

# ***Exploring the Influencing Factors and Challenges of Chinese Second Language Learners in Learning English as a Second Language***

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**Abstract:** The author find that people's learning speed is different, some people even find it really difficult to learn English. The author conduct a survey about the influencing factors and challenges of second language learning. The survey result reviews that most people think lack of native environment the most important factor, that troubles them from learning English. Most of the respondents think writing is the hardest for them, and lifestyle and learning strategy are two most important factors which influence their English learning. Based on the survey, the author will analyze how different factors (for example: lifestyle, character, learning strategy...) influence people's English learning. Besides, the author will also try to find out some effective way to help with people's English learning.

**Keywords:** English learning, influencing factors, challenges, method, second language acquisition

## **1. Introduction**

With the popularity of English, nearly 1 billion people in the world can speak English. Many Chinese students learn English at a very young age, but many of them find English learning really challenging. Numerous scholars have conducted extensive research in factors that influence people's second language acquisition, however these studies second language acquisition as a whole, and they fail to specifically focus on Chinese language learner's English learning, which the author believe is more meaningful. The research method is questionnaire, the author designed ten questions related to find out what influence people's English learning, and what kind of trouble people face when they are learning English. The author will list out top 5 factors that influence people's English learning and analyze how those factors influence people's English learning. Later, the author will use the second part of her survey to find out "What hinders people from learning English well?". Lastly, the author will combine those influencing factors and challenges to propose some useful ways to learn English. The author's ultimate goal is to find out what influence people's English learning and find out how can teachers better help people with their English learning.

## 2. Influencing Factors

### 2.1. Language Learning Environment

Language learning environments can be divided into two categories: natural language learning environments and classroom language environments. The natural language environment is a kind of language environment where people learn without guidance. Classroom learning environment means a kind of language environment where people have a teacher in class to teach them the language. According to many former researches, both kinds of environment is beneficial to people's second language acquisition [1]. It is interesting that many children can learn English comprehensively when they are placed in a natural language environment. However, many English learners cannot master English after 10 years of learning. This phenomenon can help explain the difference between natural language learning environments and classroom language environments. Even though there may not be much communication in classroom language environment, in class, teachers may pay more attention to student's vocabulary and grammar, which help to improve student's reading and writing abilities. In contrast, in a natural language environment, it is easier for language learners to improve their listening and speaking skills. In a natural language learning environment, English learners can speak more fluently and listen more accurately. From here it shows that different language environments improve different skills.

### 2.2. Cultural Background

According to Sapir, an American linguist, language has its own background, it coexists with culture. Since every language carries a kind of culture, when discussing language learning, it is necessary to talk about its cultural background. J.Vendryés also points out only if people consider language's cultural background can they fully understand a language [2].

To prove languages have strong social meaning, the author conducted a survey to find out what factors influence people's English learning. According to figure 1 85% participants think people's lifestyle and social background can influence their English learning.

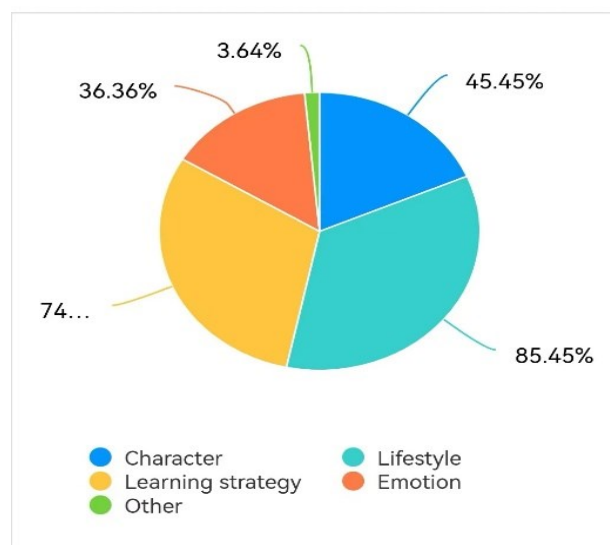


Figure 1: Factors influence people's English learning.

“The Acculturation Theory” proposed by American linguistic Schumann, said that society's attitude towards a second language and cultural diversity can largely influence people's second language learning ability. Second language acquisition is a social process. Social distance and

psychological distance largely influence this social process. Social distancing refers to two languages and cultural differences between groups. Psychological distance refers to the individual emotional factors of learners, including language shock, cultural shock, motivation, etc. This theory can help explain why people with different cultural backgrounds learn languages differently. But “The Theory of Acculturation” has its own limitations. This model ignores language learner’s intrinsic ability. Though cultural background is important for people to understand a second language, people’s intrinsic ability, such as learning strategy, motivation... also influence people’s language learning.

Objectively speaking, the social and cultural background of a second language can help people to understand the meaning of words in a second language, but people’s inner ability cannot be ignored.

### 2.3. Age

In general, older English learners will have more trouble remembering details, content, and less motivation to learn compared to younger English learners. But older English learners can have better language rules and patterns. So, language is an influencing factors of people’s English learning, but not the determining factor.

#### 2.3.1. The Critical Period Hypothesis

The critical period hypothesis suggests that a period of time after birth, language learning is easy for a child to learn his mother language. After this specific period of time, no matter how hard the child tries, he cannot master his mother tongue [3]. The critical period hypothesis was proposed by Lenneberg in 1967. He believes that the best time for children to learn a language is after 2 years of age and before adolescence. Originally, this hypothesis was for mother tongue learning. When it comes to learning a second language, it remains controversial.

Of all the supporting ideas, Johnson and Newport’s 1989 experiment is the most famous. One group of participants is American immigrants whose mother languages are Chinese and Korean. The average age of exposure to English is 10 years. Another group of participants are native English speakers. The experiment uses 276 true or false questions related to grammar to test participant’s English. Results show that people who migrate to America before the age of 7 can learn English as well as native speakers. People who migrate to America after 7 years of age perform worse than native speakers. Also, as older people migrate to America, the harder they can catch up with native speakers. This experiment proves that second language acquisition has its critical periods, but it is uncertain when the critical period is.

#### 2.3.2. Children’s Strength in Second Language Acquisition

In 1984 Littlewood summarized some children’s advantage in second language acquisition [4]:

- 1) Children have advantageous learning condition, such as being expose to a second language for a long period of time, gaining more attention from others...
- 2) Learning content for children could be easier to understand
- 3) Children generally do not hold a negative attitude towards other language groups and are also unaware of other related factors, resulting in a low ‘social emotional barrier’.
- 4) Acknowledging a tendency towards conscious thinking and analysis of learning experiences may hinder the function of the natural processing mechanism that internalizes new languages; elder language learners tend to study more, but children tend to let things go on smoothly [5].

### 2.3.3. Why Age Influence People's Second Language Learning

As people's neural system develops, their left hemisphere and right hemisphere have different functions, the plasticity of their brain grows weaker as they get older. This means that it is easier for children to learn a second language before their teenage years, because both their left and right hemispheres can process information [6].

Children's cognitive level is at its original phase, their perceptual cognition started to change at age 11. Their cognitive learning ability and language learning ability develop at the same time. But when it comes to deep learning, logical thinking is largely required. Older language learners may perform better than children because their cognitive abilities are better.

## 3. Challenges

In order to know some challenges Chinese learners face when they are learning English, the author conduct another survey. According to figure 2, result shows that tops three challenges are: language environment, learning strategy, and character. In this chapter, the author will try to analyze how these factors as well as some other factors hinder people's language learning.

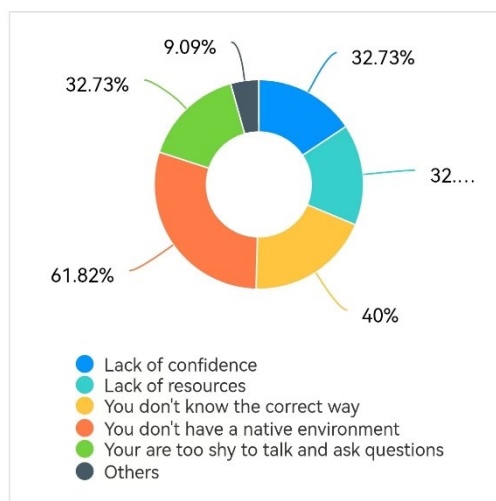


Figure 2: Challenging factors.

### 3.1. Language Environment

The Chinese language environment has a certain impact on students' learning of English. The Chinese language environment is one of the negative factors affecting students' English learning process. In the process of learning English, the use of one's mother tongue can be said to be throughout [7]. Chinese and English from grammar, vocabulary, structure...There are differences in all aspects. Learning English on the basis of one's mother tongue inevitably affects students' understanding of the grammatical structure of their mother tongue [8]. Also, students start learning Chinese when they are born. They have already formed a Chinese thinking mode, which is really difficult for them to break and form the English thinking mode [9].

Here are some problems students face when they use Chinese thinking to learn English.

#### 3.1.1. Lack of Sociolinguistic Environment

Usually, schools treat English learning as a kind of foreign language learning. They hardly use English to communicate in their daily lives. This may let students ignore the use of English, and some

students even don't learn English. It can be seen that the lack of social language environment in our country has led to the low status of English in our country. Students may not fully appreciate the significance of learning English and may not use it proficiently in everyday life. For students to overcome these challenges, teachers need to help them increase the use of English in daily life, that is, to improve the sociolinguistic environment [10].

### 3.1.2. Single Teaching Mode

In many schools, teachers teach English in a dull way. To achieve their teaching goals of getting students to score high on English tests, they "feed" students knowledge and force them to memorize it. In this case, it is really difficult for students to find English learning interesting and to learn English voluntarily. Because in this mode, students can only rigidly recite what their teachers say in class, it is difficult to foster their interest and think deeper. In addition, students only learn English and speak English in class [11]. They barely speak English after class. They won't either practice their oral skill or improve their pronunciation. For students who are not good at English, this single teaching mode is devastating to their confidence. They may refuse to practice. What's more this single teaching mode cannot teach students English effectively, because it is hard for teachers to have patience to make individual plans for students and pay attention to student's specific needs. This will also lead students to doubt themselves and lose confidence.

### 3.1.3. Psychological Barriers

In everyday life, many students feel ashamed to speak English because they think they are mispronouncing and others may make fun of them. Also, in a Chinese speaking environment, most people choose to communicate in Chinese. To adapt to this Chinese speaking environment, many students choose to speak Chinese in their daily lives. In psychology, this is called conformity. There are two main reasons for conformity in the field of English studies [12]. The individual reason is that students themselves, students have their own self-awareness, but they are not independent enough. Students also have their own thoughts, but their thoughts are not comprehensive enough. The collective reason for conformity in English learning is the display of group characteristics. According to America psychologist Charles Horton Cooley: 'The general motivation for conformity is due to a strong or weak sense of non-conformity composed of feelings of embarrassment and inconvenience.' On the one hand, ethnic characteristics are derived from the main group factors that generate conformity. Traditional Chinese culture is vast and profound, which strongly influences us. The sense of belonging within our ethnic identity can easily lead to conformity. On the other hand, group life inertia affects English learning.

Society is a large group of people in their daily lives. The characteristics and norms of each group affect students' ways of thinking, lifestyles, and learning habits. This may explain why sometimes students may be afraid to speak English outside the classroom. Students may be aware that speaking English outside the classroom can help them improve their English, but they are afraid of being laughed at by others if they don't act as the majority do. In the end, the willingness to be accepted by the social group they live in outweighs their eagerness to learn English. That's why under the majority case, students choose conformity and speak Chinese in their daily lives as their peers do.

## 3.2. Learning Strategy

In a Chinese speaking environment, it is really hard to find some native material to study English. Although it is possible to find some native material on websites, it is difficult for people to distinguish what is useful for learning and what is not. When many people are young, their teachers and parents tend to over emphasize the importance of reciting words and texts, so many people often recite lots

of words, but don't know how to use those words. Lack of native material and impaired vocabulary use are the most common problems people face when learning English. In addition to the two problems the author mentioned above, there is another problem, which she called the "Translation Trap." "Translation Trap" means that when people use translation to study two kinds of languages, translation may promote their second language acquisition, as well as hinder their second language learning [13].

The author believes that when Chinese learners learn English, most of them tend to translate an English word into its Chinese meaning, so that they can better understand it. It could be a double-edged sword. On one hand translating an English word into Chinese can help English learners to better understand a word, because they have a more comprehensive Chinese language system, on the other hand, translating an English word into Chinese can hinder people's second language acquisition ability, because language system is heavily impacted by culture. The English language system is different from the Chinese language system because of different cultural backgrounds.

In the field of cognitive linguistics, there is a theory called connectionism. Connectionism believes that people's language acquisition is divided into different units, different units connect and interact in a complex way [6]. The more learners are exposed to their second language, the more these units interact with each other. By emphasizing the connection between different language materials, learners will gain a deeper understanding of phonology, syntax, and semantics. Connectionism also claims that at the beginning of second language learning, second language learners will unconsciously use their mother language to help their second language learning. As they learn more, they will gradually become less dependent on their mother tongue.

Some translation learning critics believe that when people use their mother tongue to learn a second language, it may hinder their ability to learn a second language. Behaviorist theory believes that learning a new language is the formation of a new system of behavioral habits, and in the formation of new habits, old behavioral habits from the mother tongue may have a disruptive effect.

Second language learners cannot completely dissociate themselves from their mother tongue in all aspects of language activities. So, second language learners should be very careful, about the similarities and differences between the two, and use the translation learning strategy in a correct and wise way.

## **4. Some Suggestions for Learning English**

### **4.1. Try to Speak More English in Daily Life**

Knowing how to use knowledge in English class is really important because it can continuously activate people's language system. When people try to use English as much as possible in their daily life, their English language system can be strengthened, and their mind is less likely to be disrupted by Chinese. Also, it is much more likely that they will meet some foreign friends and start a conversation with them when they speak English as much as they can in their daily life. When they talk to foreign friends, they can learn about some cultures in English-speaking countries and gain a deeper understanding of English, which can also be good at improving their English.

### **4.2. Select Useful English Learning Materials**

Some people find it difficult to learn English because they cannot distinguish what kinds of materials are useful for their English studies. Here are some ways that can help to distinguish what is useful for English studies.

### 4.2.1. Evaluate Materials

When getting a piece of material, don't directly dive into it. Ask some evaluative questions. Here are some questions that need to be considered:

Is it accurate?

Is it relevant?

Is it understandable?

When evaluating learning materials, consider the extent to which each is interesting, approachable, and engaging. This isn't about materials being "entertaining." It's about whether it can spark curiosity and promote deeper thinking about the content. The more involved people are with the materials, the more they will learn. To improve the level of material engagement, it is helpful to include a variety of materials in addition to text such as images, charts, diagrams, audio, video, or interactive activities. When it is possible to find more than one way to learn something, it's more likely for learners to fully engage in learning English.

### 4.2.2. Make Full Use of the Internet

The Internet is an international high-speed electronic communications network (linking many local, regional and national networks) that allows individuals at institutions or at home to access each other's computers for rapid communication or information retrieval. Another major use of the Internet has been to provide a multimedia platform for people to learn. The great advantage of multimedia systems is that they combine audio and visual interpretation to help students learn and remember.

Audio and visual explanation is especially important for language learning, as it can allow language learners to intimate the sound of a language, which may ultimately enhance learner's oral skills. Previous studies also found that reading, listening, speaking and writing are correlative, if learner's speaking skills are improved, their reading, listening and writing skills will also be positively affected.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored some factors that influence Chinese learner's English learning, and also some challenges they have faced. This essay also gives some possible suggestions to promote Chinese learner's English learning. There are a number of limitations to this study. First, the learning suggestions on paper can be improved. Secondly, this paper analyses only a few influencing factors and some common challenges. More possible influencing factors and challenges facing learners can be further explored.

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