



RESEARCH PAPER**Exploring Chinese Foreign Language Aptitude among Undergraduates
in a Public Sector University**

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ABSTRACT

Foreign Language learning is relatively not a new concept within Pakistan. As, young students in order to avail opportunities abroad learn foreign languages for better exposure and cultural assimilation in the new context. Previously, French and German languages were two foreign languages that students used to acquire. However, with the introduction of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) project, new realities and opportunities have been explored. As a result, of this expansionist project, universities within Pakistan are offering Chinese language courses along with the relevant degree programs. Under the current circumstances, there is a sheer need to investigate the beliefs with regard to foreign language aptitude towards Chinese as a foreign language. Therefore, the present study examined the foreign language aptitude of undergraduates 'who were learning Chinese as a compulsory foreign language course in a Public Sector University in Karachi. For this quantitative study, data was collected from 200 undergraduate students using BALLI questionnaire. The descriptive statistics was used to analyze the quantitative data. The findings reveal that undergraduates hold broad range of mixed beliefs about learning Chinese. They hold strong positive beliefs about foreign language aptitude and their expectations from Chinese in future. Also, curriculum designers, decision makers and teachers must be aware of undergraduates' beliefs which are essential in terms of improving curriculum and teaching methodologies.

KEYWORDS

Beliefs, Chinese Language Learning Aptitude, Foreign Language, CPEC

Introduction

The inclination towards learning international languages is receiving popularity among the youth of Pakistan for pursuing professional and academics goals (Bacha, 2017). Several institutes and universities in Pakistan are offering compulsory or mandatory language learning courses in global languages like Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Turkish and Russia to boost skills of students (Aftab, 2019). The world has become an epitome of a global village, which expects better understanding of foreign languages in order to link the people belonging to different cultures and origins (Baloch, 2017).

Innumerable Pakistanis who want to have better jobs opportunities; foreign employment and education for their successful careers have now seemed to become fluent language speakers in global languages other than local, regional and official languages (Aftab, 2019). Today, the youth of Pakistan is passionate towards spending their energy and time to acquire global foreign languages. The national university in Islamabad is

considered one of the Pakistan's oldest and esteemed foreign language institutes that offer language courses in dominant global languages in which students are swarming, as quoted by one of the officials of the university (Jalil, 2018).

There can be multiple reasons for acquiring foreign languages in every society (Aftab, 2019). However; in the case of Pakistan acquiring a global language has various specific reasons. This ideological change of learning foreign languages has been observed by the language instructors in one of the leading language institutions of Pakistan (Garcia, 2014). Moreover, this latest trend towards learning foreign language in Pakistan is the result of European countries' policies on student scholarship programs, immigration and job opportunities in developed countries. Also, the constant political uncertainty of the country along economic deprivation, inflation and 41% of literacy rate are ultimate major factors for citizens of Pakistan particularly youth to go abroad for settling or obtaining foreign degrees and job opportunities (Garcia, 2014). However, with the introduction of Chinese as a foreign language to be taught in universities; new realities have emerged.

The world-wide dominance of China specifically in Asia is one of the highlights of 21st century. The social, political and economic empowerment of China has resulted in the growth of Chinese as an international language. The strengthening bond between China and Pakistan is not a hidden fact. Pak-China strategic relation is an epitome of long-term friendship. Both countries complement their close bond by taking considerable steps towards each other to build a stronger economic, social and political partnership based on collective efforts, values and opportunities (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015).

Investigating learners' beliefs is an important research area as it plays a significant role in learning outcomes of a learner as they have a deep influence over learners' learning ability. Chinese has started to capture the world attention in linguistic heritage due to the political and cultural dominance of China worldwide (Aftab, 2019). Consequently, research studies relative to Chinese as a foreign language have been conducted in several parts of the global world. Especially in the west as learners are more inclined to learn Chinese and they have a number of well-equipped Chinese courses and instructors (Cui, 2014; Le, 2004; Yang, 2015; Ye, 2011). In comparison, South Asian region has less exposure to Chinese due to colonialism; English is the international, official, global and foreign language in the countries of this part of the world. Through the review of literature relative to the studies done on foreign languages in Pakistan, most of the work has been conducted on English or regional languages (Akhtar & Kausar, 2011; Aziz & Qureshi, 2017; Badshah, Kausar & Khan, 2015; Kausar, 2012 & Khan, 2019). Therefore, the present study signifies the importance of Chinese language by studying the beliefs of the students who are currently enrolled in the newly introduced Chinese compulsory courses in Public Sector University. Through the results and findings of this study, we can have a deep insight on the future effectiveness of Chinese language in Pakistan from the perspective of young learners.

Literature Review

Beliefs are defined as assumptions; predictions and thinking process of language learner while learning another language especially foreign language (Horwitz, 1985). Horwitz explained that these notions are depended on five dimensions which include the ability of a learner to acquire the language; process of language learning; the methodological and instrumental strategies utilized; problems in learning the language and attitude, motivation and experience while learning the language. (Kausar, 2012). This study aimed to focus on the initial ability and capability of learners for acquiring and learning Chinese as a foreign language to know learners beliefs about Chinese language. As Chinese foreign language phenomenon is explained as a language which is taught in an environment where Chinese is not spoken as native language or widely spoken language

(For example: Pakistani learning Chinese in Pakistan). In Pakistani context, the learner learns Chinese inside a classroom, but continues to use official, regional or second language outside the classroom. Positive attitude can lead to strong language learning process which helps in developing the language learning capability. On the other hand negative attitude can lead to misconceived notions about the language; its culture and effect the intercultural communication which is vital while learning a new language especially Chinese which has no contextual background within the scenario of Pakistan.

On the other hand, beliefs based on negative attitudes and misconceptions about language learning can result in the failure of language learning process (Horwitz, 1988). Among the number of BALLI studies, a few have explored beliefs of language learners who studied Chinese in a foreign language context (Cui, 2014; Le, 2004; Sun, 2011; Yang: 2015).

Cui (2014) conducted a study on language learning belief among North American CFL where he examined the belief dimensions using standardized survey on 218 post-secondary CFL learners. The findings avowed the significant role of culture on learners' beliefs and learners considered learning Chinese a difficult task but they were positive about improvement in their learning progress in future. Also, they believed that learning Chinese would provide opportunities respective to better jobs.

Moreover, Sun (2011) investigated Chinese language learner's beliefs and motivation in the Canadian context. The findings showed that the learners had multiple factors for motivations to learn the Chinese language which varied from interest in culture to communication with native Chinese speakers. It further expanded to other motivational factors like travelling, friendship and job opportunities.

In one of other BALLI studies based on Chinese language context, Le (2004) adopted the BALLI questionnaire according to the context to know the experiences of foreign backgrounds admitted in short term language learning programs in China. It was observed that there are similarities' and differences among the three ethnic groups while acquiring a language. As most of the participants agreed that; it was relatively easy to learn few languages as compare to others. Contrastively; Chinese oriented narrated Chinese as a "very difficult" or "difficult language" than the other students enrolled in the short-term course which included Asians and others. Although the Chinese background students assumed to have more proficiency than the others; but the non-Chinese students showed relatively more confidence in acquiring and learning Chinese in comparison to the two groups. In the same manner; Yang (2015) conducted a BALLI study on exploring the experiences of young learners who were acquiring Chinese as a global language. The findings revealed that although learners found Chinese language difficult to learn, they were enthusiastic about learning the target language. Also, the learners focused more on repetition and practicing of the target language

Similarly; Aslam and Thompson (2018) investigated interconnectedness between two dimensions anxiety and experiences in Turkish context about EFL. Sample of 152 Turkish university undergraduates was taken to fill Beliefs using BALLI questionnaire and anxiety scale. According to the results, classroom anxiety and negative feelings were positively linked to the target language. It was concluded that the presence of positive experiences about acquiring the language attributed to reducing the stress, anxiety and enhanced the confidence about English language learning.

Aziz and Qureshi (2017) explored beliefs of Public sector secondary students from Lahore with focus on gender and academic major. It was a descriptive study in which they indicated a difference in terms of gender and academic major about the beliefs of foreign language learning relative to their motivation, easiness and importance. The findings

relative to learners' beliefs carried the consideration of language policy makers; institutional heads; language teachers claiming that it can be useful in terms of effective guidance for making curriculum, decision, and instruction. One of the studies about beliefs with the inclusion of gender variable is conducted in Middle-East context.

As the influence of Chinese language learning is increasing and there is great scholarly debate whether Chinese would replace English (Fan, 2018). The present study will follow the theoretical framework based on Horwitz model of 'System of belief about language learning' (Horwitz, 1988). The components comprising this model interlinks directly or indirectly with the factors that are influencing the language learning belief system. In the present study beliefs about foreign language aptitude are investigated to know the possible outcome of beliefs held by learners for Chinese language. In the present study, this dimensions will lead to the deep understanding of beliefs hold by CFL undergraduates who are studying Chinese language in Public Sector university of Karachi.

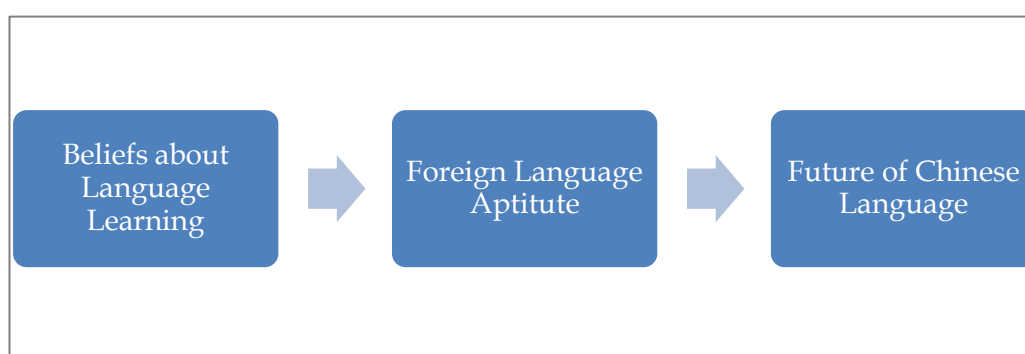


Figure 1 Chinese Foreign Language Aptitude

Material and Methods

The present study have been conducted to explore the beliefs of CFL undergraduates studying in Public Sector University of Karachi. Therefore, quantitative study has been undertaken. (Creswell, 2014). Quantitative data was collected from undergraduate students using a BALLI questionnaire.

The present study used BALLI questionnaire adopted from Horwitz model of 'System of belief about language learning' (Horwitz, 1988) to examine the beliefs of undergraduate students at Public Sector University about Chinese Language Learning. The instrument was frequently used in the recent times by the researchers for their studies on beliefs (Aslam & Thompson, 2018 & Aziz & Qureshi, 2017). Therefore, the reliability and validity of the instrument have been verified statistically in different context (Horwitz, 1999). This study was conducted at a Public Sector University in Karachi where undergraduates are being taught Chinese as a compulsory course in their first and second year. The Chinese course consists of 3 non-credit hours.

The population for this study was second year undergraduates who have taken both the Chinese courses, in their first and second years of their undergraduate study that have been offered by the university. The target population for the present study consists of 2200 undergraduates from 29 departments of Public Sector University who have completed both Chinese compulsory courses being offered by the University in their first and second year. 220 undergraduates were taken as a representative sample for the present study which is a 10% of the total target population. For selecting 220 undergraduates, systematic sampling technique was used. The sampling interval for the present study was 10 which depicts that every 10th member from the total target population would be selected for inclusion in the sample size. However, the sampling size was reduced to 200 at the time of

data collection process due to unavailability of 20 participants which were targeted to be the part of target population.

Data Analysis

Following the nature of the study, the result of the data was analyzed using the statistical analysis. Therefore; quantitative study has been carried out by using the BALLI questionnaire. The data was analyzed statistically using SPSS software for detailed insights. For the present study; descriptive statistics technique have been used to obtain frequencies, mode, median, means and standard deviation of the questionnaire. The purpose of analyzing the data statically was to present the view of undergraduates' responses in order to explore their prevailing beliefs about Chinese Language aptitude in the context of Pakistan

Ethical consideration

The study has been conducted with the cautious dealing regarding all ethical issues in order to avoid any misinterpretation relative to the objectives and purpose of the study. Once the process of participants' selection was completed, there is a requirement to obtain their permission in order to include them as a part of the study. Permission of the participants are obtained through informed consent Creswell (2014) defined informed consent as a statement that participants sign before they participate in research (p. 149). The research informed the participants and took their consent through informed consent letter before initiating the data collection process.

Results and Discussion

Foreign Language Aptitude

BALLI Questionnaire examined about the presence of specific abilities about language learning which make a learner a successful entity in foreign language learning (Horwitz, 1988). These items deal with the individual potential and their respective achievement in foreign language learning. Descriptive analysis of learners' responses through presenting means, standard deviation and percentages for each category is reported below in Table 1.

Table 1
Foreign Language Aptitude

Area	N	Mean	SD	Skewness
Foreign language Aptitude	200	3.243	1.338	-0.388

The means of 3.24 shows the mixed beliefs of undergraduates in foreign language aptitude. Mixed beliefs in foreign language aptitude represent the mild interest of undergraduates towards learning a foreign language. However the higher SD value indicates the variance in the responses of the participants which shows that the undergraduates hold different beliefs in each category relative to dimension of difficulty. Moreover, the skewness score is in between the range of +1 to -1 which reflects that the data is moderately skewed.

Easier to Learn Chinese as a Foreign Language

Collectively more than 50% of the participants opined that it was relatively easier for young kids to learn language than teenagers or old ones. The mode value of 4 represent that majority of the responses from the undergraduate students are in agreement that it is

relatively easier for younger ones to learn Chinese than the others. The normal distribution of the responses is presented through the histogram in figure 1.



Figure 1 Histogram shows language learning capability

Gender in Chinese Language Learning

It was explored that only 38% of the learners were of the belief that women are good at learning Chinese as a foreign language whereas 50% of them gave neutral response. The median value of 3 signifies that the responses of the undergraduate students about this particular item are symmetrical. Moreover, the skewness score is in between the range of +1 to -1 which reflects that the data is moderately skewed. The mode value of 3 represents that the majority of the responses from the undergraduate students are neutral for the statement as shown in Table 2. Gender was not believed to be a substantial factor to influence foreign language learning by the learners.

Table 2
Descriptive statistics for responses on comparing women ability to learn foreign language with men

Statement	Median	Mode	Skewness	SD
Women are better than men in learning Chinese as a foreign language	3	3	-0.057	1.421

Confidence about Chinese Foreign Language Learning

In terms of examining the experiences on general confidence about CFL among undergraduates, collectively more than 50% of the respondents showed their agreement and strongly agreed to the inborn ability of language learning. In comparison, 16.5% of the participants strongly agreed and only 10 % of them disagreed to the statement. The figure 2 below, revealed the high confidence of the pupils on their foreign language learning aptitudes

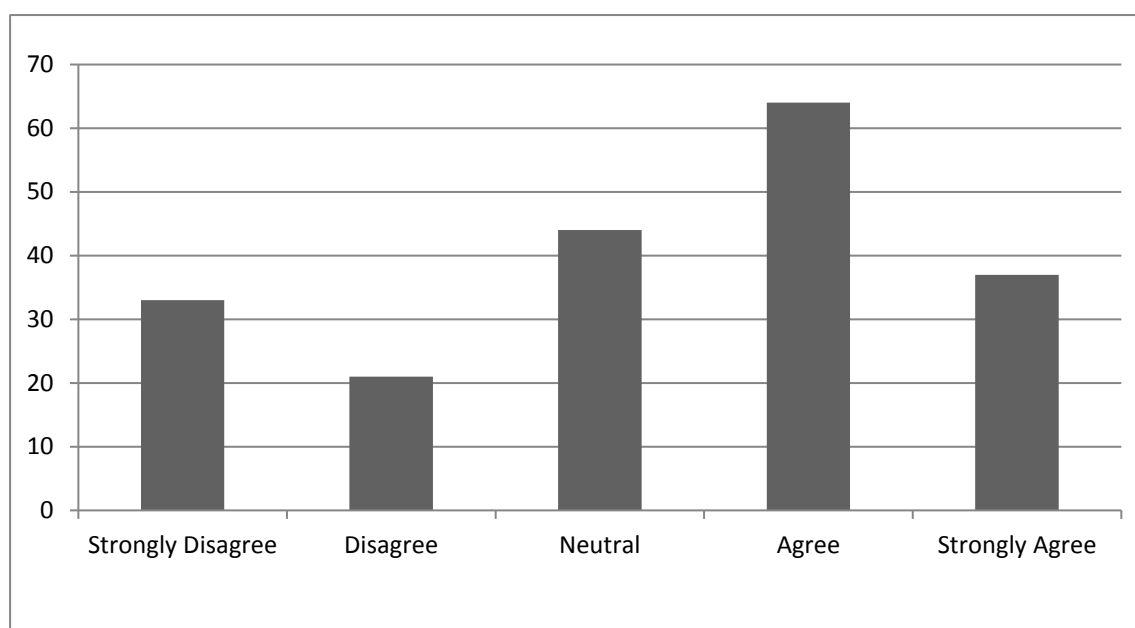


Figure 2 Percentage distribution of participants' response for people in born ability

Everyone can acquire CFL

As similar to the earlier result about special ability, the table 3 below showed the positive beliefs too in terms of the self-confidence which the undergraduates possess for learning Chinese. Majority of the respondents agreed with the statement which manifests the endorsement of the learners towards positive beliefs about acquiring CFL. Consequently; almost 60% of the learners showed confidence on their ability to learn and speak Chinese.

Table 3
Frequency table for responses on learning ability to speak Chinese

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Everyone can acquire CFL	43	37	34	52	32

Multilingual Speakers are Intelligent

The median value of 4 as shown in table 4 above signifies that the responses of the undergraduate students about this particular item are not symmetrical. I.e. they have mixed beliefs about the presence of intelligence in the speakers of more than one language. Moreover, the skewness score is in between the range of +1 to -1 which reflects that the data is moderately skewed. However, the mode value of 4 represent that the majority of the responses from the undergraduate students are in agreement for the statement.

Table 4
Descriptive statistics for responses on intelligence of more than one language speakers

Statement	Median	Mode	Skewness	SD
People who speak more than one language are intelligent	4.00	4	-0.525	1.287

Collectively more than 50% of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed to rate intelligence with language learning. In comparison, only 14% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 11% of them disagreed to the statement whereas, 20.5% were on the neutral side.

Table 5 below, 32% of the respondents agreed and 15% of them believed that the prior knowledge relative to foreign language assisted the pupils to learn CFL easily. Contrastively; 14% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 14.5% of them showed their disagreement to the statement.

Table 5
Frequency table for the response on easiness of learning a foreign language for multilingual speakers of foreign languages

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Easier to learn CFL when someone already speaks one	28	29	43	64	30

Discussion

The global influence of China achieved through economic and cultural ways has increased to a great extent in the past 10 years (Fan, 2018). In the scenario of Pakistan, learning a glob language is quite complex because there are so many indigenous languages. The notion of learning a foreign language is a familiar construct in the world outside Pakistan. The only known foreign language other than its official and regional languages that Pakistanis come across is English which is also taught as a second language in urban areas of Pakistan.

However, there is a recent shift in trend of learning foreign languages in Pakistan over the years (Garcia, 2014). The findings of the present study showed strong positive beliefs of undergraduates which aligned with other local studies (Aziz & Qureshi, 2017; Badshah, Kausar & Khan, 2017) on exploring learners' beliefs on their foreign language ability. Similarly, in this study the undergraduate students synchronized the intelligence of an individual on the basis of their ability to learn CFL. Moreover, participants further believed in their inborn abilities to learn CFL along with the introduction of foreign languages to children than adults as it is easy for young ones to acquire languages in comparison to the teenagers and old ones. The findings corroborate with the study conducted by Aziz & Qureshi (2017) who also concluded the same results on the target population of school students. Moreover, the present study further reported the responses of undergraduates on the benefits of knowing a foreign language prior to learn a new one. This finding related with other studies who also reported similar findings that it is easier for an individual to learn a new language who is a multilingual speaker and is exposed to one or two language in the childhood (Aziz & Qureshi, 2017; Badshah, Kausar & Khan, 2017 and Khan; 2019).

To sum up, the finding of the present study relative to foreign language ability in evidence of other local studies (Aziz & Qureshi, 2017; Badshah, Kausar & Khan, 2017) can be concluded on the view that learners of Pakistan are enriched with the aptitude to learn foreign languages if they are properly introduced to them at an appropriate time.

Conclusion

The existing drift of learning CFL among the young generation of Pakistan has its root engraved in the economic agreement between Pakistan and China. Majority of the participants were hopeful for future job opportunities and future use of speaking Chinese as a result of being a competent Chinese speaker (Jalil, 2018; Bacha, 2017). However, as the global importance of Chinese is increasing due to Chinese Pakistan Economic Opportunities Project and Chinese rising power in the global market. Therefore, youth is inclined towards learning Chinese language and are hopeful about their ability to learn Chinese in future.

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