Exploring German as Foreign Language Learning Motivation among Chinese GFL-Learners

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Abstract: German, as a significant European language, has seen increasing interest among Chinese students. This study investigates the learning motivation of 1851 German as a Foreign Language (GFL) students from 57 universities in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Jiangsu. Drawing on Gardner's and Lambert's theory of learning motivation, Dörnyei's "Components of Foreign Language Learning Motivation," and the L2 Self-System model, this research aims to delineate the current patterns and types of learning motivation among Chinese GFL students. The analysis reveals that these students generally exhibit an above-average motivation to learn German, predominantly driven by instrumental motives. The study also identifies notable regional variances in learning motivation, with students in Shanghai and Beijing showing higher motivation levels. Correlations were observed between learning motivation and several factors, including students' prior German learning experiences, their satisfaction with German courses, and the clarity of teaching objectives. Crucially, this research demonstrates that individual learning objectives significantly impact students' motivation, emphasizing the need to incorporate development principles within language education frameworks. This approach is pivotal in cultivating enduring and effective learning paths for Chinese students learning German.

Keywords: Chinese Students' Motivation; Languages Other Than English (LOTEs); German as a Foreign Language; Effective Learning

1.Introduction

In the context of globalization, the role of foreign language acquisition has become increasingly significant in educational spheres. Proficiency in foreign languages is beneficial not only for professional growth but also for fostering cultural exchange and understanding. Motivation in second language acquisition is a key psychological element encompassing learners' enduring attitudes towards language learning. Its study is integral to foreign language pedagogy, with a focus on optimizing learner motivation to enhance language learning outcomes.

Historically, research on second language motivation has been dominated by Gardner & Lambert's (1959) differentiation between Integrative Motivation (cultural assimilation) and Instrumental Motivation (practical objectives). This foundational work underscored the critical role of motivation in language acquisition. Li and Zhou (2023) critically reviewed the application of Gardner's theory in the K-12 sector, noting a direct impact of learning motivation on learners' effort, attitude, and emotional state.

Later, Dörnyei (1994) expanded on this by categorizing motivational components into three domains: language, learner, and learning situation, integrating both integrative and instrumental aspects. Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System further examined learner motivation through the dimensions of Ideal Self, Ought-to Self, and second language acquisition experiences, linking identity and self-concept with motivation. Recent studies emphasize the predictive capability of the L2MSS in language learning. Works by Cho (2020), Course (2021), and Swatevacharkul (2022) confirm the motivational and predictive significance of the ideal L2 self and learner experiences.

In China, motivation research has increasingly focused on practical applications in higher education. Gao et al. (2003) conducted a comprehensive survey identifying seven motivational types among Chinese university students learning English, including intrinsic interest and personal development. However, research on the motivation for

learning Languages Other Than English (LOTEs) remains limited, with few studies exploring the motivation for learning languages like Russian, Japanese, and Spanish in the Chinese context (Chen 2021, Li et al. 2021).

The significance of German language acquisition is underscored by its extensive application in business and scientific research. Given the intertwined economic relations between China and Germany and the increasing presence of German companies in regions like Jiangsu Province, there is a notable demand for German language skills in China (CIIPA Report 2022/2023). The growing number of joint educational programs and cooperation projects between the two countries further accentuates the relevance of studying the motivation of Chinese learners of German (Zheng & Liu 2023). Understanding this motivation is essential for grasping the essence of foreign language learning motivation and identifying effective strategies to enhance and stimulate it.

This study delves into the motivation of Chinese students learning German as a Foreign Language (GFL), drawing on Gardner and Lambert's motivation theories, Dörnyei's "Components of Foreign Language Learning Motivation," and the L2MSS model. The research aims to explore two main aspects: the various types of motivation among these students and the influence of foreign language learning experiences, individual factors, and learning contexts on their motivation to learn German. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research integrates both quantitative and qualitative data, including surveys and semi-structured interviews with GFL students from universities in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Jiangsu. The study seeks to address the following research questions:

(1)What are the motivational dynamics of GFL students in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Jiangsu for learning German?

(2)What factors influence the motivation of these GFL students to learn German?

(3)How does German learning motivation correlate with these influencing factors?

2.Materials and Methods

The research procedure was structured into two steps: a quantitative online survey and its analysis, followed by qualitative semi-structured interviews to confirm the survey findings.

2.1 Participants

The participants were Chinese students learning German as a foreign language at universities in Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Jiangsu. Data collection was facilitated through an online platform, garnering responses from 57 universities with a total of 1851 valid questionnaires. Among the students surveyed, there was a gender distribution of 38.6% male and 61.4% female. The majority (88.1%) were undergraduate students, with the remaining being master's or doctoral candidates. Regarding their academic progression, the largest proportion was second-year students (31.3%) followed by third-year students (27.4%).

Table 1. Demographic information of online survey participants.

Demographic Information	Frequency	Percent
	(n=1851)	(%)
Gender		
Male	714	38.6
Female	1137	61.4
Grade		
1st year, undergraduate	373	20.2
2nd year, undergraduate	579	31.3
3rd year, undergraduate	508	27.4
4th year, undergraduate	170	9.2

graduate	202	10.9
Ph.D. student	19	1
Foreign Language Learning Experience		
German as First Foreign Language	35	1.9
German as Second Foreign Language	1610	87
German as Third Foreign Language	183	9.9
German as Fourth or More Foreign Language	23	1.2
German Learning Experience		
Not at all	1634	88.3
Learned a little (within 120h)	180	9.7
Some basic knowledge (over 120h)	37	2
German courses currently attended		
Elective course	838	45.3
Required course	1013	54.7

(Note: Continued Table 1)

To corroborate the survey findings, semi-structured group interviews were conducted with 38 students from various universities across Beijing, Shanghai, Guangdong, and Jiangsu. The interviewees were selected to represent a diverse sample of majors and academic years.

2.2 Online Survey and Interview

The questionnaire gathered data on students' demographics, foreign language learning experiences, learning environment, individual learning goals, and motivation to learn German. The Likert-type items were scored on a scale of 1 to 5. The interview protocol included questions focusing on students' motivation, learning experiences, and personal learning objectives. Ethical considerations were addressed by informing participants of the study's purposes, risks, and benefits. The questionnaire and interview outline were approved by the ethics committee of the authors' home university.

3.Results

Data analysis was performed using SPSS 26.0 software. The overall reliability of the questionnaire, as measured by Cronbach's Alpha, was 0.711. The KMO measure of sampling adequacy was 0.728, and Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded significant results, indicating satisfactory reliability and validity of the questionnaire.

3.1 Motivation to Learn German

The mean motivation score to learn German was 3.5 (on a 5-point scale), implying a moderate level of motivation among the students. Statistical analysis revealed that 54.3% rated their motivation as strong or very strong, while 36.7% perceived it as average, and approximately 10% reported no motivation. The motivation distribution followed a normal pattern, with no significant differences between genders or course types.

Further analysis showed significant regional variances in motivation levels, with students from Shanghai and Beijing exhibiting higher motivation than those from Guangdong and Jiangsu.

Table 2. Results of the ANOVA for the region

	M±SD	F	P	Post Hoc Tests
BJ （n=409）	3.60±0.807	17.106	<0.05	BJ>GD**；BJ>JS*
SH（n=560）	3.64±0.818			SH>GD**；SH>JS**

GD（n=412）	3.29±0.874			JS>GD*
JS（n=470）	3.45±0.790			

**. The mean difference is significant at the 0.01 level.

An additional analysis was conducted to understand the factors contributing to low motivation, particularly among the 846 students who indicated having little or no motivation to learn German. According to Table 7, nearly a third of these students reported learning German passively and lacking interest in the language. Other prevalent factors included the absence of clear learning goals (28.6%), unsuitable learning methods (27.3%), and a lack of a conducive learning environment (26.1%). These findings suggest that insufficient motivation to learn German is predominantly linked to subjective factors, such as unclear learning goals and ineffective learning methods, and to objective factors like the absence of a supportive German learning environment.

3.2 Factors Influencing Motivation

3.2.1 Experiences in Foreign Language Learning

For 87% of participants, German is their second foreign language, and for about 10%, it is their third. Only 1.9% indicated German as their first foreign language. Most students had no prior exposure to German before university, with only 9.7% having learned a little German and 2% possessing some foundational knowledge. Prior exposure to German significantly influenced motivation levels, with students having some basic knowledge or prior experience showing higher motivation.

Table 3. Results of the single-factor analysis of variance for learning German

	M±SD	F	P	Post Hoc Tests
Not at all （n=1634）	3.47±0.838			Learned a little > Not at all**
Learned a little （n=180）	3.81±0.669	13.524	<0.05	
Some basic knowledge （n=37）	3.57±0.987			

3.2.2 Learning Context

The primary form of German learning was compulsory university courses (54.7%), with high satisfaction reported for course content and teaching materials (over 80%). However, awareness and participation in extracurricular German activities were limited. Only a minimal 0.5% of students reported regular participation in activities such as translation volunteering or tutoring in German. A slightly higher percentage, 2.25%, had participated occasionally, but the overwhelming majority had never engaged in such practical activities. Positive correlations were observed between motivation and course satisfaction, clarity of teaching objectives, and involvement in language activities. The strength of these positive correlations varied, with course satisfaction showing the highest correlation (0.398), followed by the quality of teaching materials (0.288), clarity of teaching objectives (0.264), and participation in learning or cultural activities (0.065).

Table 4. Result of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient

	MLG	SGC	CCO	SGT	GCA	PA	GCC	
MLG	1							
SGC	.398**	1						
CCO	.264**	.385**	1					
SGT	.288**	.428**	.317**	1				
GCA	.065**	.059*	.059*	0.005	1			
PA	0.027	-0.015	0.006	-0.019	.058*	1		

GCC	0.045	-0.002	0.023	-0.005	.305**	.064**	1	
**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)								
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)								

3.2.3. Personal Learning Goals

Contrasting with positive student assessments of teaching objectives in German courses, only 6.29% of the students reported having a distinct personal goal for learning German. A further 16.72% had a somewhat clear goal, but nearly half of the respondents described their goal as vague. Those with specific objectives, such as passing exams or enhancing career prospects, displayed stronger motivation. Regional differences were noted, with Beijing and Guangdong students showing a stronger orientation towards integrative motives, while Shanghai and Jiangsu students focused more on instrumental motives. Table 5 illustrates significant positive correlations among these elements. The strongest correlation was observed with a clear personal learning goal (0.424), followed by exam plans (0.236), and aspirations to study abroad (0.202).

Table 5. Result of Pearson's Correlation Coefficient

	MLG	PGLG	PPGE	PSC
MLG	1			
PGLG	.424**	1		
PPGE	.236**	.387**	1	
PSC	.202**	.315**	.329**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

3.3 Interview Results

In interviews conducted across various regions in China, distinct motivations, learning environments, and personal goals for studying German emerged among students. In Beijing, six students showed strong motivation primarily for cultural understanding and opportunities to study abroad, while four were motivated by immediate academic needs such as exam preparation. Shanghai students displayed high motivation, with eight citing a fascination with German culture and personal interests like class dynamics as key drivers, focusing less on academic pressures. In contrast, Guangdong students, while generally finding German more accessible due to engaging teaching methods, were motivated by career prospects and language interest, although some struggled with the complexity of grammar. Jiangsu students reported mixed motivation levels, influenced heavily by external factors such as exams and teacher expectations. Across regions, German was perceived as a challenging language, yet students actively engaged with the language outside the classroom to enhance their skills. Personal learning goals varied widely, from preparing for studies abroad to career advancement in specific fields like law, with significant regional differences in focus and awareness of opportunities related to German language proficiency.

4.Discussion

The study elucidates that a substantial majority of students display a high level of motivation to learn German, although notable individual and regional variations are evident. The primary motivators for students include a deep-seated interest in German culture, career opportunities, and the prospects of studying abroad. However, challenges such as the complexity of the German language, learning-related stress, and vague personal learning objectives can negatively impact motivation levels.

Instrumental motivations, particularly those linked to career advancement and academic requirements, are predominant and exert a significant influence on students' motivation. This is indicative of the high value placed on language skills in both the educational sphere and the job market. Factors positively correlating with motivation include course satisfaction, the clarity of teaching objectives, and well-defined personal learning goals. Students in

economically vibrant regions like Shanghai and Beijing exhibit higher motivation levels, likely due to greater job prospects and more conducive learning environments.

To enhance and sustain student motivation in learning German, the study proposes several targeted strategies. First, educators should establish clear teaching objectives and pathways, aligning with Zimmerman's theory of self-regulated learning, which encourages students to self-monitor and adjust their learning processes effectively. Additionally, course content should be made more engaging by incorporating task-based teaching, practical language applications, and cultural elements such as group projects and debates, to boost student interest and participation. Utilizing digital and multimedia resources, such as online courses and language applications, can also enrich the learning experience, making it more interactive and appealing. Furthermore, educational institutions should organize a variety of German language activities, creating a relaxed and enjoyable learning atmosphere that can facilitate language acquisition. By implementing these strategies, educational institutions can better support and enhance the motivation levels of students pursuing German language studies. In conclusion, fostering motivation to learn German necessitates an integrative strategy that considers individual learning goals, the surrounding educational environment, and the employment of targeted teaching strategies. By implementing these recommendations, educational institutions can better support and enhance the motivation levels of students pursuing German language studies.

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