies as "those processes which are consciously selected by learners and which may result in action taken to enhance the learning or use of a second or foreign language, through the storage, retention, recall, and application of information about language" (7)

One of the frequently cited definitions of learning strategies is that of Oxford (1990), who characterized learning strategies as "specific actions taken by learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to a new situation" (8).

From the various definitions above, it is summarized that language learning strategies are steps, methods, and techniques employed and utilized by various language learners to facilitate and enhance the successful acquisition of the target language. However, it is important to note that various language learners use different strategies that differ from one individual to another in learning the target language. The individual differences in language learning strategies were confirmed by Ghani (2003) when she points out that " these learners use different kinds of language learning strategies, or specific actions and behaviours to help them learn. Their strategies differ greatly at least in part because their general learning styles are so varied" (58).

## **2.3 Classification of language learning strategies**

O'Malley (1985) classification

O'Malley et al. (1990) classified language learning strategies into three main subcategories, namely; Metacognitive, cognitive, and socio-affective. Metacognitive strategies, according to Brown et al. cited in O'Malley & Chamot (1990), are "higher-order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring, or evaluating the success of a learning activity"(44). These processes entail planning, selective attention to the learning process as is it taking place, monitoring of one's production and comprehension, and making a self-evaluation of the learning process as it is completed.

Cognitive strategies: These kinds of strategies involve direct manipulation of learning materials or incoming information to enhance learning (Brown 2007). These strategies are more limited to specific tasks, like repetition, rehearsal, grouping and classifying words, deduction, imagery, keywords, elaboration, and transfer.

Socioaffective strategies are characterized by "either interaction with another person or ideational control over effect" (O'Malley & Chamot,1990:45). This means that socio-affective strategies involve interpersonal communication, social activities, and transactions with others. Cooperation, Self-talk and, questioning for clarification are the main socio-affective strategies that L2 learners engage in when learning new languages.

Rubin's (1987) Classification

Rubin's (1987) classification of language strategies was different from O'Malley and Chamot's classification in the sense that the scholar made a distinction between strategies contributing directly to learning and those indirectly contributing to learning. Therefore, Rubin classified language learning strategies into direct and indirect. The learning, communication, and social strategies were identified as the three types of strategies used by language learners that contribute either directly or indirectly to language learning.

Learning strategies are strategies employed by language learners that directly contribute and as well facilitate learning of the target language. These strategies are classified into two: cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. According to Rubin (1987), cognitive strategies refer to the "specific actions which contribute directly to the learning process" (p. 118). This means that

cognitive strategies can be seen as measures that are utilized in learning that "involves direct analysis, transformation or synthesis of learning materials" (Zare 2012, p.165). The six major cognitive strategies that directly contribute to language learning are: clarification/verification, monitoring, memorization, guessing /inductive inferencing, deductive reasoning, and practice. Metacognitive strategies entail different procedures used to supervise, control, or self-direct language learning, such as planning, setting goals, prioritizing, and self-management.

Communication strategies are less directly connected to language learning. It involves communication processes like conversation and getting meaning across or making a clarification of the speakers' intentions.

Social strategies, on the other hand, refer to those activities language learners engage in that provide them with the opportunity to be exposed to and practice their language. This exposure to the target language contribute indirectly to learning since it does not "directly involve obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of the language" (Rubin&Wenden1987:23)

Oxford classification of language learning strategies

In reference to existing works of literature on language learning strategies, Oxford (1990) seems to be the most popularly inclusive classification of language learning strategies used by researchers and scholars of learning strategies. Oxford's language learning strategies were divided into two main categories; Direct and indirect strategies.

Direct strategies are strategies that have a direct impact on language learning. According to Oxford, "direct strategies require the mental processing of the language" (1990:37), and they are divided into cognitive, memory, and compensation strategies. Cognitive strategies involve conscious methods of handling the target language. It facilitates understanding the new language structures, organizing materials, language use, and production, and it falls into four sets which include: practice, receiving and sending information, analyzing and thinking, creating a structure for input and output that helps learners sort out the relevant information needed, reject unnecessary and confusing material. Memory strategies refer to those strategies used for the storage of information. In a more refined way, it involves the mental process of retaining new information in the memory and retrieving it when needed. These types of strategies are in four sets, which are: creating mental links, applying images and sounds, reviewing well, and employing action. The compensation strategies are strategies that help learners overcome knowledge gaps, especially when facing a temporary breakdown in communication. These strategies are divided into two sets, which are: guessing intelligently and overcoming limitations in speaking or writing.

The indirect strategies, on the other hand, are strategies that are indirectly used by learners in learning a second or foreign language. These indirect strategies are divided into metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Metacognitive strategies are strategies that enable learners to control and coordinate their own learning processes. These strategies entail paying attention, planning, finding and using resources, looking for practice opportunities, self-monitoring, and evaluation. Affective strategies are strategies that help learners manage and control their emotions, values, motivations, and attitudes towards learning the target language. These strategies are regarded as inner sparks that can be achieved through building positive emotions, lowering anxiety, and encouraging oneself. Social strategies are used by learners to help them learn language from people around them through interactions, cooperation, and empathizing with others. The aims of these strategies, according to Oxford (1990), are to "help learners interact and collaborate with others, seek help, continue social interaction when knowledge gaps arise and deal with sociocultural identity issues" (p.24).

## **2.4 Review of previous studies**

Hou (2018) conducted a comparison with learners of FL, EFL, and EFL 224 Taiwanese college students to determine the role of strategy in foreign language learning and factors affecting the student's proficiency use of the language. The research design used was a descriptive study, and the instrument used was a questionnaire of motivation, belief, strategy, and anxiety. The findings of the study showed that the strategy used in learning the language was a good instrument for successful language learning. It was also discovered that motivation plays a significant role in language learning in comparison to other factors.

In trying to determine the changes in and contributing factors of learners' beliefs, Liu (2018) conducted a longitudinal study that spanned one year using 70 Chinese Freshmen College students. The Questionnaire used as a research instrument was formulated using Horwitz 1987 BALLI, Gao AMTB, Oxford's SILL, and Reid's PLSPG to measure their learning beliefs, and the IELTS published test paper was used to assess their proficiency. The findings showed that there were significant changes in self-efficacy beliefs not only about learning difficulty but also about learning strategies.

To find out the relationship between English learning beliefs and learning strategies from 100 (90 females and 10 males) second-level university students in Jiangxi province, Zhou (2018) conducted a survey using two research instruments; BALLI and SILLS questionnaires and an interview to elicit information from the participants. The findings show that there is a close relationship

between learning beliefs and learning strategies.

Yashima, Neshida & Mizumoto (2017) investigate the influence of learner beliefs and gender on the motivational power of L2 selves among 2631 university freshmen in West Japan. The instruments used were questionnaires and TOEFL tests. The results showed that strong ideals and thoughts of L2 self-visions led to an intended effort that amounts to higher levels of objectives measured proficiency, and females' greater tendency to value communication activities influenced their stronger vision of ideal L2 self.

Liu's (2016) study examined the interrelations between foreign language listening anxiety and strategies used to predict the effect of text performance of high and low proficiency. A questionnaire and listening text were administered to 1660 first-year undergraduate non-English majors. The findings highlighted that low-proficient groups were significantly more anxious and less confident about their English listening than High-proficient pairs. There was also a significant correlation between language anxiety and the strategy used, and the strategy used was a good prediction for listening test performance for both groups. The results showed that language anxiety and strategy use are closely interrelated and are also considered a prominent factor in second language learning.

Six Turkish university students were used by Kaymakamoghu (2016) to examine the effect of context on learners' perception when learning the English language as a foreign language. The results of the interview conducted were analyzed using coding, narrative, and thematic analysis methods. It showed that individual differences in the learner's beliefs vary based on different learning environmental conditions that different people evaluate their proficiency based on different learning contexts. Hayati (2015) investigated the English language beliefs, strategies, and English academic achievement of ESP students of STIENAS Samarinda to determine if there is a relationship between the three variables. The researcher employed a quantitative method which includes descriptive and correlational design. The instruments used were BALLI and SILL, which were administered to sixty-six first-year Management students. The data collected was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The results of the findings show that there was a positive and weak correlation of beliefs and strategies with the students' English academic achievement. There was also a positive and insignificant correlation between English academic achievement and beliefs about learning the English Language and a negative and significant correlation between students' English learning strategies and academic achievement.

Abudolahzede and Nai (2014) study to investigate if there is a positive correlation between learners' language beliefs and their proficiency level. The researchers used 226 Iranian students between the ages of 14-17. The instruments for data collection were the Key English Test (KET) which was used to measure the English proficiency of the participants, and a Persian version of Horwitz's (1987). The results of the findings revealed that there was a positive correlation between language proficiency and beliefs about the language.

To investigate the relationship between EFL learners' beliefs and learning strategies used by English Majors in Vocational Colleges in Jiangxi, Li (2010) made use of two questionnaires, namely the Language Learning Belief Questionnaire designed by Liu (2003) with a few items taken from Horwitz's BALLI (1897) and Oxfords (1990) SILL (version 7.0) as two integuments used for data collection and analyzed using SPSS package. The questionnaire was randomly administered to 214 second-year students of English majors. The results of the findings showed that the students hold a strong opinion about the six belief categories, and there is a moderate correlation coefficient between the language learning beliefs and the frequency of strategies used.

Boakye (2007) investigated the students' beliefs about language learning to find out if the student beliefs can influence the language learning process. The researcher used the Horwitz's (1987) BALLI questionnaire as the research instrument, which was administered to first-year South African students from various faculties who had been identified as being at risk academically. The findings of the study show that learner beliefs can have a negative influence on their learning strategies, which in turn affects the successful process of acquiring the target language.

In order to show the correlation between EFL learners' beliefs about language learning and strategy, Yang (1999) carried out a study on Taiwanese EFL college students, and the study revealed that students' self-efficacy beliefs about learning the English language correlate strongly with their learning strategies and also the learners' beliefs about values and methods of learning spoken English were closely tied to their use of the spoken practice strategies employed.

To study how a positive attitude and realistic beliefs are linked to proficiency, Mantle-Bromley (1995) investigated the beliefs of 208 first-year middle school students taking Spanish and French in Kansas using the BALLI questionnaire as a research instrument. The results revealed that some of the participants' beliefs about language learning completely varied from those of the beliefs held by their teachers, which corresponds with the findings made by Horwtiz (1988).

Therefore, from the above-reviewed works of literature from different scholars, some of the literature that focused more on CFL learners was mostly not in a Chinese context, and the participants were mostly English, Korean, and Cantonese Speakers. Most of the literature, on the other hand, extensively focused more on the EFL context. It becomes important to examine the beliefs, strategies used, and proficiency of learners learning Chinese as a foreign language in its natural environment. It is believed that this study will provide new insight that will pave the way for new assumptions about learning Chinese as a second/ foreign language and will cover a more wide range of participants from multiple nationalities, unlike other sample subjects used by other researchers. It also aimed to verify the relationship between language learning beliefs and strategies to see if this study will correlate significantly or insignificantly with previous and earlier studies.

### **2.5 Research questions**

The present analytical descriptive study was designed to address the following questions:

1. Which beliefs are held, and which strategies are practised by second/foreign language learners of the Chinese language?
2. Is there any correlation between beliefs, strategy use, and Chinese language proficiency?
3. To what extent can these correlations be used to predict the proficiency of Chinese language learners?

## **3. Method**

### **3.1 Sample / Participants**

The sample for this study consisted of 120 international/foreign students of different Chinese universities in China from different countries, and the sample subjects comprised language students, bachelor and postgraduate students from different disciplines. Also, 6 out of the 120 international students used for quantitative data analysis were randomly selected.

### **3.2 Instrument(s)**

#### **3.2.1 Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)**

The first instrument is the "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)", developed by Horwitz (1988) to assess the beliefs about learning a foreign language. The 30-statement BALLI employs a 5-1 point Likert scale ranging from answers indicating "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The BALLI was distributed to the students in English. Only minor and most necessary modifications were made to ensure that the instrument reflects the present study's context with a focus on international students studying in China. For example, the word "*English*" was replaced with "*Chinese*." Another example, the "*most important part of learning the English language is learning new words*". was changed into "*it is better to start learning Chinese with pinyin*". The items were categorized into five components as follows:

Learning and communication strategies [1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9]

Difficulty of language learning [10,11,12,13,14,15,16]

Foreign language Aptitude [17,18,19,20,21]

Motivations and expectations [22,23,24]

The nature of language learning [25,26,26,27,28,29,30]

#### **3.2.2 Strategy Inventory Language Learning**

The second questionnaire was SILL developed by Oxford (1990) Version 7.0. Like the BALLI instrument, only minor and most necessary modifications were made. For example, the word "*English*" was replaced with "*Chinese*". In another example, "*I practice the sounds of English*" was changed to "*I practice the Chinese tones as much as I can*". Respondents were asked to rate their use of SILL on a five-point Likert scale from "(5) always or almost always true of me to "(1) never or almost never true of me". Items were measured based on the type of strategies as follows:

Memory strategy [1, 2, 3, 4, 5,6,7, 8,9]

Cognitive strategies [10,11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23,24,25]

Compensational strategy [25, 26, 27, 28,29,30]

Metacognitive strategy [31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37,38,39]

Social strategies [40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45]

Affective strategies [18, 46 47, 48, 49,50]

#### **3.2.3 Measurement of Chinese Proficiency**

The HSK (Level IV) test is made up of listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing and contains a total of 100 test items. The listening part comprises 45 items, reading consists of 40 items, and writing 15 items. The total score for the whole test is 300, with 180 as the official cut-off mark, but the majority of the institutions consider 200 above as the passing score to

either graduate or get admitted into their university.

### 3.2.4 Interview

The fourth instrument was an in-depth interview (IDI) Guide. This research instrument employed a qualitative approach using an interview guide to elicit information that mostly borders on the research subject matter. An in-depth interviews guide was used to complement the findings from the questionnaire. In this study, 6 out of the 120 international students were randomly selected for the interview.

### 3.3 Data collection procedures

After the instruments were approved, the researcher randomly disseminated the questionnaires through an online survey platform via a WeChat link which makes it convenient for the respondents to fill.

### 3.4 Data analysis

The participants were asked to complete the close-ended questionnaire, and the data gathered from questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25. To provide a depth study, this research used both quantitative and qualitative methods to conduct this study. It also made use of descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard derivations, and rankings) and inferential statistics (Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Multiple Regression) to interpret the responses gathered from the quantitative data.

## 4. Results

The Results section presents the study's findings.

### 4.1 Beliefs about learning the Chinese language

There were 30 items that reflected the beliefs of the respondents, and they were categorized under beliefs about learning and communication strategies (1-9), the difficulty of language learning (10-16), foreign language Aptitude (17-21), motivations, and expectations (22-24), and nature of language learning (25-30).

With regards to beliefs about learning and communication strategies, most of the respondents indicated the belief, 'It is better to start learning Chinese with Pinyin,' has the highest mean ( $M=4.22$ ;  $SD=.804$ ). This was attested by one student's interview response, *"I think the best way to start learning the Chinese language is starting with Pinyin because it helps you get the basics of the language in terms of sounds and tones."*

The respondents also have the belief that 'It is important to repeat and practise a lot when learning the Chinese language' ( $M=4.17$ ;  $SD=0.813$ ). The respondents also agreed to the statement, 'I enjoy practising Chinese with people I meet, whenever possible' ( $M=4.08$ ;  $SD=0.885$ ). Likewise, the respondents agreed to the statements 'I would like my Chinese teacher to correct all my mistakes' ( $M=3.90$ ;  $SD=1.040$ ) and 'It is important to speak Chinese with an excellent accent' ( $M=3.77$ ;  $SD=1.170$ ). The respondents had neutral beliefs about 'I feel timid speaking Chinese in front of other people' ( $M=3.24$ ;  $SD=1.152$ ) and 'If you are allowed to make mistakes, in the beginning, it will be difficult to get rid of them later on' ( $M=3.32$ ;  $SD=1.153$ ). The respondents disagreed with the statement, 'You shouldn't say anything in Chinese until you can say it correctly,' with the lowest mean of 2.23.

With regards to beliefs about the difficulty of language learning, most of the respondents indicated that 'The most difficult part in learning Chinese is learning the Characters' ( $M=4.13$ ;  $SD=0.934$ ). Due to the differences in the language writing system, most CFL learners find difficulties in writing the Chinese characters. Just as one of the students pointed out, *"My earlier belief about the Chinese language is that it's the most difficult language due to the complicated nature of the writing system. I find it difficult to recognize the characters and sometimes do not follow the correct pattern of writing the Hanzi, which seems complicated."* This was followed by a majority of respondents with the belief that 'they will learn to read, write and speak Chinese well' ( $M=4.03$ ;  $SD=0.934$ ). The respondents also agreed to the belief that 'Some languages are easier to learn than others' ( $M=4.03$ ;  $SD=0.855$ ). The respondents were also of the belief that 'The Chinese language is one of the most difficult languages for someone who doesn't have it as a first language' ( $M=3.97$ ;  $SD=1.025$ ). The respondents agreed to the statement that 'Differentiating the tones in words is the most difficult in learning spoken Chinese' ( $M=3.9$ ;  $SD=0.892$ ). The interview showed a lot of speaking difficulties about the Chinese tones. Although most of the participants expressed the importance of speaking Chinese, yet the tones have always been the difficult aspect of it. They pointed out, *"Although it's normal to get frustrated when trying to master the complicated nature of the Chinese tones which state the meaning of any word used in the sentence. The existence of four different tones makes it more complicated especially speaking or trying to express oneself. Most times, hearing the native Chinese saying that they don't understand my Chinese also makes me disappointed."* The respondents are also of the belief that the 'Chinese language is one of the most difficult languages for someone who doesn't have it as a first language' ( $M=3.97$ ;  $SD=1.025$ ). The respondents also affirmed that

'Chinese Grammar is the most difficult part of learning Chinese' (M=3.60; SD=1.032).

With regards to beliefs about foreign language Aptitude, most of the respondents agreed to the belief that 'It is easier for children than adults to learn the Chinese language' (M=4.07; SD=0.842), followed by those who believe that 'some people have a special ability for learning new languages' (M=3.99, SD=0.957), then those who believe that 'Everyone can learn to use Chinese as a second/foreign language (M=3.98, SD=0.874). The respondents were neutral to the belief that 'females are better than males at learning Chinese language' (M=3.04; SD=1.212) and 'People who are good at mathematics and science are not good at learning languages' (M=2.83; SD=1.324).

In terms of beliefs about motivations and expectations, the respondents agreed to the belief that 'I want to learn to speak, read, and write Chinese very well' (M=4.23; SD=0.847). Also, the respondents agreed to the belief that 'The Chinese language is a language of opportunity and employment' (M= 3.99; SD=0.874) and 'If I learn to speak Chinese well, I will have a better chance of finding a good job' (M=3.98; SD=0.953).

Finally, with regards to beliefs about the nature of language learning, a majority agreed to the belief that 'It is better to learn the Chinese language in China' (M=4.07; SD=0.780). This was in line with the responses derived from the interview, which showcased the importance of the natural environment in learning the Chinese language. One of the participants commented that *"the natural environment is an essential factor when learning any given language. Learning Chinese in China has helped me to improve my proficiency use of the language. Communicating with the native speakers, listening to various people around me speaking in Chinese, and also reading the characters on the street boards did help a lot"*.

Another participant also commented that *"I believe when learning a language, the environment has a crucial role to play for helping the learner. Learning Chinese in China has helped me a lot, in the sense that I have direct contact with native speakers, which gives me a chance to practice my Chinese and also to learn more about the culture"*.

The respondents also agreed to the 'belief that they find it important to create opportunities for themselves to use Chinese outside of class' (M= 4.02; SD= 0.767). The respondents were also of the belief that 'Learning Chinese language is different from learning other academic subjects (M= 3.98; SD= 0.825) and 'The most important part of learning the Chinese language is learning its vocabulary' (M= 3.93 SD= 0.786). The respondents remained neutral on the belief that 'Learning Chinese is mostly a matter of translating from my mother tongue' (M=3.53; SD= 1.084).

**4.1.1 Most common beliefs about learning the Chinese language**

To identify the most common beliefs about learning the Chinese language, all the items with means greater than 4.0 were sorted in decreasing order as presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1 Results on respondents most common beliefs about learning the Chinese language

Beliefs	M	Category	Rank
I want to learn to speak, read, and write Chinese very well	4.23	Motivations and expectations	1 <sup>st</sup>
It is better to start learning Chinese with Pinyin	4.22	learning and communication strategies	2 <sup>nd</sup>
It is important to repeat and practise a lot when learning the Chinese language	4.17	Learning and communication strategies	3 <sup>rd</sup>
The most difficult part in learning Chinese is learning the Characters	4.13	Difficulty of language learning	4 <sup>th</sup>
I enjoy practising Chinese with people I meet, whenever possible	4.08	learning and communication strategies	5 <sup>th</sup>
It is easier for children than adults to learn the Chinese language	4.07	Foreign language aptitude	6 <sup>th</sup>
I believe that I will learn to read, write and speak Chinese well.	4.03	Difficulty of language learning	7 <sup>th</sup>
Some languages are easier to learn than others	4.03	Difficulty of language learning	8 <sup>th</sup>
I find it important to create opportunities for myself to use Chinese outside of class	4.02	Nature of language learning	10 <sup>th</sup>



#### 4.1.2 Strategies used by learners of the Chinese language

There were 50 items representing the strategies used by learners of the Chinese language. Of the 50 items, they were categorized into memory strategies (1-9), cognitive strategies (10-24), compensational strategies (25-30), metacognitive strategies (31-39), social strategies (40-45), and effective strategies (46-50).

With regards to memory strategies employed, 'I use new Chinese words in a sentence, so I can remember them' was used by the majority of respondents with the highest mean ( $M= 4.14$ ;  $SD= 0.737$ ). The respondents agreed to the remaining strategies (i.e., items 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9) in learning the Chinese language. The least memory strategies used by respondents are 'I physically act out new Chinese words' and 'I remember new Chinese words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on board, or a street sign' with the lowest means of 3.62.

With regards to cognitive strategies employed by learners, most of the respondents agreed to the statement, 'I practice the Chinese tones as much as I can' with the highest mean in this category ( $M= 4.05$ ;  $SD=0.743$ ). This is in line with item 16 of the belief question 'Differentiating the tones in words are the most difficult in learning spoken Chinese'. Therefore, to overcome this difficulty, most CFL learners result in constant practice to improve their Chinese tones. One of the participants narrates his experience, "At first, I always confuse 4 and 10 digits. When you are buying some items, and the seller says 4 or 10 RMB in Chinese, I always have to repeat after them to verify if he/she meant 4 or 10. But with constant speaking and listening practice, I can tell the differences now," The respondents also agreed to the remaining items (10,11, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24) under this category with the statement, 'I try not to translate word-for-word' identified as the lowest cognitive strategy ( $M=3.60$ ;  $SD=1.048$ ) used by learners of the Chinese language.

Under compensational strategies, the respondents agreed to all the items with the strategy, 'When I can't think of a word during a conversation in Chinese, I use gestures' ( $M= 3.85$ ;  $SD=0.984$ ) identified as the most used strategy by the respondents. The least employed strategy with the lowest mean under this category was identified to be 'I read Chinese without looking up every new word' ( $M=3.57$ ;  $SD=1.034$ ).

In terms of metacognitive strategies employed by the respondents, most agreed to the statement, 'I try to find out how to be a better learner of Chinese' ( $M= 4.13$ ;  $SD=0.762$ ). Most of the interviewed participants believed that "the more you participate in social activities, by speaking Chinese every day, by putting all my devices in Chinese so that I can learn the language well and quick." Others also emphasized "interacting with Chinese friends and native speakers."

The rest of the items under metacognitive strategies were all agreed as strategies employed by the respondents. Under this category, respondents identified that the least implemented strategy was 'I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in Chinese' ( $M=1.92$ ;  $SD=0.852$ ).

With regards to social strategies, 'If I do not understand something in Chinese, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again' was identified as the most implemented strategy with the highest mean ( $M=4.08$ ;  $SD= 0.784$ ). The least employed strategy with the lowest mean under this category was identified to be 'I try to learn about the culture of Chinese speakers' ( $M=3.88$ ;  $SD=0.862$ ).

Finally, in terms of affective strategies majority of the respondents agreed to "I encourage myself to speak Chinese even when I am afraid of making a mistake' ( $M=3.95$ ;  $SD=0.897$ ) as a strategy they use in learning Chinese. The respondents were neutral to the statement 'I write down my feelings in a language learning diary' ( $M= 3.37$ ;  $SD=1.152$ ) and 'I notice when I am nervous or tense when studying or learning Chinese' ( $M= 3.43$ ;  $SD=1.179$ ).

#### 4.1.3 Most used strategies by learners of the Chinese language

In order to identify the most used strategies in learning the Chinese language, all the items with means greater than 4.0 were sorted and listed in order of importance as presented in Table 2 below:

Strategies	$M$	Category	Rank
I use new Chinese words in a sentence, so I can remember them	4.14	MEM	1 <sup>st</sup>
I try to find out how to be a better learner of Chinese	4.13	MET	2 <sup>nd</sup>
If I do not understand something in Chinese, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again.	4.08	SOC	3 <sup>rd</sup>
I pay attention when someone is speaking Chinese	4.07	MET	4 <sup>th</sup>
I notice my Chinese mistakes and use that information to help me do	4.07	MET	5 <sup>th</sup>

better			
I pay attention when someone is speaking Chinese	4.07	MET	6 <sup>th</sup>
I ask Chinese friends and teachers to correct my mistakes when I speak Chinese	4.06	SOC	7 <sup>th</sup>
I practice the Chinese tones as much as I can	4.05	COG	8 <sup>th</sup>
I have clear goals for improving my Chinese language skills	4.04	MET	10 <sup>th</sup>
I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study Chinese	4.02	MET	11 <sup>th</sup>

**4.2 What is the correlation between beliefs, strategy used, and proficiency?**

The correlation matrix was conducted to answer the second research question, and the results are presented in Table 3 below:

Table 3 Correlation matrix between Chinese learners' beliefs, strategies, and Chinese learners' proficiency

		Beliefs	Strategies	M	SD	N
Chinese Proficiency	R	0.16**	0.10**	226.70	34.28	120
Beliefs		--	0.71	3.66	0.37	120
Strategies		0.71	--	3.85	0.49	120
	Sig(2 tailed)	<i>p</i> < 0.05	<i>p</i> < 0.05			120

Table 4.5 shows the Pearson correlation matrix between the independent variables (Chinese language learners' beliefs and strategies) and the dependent variable, Chinese language learners' Proficiency. Correlation can take on any value in the range [-1, 1].

The correlation coefficient (r) between their beliefs and proficiency was found to be 0.16, while the correlation coefficient between the strategies practised and their proficiency was found to be 0.10. This indicates a weak positive and statistically significant correlation exists between learners' beliefs about the Chinese language (*r* = .16) and strategies practised by Chinese learners (*r* = .10) with their Chinese Proficiency. It can be concluded from the result that as Chinese language learners' beliefs about the Chinese language grow, their Chinese proficiency improves, but the effect is very small. Similarly, as Chinese language learners adopt strategies in learning the Chinese language, their Chinese proficiency improves, but the effect is very small. Also, it could be determined from the table that there exists a strong positive correlation (*r*=0.71) between Chinese learners' beliefs about the Chinese language and the strategies practised.

**4.3 To determine the extent these correlations can be used to predict the proficiency of Chinese language learners**

To answer the third research question, a regression analysis was conducted, and the results are presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4 Regression coefficients of Chinese learners' beliefs and strategies on Chinese proficiency

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>		
(Constant)	174.968	30.842		5.673	.000
Beliefs	.014	.006	.142	2.333	.041
Strategies	.042	.008	.073	5.250	.000

Dependent Variable: Chinese Proficiency

According to the regression results, it is deduced that 64.9% of the variation in Chinese learners' proficiency was explained by Chinese learners' beliefs and Strategies. Moreover, the ANOVA table shows that the regression model is statistically significant (*F*=70.63, *p*<0.05), and this gives the indication that Chinese learners' beliefs and strategies practised have the potential to statistically predict Chinese learners' proficiency. Chinese learners' beliefs are significantly predictive of Chinese learners' proficiency ( $\beta$ =0.142, *p*=0.041, *t*=2.333). This shows that as Chinese learners' beliefs grow, their Chinese proficiency also improves. Similarly, the strategies used are significantly predictive of Chinese learners' proficiency ( $\beta$ =0.073, *p*=0.00, *t*=5.25). This indicates that as Chinese language learners adopt strategies in learning the Chinese language, their Chinese proficiency also improves. A standardized beta coefficient compares the strength of the effect of Chinese learners' beliefs and strategies used on Chinese learners' proficiency. The higher the absolute value of the beta coefficient, the stronger the predictive power. The results indicate that Chinese learners' beliefs with a beta of .142 have a stronger effect than the strategies implemented with a beta of .073.

## 5. Discussion

The findings revealed that learners of the Chinese language included in this study have the motivation and expectation to learn to speak, read, and write Chinese very well. That notwithstanding, they believe it is better to start learning Chinese with Pinyin. They also believe it is important to repeat and practice often when learning the Chinese language. This demonstrates that L2 learners' beliefs about language learning can have a significant impact on how they approach learning the language, in line with White's (2008) argument that the domains of beliefs that are acknowledged as relevant in terms of language learning are the beliefs learners hold about themselves, the language and language learning, and the coexistence of language learners.

The survey and interview sessions showed that the participants adopt or devise various strategies to successfully attain their goals over the course of learning the Chinese language properly. Among the strategies examined, it was revealed that a majority use new Chinese words in a sentence so they can remember them. Researchers such as Marion (2008) and Nation (2011) realize that the acquisition of vocabulary is very crucial for successful second language use and plays an important role in the formulation of complete spoken and written texts. Since learners see second language acquisition (SLA) as essentially a matter of learning vocabulary, they spend a great deal of time trying to find out how to be a better learner of Chinese and if they do not understand something in Chinese, they ask the other person to slow down or say it again. The findings also revealed that learners of the Chinese language adopt metacognitive strategies more frequently than any other strategy. There is evidence that metacognitive strategies play a more significant role than other learning strategies in this process because once a learner understands how to regulate his/her own learning through the use of strategies, language acquisition should proceed at a faster rate (Anderson, 2003).

The correlation matrix revealed a strong positive correlation between the independent variables (Belief and Strategies). This finding is congruent with the research finding of Zhou's (2018) and Liu's (2006) study to a greater extent. Zhou (2018) used a similar research instrument that is the BALLI questionnaire, to elicit information from the participants. His finding showed that there is a close relationship between learning beliefs and learning strategies. Liu (2016) examined the interrelations between foreign language listening anxiety and strategies used to predict the effect of text performance of high and low proficiency. There was also a significant correlation between language anxiety and strategy used, and the strategy used was a good prediction for listening test performance for both groups. The findings also showed a weak positive, and statistically, a significant correlation exists between learners' beliefs, strategies, and Chinese learners' proficiency. This finding is similar to the research finding of Hayati (2015), whose scope of the study was on English learners. The results of his findings show that there was a positive and weak correlation of beliefs and strategies with the students' English academic achievement. From the findings, it was determined that learners' beliefs are highly predictive of their success in Chinese language learning than the strategies used. Therefore, learners of the Chinese Language should foster specific beliefs if they hope to become proficient, successful learners of the Chinese language.

## 6. Conclusions

Chinese language learners have a set of beliefs about the Chinese language and language learning. Participants at the beginner level hope to be able to speak, read, and write Chinese fluently. Teachers should assist in the creation of an environment that is favourable to reducing feelings of nervousness or shyness and establish a learning strategy that fits all learners in the classroom. Language teachers must pay attention to each student's strengths and weaknesses and also try to abolish any negative beliefs that will put off the Chinese learners learning the Chinese language properly, especially the general perception that the Chinese language is so difficult to learn. (汉语特别难学)。

There were some notable limitations encountered in the course of accomplishing the goals of this study. First, it was getting participants to fill the lengthy questionnaires; hence the answers given to the questions could not be trusted fully as some students quickly rushed through without taking time to understand the questionnaire items.

The current study revealed the learning beliefs and what general strategies students used to improve their language proficiency. Future researchers should also explore and examine the relationship among other variables such as gender, age, attitude, and anxiety towards learning the Chinese language in its natural environment with target participants of Chinese-taught programmes, make a longitudinal study or comparison between low-proficiency learners and high proficiency learners, and also it is important to develop well concise instruments that capture those variables.

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