American Journal of
Education and Practice
(AJEP)

Ghanaian Students' Perceptions of Chinese Language Learning

James Opoku-Darko

AJP

Ghanaian Students' Perceptions of Chinese Language Learning

James Opoku-Darko

Lecturer, Confucius Institute, Faculty of Arts, University of Cape Coast, Ghana

Email: james.opoku-Darko@ucc.edu.gh

Abstract

Purpose: Chinese language proficiency presents myriads of opportunities. However, students' perceptions influence their decisions to learn the language and since perceptions vary in different contexts, this study examined how Ghanaian students perceive Chinese language learning.

Methodology: The qualitative approach, with the descriptive research design was used for the study. The target population was the University of Cape Coast students who were neither reading BA Chinese language programme nor taking free Chinese language and culture classes. Using the convenience sampling technique, twenty-two students who volunteered to partake in the study were selected. Data for the study were collected using an open-ended questionnaire. The data collected were analysed using the thematic content analysis based on the techniques of opening and axial coding.

Findings: The results revealed that Ghanaian students generally had positive perceptions of Chinese language learning, and those with unfavourable perceptions are likely enroll onto a form of Chinese learning course if they become aware of the benefits associated with proficiency in Chinese language.

Recommendations: The study recommend that outreach programmes should be instituted by Chinese language centres in Ghana to sensitise the public on the benefits of Chinese language learning. The study also recommend more research to be done on Chinese language.

Keywords: *Chinese language learning, Chinese, students' perceptions, Ghanaian students*

INTRODUCTION

Chinese language has gained recognition globally (Chen, 2022; Opoku-Darko & Nkrumah, 2022). Many educational institutions across the globe have incorporated Chinese language in their curricula (Smith & Li, 2022; Xu, 2022). Specifically in Ghana, the University of Cape Coast and the University of Ghana are presently offering Chinese language programme. Several private university colleges, senior high schools and basic schools in Ghana have also accepted the language to be taught to their students. Despite the fact that these institutions have included Chinese language learning in their courses, student enrollment has not been impressive, compared to other courses (Opoku-Darko et al., 2022). Even some of these institutions have set up well-furnished classrooms purposely for Chinese lessons but the number of students remains discouraging (Ma, 2022). Consequently, Chinese language teachers find it difficult to commit completely to the teaching-learning process.

It appears students have not yet appreciated the various benefits associated with learning the Chinese language. According to Zhong and Adegah (2022), students who have been able to reach some level of proficiency in Chinese language have won scholarships to study various programmes in highly ranked Chinese universities. Some have also secured lucrative jobs as translators, among others (Opoku-Darko et al., 2022). Thus, it is mindboggling that students are not showing interest in the study of the language, despite these related benefits. This disinterest in the study of the Chinese linguage among students has been argued to have been driven by students' perceptions of Chinese learning (Zhao, 2015; Gao, 2020; Nkrumah & Asamoah, 2022). The researcher, thus, argued that if students' perceptions of the language are positive, then many students are expected to register for Chinese studies; otherwise, only few students are expected to register. Knowledge of how students perceive Chinese learning is required by authorities to take actions that may ensure that students develop interest in Chinese studies.

However, to date, extant Chinese language literature appears to pay less attention to this critical area in non-native Chinese settings, despite the ever-growing economic and educational engagements with China globally, making learning of the language even more crucial. For instance, Gao (2020) looked at Australian students' perceptions of the challenges and strategies for learning Chinese characters in online teaching. As could be seen, Gao (2020) focused specifically on perceived challenges of students who were already studying the Chinese language. Thus, their perceptions cannot be likened to how potential students may perceive Chinese language learning. Similarly, Lam, Wang and Zhao (2018) studied students' perception of quizlet as a Chinese learning tool. Just as Gao (2020), Lam et al. (2018) focused on students who were already learning the Chinese language. Xu and Moloney (2011), on the other hand, studied perceptions of interactive whiteboard pedagogy in the teaching of Chinese language. Lau (2013) examined Chinese language teachers' perception and implementation of self-regulated learning-based instruction. Nkrumah et al. (2022) considered Ghanaian Chinese language learners' perception of Chinese characters. Apparently, it could be seen that the foci of these prior studies were different from that of the present study.

Considering the foregoing, it could be realised that there is a modicum of knowledge of how Ghanaian students perceive Chinese language learning, as majority of the prior studies either focused on Chinese characters or individuals who were already enrolled onto the Chinese language learning. In response to this literature lacuna, the present study sought to examine how Ghanaian

students at the University of Cape Coast perceive Chinese language learning, using the qualitative approach. The key guiding question of the study is "how do Ghanaian students perceive Chinese language learning?" The outcomes of this study are expected to inform Chinese language teachers and the tuition organisers of what to do to whet the interest of students to get enrolled on the Chinese learning programme.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on students' perceptions of learning has been conducted in myriads of contexts. Nonetheless, the foci have mostly been on disciplines other than general Chinese language learning, and settings other than Ghana. Moreover, the findings of these prior studies have been inconsistent. For instance, Mackey (2002) found that adult learners of English as a Second Language (ESL) have positive perceptions of the learning process. McDonough and Chaikitmongkol (2007) revealed that learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in a Thai environment accepted how the concepts were delivered. In like manner, Bao and Du (2015) reported that beginner learners of Chinese as a foreign language highly appreciated the Chinese learning process as it helped them to speak Chinese.

On the flipside, Thai learners of ESL in a study by McDonough (2004) perceived the learning process as a waste of time. Similarly, Tse (2000) found ESL learners to be dissatisfied with the studying the discipline. Kuo (2011) also revealed that learners in a British EFL setting were dissatisfied with the learning of the EFL. Consequently, some prior studies have indicated that learners' perceptions of learning are context-based, as it has been revealed that contextual factors influence learner perceptions. For instance, some studies found that when learners perceived themselves as indigenous learners, they were more likely to put in more effort to develop their linguistic and cultural expertise (Bearse & de Jong, 2008; Dressler, 2010). Others also intimated that learners' perceptions of what happens in second language classrooms are subject to learning environment such as the status of the target language (Rivera & Matsuzawa, 2007), the nature of the class (Brown, 2009), as well as the characteristics of the target language (Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000). This implies that non-Ghanaian students' perceptions of language learning cannot be said as being same as that of Ghanaian students; thus, the need to empirically investigate Ghanaian students' perceptions of Chinese language learning.

Furthermore, Wang (2017) averred that students' perceptions of learning are affected by learners' communication motivation. Dörnyei and Kormos (2000) found that learners' positive view of learning convinces them to be willing to communicate. Bernaus and Gardner (2008) also reported that the more positive learners' perceptions are, the more positive the learning outcomes. In contrast, Schulz (2001) posited that language learning process is more likely to be hindered if learners' perceptions of class activities do not match what they expect. Considering these, the present study argues that students' perceptions play a vital role in their learning process. It has also accentuated the context dependent nature of students' perceptions, as this nature makes it implausible to generalise students' perceptions of language learning across contexts. It is, thus, based on this backdrop that more research is required in different contexts, such as the Ghanaian context, to assess how students perceive Chinese language learning, since little attention has been given to this area.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study was conducted in the University of Cape where BA Chinese language programme is offered, among other programmes. The Confucius Institute at University of Cape Coast also offers free Chinese language proficiency courses (HSK1 to HSK5 – HSK is an official assessment for foreigner proficiency in Chinese) for interested students of the University. Students in the University are from various walks of life, and are in the University for various purposes. As some are interested in studying foreign languages, such as the Chinese language, on part-time basis or as part of their extracurricular activities, others seem just uninterested in any other activities outside their core academic engagements. For the purpose of this study, only students who were neither reading BA Chinese language programme nor offering free Chinese language proficiency courses were considered.

In all, twenty-two students volunteered to take part in the study. Out of these 22 participants, two were in their first year, five were in their second year, seven were in their third year and the remaining eight participants were in their fourth and final year. The ages of the participants varied from 20 years to 31 years. Of the total number, eight are males whilst 14 are females.

The convenience sampling technique was used for the data collection, as only participants who were available and willing to partake in the study were included. All the participants were informed of utmost anonymity and confidentiality of their participation and the data collected. Open-ended survey was used to collect the data. The survey instrument was designed based on relevant prior literature (Zhao, 2015; Gao, 2020; Nkrumah et al., 2022), and it comprised two sections. Section one solicited information on the participants' demographic information whilst section two obtained data on students' perception of Chinese language learning. Section two consisted of two open-ended questions – *What is your perception of Chinese language learning? Would you like to learn Chinese language?* – to enable participants to freely articulate their views and opinions. Giving cognisance of the importance of piloting in the validity of a survey (Wagner, 2010), the initial draft survey instrument was administered to a sample of nine participants, and the insights garnered were incorporated into developing the final instrument. The entire data collection process took place within the last two weeks of the second semester of the 2021/2022 academic year.

Regarding analysis of data, the responses obtained from the participants, though the survey, were qualitatively analysed using the thematic content analysis based on the techniques of opening and axial coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Three main procedures were followed in the analysis. First, all the surveys were given numbers so that the researcher could track the analysis. Second, by iteratively reading the students' responses, codes were assigned to the responses using open-coding. Third, by recursive reading on the assigned codes, axial coding was conducted to merge recurring codes into related groups, which were then conceptualised as themes. To ensure reliability of the coding, the researcher took into account the procedures of other studies () that studied students' perceptions (Bao, 2022; Zhao, 2015). Moreover, the draft analysis and interpretations were cross-checked by other experts in the field, and their takes were assimilated into the final analysis and interpretations.

FINDINGS

Perceptions of Chinese Language Learning

In response to the first main research question, the thematic content analysis of the responses produced two themes: favourable (positive) perceptions and unfavourable (negative) perceptions. These themes have been discussed in details below.

Favourable perceptions

Out of the 22 participants asked to share their views on how they perceive Chinese language learning, majority of them (n = 18) had favourable perceptions of Chinese language learning, as they argued that Chinese language learning is good, improves communicative skills, opens doors for future career, and provides job opportunities globally. Some of the supporting excerpts read as follows: "*. . . Chinese language learning is good, as it gives job opportunities*" (Participant 12); "*Chinese language learning is nice and can open doors for careers*" (Participant 13); "*The language is interesting and can boost my communication and provide job opportunities*" (Participant 4).

Unfavourable perceptions

On the other hand, out of the 22 participants, four of them opined that Chinese language learning is difficult, complicated and confusing. For instance, participant 9 responded that Chinese language learning is difficult. Participant 8 said Chinese language learning is complicated and may be difficult to assimilate. Similarly, participant 2 contended that Chinese language learning is difficult and confusing. Finally, participant 15 perceived Chinese language learning as uninteresting

Decision to learn Chinese language

This question enquired from the participants whether they would like to learn the Chinese language or not. Surprisingly, despite the fact that four participants had unfavourable perceptions of the Chinese language learning, only two participants said they are not interested in learning the language. This implies that out of the 22 participants, 20 would like to learn the Chinese language.

DISCUSSION

The results have indicated that, overall, the students at the University of Cape Coast seemed to have positive perceptions of Chinese language learning. This finding was in line with the findings of a number of prior studies on learners' perceptions (Bao, 2022; Bao & Du, 2015; Mackey, 2002; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). This implies that Chinese language learning appears to present potentially desirable outcomes to the students. This finding could be explained from a number of perspectives. One, the students' positive perceptions of the Chinese language learning may be due to the fact that the students who took part in the study had heard or read about benefits associated with Chinese language learning. Also, it could be due to the fact that these students just liked the Chinese language and the exposure it could offer them, as some rightly explained in their responses. Nonetheless, it should be stated that the few students who had negative or unfavourable perceptions of Chinese language learning might have these perceptions due to the claim that Chinese language learning is difficult and complicated (Nkrumah et al., 2022).

Surprisingly, some of the students who had unfavourable perceptions of Chinese language learning would like to learn Chinese language. This suggests that public education on benefits of learning Chinese could influence many students to get enrolled onto a Chinese language course. This is because the negative perceptions might be counteracted by the numerous positive benefits – such as career, job and scholarship opportunities – associated with Chinese language learning. Moreover, many students are interested in scholarship opportunities to study outside their home countries and China is now one of the main destinations for higher education. Also, there seems to be several scholarship opportunities for students to benefit from in China. These, to a good extent, may influence students' negative perceptions of the Chinese language learning (Wang, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This study assessed students' perceptions of Chinese language learning. The results revealed that most Ghanaian students had positive perceptions of Chinese language learning. However, few of these students need awareness on the need to learn Chinese language to change their unfavourable perceptions of Chinese language learning. Consequently, this study has informed Chinese language teachers and tuition organisers of what to do to whet the interest of students to get enrolled on the Chinese learning programme. Also, the study has revealed that students with negative perceptions of Chinese language learning could be made to change their perceptions through awareness on how learning of the language could positively impact their lives. This implies that with public education or outreach programmes on the benefits of learning Chinese language by Chinese language centres in Ghana, the masses can be drawn to learn the language.

Based on the findings and the conclusions drawn thereof, Figure 1 displays a model that summarises the stages through which a student's perceptions of Chinese language learning can lead to enrolling onto a Chinese language course. The figure shows that the two themes of students' perceptions of Chinese language learning – favourable and unfavourable – may influence students' decision to learn Chinese language. This decision is dichotomous – yes or no. If the decision is affirmative (yes), it is likely the student or individual under consideration will enroll onto a Chinese language learning course, all being equal. Otherwise, there may be no enrollment. Nevertheless, awareness on benefits associated with Chinese language learning can influence the "no" decision and ultimately get the individuals enrolled onto a Chinese language learning course, holding all other factors constant. This model can be fully explored by further studies.
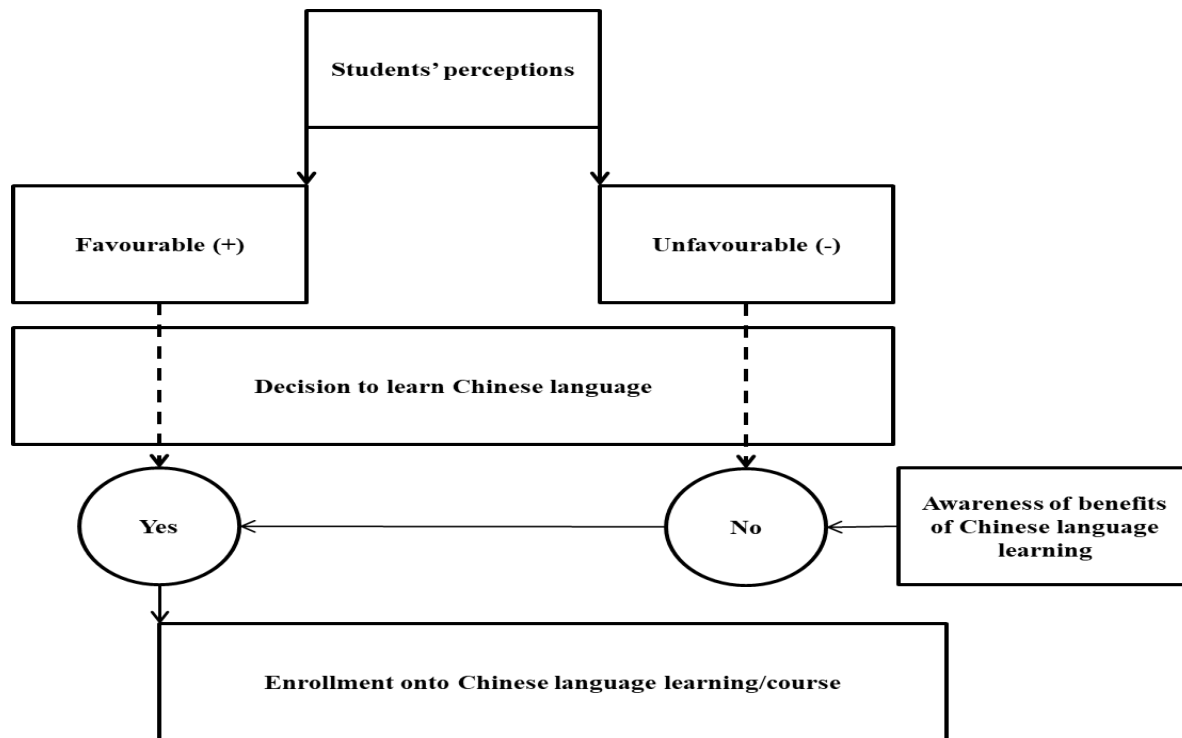
studies.

Figure 1: Perceptions and Chinese language learning
Source: Author (2022)

Study Limitations

Taking everything into account, two main limitations should be highlighted. First, the small sample size of 22 participants might asphyxiate the generalisability and interpretability of the results. Finally, since the data were sourced from only University of Cape Coast students, a complete picture could not be made of students' perceptions of Chinese language learning; hence, the findings need to be applied cautiously. As a result, it is suggested that future studies should consider an appreciable sample size, as well as expand the scope of their studies to rope in other data resources to enable better comprehension and appreciation of students' perceptions of Chinese language learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and the conclusions drawn, the Chinese language centre at the University of Cape Coast should embark on outreach programmes to educate the public on the benefits of learning Chinese language, as this may go a long way to change people's general unfavourable perceptions of Chinese language learning. Also, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education, through the Ghana Education Service, introduces Chinese language learning into the basic education and high school education curricula to ensure early exposure of students to the language.

Funding

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

Bao, R., & Du, X. (2015). Implementation of task-based language teaching in Chinese as a foreign language: Benefits and Challenges. *Language, Culture, And Curriculum, 28* (3), 291-310. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2015.1058392

Bearse, C., & De Jong, E. J. (2008). Cultural and linguistic investment: Adolescents in a secondary two-way immersion program. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 41*, 325-340. https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680802174817

Bernaus, M., & Gardner, R. C. (2008). Teacher motivation strategies, student perceptions, student motivation, and English achievement. *Modern Language Journal, 92*, 387-401. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00753.x

Brown, A. V. (2009). Students' and teachers' perceptions of effective foreign language teaching: A comparison of ideals. *Modern Language Journal, 93*, 46-60. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2009.00827.x

Chen, Y. M. (2022). Understanding foreign language learners' perceptions of teachers' practice with educational technology with specific reference to Kahoot! and Padlet: A case from China. *Education and Information Technologies*, *27*(2), 1439-1465.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. USA: Sage.

Dörnyei, Z. & Kormos, J. (2000).The role of individual and social variables in oral task performance. *Language Teaching Research, 4*, 1362-1688. https://doi.org/10.1191/136216800125096

Dressler, K. (2010). "There is no space for being German": Portraits of willing and reluctant heritage language learners of German. *Heritage Language Journal, 7*, 1-21.

Gao, X. (2020). Australian students' perceptions of the challenges and strategies for learning Chinese characters in emergency online teaching. *International Journal of Chinese Language Teaching*, *1*(1), 83-98.

Kuo, I., (2011). Student perceptions of student interaction in a British EFL setting. *ELT Journal: English Language Teaching Journal, 65*(3), 281–290. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccq063

Lam, E. T., Wang, L. C. C., & Zhao, X. W. (2018). Students' perception of quizlet as a Chinese learning tool: A preliminary study. *International Journal of Technology Enhanced Learning*, *10*(1-2), 128-136.

Lau, K. L. (2013). Chinese language teachers' perception and implementation of self-regulated learning-based instruction. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *31*, 56-66.

Mackey, A. (2002). Beyond production: learners' perceptions about interactional processes. *International Journal of Educational Research, 37*, 379-394. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-0355(03)00011-9

Mackey, A., Gass, S. & McDonough, K. (2000). How do learners perceive interactional feedback? *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 22*, 471-497. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0272263100004022

McDonough, K. (2004). Learner-learner interaction during pair and small group activities in a Thai EFL context. *System, 32*, 207-224. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.system.2004.01.003

McDonough, K., & Chaikitmongkol, W. P. (2007). Teachers' and learners' reactions to a task-based EFL course in Thailand. *TESOL Quarterly, 41*(1), 107–132. https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2007.tb00042.x/pdf

Nkrumah, B., & Asamoah, R. (2022). Ghanaian Chinese language learners' perception of Chinese characters. *Journal of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning*, *7*(2), 329-352.

Opoku-Darko, J., & Nkrumah, B. (2022). Effect of gender on morphological awareness and reading comprehension competence in Chinese language: Evidence from the University of Cape Coast. *American Journal of Education and Practice*, *6*(4), 13-25.

Rivera, G. M., & Matsuzawa, C. (2007). Multiple-language program assessment: Learners' perspectives on first-year and second-year college foreign language programs and their implications for program improvement. *Foreign Language Annals, 40*, 569–583. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2007.tb02881.x

Schulz, R. A. (2001). Cultural differences in student and teacher perceptions concerning the role of grammar instruction and corrective feedback: USA–Colombia. *Modern Language Journal, 85*, 244–258. https://doi.org/10.1111/0026-7902.00107

Smith, S. A., & Li, Z. (2022). Closing the enjoyment gap: Heritage language maintenance motivation and reading attitudes among Chinese-American children. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, *25*(3), 1070-1087.

Tse, L. (2000). Student perceptions of foreign language study: A qualitative analysis of foreign language autobiographies. *The Modern Language Journal, 84*(1), 69-84. https://doi.org/10.1111/0026-7902.00053

Wagner, E. (2010). Survey research. In *B. Paltridge, & A. Phakiti (Eds.), Continuum companion to research methods in applied linguistics* (pp. 22-38). Continuum.

Wang, C. (2017). Two affective variables and language learners' perceptions of classroom interaction. *The Journal of Asia TEFL, 14*(1), 16–31. https://doi.org/10.18823/asiatefl.2017.14.1.2.16

Xu, C. L. (2022). Portraying the 'Chinese international students': A review of English-language and Chinese-language literature on Chinese international students (2015–2020*). Asia Pacific Education Review, 23*(1), 151-167.

Xu, H. L., & Moloney, R. (2011). Perceptions of interactive whiteboard pedagogy in the teaching of Chinese language. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *27*(2), 307-325. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.972

Zhao, L. (2015). 任务型口语课堂汉语学习者协商互动研究 (Research on negotiated interactions among Chinese language learners in task-based spoken classroom), *世界汉语教学* (*Chinese Teaching in the World*), *3,* 362-376. https://doi.org/10.13724/j.cnki.ctiw.2015.03.006

Zhong, Z., & Adegah, C. D. (2022). "Why I am Back": A case study of Charlie an African Chinese language teacher. *Forest Chemicals Review*, 2291-2299.