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## Motivation Research among Chinese Language Learners in the Chinese Department at Eötvös Loránd University, Hungary

### Abstract

By investigating the motivation to learn Chinese among BA and MA students in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University, this study explores the main characteristics of learners at the language level, learner level, and learning context level, as well as the similarities and differences in learning motivation among learners of different Chinese proficiency levels. Moreover, this study discusses how to stimulate and maintain learners' motivations to learn in order to ensure the sustainable and vigorous development of Chinese teaching in Hungary.

**Keywords:** learning motivation, Chinese teaching in Hungary, motivation

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#### 摘要

本研究通过对罗兰大学中文系本科和硕士生汉语学习动机进行调查，探索学习者在语言层面、学习者层面和学习情境层面的主要特征，以及不同汉语水平学习者在学习动机上的异同，探讨如何激发并保持学习者的学习动机，以确保匈牙利汉语教学的持续蓬勃发展。

**关键词：**学习动机，语言层面，学习者层面，学习情境层面，融合型动机，工具型动机，激发策略



## Introduction

Hungary has a deep-rooted foundation in Sinology with a rich history. In recent years, Chinese language education has seen remarkable growth and achievements. Beyond the rising trend of ‘Chinese fever’, what motivates learners to study the language? This is a question worth delving into in its own right, but it is also of practical significance for language teachers and language teaching institutions.

## Motivation and its Classification

According to Jones, motivation is defined as ‘psychological forces that determine the direction of a person’s behaviour, their level of effort, and their level of persistence’<sup>1</sup>. Among the various factors influencing second language acquisition, according to Li motivation takes the first place at 33%, followed by aptitude, also at 33%, and intelligence at 20%<sup>2</sup>. We should note that the notion of ‘aptitude’ has been analysed in many ways, but it invariably includes motivation, so the latter appears to be the strongest single factor.

Many scholars follow Gardner et al. (1972) in classifying motivation into integrative and instrumental types. The former type is closer to what others (e.g., Ng and Ng, 2015) call ‘intrinsic motivation’, which refers to the (potential) learner’s internal hopes, desires, and interests. The latter type is more concerned with ‘extrinsic’ rewards, such as better grades or jobs, higher salaries, peer approval, and avoidance of punishment.

Hungarian scholar Zoltan Dörnyei (2015, 2000) offers a more subtle ‘process’ model by adding a temporal dimension, suggesting that motivation is a dynamic phenomenon that may develop and go through several stages as the individual learner follows their own path through language learning. Each stage is characterised by a different type of motivation. For example, the learner may start with preliminary instrumental (e.g., job-related) goals, followed by (intrinsic) enjoyment of actual learning, then by satisfaction at success. In Dörnyei’s view, motivation is (at least partially) open to influence

<sup>1</sup> Jones 2000: 455.

<sup>2</sup> Li 2013: 9.

by others, including peers, teachers, and family members, and different types may co-exist or even conflict.

Dörnyei (1994) proposes a three-tiered model of motivation. The ‘language level’ is the most basic level, determining the direction and purpose of second language learners, including both integrative and instrumental motivation. The ‘learner level’ encompasses emotional and cognitive factors, such as achievement needs and self-confidence, shaped by the stable personality traits of learners. Self-confidence is comprised of lack of language anxiety, self-evaluation of second language abilities, outcome attribution, and self-efficacy. Finally, the ‘learning context level’ consists of three motivational components related to the course, the teachers, and the learning community respectively.

Clearly, there are many different ways of conceptualising motivation in language learning: for the purposes of the research project outlined in the present paper, which was not planned as a diachronic investigation, it was decided to use the last model mentioned above.

## Research Objectives and Methods

### (1) Survey Participants

This study focused on BA and MA students currently enrolled in degree programmes of the Chinese Studies Department at Eötvös Loránd University. Participants included first, second, and third-year BA students and first-year MA students. There were 54 first-year undergraduates, 25 second-year undergraduates (11 in the regular class and 14 in the translation class), 32 third-year undergraduates (16 in the regular class and 16 in the translation class), and five first-year master’s students. A total of 116 questionnaires were distributed, and all 116 were returned, resulting in a 100% response rate.

### (2) Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. The first part collected basic information about participants, including their name, gender, age, major (some Chinese studies students major in Chinese, while others have it as a minor), and the duration of their Chinese language learning. The second part was designed on the basis of Dörnyei’s three-tier theory of second lan-

guage learning motivation, with reference to Zhang's questionnaire (2018) on the motivation of Nepalese students learning Chinese. It contained a total of 28 questions, covering language level (integrative and instrumental motivation), learner level, and learning context level. The language level section included 18 questions, with the first nine related to integrative motivation and the next nine to instrumental motivation. The learner level section included four questions, while the learning context level section had six questions. The questionnaire was provided in both Chinese and Hungarian to aid comprehension and completion by novice Chinese language learners. For each question, participants used a 5-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree', corresponding to a scale of 1 to 5.

### (3) Data Collection

Initially, the questionnaire survey method was employed. Subsequently, the collected data were analysed using Excel. Finally, based on the statistical analysis, a comparison of motivation between learners of different Chinese language proficiency levels was conducted to identify similarities and differences.

## Research Results and Analysis

### (1) Language Level

Regardless of whether we consider integrative or instrumental motivation, the average values for first and second-year Chinese learners were higher than those for more advanced learners. Generally, as learning progresses, learners' motivation, especially integrative motivation, tends to decrease. This is contrary to the findings of Cheng, who suggested that integrative motivation varies significantly with the level of learners: the higher the level, the stronger the integrative motivation, especially among advanced learners when compared to beginners or intermediate learners<sup>3</sup>.

In this study, however, the motivation of lower-level learners, in terms of both integrative and instrumental factors at the language level, as well as

<sup>3</sup> Cheng 2018: 159.

at the learner and learning context levels, was stronger compared to that of advanced learners. This phenomenon of decreasing motivation with increasing proficiency level is noteworthy.

In instrumental motivation, there were significant differences among learners at different proficiency levels. For example, many first-year students chose to study Chinese based on the advice of their parents or friends (Statement 4). However, second-year BA students and MA students, especially those in the translation class, were less influenced by such advice. This difference could be attributed to the increasing recognition of the importance of learning Chinese due to close Sino–Hungarian relations in recent years, which has led individuals to encourage their relatives or friends to learn Chinese, especially to become translators, who have obvious professional motives. For Statement 5, ‘want to study or work in China’, undergraduate students generally agreed, while master’s students disagreed. This is because students pursuing a master’s degree either have a strong motivation to continue studying Chinese or are choosing to stay in their home country temporarily due to a lack of suitable job opportunities. Undergraduate students displayed strong motivation in Statement 18, ‘want to pass the HSK exam’, especially first and second-year students, whereas master’s students had relatively weaker motivation. Generally, HSK scores are crucial for scholarship applications and undergraduate graduation, making them more significant at the undergraduate level. For master’s students, it depends entirely on individuals’ needs. Both for undergraduate and master’s students, motivation for ‘engaging in research related to China’ (Statement 27) was relatively weak. This explains why there are few undergraduate students from the Chinese Studies Department at Eötvös Loránd University who apply for a master’s degree in Sinology. In this study, there were only five first-year master’s students. Among instrumental motivation factors, it is evident that work, travel, and making friends are strong motivations for learners. Additionally, motivation for becoming a Chinese teacher or translator is also relatively strong.

## (2) Learner Level

Learners generally showed high motivation at the learner level, particularly for the statement ‘I want to learn one more foreign language’ and the desire to challenge themselves. However, third-year undergraduate students did not

exhibit strong motivation in terms of ‘promoting Sino–Hungarian exchanges’ compared to students in other grades. The overall average motivation at the learner level was higher for first and second-year undergraduates than for third-year undergraduates and first-year master’s students. This aligns with the findings at the language level. The reasons behind this discrepancy may be related to the specific stage of graduation for third-year undergraduate students and the polarisation of motivations among master’s students (as detailed in the ‘Language Level’ section).

### (3) Learning Context Level

Regarding the curriculum, first and second-year undergraduate students, as well as first-year master’s students, generally expressed approval of the course materials. However, third-year undergraduates had a lower opinion of the materials. The Modern Chinese course at the Chinese Studies Department of Eötvös Loránd University uses textbooks from the *New Practical Chinese Reader* series. This series is widely used due to its practicality and systematic approach, but it may seem somewhat outdated in terms of certain topics and vocabulary. While these textbooks are helpful for establishing a foundation in Chinese for lower-level learners, third-year students, particularly those who have studied in China, may have been exposed to different materials, leading to higher expectations. All levels of students considered the Chinese course very engaging, but third-year students showed slightly lower approval compared to other years. This could be attributed to the fact that, despite the recognition of the high-quality teaching and expertise of the Chinese Studies Department at Eötvös Loránd University, third-year students may have encountered more native-speaker teachers while studying in China and thus have higher expectations of teachers. Regarding the classroom atmosphere, students from all grades generally considered it ‘not tense’, indicating that the Chinese courses at the Chinese Studies Department of Eötvös Loránd University provide a relatively relaxed learning environment. In terms of teachers, all grades showed high motivation, especially for ‘liking my Chinese teacher’, which signifies the excellence of the department’s teaching staff. Students from all grades expressed strong motivation associated with the learning community. In summary, students from all grades generally showed high motivation at the learning context level, with third-year students exhib-

iting slightly lower motivation. This may be primarily due to some students' experiences of studying in China.

In conclusion, learners from all grades exhibited motivation levels greater than 3 for language level, learner level, and learning context level, indicating a relatively strong motivation overall. First and second-year learners displayed stable and strong motivation, while advanced learners in the third year and first-year master's students had relatively weaker motivation. It is noteworthy that third-year learners had the lowest motivation among the four different proficiency levels in all aspects.

### Strategies to Foster Motivation

Firstly, regarding the use of teaching materials, it is important to strike a balance between continuity and diversity in order to tailor instruction to individual needs. For undergraduate students in their third year, classes could be organised based on whether or not they have studied in China, with the use of different teaching materials accordingly. Students who have progressed from the second year and have not studied in China can continue to use the *New Practical Chinese Reader* to ensure the continuity and systematisation of their studies. However, for students who have studied in China, after a thorough assessment of their one-year experience in China, more closely targeted teaching materials should be selected. Targeted materials should not only consider difficulty levels but also the relevance of content to contemporary times.

Secondly, there should be adjustments made to the direction of the master's degree programme. The master's degree programme at the Chinese studies department primarily focuses on research in Sinology. In 2015, with the support of the Chinese National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, the department established a Chinese language teacher education programme. As the survey indicates, motivation to engage in research related to China was low for students at all levels, with this being the only question with an average response below 3. This indicates that learners, regardless of their proficiency level, are generally not interested in pursuing research related to China. This result raises questions about the current aims and content of the Sinology master's programme. Therefore, adjustments are needed to stimulate learner motivation. In early 2021, the Chinese Studies Depart-

ment at Eötvös Loránd University decided to revise the MA programme in Sinology, incorporating more practical content such as translation. After the master's programme presentation in March 2022, 44 students applied for admission to the Sinology master's programme.

Thirdly, for the statement in the survey, 'I want to become a Chinese teacher or translator', learners at all proficiency levels did not exhibit strong motivation, especially third-year students, whose average motivation was slightly above 3. To distinguish the motivational differences between 'becoming a Chinese teacher' and 'becoming a translator', interviews were conducted to supplement the questionnaire data. The results of the interviews, which involved sampling one class from each proficiency level, showed that over 70% of learners chose 'becoming a translator' rather than 'becoming a Chinese teacher'. This indicates that motivation to become a Chinese teacher is relatively weak across all levels. The Chinese Studies Department at Eötvös Loránd University initiated a Chinese language teacher volunteer recruitment project in the second half of 2020, although the recruitment was limited to individuals of Chinese descent. If the programme expands its recruitment to include Hungarian learners or creates more positions for local Chinese language teachers, it will probably enhance learner motivation and contribute to the international promotion of the Chinese language. As Zhao pointed out, 'Chinese language education should be localised. The day when Chinese language teachers are localised is the day when the Chinese language will truly go global'<sup>4</sup>.

Lastly, it is worth noting that the instrumental motivation at the language level significantly decreases for third-year students. This is understandable since, as goals such as passing the HSK exam, traveling to China, or making Chinese friends are achieved, the corresponding motivation diminishes. To maintain strong motivation for effective language acquisition, teachers should search for ways to encourage learners to set different goals at each stage, combining short-term and long-term objectives and transforming instrumental motivation into integrative motivation.

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<sup>4</sup> Zhao 2014: 25



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