

# Psychological Preference of Chinese Students in Learning English as a Foreign Language: Case of Shaanxi Normal University

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## Abstract

Students' outlook in life is an important factor necessary for building a character, and so with creating an optimistic view in schooling as they explore unfamiliar things. In the context of Shaanxi Normal University, communicating with Chinese students using the English language will lead them to the line "Sorry, my English is poor". This concept paved the way to explore the psychological preference of undergraduate students at Shaanxi Normal University towards learning the English language using quantitative research design. Also, the present study explored whether there is a significant difference in students' psychological preference towards the English language based on gender, year level, and courses or field of specialization. A modified survey questionnaire aligned to Chinese students' context was made to describe their ways of studying English. A total of 200 randomly selected students answered a 30-item survey questionnaire from different academic disciplines. Results show that Chinese students have a moderate psychological preference for studying the English language. T-test and one-way ANOVA test results show no significant difference in gender, year level, and academic disciplines. The implication of this study is for EFL teachers to have an idea of the psychological preferences of Chinese students towards learning the art of the English language. In conclusion, Chinese students have a moderate preference for learning the English language. Thus, teachers are recommended to boost the preference of Chinese students to the highest level possible in English classroom instruction for a more productive outcome.

**Keywords:** Psychological preference, English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Classroom instruction

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## 1. Introduction

Psychological preference or viewpoint is a stimulating force that persuades students' determination to learn. Accordingly, Fakeye (2010) reported that students' viewpoint is an important agent of different learning stance. Consequently, in the pedagogical realm, students carry out their own will and so with what to do in their schooling. Looking into the perspective of China, studying the art of English is really challenging because of the cultural and gaps in language. Yet, through growing competition in the global arena, and emphasis on the business industry, education sectors in China expect students to be globally competitive. Also, in order to maintain or excel not only in world trade and industry but in education as well, Chinese students need to accept the challenge of understanding the English language. Moreover, China already acknowledged the importance of studying the English language as they started to open their horizons to other countries (Yan, 2010 as cited in Bolton & Graddol, 2010). Hence, Liu (2012) implied that to improve students' performance in learning a foreign language, it is necessary to develop their constructive outlook and interests in studying English. Also, Luciani (2013) remarked that if the optimistic outlook creates fire, the inspiration keeps it hot.

Considering these notions, Hu and Baumann (2014) suggested that teachers should give numerous activities as well as chances for students to practice speaking and reading English learning materials which by some means eventually develop students' interest in familiarizing the English language. However, Yu (2010) remarked that Chinese students expressed displeasure in the pedagogy of English. Hence, the psychological preference of students should be explored and so with the passion that could fuel their interests. Furthermore, adolescents in China nowadays have a tough desire for English for the reason that English skills will help them find an excellent job in the future (Liu, 2009 & Yang et al. 2010 as cited in Liu, 2012). Nevertheless, Zhang (2014) said that the conjoint difficulty of students in China is their communication skills. Students don't have self-confidence in speaking the English language in communicating with others. Hence, this concern is challenging for undergraduate students to practice the use of the English language.

### 1.2. Objectives of the Study

This study was designed to explore the psychological preference of Chinese students in learning the English language at Shaanxi Normal University. Objectively, this study sought to investigate the following:

(1) The level of agreement on the psychological preference of Chinese students towards learning English as a foreign language in terms of cognitive, behavioral, and emotional aspects;

(2) The significant difference in psychological preference of students in terms of gender, year level, and academic disciplines towards learning English as a foreign language.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of learning the English language in China is considered as the key to progress and modernization. Many students may have a positive inclination towards learning the English language but numerous students also show a negative outlook in learning the English language as it seems not important compared to other subjects like Science and Mathematics (Qi, 2016). According to Ahmed (2015), the desire to acquire knowledge or learn depends on the students' preferences or how they perceive the significance of learning to their daily living. It all narrows down to many causes that involve life experiences and for the idea of having a good job. In this study, psychological preference is considered as learning attitude (Chew, 2012). The learning inclination of the students is divided into three components such as emotional or affective, behavioral, and cognitive. Emotional refers to the student's feeling about learning or certain matter; behavioral refers to the manner of the students in making means and ways to learn, and cognitive which refers to how students create implication out of a certain idea or concept.

### 2.1 *Language Learning Preference*

Studies on viewpoint in language have become significant in the last years in relation to the idea of improving students' performance in learning a foreign language, specifically, English (Abidin, 2012; Eshghinejad, 2016; Saidat, 2017; Asghar, Jamil, Iqbal, & Yasmin, 2018). Generally, preference or viewpoint is the concept used to explain the ways and means of one's perspective or behavior in dealing with matters concerning life choices which is intertwined in the theory of Behaviorism. Therefore, students' viewpoint on learning a foreign language depends on their perspective on whether to take action positively or negatively to English language learning and practice (Baker 1992, as cited in Saidat, 2017).

### 2.2 *Related Studies on Language Learning Preferences*

Several studies on students' attitudes in learning the English language emerged with the aim of improving students' attitudes and viewpoints towards learning a foreign language. For instance, Liu and Zhao (2011) conducted a study on EFL students' language attitudes in different universities in China. The results revealed that students have positive attitudes towards learning the English language and the researchers concluded that the Chinese students consider learning the English language significant to boost their sense of identity.

Another study was made by Chew (2012) who investigated students' attitudes towards the English language and the relationship of their motivation to learn considering their identity. Results reveal that the students have a positive outlook on English language learning. Students wish to speak fluent and accurate English. Their motivation is fueled by English movies. They also manifested the value of learning the English language and the idea of socialization to other English speaking people as well as learning English culture.

Likewise, a study with students showing a constructive attitude in learning English was made by Eshghinejad (2016). The study aimed to explore if there is a significant difference in the attitudes of college students in learning the English language in terms of their demographic profile. Results showed that there is a significant attitudinal difference between male and female students who are learning English as a foreign language.

Contrary to the previous studies, Abidin, Alzwari, & Pour-Mohammadi (2012) investigated the different aspects of attitudes among Libyan high school students who are learning English as a foreign language and they found out that students showed negative outlook towards learning the English language.

In the context of China, Liu (2012) explored the relationship of the Chinese students' attitudes towards learning English as well as their perception of social norms related to learning foreign languages. The results of the study showed that Chinese students have a moderately strong positive attitude in learning the English language and interest in learning other foreign languages. Also, students perceived that Chinese social norms moderately support foreign language learning. Moreover, the study further explored the attitude of the students in terms of gender; it revealed that there is a significant difference in the attitude of male and female Chinese students in learning the English language. Interestingly, the study showed a significant relationship among students' attitudes and performance in learning the language.

Moreover, Qi (2016) investigated the importance of English language education among students in China using qualitative design and found out that students show a positive attitude in learning the English language. Also, these students show support to the implementation of English language education in China, however, some students thought that English is not that important compared to other subjects.

## 3. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to explore the level of agreement and significant difference in the psychological preference of Chinese students towards learning English as a foreign language at Shaanxi Normal University. To answer the target questions for this study, the quantitative research design was used as statistical procedures played

an important role in the analysis part. According to Fischer, Neumann, & Boone, (2014) quantitative research is used when the data is obtained from a large group of samples and the analysis is possible through statistical procedures.

### 3.1 Participants

The participants were 200 college students, 40 males, and 160 females, in Shaanxi Normal University. With regard to the year level, there were 92 first-year students and 108 second-year students. These students were from eight fields of study: Mathematics, Psychology, Food Engineering, Political Education, Physics & IT, Chemistry, Preschool Education, and Bioscience. There is no English subject offered to the third year and graduating students except for those majoring English language.

### 3.2 Survey Questionnaire

A modified survey questionnaire was made and translated to suit the level and needs of Chinese students. The questionnaire is composed of 30 items; 10 items are allotted for each aspect. A five-point Likert scale was used to measure the level of agreement from 1-strongly disagree to 5-strongly agree. To check the correctness of the translated statements, three experts were identified to examine the questionnaire. These experts include a master's student specializing in Chinese language, one professor from the School of Foreign Studies and one lecturer from the School of Education at Shaanxi Normal University. The reliability of each item was determined through Cronbach Alpha. Results show 0.545 which is considered an acceptable consistency. This also means that items in the survey questionnaire are appropriate for the final conduct of the study. After considering all comments and suggestions from these experts, the questionnaire was pilot tested among undergraduate Chinese students from different departments who were attending English courses.

### 3.3 Data Gathering Procedure

Considering ethical standards, a letter to conduct the study was given to the Vice Dean of the School of International Studies seeking permission. Upon approval of the letter, a survey questionnaire along with a letter of consent for the participants of the study was administered. The subjects or participants of the study were shortly briefed about the background of the study with the help of their Chinese teacher.

### 3.4 Statistical Procedure

The data was analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS), to answer the research questions, descriptive statistics, specifically; frequency, mean, and standard deviation were used to determine the level of agreement of Chinese students on their psychological preference towards learning the English language. T-test was used to determine if there is a significant difference in students' psychological preference in terms of gender and year level. Furthermore, the one-way ANOVA analysis test was used to examine if there is a significant difference in students' psychological preference considering their field of specialization or academic disciplines. Hence, the results are stipulated in the succeeding details.

### 3.5 Limitations

This study is limited to the college students of Shaanxi Normal University, thus, represents a lesser part of the Chinese students at the tertiary level who have preferences in learning the English language. Considering that the study was conducted personally, it is expected that students gave honest and sincere answers to each item in the survey questionnaire. This study was done with the optimism that more constructive studies will be done in this specific area for future innovations.

## 4. Results

The scores and interpretation obtained from the statistical treatment used in this study are presented in the following tables:

### 4.1 Students' Psychological Preference for English

To answer the first research question, table 1 shows the result of the students' level of psychological preference.

Table 1. Students' Level of Psychological Preference

Aspects of Psychological Preference	n	mean	SD	interpretation
Behavioral	200	3.16	0.31	moderate
Cognitive	200	3.09	0.25	moderate
Emotional	200	3.35	0.46	moderate

This result reveals that Chinese students have a moderate preference for learning English. The mean scores of the three aspects of psychological preference towards English are construed as moderate. Similarly, Eshghinejad (2016) reported that English learning is reasonable for students and it means that students appreciate the

importance of learning the English language.

#### 4.2 The Behavioral Aspect of Psychological Preference among Chinese Students

This aspect represents the second highest mean score ( $M=3.16$ ,  $SD=0.31$ ). In view of the items under this aspect, statement number 6 written in the survey questionnaire “I am not relaxed whenever I have to speak in my English class” obtained the highest mean score ( $M= 3.54$ ,  $SD= 0.91$ ), while statement number 9, “when I miss the class, I never ask my friends or teachers for the homework on what has been taught” got the lowest mean score ( $M= 2.31$ ,  $SD= .88$ ). This result showed a negative attitude of participants considering that the negative statement obtained the highest mean score. Also, this notion was supported by (Shams, 2008 as cited in Abidin, Alzwari, & Pour-Mohammadi, 2012) who reported that most of the participants were confused and nervous when they started speaking English in front of their classmates.

#### 4.3 The Cognitive Aspect of Psychological Preference among Chinese Students

The cognitive aspect obtained a mean score ( $M=3.09$ ,  $SD=0.25$ ) which means students have a moderate psychological preference towards learning the English language as they believe it will help them improve their knowledge or intellectual skills as manifested in statement number 11, “being good at English will help me study other subjects well” obtained the highest mean score ( $M=4.10$ ,  $SD=0.85$ ). On the other hand, statement 16, “I cannot apply the knowledge from English subject in my real life” got the lowest mean score ( $M=2.41$ ,  $SD=0.83$ ). Apparently, these notions were supported by Chew (2012) who proposed that students are motivated to learn the English language and value learning English language but many also believed that the English language is not applicable in their daily life.

#### 4.4 The Emotional Aspect of Psychological Preference among Chinese Students

The emotional aspect of students’ psychological preference for learning the English language obtained the highest mean score ( $M=3.35$ ,  $SD=0.46$ ). Students manifested interest in English represented by the statement number 24, “studying foreign languages like English is enjoyable” with the highest mean score ( $M=3.92$ ,  $SD=0.78$ ) and statement number 22, “honestly, I don’t have much interest in my English class” got the lowest mean score ( $M=2.27$ ,  $SD=0.86$ ). In support of these notions, Eshghinejad (2016) reported in her study that the majority of the students showed good feelings for learning English, however, some students remarked that they don’t like English much. Similarly, Liu (2012) found out that Chinese students have an optimistic view of learning English and other foreign languages but not so much to put their concentration. Considering that this study was conducted in the context of China, the results on Chinese students’ feelings in learning English are comparable.

#### 4.5 Psychological Preference of Chinese Students towards Learning English in terms of Gender

To answer the second question, table 2 shows the T-test result of the students’ psychological preference by gender.

Table 2. T-Test Results of Chinese Students’ Psychological Preference by Gender

Gender	N	Mean	sd	t	df	p-value
M	40	3.09	0.05	3.98	198	<0.0001
F	160	3.25	0.07			

Table 2 shows the results of the psychological preference of Chinese students in learning English in terms of gender. The results also showed that there is no significant difference between males ( $M=3.09$ ,  $SD=0.05$ ) and females scores ( $M=3.25$ ,  $SD=0.07$ ),  $t(198) = 3.98$ ,  $p = 0.0001$ . Contrary to the study conducted by (Shoib and Dornyei, 2005 as cited in Abidin, Alzwari, & Pour-Mohammadi, 2012) who proposed that gender is an essential factor in second language learning research and those female students show more interests and positive behaviour than male students, these results indicate that psychological preference among students in terms of gender is alike.

#### 4.6 Psychological Preference of Chinese Students towards Learning English in terms of Year Level

To answer the third question, table 3 shows the T-test result of the students’ psychological preference by year level.

Table 3. T-test Results of Chinese Students’ Psychological Preference by Year Level

Year Level	N	Mean	sd	t	df	p-value
1 <sup>st</sup>	92	3.23	0.07	0.54	198	0.30
2 <sup>nd</sup>	108	3.21	0.07			

Table 3 shows the results of Chinese students’ psychological preference in terms of year level. Accordingly, second-year students dominated the study ( $N=108$ ) against first-year students ( $N=92$ ). As presented in the table, although first-year students have slightly higher attitude with ( $M=3.23$ ,  $SD=0.07$ ) than second-year students ( $M=3.21$ ,  $SD=0.07$ ),  $t(198) = 0.54$ ,  $p = 0.30$ . Still, there is no significant difference in the psychological preference of the first year and second-year students. This means that the interests of the students regardless of the length of study in the university are somewhat similar.

#### 4.7 Psychological Preference of Chinese Students towards Learning English in terms of Field of Study

To explore the psychological preference of students towards learning English by field of study, table 4 shows the mean scores of the different academic disciplines. Moreover, to answer the fourth question, table 5 shows the result of the One-way ANOVA test.

Table 4. Mean Scores of Chinese Students' Psychological Preference by Field of Study

Academic disciplines	N	Mean	sd
Natural Sciences	87	3.21	0.22
Formal Sciences	33	3.31	0.23
Social Sciences	71	3.21	0.24
Applied Sciences	9	3.21	0.17

Table 4 shows the mean scores of Chinese students' psychological preference across different courses as represented by the academic disciplines. Apparently, students whose courses belong to formal sciences got the highest mean score ( $M=3.31$ ,  $SD=0.23$ ) while students whose courses belong to Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, and Applied Sciences got the same mean scores ( $M=3.21$ ,  $SD=0.22$ ;  $M=3.21$ ,  $SD=0.24$ ;  $M=3.21$ ,  $SD=0.17$ ). These results show that students who are taking Mathematics and Computer Science showed a remarkable psychological preference for learning the English language.

Table 5. One-way ANOVA Test on the Chinese Students' Psychological Preference by Field of Study

	SS	df	MS	F	p value
Between Groups	0.282	3	0.93	1.861	0.138
Within Groups	9.883	196	0.05		
Total	10.165	199			

The results of one-way ANOVA show that there is no significant difference in the Chinese students' psychological preference by field of study. As presented in table 5, ( $F=1.86$ ,  $p=0.14$ ), this means that students' psychological preferences regardless of their field of study or academic preferences don't have much difference towards familiarizing the art of English language. In contrast, Abidin, Alzwari, and Pour-Mohammadi (2012) reported different findings in their study about attitudes of EFL students in learning the English language considering that these researchers noted a significant difference in students' attitudes towards learning the English language across different specializations.

#### 5. Implications to Psychological Preferences and English Language Learning

Considering the results as discussed, possible implications of the psychological preferences of students must be taken into consideration in the teaching and learning process. This study implies that positive views in learning must be supported and the negative views in learning the English language should be altered through constructive reinforcements. Students should be encouraged to have constructive thinking or an optimistic point of view in learning new things especially unfamiliar topics like the English language. Students should know how to actively think or construct scenarios where they could use the English language in their daily living; hence, they could practice using the English language and familiarize it through experience. Moreover, students must be given a comfortable learning environment in English language instruction to discourage the students' hesitations and fear in expressing themselves using the English language. This is possible through implementing teaching methods and activities effectively in English classroom instruction. In addition, the EFL teachers must establish a communicative approach in the class, so students could cooperate with each other and share their experiences as well as problems with language learning. With these concepts, teachers' approaches in teaching and the connection of students' behavior towards learning the English language is vital.

#### 6. Conclusion

Students' psychological preference in learning is important for the teachers to have an idea of what to give in support or assistance. In conclusion, teachers should consider using the lenses of Behaviourism in motivating and helping students to learn. Moreover, the purpose of identifying the significant differences of Chinese students' psychological preferences in terms of gender, year level, and field of study is to have an idea of how learning works across different variables. However, the case of Chinese students at Shaanxi Normal University shows no significant difference in their psychological preferences towards English language learning across gender, year level, and academic disciplines. Although it has been noted that students who are inclined to Formal Sciences show high psychological preference in learning the English language, this means that the English language is important to their field of study. Interestingly, most students in this academic discipline are majoring in Mathematics. Teachers should think about how students' behavior can affect their learning process. Therefore, it is recommended that the content and the design of the English curriculum should meet the needs and interests of the students. The following recommendations are also presented for EFL teachers to alter the negative outlook of

Chinese students towards learning the English language. Those students who felt shy or ashamed in speaking English in the class should be monitored. Teachers should encourage learning English to build self-confidence among students. The use of audio-visual learning materials in English to support the familiarization of the language among students through their different senses already exists in classroom instruction.

Accordingly, Hu & Baumann (2014) remarked that teachers should let the students practice speaking the English language through the use of communicative teaching approaches as part of English classroom activities. Considering that the behavioral aspect of psychological preference among Chinese students, the teacher should establish the habit of the students in learning the English language through constant motivation and make English classroom instruction enjoyable and a comfortable platform to practice the English language for students through relaxing conversations and fun communicative learning activities.

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