

Chapter 12

Every Cloud Has a Silver Lining: Learning Mandarin During COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine students' motivation towards Mandarin learning during COVID-19. Theoretically, motivation is considered a broad concept that aims to define why people decide to do something, how long they sustain the activity, and how much effort they will expend to pursue it. Considering that there is no single theory that can comprehensively cover the possible motives, this study investigates the L2 motivation with the self as its core, which is found closely related to three motivation frameworks: Socio-education theory, self-determination theory, and L2 motivational self-system. This study found that L2 learners of Mandarin were highly driven by intrinsic motivation such as knowledge, culture, language learning stimulation, and accomplishment. They were less likely to be motivated by external pressures such as the ought-to L2 self or introjected opinions and showed a highly self-decisive multilingual profile with a willingness to diversify their knowledge and skills. Finally, Mandarin learning had positively contributed to their overall well-being during COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

A new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) causing respiratory symptoms was first identified in China in December 2019. The UK confirmed the first two cases of COVID-19 on 31st January 2020 and announced “Lockdown Regulations” on 26th March which came into effect immediately. These regulations significantly restricted people’s freedom of movement, with the stipulation that “no person may leave the place where they are living without reasonable excuse” (SI 2020/350), in the hope of slowing the spread of COVID-19, especially among the most vulnerable populations, and ensure a manageable caseload for the country’s National Health Service (NHS). Measures were enforced on individual and

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population levels, including nationwide school closures, banning of public events and non-essential public gatherings, self-isolation for symptomatic individuals, closure of businesses, educational and public institutions, and stay-at-home orders aside from essential tasks and exercise.

Since then, universities have halted non-essential services and transferred from campus-based teaching to remote online education using online resources and platforms. The school involved in this case study is an international language school established in 1957 located in central London. The school aims to raise the standards of English language teaching and training worldwide and foreign language courses were added in 1989. Currently, there are eleven languages taught by the department of Modern Languages at the school: Arabic, French, German, French, Italian, Mandarin, Japanese, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish. Every year, more than 8,000 students from over 150 nationalities study here, given the convenience of exploring the local culture in the UK. In the past, the lessons were classroom-based, however, due to the impact of Covid-19, the school closed on 20th March and face-to-face classes were transferred to online on 23rd March, just three days before the imposition of the lockdown in the UK.

In this school, Mandarin was established in 2018 and has been taught at various levels (beginner, elementary, pre-intermediate, intermediate and advance) ever since. When the classes moved online, I, as the Mandarin language teacher at the school, was worried that I may lose some students due to the unpredictable situations. I was also concerned that online lessons would be less effective and enjoyable, causing students to lose interest in learning the language. However, over the subsequent nine months that have passed since March, more students have attended the course compared to last year. What has surprised me the most is that one group of students who had face-to-face lessons before the lockdown are still learning Mandarin with me online. Although they have moved to online learning, these students have made fantastic progress during these past nine months.

I wondered what has been driving these students to learn Mandarin, especially during this challenging time. Thus, this research investigates the learners' motivation towards Mandarin learning and only focuses on those who have been learning Mandarin consistently through the pandemic. Understanding their answers to this question of motivation would presumably help us understand the motivation of Mandarin students better and facilitate students' engagement in the learning process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Motivation plays a significant role in understanding learners' second language¹ (L2) learning and is generally understood as to why people decide to learn an L2, how long they will sustain their learning and how much effort they will expend to pursue their L2 (Boekaerts, 1995; Dörnyei, 2001).

Two types of the most general and well-known forms of motivation are intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Dörnyei, 2013; Brown, 1994; Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei, 1994a; Schmidt, Boraie, & Kassabgy, 1996; Williams & Burden, 1997). Intrinsically motivated students are naturally engaged in an activity for its own pleasure and satisfaction and are not under any external pressure to meet any extrinsic requirements (Vallerand, 1997; Vallerand & Ratelle, 2002). Three types of intrinsic motivation have been identified concerning second language acquisition: (1) intrinsic (knowledge), which refers to the satisfaction of students' curiosity in understanding something new or exploring the new language; (2) intrinsic (accomplishment), which relates to the sense of achievement when students cope with challenges or accomplished something; and (3) intrinsic (stimulation), which refers to the enjoyment students experience when learning or using their new language.

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