



RESEARCH ON FACTORS AFFECTING THE FOREIGN-LANGUAGE LEARNING OF INTERNATIONAL VIETNAMESE STUDENTS

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Abstract

Foreign students at universities experience different educational environments. In addition to integrating into the local teaching and living environments, foreign-language learning is essential. This study mainly investigated the factors affecting Vietnamese university students in Taiwan who were learning English as a foreign language, and took the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language as a control for the purpose of comparison. The research subjects were four international university students from Vietnam. Based on the in-depth interview data, this study analyzed the main factors that affected learning and found that the main factors that impacted on leaning effectiveness were the learning experience, the level of practical application, the first language and the application of information technology. Previous learning experiences and the current level of practical application also affected their motivation with regard to learning a foreign language. This research analyzed the difficulties that Vietnamese students experienced in the process of acquiring English to allow teachers of foreign languages to have a better understanding of Vietnamese foreign-language learners. The study also provides teachers of foreign languages with suggestions for teaching strategies.

Keywords:

foreign-language learning, higher education, Vietnamese students, international students.

1. Introduction

The number of Vietnamese students studying in Taiwan has gradually increased in recent years. Foreign students generally encounter and need to adapt to the differences in language, schoolwork, and living environments that are different from their native countries (Nasirudeen, Lau, Seng, & Ling, 2014). In the teaching environment, apart from striving to improve the learning ability of students, teachers must also consider the learning situations of international students from different countries in order to improve teaching effectiveness.

In addition to adapting to the living environment that uses Mandarin, international Vietnamese university students in Taiwan must also take compulsory English courses. Even though each student has different individual goals or different majors, what international Vietnamese students all experience is the challenge of foreign language learning. The objective of this study was to investigate the factors that affected international Vietnamese students who were learning English as a foreign language, and to compare the factors that affected them when learning Mandarin as a foreign language. It is hoped that the results of this research can provide foreign language teachers with a reference for assisting international Vietnamese students in their courses in order to achieve optimum instructional effectiveness.

Based on the research motivation stated above, the research objectives of this study were as follows:

1. To investigate the factors affecting international Vietnamese students when learning English as a foreign language.
2. To investigate the current situation of international Vietnamese students learning Mandarin as a foreign language.
3. To investigate international Vietnamese students' opinions of learning a foreign language.

2. Literature Review

Foreign students studying at universities must adapt to the new environment, and one of the aspects to which they must become accustomed is learning a foreign language (Wearing, Wilson, & Arambewela, 2015). Various scholars have proposed that the factors that affect learning a foreign language include teaching strategies (Ercan, 2020), learning strategies (Raofi, Chan, Mukundan, & Rashid, 2014), and psychological factors (Vibulphol, 2016). With regard to the issue of Vietnamese students learning English as a foreign language, Nguyen, Warren, & Fehring (2014) studied the teaching of higher education in Vietnam, and the results revealed that there were many factors that affected the quality of English teaching; for example, “uninteresting teaching style, insufficient time for communicative activities, grammar-driven teaching, unreasonable time-management, unclear instructions, large class sizes, teachers' limited ability in classroom organization, students' unequal levels of English, inadequate lesson

preparation, teachers' limited use of teaching aids and technology, and students' lack of confidence in speaking English during class activities.”

Concerning improving the learning effectiveness of Vietnamese students who were not majoring in English but were learning English as a foreign language, Ngo and Eichelberger (2021) believed that the degree to which Vietnamese students used information and communication technologies was related to their self-efficacy in foreign-language learning. Students with a high to very high level of comfort with information and communication technologies were more self-efficacious in learning English as a foreign language than were those with a low to very low level of comfort with information and communication technologies.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research participants

The participants in this study were international Vietnamese students who were studying for a university degree in Taiwan, and were majoring in non-English majors. They were all enrolled in the universities' compulsory English course; their first language was Vietnamese, and they were learning English as a foreign language. The basic information and foreign-language learning backgrounds of the study participants were as follows:

- A. Female, from Northern Vietnam, 21 years old, had been in Taiwan for eight months. Experience in taking English courses: Had taken English courses for six years. Experience in taking Mandarin courses: Had taken Mandarin courses for three years, and was currently studying Mandarin as a foreign language at the university.
- B. Male, from Central Vietnam, 21 years old, had been in Taiwan for nine months. Experience in taking English courses: Had taken English courses for 10 years. Experience in taking Mandarin courses: Had taken Mandarin courses for approximately three years, and was currently studying Mandarin as a foreign language at the university.
- C. Female, from Northern Vietnam, 24 years old, had been in Taiwan for nine months. Experience in taking English courses: Had taken English courses for 14 years. Experience in taking Mandarin courses: Had taken Mandarin courses for approximately two years, and was currently studying Mandarin as a foreign language at the university.
- D. Female, from Southern Vietnam, 20 years old, had been in Taiwan for a year and five months. Experience in taking English courses: Had taken English courses for 10 years. Experience in taking Mandarin courses: Had taken Mandarin courses for approximately two years, and was currently studying Mandarin as a foreign language at the university.

3.2. Qualitative research approach and analysis

This research adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate the factors affecting international Vietnamese students who were learning English as a foreign language and their current situation of learning Mandarin. In five individual in-depth interviews conducted via the semi-structured interview method over the course of a semester, the research participants (coded A, B, C, and D) were asked to describe their learning experiences and views on learning English as a foreign language in response to the research-related questions, and to compare them to the experience of learning Mandarin as a foreign language. After the researchers recorded the points of view of the study participants, they analyzed the interview data using protocol analysis in the content analysis method. In addition to the analysis of the data obtained from the in-depth interviews, the study participants were asked to read the content of an English article aloud and record it. After sorting, the audio files of the participants reading the article were used to analyze the types of English pronunciation errors made by the Vietnamese students. The recorded observational research data obtained by the researcher in the research participants' English courses were mutually verified with the analysis of the interview data.

4. Results and Discussions

This research analyzed the factors affecting Vietnamese international students who were learning English as a foreign language and their current situation of learning Mandarin via in-depth interviews and classroom observation data. The results of this study revealed that all the study participants realized the importance of foreign-language learning and were willing to continue learning English as a foreign language.

I think that learning English is very important. The reason is simple, because English is the universal language in the world. Learning a new language also creates new opportunities for my own career. Therefore, I will strive to keep advancing along my chosen path. (A)

However, factors including experience of previous learning processes, the current level of practical application, the first language, and the application of information technology affected the learning effectiveness of the learners. Past learning experience and the current level of practical application also affected their motivation to learn a foreign language. The details of the influencing factors are discussed in detail in the following section.

4.1. Past learning experience

All the study participants had taken English courses in middle school. The experience of previous learning processes, such as the teaching methods, the teaching materials, and the evaluation methods in the middle school classes affected their motivation to learn English in their current situation. The participants in the study believed that the ‘spoon-feeding’ method, the educational system emphasizing memorizing and examining, of teaching English in middle school caused them to easily lose their enthusiasm for learning when encountering a heavy workload. Compared to learning English as a foreign language, the study participants spent less time learning Mandarin. However, due to the different learning styles, their learning effectiveness was better than it was when learning English. They were all more confident in their ability in Mandarin than they were in their ability in English.

Research Participant A: She started learning English in the 10th grade. She reported that she performed poorly in English at high school, and her English-speaking skills were limited to only a few simple sentences in daily conversations. She had almost no reading and writing skills in English. She self-assessed her English proficiency as poor, and her Mandarin proficiency as fair.

I started to learn English in the 10th grade. When I was in middle school in Vietnam, I had three hours of English classes a week in school. When I was still a high school student, my English proficiency was quite average compared to others. At the time, English was just a subject that I was failing, and it didn't matter. Finally, I started to study hard at the end of the 12th grade, but I only just scraped through... By the time I took the high school graduation exam, I could only get four points (barely passing) to pass the exam. (A)

Regarding my English-speaking skill, I only know some simple phrases such as “How are you?”, “What time is it?”, and “What do you do?” As for literacy skills, it is almost impossible for me to read and write English. This is the most difficult for me, and I also find that most people who learn foreign languages find reading and writing skills very demanding, and I am no exception. (A)

Research Participant B: He started learning English in the 5th grade. He reported that English was the most difficult subject for him before university, and his English-speaking skill was relatively weak. Grammar was the main teaching focus in middle school, and the exams consisted mainly of fill-in-the-blank questions. Students solely memorized vocabulary and grammar, and had no opportunity to practice speaking. He self-assessed his English proficiency as poor, and his Mandarin proficiency as good.

Before going to university, English class was probably the most difficult for me. Since all we did in high school was going to class and going home to do homework...it was stressful. Regarding

teaching materials, in addition to the textbooks used in class, we were also asked to buy more workbooks. In class, grammar was often the focus rather than pronunciation. Not only English, but any language requires practice and training in an appropriate environment. In middle school, students just listened to the explanations, and this learning method has created the habit of “rote memorization”. (B)

Research Participant C: She learned English when she was in primary and secondary school in Vietnam, with about one and a half hours of classes per week. She reported that the English courses at the time emphasized the study of grammar and not the practical application. For example, writing or oral communication were only evaluated via a written test. She self-assessed her English proficiency as poor, and her Mandarin proficiency as fair.

I learned English when I was in primary school... Every time we studied English, grammar was the most important but was not often used in practical applications, so we quickly forgot it. In class, we only read the dialogue in the textbooks. Not much English writing was taught... We only reviewed what was covered in the exam and always focused on the format of the exam. The results (exam results) were often emphasized instead of the teaching process. Compared to other subjects, my English grade was very low, just enough to scrape through. (C)

Research Participant D: She started learning English in the 4th grade. She said that most of the students in the class learned vocabulary by rote and considered English grammar very complex. She self-assessed her English proficiency as poor, and her Mandarin proficiency as good.

In the last two weeks of the course, students had a vocabulary test, with a maximum of 15 vocabulary items per test. I think that this kind of teaching has both positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, it can help students remember the vocabulary they have learned. The downside is that some students consider this as a rote learning method and are not interested in learning this language (English). (D)

4.2. Degree of practical application

In addition to the impact of the negative experiences of previous learning processes on the motivation for learning English as a foreign language, the degree of practical application was another factor that affected the learning motivation. All the research participants were willing to work part-time. Not only does a part-time job bring economic independence, it is also a process of learning to adapt to a foreign environment. Even if a part-time job takes up a significant

amount of time, it still has adding value. As part-time jobs mainly require the use of Mandarin, this affects the willingness to learn English as a foreign language, and decreases the motivation to learn English as a foreign language. For international Vietnamese students, the motivation to learn Mandarin as a foreign language is stronger than it is for learning English as a foreign language. Vietnamese students who choose to study in Taiwan are extremely motivated to learn Mandarin. In order to integrate into Taiwan's teaching and living environment during the period of studying abroad, learners need to learn Mandarin more urgently than they do English. Apart from the need to communicate daily in Mandarin at school, in their lives, and at their part-time jobs, Mandarin might also be required for work following graduation. In other words, the actual practical application of Mandarin was currently higher than was that of English and, due to having limited time, these pragmatic considerations would affect the motivation for learning English as a foreign language to a certain extent.

4.3. First language influence

The learning problems of Vietnamese students in English classes are different from those of Mandarin-speaking students. The impact of the first language on learning effectiveness is that first language not only affects the pronunciation of foreign languages, but also affects the comprehension of phonograms. According to the results of the interviews with the research participants, although the period of learning Mandarin as a foreign language was shorter, the effectiveness of learning was better than was that of learning English as a foreign language, and they were more confident in their Mandarin proficiency. They self-assessed their proficiency in English listening and speaking as weaker than in reading. When learning English listening and speaking skills, international Vietnamese students often make mistakes in their English pronunciation due to the influence of their first language. These include the retroflex sounds [r] and [l], which are more difficult to pronounce, and they tend to pronounce [aɪ] as [i]; furthermore, long vowel sounds [e], [o], [u] are also frequently confused.

Compared to learning English, all the study participants agreed that learning Mandarin listening and speaking skills were easier than were learning Mandarin reading and writing skills. Since Vietnam is deeply influenced by the Han Chinese culture, Vietnam has historically used Chinese characters as its official language. Although modern Vietnamese uses the Latin alphabet, Vietnamese retains a large number of Sino-Vietnamese words (words borrowed from Chinese), which account for approximately 60% of Vietnamese vocabulary. Many loanwords borrow Chinese pronunciation; therefore, many Vietnamese words are pronounced similarly to Chinese words, which makes it easier for learners to understand the meaning when listening to Mandarin. When studying Mandarin reading and writing, some research participants believed that the major difference between Mandarin and Vietnamese was the structure of the

Chinese characters. As Vietnamese uses the Latin alphabet, the students mainly used Pinyin when writing Chinese. In terms of learning strategies, the Vietnamese students first focused on their listening and speaking skills when learning Mandarin, and then proceeded to learn to write Chinese characters. This is what made it more effective for them to learning Mandarin than to learn English.

4.4. The application of information technology

In the field of foreign-language learning, finding a learning method that best suits the learners is crucial for enhancing their learning. However, in terms of using information to assist foreign-language learning, the vast amount of jumbled information sometimes prevents learners from finding a learning method that suits them, and often affects the effectiveness of their foreign-language learning. Some research participants often attempted to utilize online resources for learning English in the hope of increasing their opportunities to practice. Some research participants considered the rapid access to resources to be convenient, as many online educational resources are available on the internet. Nonetheless, they may not be able to apply them systematically to self-directed learning or to find the most effective learning method for them. As foreign-language learners rely on online learning resources, the ability to use information technology also affects their learning strategies. In terms of learning strategies, it is necessary to pay attention to the individual differences with regard to learning materials and learning methods. Foreign-language learners today are confronted by the task of finding a suitable learning strategy.

I went to some cram schools before, but it didn't work out, and I think this was partly due to the way of teaching, and partly because I didn't have enough perseverance to learn a new language. Currently, I'm still looking for an effective learning method. There are many learning materials, but I don't know which to choose and what suits me. (C)

5. Conclusions

International Vietnamese students who leave their hometowns to study for a degree in Taiwan have the opportunity to learn foreign languages and culture, and to develop themselves. However, in an unfamiliar environment, in addition to learning the academic knowledge taught by the department and adapting to the Mandarin foreign-language environment, English courses are also compulsory. This study investigated the factors that influenced the learning of English as a foreign language by Vietnamese university students in Taiwan, and used the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language as a control for the purpose of comparison. The results of the study demonstrated that, although Vietnamese students studied Mandarin for a shorter period, their learning was more effective in comparison to English. Compared with their English proficiency, they were more confident in their Mandarin proficiency. Among the factors that influenced learning effectiveness were previous learning experiences, the current level of practical application, the first

language and the application of information technology. Learning experiences and the degree of practical application also affected the motivation to learn foreign languages.

In the course of learning English as a foreign language, the striving for progress attitude of the international Vietnamese students was of great help in promoting their learning achievements. The Vietnamese foreign-language learners emphasized that practical aspects, such as the teaching materials that could be applied to daily life, the campus, and work-related topics could enhance their learning motivation, and strengthen their ability to use information and communication technologies, which was helpful in increasing their self-efficacy in learning English as a foreign language (Ngo & Eichelberger 2021). In terms of learning strategies, the Vietnamese foreign-language learners improving their pronunciation when learning English might lead to greater progress when learning English. Learning strategies were based on combining interests and needs, which could improve learning effectiveness to some degree. Due to the rapid economic development of Vietnam, English education is in great demand, and the foreign-language learning environment of Vietnamese students in Vietnam has gradually changed. Therefore, foreign-language teaching strategies must also be adjusted in accordance with the learners' needs.

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