



Good Learners of Chinese – Profiles of students in secondary school

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1. Introduction

This report presents profiles of the study habits, attitude, beliefs and learning experience of fourteen Victorian classroom learners of Chinese whom their teachers consider to be 'good' language learners: students at various stages of their secondary schooling who have made particularly good headway in Chinese, especially in their acquisition of the oral language.

The aim of the research is to provide information on a range of 'good' learners of Chinese in Victorian schools, showing what they think and feel about their study, and what they do to learn the language so successfully. The profiles show the students interviewed represent a spread of individual interests, history and learning styles. They also show some strong commonalities across the group. While personality and individual history cannot be shared, a number of characteristics have been identified which might usefully be cultivated in other learners to assist them in achieving greater success. The research also reveals some of the challenges in learning Chinese well at school that daunt even keen, hard-working young Australians. It is hoped that this report may lead to greater public recognition of these and some collaborative effort to eliminate them, both for the sake of the individual students and in the national interest.

2. The Notion of the 'Good Language Learner'

The idea that those who do well in second language courses might be more than simply students of higher diligence than their classmates, that they might employ particular strategies and even be a particular kind of person, first became publicly debated in modern education with the publication of Rubin's (1975) report, *What the Good Language Learner Can Tell Us*. Turning away from a focus on the characteristics of a good teacher of language, Rubin proposed that there was, indeed, such a person as a 'good' language learner (GLL), and that what was distinctive about such students was that they made use of certain strategies and exhibited superior perseverance. In 1978, a study of successful second language learners by Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Tedesco found that

...certain attributes [were] common among good language learners, especially with regard to strategies and techniques they had employed.... [The study] also illustrated the complexity and individuality of each learning situation and career (p. 99).

The results of a later study by Rubin and Thompson (1982/1994) showed that success in learning a foreign language depends largely on how well the learners assess what they need to do at each stage of development. In addition to suggesting common characteristics, these studies also showed that even good language learners face considerable individual challenges in achieving proficiency.

In 1990 Oxford began a series of studies of the strategy typology of GLLs, comprising study habits, learning styles and learning strategies (e.g. Oxford, 1992). She found they fell into two categories: indirect strategies – metacognitive, affective and social – which support and manage language learning; and direct strategies – cognitive, memory and compensatory – which directly involve the target language.

Oxford's work involving the study of school aged language learners was used as the framework by Foard (2000) in her study of Year 8 students of Italian in a Melbourne junior high school. Foard discovered a pattern of characteristics, emotions, attitudes, actions and behaviours exhibited by the good language learners in her group, who were defined as sharing both good results in formal assessments of language acquisition, and keenness to continue. The most important among their common attributes were (1) strong parental support and encouragement; (2) the opportunity to play around with the language outside of class; (3) professional status of family plus bilingual background; (4) a major desire to please parents; (5) friends also studying the language; (6) an attitude to the study of a language other than English as being especially exciting, interesting and feasible; and, (7) the use of specific language learning strategies, notably, particular cognitive strategies, as well as managing their learning effectively by doing all work set in class and as homework, and reviewing it. As a group, Foard's GLLs were generally diligent and successful students, achieving well also in Mathematics and English. Foard concluded from her findings that students who are encouraged from an early age to think about how they are learning may become more strategically competent as they mature, and may benefit from quite small changes in their learning approach through strategy training (p.139).

A later study of relevance was undertaken in South Australia and involved the motivation and beliefs of some 60 school students from all sectors who were continuing with language learning beyond the compulsory years (Curnow and Kohler, 2006). It revealed the primary factor across the group for going on was *feeling they were doing all right* in the subject, and this was commonly combined with *liking their teacher* and *having some friends also doing the language*.

The most recent consideration of the notion is a study by Erard (2012) of the GLL in extreme form, the *hyperpolyglot*, who learns many languages exceptionally well, and usually exceptionally quickly. Erard points out that the prior explanations for talented language learning diverge over whether there is either, no need to resort to *biological exceptionality*, what matters is a person's sense of mission and dedication to language learning, what they do is the product of practice; or, whether there is *something neurological is going on*. We may not know exactly what the neurological mechanisms are, *[but] we can't fully explain the exceptional outcomes as just the result of training or motivation* (p.p. 163). After investigating and explaining the origins of hyperpolyglottism, Erard concludes that the brain, culture, and individual biography interact with each other to produce hyperpolyglots (p. 242).

3. Procedure

Watching students performing in the Victorian Schools Chinese Speaking Competition prompted the question of what it was that made these ones successful and this led to twelve secondary schools with established Chinese programs being approached, and their Chinese teachers asked if they were able to identify one or two students who might fit the definition of an especially good oral language learner who was not of Chinese background. Six schools responded, each nominating between one and three students, including five who had been selected to participate in regional reading/speaking competitions, two of whom had attended competition finals in China and obtained a future scholarship to study at a university in Beijing. In addition, three sets of parents were contacted who over the prior year had mentioned to one of the researchers that their child was a keen and successful secondary learner of Chinese in a school of predominantly background speakers. In all, 18 candidates were identified, and their schools were requested to pass on an invitation to them to participate and a request to their parents for permission to interview. The schools these students attend are from the three sectors, government, independent and catholic.

A semi-structured interview lasting approximately 30 minutes was audio recorded by one researcher at their school with each of the 14 students who agreed to participate. (Of the other four, two could not participate at the time, and two chose not to.) The interview sought the nature and meaning that participating students made of their success in learning Chinese. In light of the prior studies mentioned above, participants' information was analysed with respect to situational factors and family influences, their personal attitude to the language and culture of China, and the kind of practices they engaged in as part of their learning.

4. Summary

4. 1 Participants

The 14 participants are students of secondary schools in the government, independent or catholic sectors, aged between 13 and 18 years. Of this, 13 have no Chinese heritage; 1 has 25% Chinese heritage, but grew up away from the language and culture. The table below shows the student profile.

Year Level	Male			Female		
	Gov	Ind	Cath	Gov	Ind	Cath
7					1	
8					1	
9	2	1		1		2
10						
11		1			2	
12		2				
Post Yr 12		1				
TOTAL	7 students			7 students		

Table 1: Student Group Profile

4. 2 Results

1. The one common good learning characteristic of all the students, which appears across the range of gender, age and school type, is that they benefit from support and a positive attitude to their study from their family: their families *are keen for them to learn Chinese* and they *encourage them in their language learning tasks*, despite the fact that none of the parents is able to assist with the study, and only two students have a sibling who has studied Chinese. Parental support includes applying pressure to do well, offering rewards for success and offering to 'hear' work learned such as vocabulary and dialogues.
2. A further learning characteristic, which runs a close second to the first, is that the students describe themselves as *engaged by their studies*, both with respect to Chinese and more generally. Two-thirds refer to themselves as 'a high achiever' and are doing very well in English, while half are taking advanced Maths and two-thirds are also quite highly developed musicians.
3. All the students are doing well in Chinese and greatly enjoy the challenge it offers despite the work it takes. Whether they volunteered to study it or it was compulsory, they find Chinese intriguing and nice to listen to, and look forward to travelling to China in future.
4. The same high proportion of the students is readily able to articulate specific learning strategies they employ, the principal two of which are that they *are diligent in doing all the work set* and they *make additional efforts themselves*. Just over half believe they are naturally good at language learning. Their learning techniques consist primarily of reading/speaking aloud and/or using auditory aids, and just over half have a revision/review strategy to consolidate work. It is evident that all are active and able in managing their studies and the demands they make on them.
5. The 12/14 still studying Chinese at school at the time of the interviews *intend to continue the following year*, and this despite a number having found studying Chinese to be quite a negative experience. One of the two who will not continue has already completed VCE and has not

continued with Chinese at university, although he thinks he still might. The other non-continuer is one of the youngest male students who, after a very positive first year of Chinese in Year 7, found himself in a new group in Year 8, where he was overwhelmed by the large number of home speakers. Despite his best efforts, he was ranked very low in the class and he could see no point in continuing.

6. All the students have clear views on how their Chinese course could be improved. Their major proposition is that *the listening and speaking component be increased considerably*. They also think more time should be spent on teaching the mastery of tones, and more time should be allowed for Chinese altogether. All complain that the bulk of their study is only reading and writing. As a result, even when they have the opportunity to speak Chinese, in China or locally, they find themselves very poor at getting anything out, a situation they experience as both embarrassing and disappointing.
7. The students' success in Chinese has developed despite the fact that fewer than a quarter had had the opportunity to learn Chinese over any period in Primary, and nearly two thirds had found themselves in Chinese at the start of Secondary without the option to choose another language. Those in both groups, however, said they felt Chinese was intriguing and they liked the sound of it, the characters and the culture; and they have a desire to socialise, travel and work with the language.

The above characteristics of these good language learners match much that Foard and other researchers have found among similar groups of students, notably that:

- parental interest and encouragement play a central role in their success
- the students are interested in their school work more generally and, specifically, in the language they are learning, both now and for itself, as well as for its likely value in the future
- the students know their own learning needs and manage their learning by adopting strategies that they have found effective.

While all acknowledge and appreciate the encouragement they receive from their teachers, unlike Foard's students, and notably unlike Curnow and Kohler's interviewees, the students in this study rarely mention liking (or not liking) their teachers of Chinese, or finding them interesting; and the two who spoke of working with a friend raise the practical help this provides, rather than the camaraderie mentioned by students in Foard's research and in the South Australian study. Unlike Foard's students, only 25% of these students access Chinese in the community, although some others watch Chinese television.

4. 3 Recommendations

The above results provide the following information for teachers on how they might help students learn better, and on how they might teach better.

Learning

As with earlier research, the results of this study suggest there is much that is teachable about being a successful learner of Chinese, and very much in line with Rubin and Thompson's major finding and Foard's own conclusions, most of what it is recommended teachers might teach their own students falls into the category of *learning to learn*. To this end, teachers should:

- talk to students about their learning and make talking about their problems a discussable topic
- help them to monitor their learning, understand their own needs, and design strategies that work for them on points where they are weak
- teach specific practical strategies for learning tones and characters
- ensure that lessons include metalinguistic awareness so that the intrinsic interest in language can develop and sustain the study
- teach students to find challenges interesting rather than simply daunting
- assist background speakers and classroom learners to work more cooperatively together
- ensure students are aware of community resources they can access independently to increase their experience of the language in natural settings
- educate parents about the importance of their interest in their child's perseverance and success; suggest practical ways for them to help their children with Chinese.

Teaching

The picture that emerges of the experience of studying Chinese is rather a dismal one. Although not the direct focus of the inquiry, the students had a great deal to say about their experiences, their aspirations and their preferences with respect to teaching and course structure that, if listened to, could contribute to better learning by students like themselves, and very possibly lead to the retention and development of many of those who drop out once Chinese is no longer compulsory. The following are the major points on these matters raised by virtually all of the students:

- Along with acknowledgement of encouraging, supportive teachers, lessons are described as dull, repetitive and frequently dysfunctional
- Especially in the crucial Middle Years (7-9), even these passionate, diligent learners claim to have made only modest progress in proficiency, creating a poor base on which to develop a Year 12 standard comparable to that reached by learners of other languages
- Right up to the end of secondary school, these good students are lamenting their lack of grasp of tones and their poor ability to understand and speak, which inhibits most of them from taking advantage of opportunities to practise and improve their Chinese by participating in community activities
- While in their classes there is considerable imbalance in emphasis on development in literacy at the expense of the spoken, their lower oral skills are also the result of being given very little chance to ever hear flows of natural Chinese and thus develop an inner impression of how they should sound. Instead, what they hear most are Australian students answering in class which, as one put it, 'is almost a different language compared to a Chinese person speaking'.
- Their stronger ability in reading and writing does not reflect a high return on effort. To the contrary, they say, it has been gained at excessive cost in comparison to work done for other subjects, and remains tenuous, in need of constant maintenance to prevent erosion.

5. Elaboration and Discussion

5.1 Characteristics

	Characteristic	Detail and Number of Students, N = 14	More/other detail
1	Other language spoken at home	5 by family members and student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 French (mother)/ Italian (father) • 1 Dutch (father) • 1 Hindi (both parents) • 1 GujRerati (mother) • 1 Bengali (father)/ Filipino (mother)
2	Other language learning at school	8 Primary School 4 VCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 French • 2 German, Italian • 1 Spanish, Indonesian, Hebrew • 1 Chinese + French
3	Academic achievement	10 Self proclaimed 'high achievers' 13 Claimed to be 'engaged'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 7 Higher Mathss • 10 A+ English • 10 6+ years of private music • 5 Multiple instruments • 5 Studying singing • 1 VCE Music
4	Chinese learning history	4 Full primary (6 years) 2 Grade 6 8 Secondary only	3 had negative experiences, with changes in teacher and low outcomes in learning, but were still positive about their teacher's encouragement
5	Family influence	14 Encouraged to study Chinese 11 No family assistance with Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 Private tutor • 2 Sibling studying Chinese
6	Selection of Chinese	5 Chinese selected over other languages in Year 7 9 Compulsory in Year 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 thought it would be useful • 1 liked the sound of Chinese • 1 interested due to his martial arts interest • 1 interested due to own Chinese heritage (25%) • 1 goes to school with a lot of Chinese
7	Experience learning Chinese	8 Negative 2 Ambivalent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3 Poor teaching/program • 2 In with heritage students • 3 Modest progress
8	Intention to continue with Chinese next year	12 Yes 2 No	

9	Teaching resources	6 Positive 2 OK, but not individual enough	
10	VCE opinions (N =7)	6 Not enough listening and speaking 6 Not enough specifically on tones 4 Resources too oriented to literacy 4 Time too short to improve for assessment requirements 5 Can separate formal written language from more informal spoken language	
11	Learning strategies and effort	13 Can articulate own strategies 3 Does extra work 8 Have aptitude	
12	Listening and speaking	14 Insufficient	
13	Reading and writing	13 Bulk of work and homework	
14	Chinese social	10 No contact 2 Local community 1 Family friends 1 L1 boarder at home	
15	Travel to China	4 Travelled to China 7 First trip planned	

Table 2: Characteristics of the Good Learners of Chinese

5. 2 Parental support

The parents of the students interviewed are keen for their children to do well in school, generally, and a number believe that knowing a second language is an advantage. Virtually all are particularly keen about their child learning Chinese, seeing it as likely to be an asset in the future. Their parents' powerful encouragement to learn Chinese, to keep learning it, and to do well in it, was recognized by all the students as a strong piece of their own motivation and interest. For example:

- *Whenever I get, um, good marks on my reports, my Mum will always take me out somewhere and I'll get a hot chocolate or something [laughs]. (Mary, Year 7)*
- *I think that's, like, why I do so well, 'cause I have the support from home. (Nelly, Year 8)*
- *[My mother] constantly talks to me about speaking languages ...My family is all for Chinese. (Daisy, Year 9)*
- *I got [the] Mandarin award last year, and they were very proud of me ...so I think I got a present for that as well. (Kosi, Year 9)*
- *Yeah, my Mum and Dad really want me to learn it, and they're really glad that I'm going to go to China next year. (Nicole, Year 9)*
- *Well, basically the China trip is, I guess, a reward in itself for doing well in Chinese but, um, my parents are really encouraging of Chinese, and if, you know, they see a Chinese book or something, they might buy it for me 'cause they know I'm interested in that kind of thing ...just to keep me going. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *They liked the idea of Chinese and they see I'm enjoying it. (Kiril, Year 11)*
- *If they were a bit more 'just do what you want' I probably wouldn't have continued, but Dad was really strong that I should be continuing. (Noah, post-Year 12)*

5. 3 Classroom experiences

Teachers

The most unexpected information to come from the interviews was that for most of their years of study, Chinese class had often not been of much interest, nor even especially fruitful for these good language learners. Although they said their Chinese teachers had always been encouraging, up until Year 10, several had found their teachers lacking in skill, and the lessons disrupted by classmates with no interest in learning. As a result, their progress in the language seems to have occurred more in spite of their classes, pushed along by their parents, their own desire to do well, genuine fascination with the language itself, and a great deal of time spent on task beyond the classroom. For example:

- *Um, I think all my Chinese teachers – I've only had two, but they've been really encouraging. From Prep to Year 6 we just had the same Chinese teacher, but that's good 'cause she got to know me, sort of-ish, and know what I was good at and, she was really encouraging. (Mary, Year 7)*
- *We basically did the same thing every class, we looked at the textbook of the cartoons ...and, yeah, so she reads it out first and then we write it down. Yeah, like the classes didn't vary much, like we didn't really watch videos, so it was a bit ...uninteresting. (Ned, Year 9; dropped Chinese end Year 8)*
- *Yeah, Year 8 was harder because, um, our teacher ...um [laughs] ...he wasn't that good at teaching us all that we needed to know, and he would like, teach us something then go straight on to another thing, so it was quite hard to learn it, but this year it's been really good 'cause our teacher will go through everything, ...and she'll give us time to learn it, and teach us new things, and she talks to us a lot, too ...in Chinese. (Nicole, Year 9)*
- *I think Year 7 I learnt a lot, and the teacher was really good ...I'm not sure if that's 'cause it was the first time I learnt it. Year 8 I found I didn't learn much. I'm not sure if that was the*

teacher, but I think more the students, 'cause the majority of the class didn't want to learn, which gets a bit frustrating, 'cause then I struggled to learn and the teacher focus is on them more. (Kosi, Year 9)

- *For a semester in Year 9 we had a really, really bad [non-Chinese background] teacher [laughs]. He was quite, um, well he just didn't know how to teach us ...and, the class was pretty out of control, um, we weren't learning the coursework, and my marks did drop a bit, by about 10% I'd say. (Delia, Year 9)*
- *One [teacher] taught me in Year 7 and again in Year 11 – and um, my Middle School years [were] just filling in with other teachers ... and he's really had a positive aspect on me, always pushing me to do something, like this [interview]. He wants me to do some Chinese scholarship after school [graduation]. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *I think they teach Chinese differently to Chinese people. And, well one of my teachers [who was not Chinese], I don't think they were very good at all ...um, their vocab wasn't that good, and, yeah, their Chinese wasn't that good either, so that was obviously a hindrance. I didn't enjoy it that much, the class when I had that teacher. I think quite a few students stopped because the teacher wasn't very good. (Kevin, Year 12)*
- *From Year 7 till [Year] 10, um, I had a very slow rate of improvement, like I didn't feel I was learning much in between those years and I wasn't really putting in. I didn't really like the style of learning, like, I mean, you just had a book and filled out some things and it didn't really stick with me. (Noah, post-Year 12)*

Classmates

One of the challenges to doing well that some had faced was being in class with students of Chinese background, who often had considerable proficiency in the language and familiarity with the culture. Responses to this challenge, however, varied. Another challenge was being in class with disruptive students, who were not interested in Chinese. In either case, the students interviewed often felt they had been rather neglected. For example:

- *In primary school I didn't enjoy it. But I partly blame the teacher for that, because the primary school that I went to was very much an Asian population, like 80% was Asian, so, um, she'd give us a worksheet to do and put us to the side while she just taught the, um, the you know ...[the background Chinese students]. (Daisy, Year 9)*
- *One of my, I guess, key experiences, was in Year 8 [when] I was put into a Chinese heritage class ...Most of the people around me were Chinese, and I guess that was my major booster, where I actually learnt Chinese. Not only having a Chinese teacher, but all the students around you actually being Chinese, it really sped the class up quite a bit. And also the students talking to the teacher usually spoke Chinese as well, so the conversations were mostly in Chinese. (Bahir, Year 9, now in a second language group)*
- *Not many people [in my state secondary college] choose Chinese [because of the many heritage learners]. Everyone else was a bit more headstarted, so I found that a little bit hard to sort of keep up from scratch without knowing anything. If everyone started on the same foot, [it] probably would have been a bit easier to work, and then the teacher probably wouldn't have ...moved so quickly, so maybe I wouldn't have got behind. We were sort of clueless, you know. (Ned, Year 9; dropped Chinese after spending Years 7 and 8 in a class of 25 background speakers and 4 other classroom beginner speakers like himself.)*
- *So, like, there's a lot of kids who don't want to learn, and fair enough, I mean they're being forced to do a subject they're not particularly interested in. No matter how good a teacher you are in Year 7, you're not going to have much impact on them ...But she got us interested, that was the key thing. And the same in Years 8 and 9, when I had [another teacher]. So I learnt more in Year 10 than I think I did in those three years before. Like now, there's 10 or 12 kids who are actually serious and who actually want to learn, so you learn a lot more. (Taksheel, Year 12)*

5.4 Independent Learning

Attitude

The students exhibited a strong sense of responsibility for their own learning and had developed personal processes and techniques to keep themselves on track. For example:

- *I think if I did, like a test and I get something wrong, then I work on that particular one that I got wrong so that I get it right on the next test. (Nelly, Year 8)*
- *I do work hard at it, like in every subject, but I think I listen and I actually concentrate when I do my work. (Tania, Year 9)*
- *Well, really I try to expose myself to Chinese as much as possible ...you can do a lot of fun things like watching Chinese movies, reading Chinese books ...and listening is the main key thing, I found, when learning Chinese. (Bahir, Year 9)*
- *Going back and seeing your mistakes is really useful, especially in Chinese, cause, there's a tendency to make the same grammatical mistakes, or use a word in the wrong place, or forget simple things, again and again, so you need to review. (Taksheel, Year 12)*

Extra time spent on Chinese was largely dependent upon and shuffled around in light of the demands of other subjects and extracurricular pursuits, with the most time spent consolidating before assessment or on weekends. All have high personal expectations and are self-motivated to achieve those outcomes. All mentioned persevering with Chinese, and deriving pleasure at perceiving a connection between effort and result.

Strategies

All but the student who had dropped Chinese after Year 8 could easily identify their personal learning style and strategies. The accounts below of how they go about their independent learning show they have remarkable self-awareness with respect to how they learn and what they need to work on to grasp Chinese and to improve, and this is combined with admirably mature, disciplined study practices. For example, these notes from their accounts:

- *Learns things really quickly; does a lot of revision for tests and exams, parents help test for assessment. (Mary, Year 7)*
- *Learns characters pretty quickly (sees them once or twice/writes a few times to memorise); perseveres and persists with revision (primary school technique: look, see, cover, write, check); always does extra revision and identifies what she is struggling with in order to improve. (Nelly, Year 8)*
- *Repetition (also using 'raps'); doesn't cram, takes breaks to avoid frustration; benefits from classmates modeling the language well; takes time to process and understand content. (Daisy, Year 9)*
- *Visual learner; works closely with friend in and out of class; aware of intonation (from studying 'raps' in class and studying violin). (Tania, Year 9)*
- *Likes to analyse characters; does some extra work on the radicals and stories, finds her own way to group characters as this helps with memorization; sometimes reads books about China. (Nicole, Year 9)*
- *A visual thinker, currently focussing on aural/oral work; watches film in Chinese in his own time to improve listening; practices characters in context and studies radicals. (Bahir, Year 9)*
- *Asks questions, enjoys classroom discussion (doesn't find working online at home helpful as has a lot of questions); says sentences aloud to himself to memorise and help with pronunciation; analyses radicals; finds characters hard to write but learning radicals makes it easier. (Kosi, Year 9)*

- *Listens to songs to learn, finds it really helpful to memorise words through singing, associating them with a note or the melody; visual learner, finds characters easy to remember; uses charts or mind maps to revise in other subjects also; really likes to make flashcards for revision; also writes key sentences and sentence structures. (Delia, Year 11)*
- *Does Chinese homework straight away, probably everyday; own revision strategy to consolidate everything, includes writing English and Chinese translations; says aloud while writing sentences structures out (flashcard strategy in Years 7-9); uses CD for listening preparation before assessment; works with a Chinese heritage classmate. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *Punctual with homework so he's ahead or with the class; thinks it's easier to revise consistently after each class (4 per week) character practice and sentences; doesn't cram for tests, does the work beforehand; in contact with 3-4 close friends (non-heritage) outside of class over the phone for help. (Kiril, Year 11)*
- *Maintains awareness of tones; has an essay writing strategy; combines movement with speaking aloud for oral memorisation. (Kevin, Year 12)*
- *Reviews his work to correct and improve, especially essays; consults character history book for etymology and to memorise by radicals; does extra reading from books or online outside of set homework (encouraged by teacher); enjoys weekly buddy system with international students, good to have another perspective. (Taksheel, Year 12)*
- *VCE study strategy based on assessment tasks, not focusing on personally needed improvements; personal focus on oral exam, walked and talked; work was more about memorisation than proficiency; conferred with classmates and measured priorities against them. (Noah, post-Year 12).*

5.5 Proficiency development

Speaking and listening

Students were generally disappointed at the lower priority given to speaking and listening in their courses, calling it an 'imbalance' and lamented their relative inability to express themselves well in speech and, especially, to master the tones for which they wanted much more listening practice and some specific instruction in becoming tonal.

Pre-VCE students

- *Speaking ...yeah we do a bit of it. Um, we don't do much listening activities. We just listen to our teacher, and then just say it. It's mostly English for like explaining things, but if we're learning language she'll obviously say it in Chinese, and greetings, they're in Chinese. (Mary, Year 7)*
- *We do listening and speaking sometimes, like we might go around the class once every now and then. We do more of reading and writing, like textbook work or writing stuff down in our exercise book. I had a lot of trouble with the pronunciation, like, I'm hopeless at tones pretty much. I try, but I always get confused [laughs]. (Nelly, Year 8)*
- *I wasn't too good at hearing the pronunciation and tones 'cause the words were a bit close together, and, like, I just kind of found it a bit hard where one word started and one word ended. (Ned, Year 9, dropped Chinese end Year 8)*
- *I can usually notice in my voice if I'm saying it wrong ...But that's also one of the things that frustrates me the most: if I'm unable to hear it in my own voice, I just don't know where to go ...but because, um, there are some students in our class that are unable to pick that up, like hearing them next to me kind of confuses me. (Daisy, Year 9)*
- *I would like to do some more listening type things, like, watching like movies or the news and stuff ...'cause I think that's something that I need to work more on. I think the tones are the hardest, for me, yeah. (Nicole, Year 9)*

- *I find picking up the tone marks hard ...I think that if we were just more focused on speaking than writing I'd be, a lot better at Chinese ...because when the teacher sometimes talks and it's hard to decipher it. (Kosi, Year 9)*
- *Well we don't really have that many periods of Chinese a week, but I just think, like, for a language you have to hear it and practice it frequently. (Tania, Year 9)*

VCE students

- *It's predominantly written ...we don't really have a lot of time to do listening ...listening's more of an optional thing ...Pronunciation's quite hard, basically because I'm not really experienced in that area, and I don't hear it enough. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *We've been doing listening since Year 7, but it's getting more complex now ... and also the oral work, that only kicks-in in Year 9 ...When it's really fast it's just a blur and you're sort of a bit confused. (Delia, Year 11)*
- *We do more writing tests, essays and vocab tests than we do listening and oral ...I feel I've got to try to do some more oral practice. If I do that, my tones and my pronunciation will get better. (Kiril, Year 11)*
- *[Listening and speaking] are actually more useful, in the real world, so it's just unfortunate that on the exam it's the [reading and writing]. (Taksheel, Year 12)*
- *I don't do much listening at all. (Kevin, Year 12)*
- *Hearing it from a Chinese teacher who's been based in Australia for years is so much different to hearing it through a native Chinese person on the streets, and I certainly wasn't prepared for the speed or the tone they used when I was over there [in China]...In a classroom half the teachers are talking slowly and clearly, you can understand it, but the only real opportunity you got to listen to it was that and other classmates answering a question. An Australian Year 11 student answering Chinese ...it's almost a different language compared to a Chinese person speaking it. (Noah, post-Year 12)*

Tones

- *I can tell the difference [between the tones], but I really need to work on it ...I feel that I'm not too good at it, so I'm always sort of, conscious about, am I making sense? But I'm eager, I don't really mind if I make a few mistakes. You do need to be exposed a lot to know what a language sounds like ...with French I know this is how you pronounce it. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *I would say that it's easier for me to pronounce the sound of the word than the tone marks. (Delia, Year 11)*
- *I think the tones are more difficult ...'cause there are so many different ways you can say it. (Kiril, Year 11)*
- *Yeah, with the tones ...that took practice, it didn't come straight away ...I still have sometimes, if someone's speaking fast, confusion with the second and third tone. (Taksheel, Year 12)*
- *Because you sort of know them even if you can't say them ...I know when the thing's supposed to be third tone, but I just can't pronounce the third tone very well...I know what tone it should be for the characters that I know [but] it might not flow naturally. (Kevin, Year 12)*
- *I'm not even close to being ...knowledgeable about every tone and when I was speaking I found I kind of just placed my own intonations and stress on the words ...When I speak it I feel a bit uncomfortable, not sure if I just sound like an idiot or not. (Noah, post-Year 12)*

Register

- *When you hear [the teacher] talking with other people you're like, 'Oh, is that how you say it' You realize he's not speaking formal Chinese, so it's a bit confusing in that sense, yeah. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *If you're talking to peers, if there are a lot of, like, colloquialisms, and bits of sentences that aren't critical to the sentence structure but, you know, people, like, just tack on the end, it's like, 'Wow, what is happening?' Because you only learn one way of saying something. (Taksheel, Year 12)*
- *In class we were certainly exposed to a more formal standard of writing and speaking, which was fair enough because it was a classroom setting, but on the street it doesn't really correlate so well. (Noah, post-Year 12)*

Reading and writing

Inside class and out, the students spend a considerable amount of time on reading and writing, and learning characters and vocabulary by writing them out. Two-thirds of them said (to their express regret) they were better at reading and writing in Chinese than in speaking and listening, one said she was about equal in all skills, and two said they were better at speaking and listening.

Character learning is tedious work, with retention over time difficult to achieve, even by senior level. For example:

- *Basically I find myself learning characters, and then perfecting them and then maybe 3 weeks later I've missed a stroke or something, so I'll have to go back. It's always that constant catching up. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *If you stop even for 2 weeks, you find you're forgetting, and it all falls apart. [Even native speakers] say it's really easy to forget characters and [that is when] I realized the challenge and that you really have to push at it. (Taksheel, Year 12)*
- *If you're reading a sentence, all it takes is, like, to not know a couple of characters, or to misread a character, and you can't understand the whole thing. (Noah, post-Year 12).*

Resources

- *The textbooks have helped ...great for writing and reading ...[But] I came up to one of my Chinese friends and said, 'Ni hao', and [laughs] he said to me 'No one says that these days! People usually go 'Ni gan ma?' [What are you doing/up to?] You have to actually speak with Chinese people who know Chinese and they'll teach you how people communicate these days. [Bahir, Year 9]*
- *It's a bit outdated because it was published in 1990, so for instance learning about trains it's all about bunks, when it's really bullet trains now. (Karolina, Year 11)*
- *But I found there's a few mistakes on the [online] site and that's sort of a bit irritating. (Kiril, Year 11)*
- *I don't think that [textbook A] was as good [as textbook B] because there was too much vocab in each section; and I thought it was a bit boring, because all in black and white. (Kevin, Year 12)*
- *They helped, but, yeah, they didn't help as much as, like, going out and speaking would. (Noah, post-Year 12)*

6. Conclusion

Articulate, engaged, disciplined and very eager to develop in Chinese, these students give ample evidence of the time, effort and interest teenagers can and will devote to language learning if they are encouraged to by their parents and have been assisted in developing a capacity to learn. The success of the students interviewed seems well in line with Erard's view that there is no need to resort to neurological exceptionalism to account for it. They clearly put in plenty of time practising and consolidating their work and analysing and correcting their errors. The one personal gift these students do have is parental interest, a factor that should not be a privilege, and one which could be enhanced for others if schools and teachers put their energies into it. To be effective, such a campaign would need to go beyond exhortation and offer practical means parents might use to be helpful to their children.

While they have made good progress in the school subject Chinese, the students interviewed give the impression that they (and their classmates) could be making much greater progress in the language if the experience were organised a bit differently: if classes in lower secondary were better managed and teachers competent in the language and in teaching; if there was a greater exposure to listening to natural Chinese and more up-to-date textbooks; if there was guidance in understanding their own learning needs and identifying problems; and practical strategies taught to improve on performance. It is unlikely that many schools will devote more time to Chinese, but keen students like these, and no doubt others as well, could also benefit from guidance in making use of opportunities available outside class, virtual and real, to exercise their Chinese.

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APPENDIX – Participant details

MARY – Year 7

Conscientious student who obtains top marks in her subjects. A high achiever and independent learner, who likes a good challenge. Very musical and does extension Maths. Studied Chinese as a compulsory subject from Prep. Likes languages and really enjoys Chinese, intrigued by it, thinks it looks and sounds 'really cool', thinks it's different and interesting. Finds Chinese easy at the moment. Really enjoys the characters, feels she has more strength in reading and writing, likes reading more. Entered a speaking competition. Doesn't do many listening activities; teacher speaks mainly in English. Identified learning strategies; learns things really quickly, does a lot of revision for tests and exams, parents help test her for assessment, happy to work on Chinese because she really wants to do well. Has been happy with her teachers. No interaction with Chinese outside of class. Will continue with Chinese and looking forward to Year 9 trip.

NELLY Year 8

Very diligent student, who has high standards and strives to do really well. Studies extension Maths and musical theatre. Has taken Chinese as a compulsory subject in Years 7 and 8. Gets a lot of support from parents and encouragement to do Chinese. Parents think she has a gift for languages. Wants to acquire more language for Year 9 school trip to China; likes the idea of traveling to China and mixing with another culture. Loves Chinese, thinks it's a really good language, feels a sense of achievement. Likes how it sounds smooth and flowing. Had a lot of trouble with pronunciation; Inter-school reading competition valuable experience in giving her a lot more confidence in speaking, now takes tones into consideration independently (although finds them confusing). They do more reading and writing work, and thinks she's better at it. Identified learning strategies: learns characters pretty quickly; perseveres and persists with revision, always does extra revision and identifies what she struggles with in order to improve. Doesn't usually get Chinese homework every lesson as they're supposed to. No interaction with Chinese outside of class, no help at home. Feels she's good at Chinese and satisfied with how she's doing.

NED Year 9

A creative thinker, who studies mainstream Maths, and did guitar for 6 years in primary. Didn't really like both languages studied (French – primary, Chinese – secondary). Interested in, curious about, Asian culture; holds a red belt in Karate, and some mates were also doing Chinese. Goals for Chinese related to his immediate school environment with over 50% Chinese heritage students, also his desire to travel. Ned studied beginner Chinese in Years 7 and 8, one of 5 Anglo students in classes out of about 25. Most Anglos dropped Chinese as they didn't catch on; feels it would have been easier if everyone had started on the same footing. Definitely more non-Chinese choose French and Greek. Parents suggested he do Chinese, wanted him to go on with it, but hard as he couldn't get help at home. Parents understood the issues when he dropped it. Happy he's not doing Chinese in Year 9; it got harder, he got left behind, got confused, started not to enjoy it, classes were repetitive and textbook based, wasn't much fun, lost interest, resented it. Definitely thought his reading and writing was better than his listening and speaking, as he's a visual learner (used *Pinyin* for reading). Found character work more enjoyable than listening and speaking; found listening confusing; pronunciation and tones two separate issues (not too good with tones). Couldn't practice speaking with heritage classmates as he wasn't at the stage where he could talk to someone in Chinese. *May* do it again with a specific purpose if he needs it i.e. for travel, but not as a formal subject.

DAISY Year 9

Linguistically oriented family, with solid push and drive to study Chinese. Intellectually engaged student, who studies music and mainstream Maths. Has familiarity with the Chinese community in which she lives, although does not interact and communicate in Chinese. Would not have chosen Chinese based on primary school experience. Enjoys the challenge of Chinese and it not being 'straightforward' as compared to European languages. Wants to experience Asia, with little language barrier. Really enjoys listening to Chinese, feels she has greatest strength in listening capacity. Greatest challenge is speaking, in which she feels she has regressed. Sees 'the lifestyle' as preventing her from doing better. Feels she doesn't have adequate time to work on Chinese at school and would prefer longer periods. Identified learning strategies: repetition, doesn't cram, takes breaks to avoid frustration, benefits from classmates modeling the language well, takes time to process and understand content. Not a lot of homework, reading and writing based, with no help available at home.

TANIA Year 9

Student who works hard at all subjects. Influenced by mother's love of languages and brother studying Japanese in Year 12. Likes the sound and rhythm of Chinese, and it being different. Feels she's persevered and persisted with Chinese. Has gone over and above work requirements with some tasks. No help from anyone at home. Identified learning strategies; visual learner, works closely with friend in and outside of class, awareness of intonation (as a result of studying raps in class and studying violin). Feels she's strongest in oral capacity, although not confident using Chinese in the community. Finds characters the hardest. Homework mainly reading & writing based, with character practice the main focus. Feels she doesn't have adequate time to work on Chinese at school, although praises teacher's efforts. Planned progression with Chinese into VCE and may enlist a tutor.

BAHIR Year 9

Linguistically oriented family and extensive family exposure to languages (English, Bengali, Filipino and reading Arabic). Academic and self motivated student, who studies 3 musical instruments and extension Maths. Creative, deep thinker, with strong insight into the language experience (learning priorities, strategies, nuances). Benefited from being in a Year 8 extension class with heritage students; sees listening as one of the most important aspects of learning. Wants to integrate study of Chinese into his normal lifestyle; immerse himself in the Chinese community. Wants access to the people, culture, belief system, travel. Currently accesses community through his heritage school friends and online Chinese MSN. Identified learning strategies: a visual thinker, currently focuses on aural/oral work, watches film in Chinese in his own time, practises characters in context and uses components. Would like to do more listening and speaking at school, feels one can get distracted from oral work by just writing it. Looking forward to upcoming 5-week school trip to China. Would like to continue with Chinese and is also researching some after-hours Chinese schools.

NICOLE Year 9

Intellectually engaged, slightly nervous student, who studies advanced Maths, singing and an instrument. Despite struggling with her teacher in Year 8, was motivated to take an 'Extended Mandarin' elective as well as compulsory Chinese in Year 9, as she wanted to work on it more. Very much likes Year 9 teacher (who she has for both streams) and likes having about 6 Chinese classes per week. Really wants to learn the language and many classes help her to learn it better; wants to do further travel in Asia. Feels she copes with listening well due to her singing background, finds speaking the hardest, especially tones. Does a lot of character writing in class. Personally she thinks she needs to work more on listening and speaking. Identified learning strategies: likes to analyse characters, does some extra work on the radicals and stories, finds her own way to group characters as this helps with memorization; sometimes reads books about China. Slightly vague about homework; thinks she does a bit more than 1, maybe 2 hours, each night. Parents encourage Nicole to study the language, but doesn't get any help from anyone at home. In weekly contact with a Chinese couple who are friends of the family, sometimes practises with them; thinks it's really good to have this opportunity and would be confident to speak with them more. Will undertake VET Mandarin in Year 10 and looks forward to a 2-week school trip to China next year.

KOSI Year 9

Dedicated student who received Year 8 Chinese award; continuously trying and being motivated to work got him to where he is. Parents very happy with his results. Studies general Maths, no music. Despite not learning much in Year 8 due to classroom management issues, motivated to take 'Extended Mandarin' elective as well as compulsory Chinese in Year 9 (6 classes per week) and finds he's learning a lot more. Doing Chinese for future work prospects, also likes the challenge. Focuses more on reading and writing at school and home; thinks he'd be a lot better at Chinese if they did more listening and speaking in class. Finds tones very hard to comprehend and listening hard to decipher; exposure not as much as he'd like. Finds Malaysian class buddy a help; buddy has a big advantage over him in listening and speaking as he speaks Chinese at home. Little Chinese socialisation outside of class, a bit nervous to speak Chinese in the community. Identified learning strategies: asks questions, enjoys classroom discussion (doesn't find working online at home helpful, as has a lot of questions); says sentences aloud to himself to memorise and help with pronunciation; analyses radicals, finds characters hard to write, but learning radicals now makes it a bit easier. Will undertake Language Advanced in Year 10, might do VET course. Family cannot afford 2-week school trip to China in Year 10.

DELIA Year 11

Reserved student, thinks she has an aptitude for languages, studies VCE Chinese and French, feels she's doing well. Finds French a lot easier in terms of speaking fluently, especially after 6-week trip; Chinese vocabulary quite limited. Enjoys doing Chinese, sense of satisfaction when finishes a task and does well in it. Interested in Chinese culture and language because it's part of her history (a quarter Chinese); doesn't use Mandarin with extended family, little other socialisation. Parents generally encouraging, no one in immediate family can help. Had a very bad teacher in Year 9, but continued with it, had a great teacher in Year 10. Studies VCE Voice Performance, joined a Chinese Orchestra start of Year 11. Would say she has a 'good ear'; finds it fairly easy to differentiate between the sounds and to pick them up, tones are more challenging. Identified learning strategies: listens to songs to learn, finds it really helpful to memorise words through singing, associating them with a note or the melody; finds characters easy to remember, uses charts or mind maps to revise in other subjects; really likes to make flashcards for revision, also writes key sentences and sentence structures (probably does 1 hr extra a week on this, maybe more, depending on assessment coming up). Overall they do more reading and writing, especially with homework, oral exams only commence in Year 9; doing more listening now in Year 11, probably better at reading and writing. Will get more exposure to general conversation when she travels to China (school 3 weeks, Chinese Orchestra 3 weeks). Would like to continue with Chinese in university, maybe even teach English in China, or study there.

KIRIL Year 11

Diligent student, works his hardest to get results. Really enjoys learning another language, picked it up quickly. Chinese has always been one of his best subjects. Works hard to improve, persists. Although time consuming, it's not a chore, fun. 3-4 of closest mates do Chinese; helps to have friends to test over the phone. Parents know he's good at languages, really pushed for Chinese, no help at home. Thinks his characters are fairly good. Feels character writing is at the expense of oral work. Identified learning strategies: punctual with homework so he's ahead or with the class; thinks it's easier to revise consistently after each class, character practice and sentences, doesn't cram for tests, does the work beforehand. Assessment and homework more reading and writing based. Likes the way Chinese sounds, it's different and good. Trying to improve on speaking and listening; thinks tones are more difficult than pronunciation of sounds, tries to emulate the tones. Never really done informal speech in class, will be exposed to it when he goes on school China trip (3 weeks). Excited about it, as it should improve his speaking if he speaks constantly in Chinese. No socialisation outside of school. He would like to study Chinese after VCE, likes studying it.

KAROLINA Year 11

Linguistically oriented family, very language aware, very articulate. Studies Maths Methods and music. Thinks she has an aptitude for languages, better at French than Chinese, despite more of a passion for Chinese. Parents definitely think she has a gift for languages, really encouraging of Chinese, despite no help at home. Interested in Chinese as it's such a beautiful sound to hear and it's non-alphabetical. Chinese her favourite subject, really passionate about it, it's fun; does quite a lot of extra work consolidating. Goal is to get into business and work in China, ambitious. Identified learning strategies: does Chinese homework straight away, probably everyday; own revision strategy includes writing English and Chinese translations, saying aloud while writing sentences structures out, (used flashcard strategy in Years 7-9); uses CD for listening preparation before assessment; works with a Chinese heritage class buddy. Character writing tedious at times; perfects characters then 3 weeks later misses part of it, always constantly catching up on characters. Majority of time spent on characters, always writing, feels she's not learning the most modern content from outdated textbook. Feels difference between informal speech and formal written language should be explicitly shown. Doesn't have a lot of time to do listening in class, listening is more optional, personally something she has to work on. Pronunciation is quite hard because she doesn't hear it enough, tones probably the hardest part. Wishes she had another half a year to perfect Chinese or even stay with a Chinese family in China – need to be exposed a lot to know what a language sounds like. Socialises with Chinese people, but doesn't use the language with them or anyone in the community. Teacher had a really positive influence on her, wants her to do a Chinese scholarship after school.

KEVIN Year 12

Academic student, undertaking VCE Chinese and French. Sees doing languages as quite rewarding, a pleasure to learn them despite the time commitment. Always been good at languages; felt he needed to work harder at Chinese and has gone to lengths to make improvements and thus feels better at it. Chinese socialisation at home through live-in student and weekly tutor. Has traveled to China on two school trips. Currently immersed in VCE assessment requirements. Majority of workload on literacy development, vocabulary acquisition and memorisation. Identified learning strategies; awareness of tones, essay writing strategy, combines movement with memorisation. Vague regarding current homework hours. Negative perception of non-Chinese background Chinese teachers. Planned progression with Chinese post-Year 12 through scholarship in Beijing.

TAKSHEEL Year 12

Linguistically oriented family, fine appreciation of language and culture worldwide. Insightful student, deep conceptual understanding of Chinese; the need for comprehension of tones, colloquialisms and radicals. Believes Chinese is useful in the modern world, interested in modern Chinese history, found inquiring about modern culture a bit taboo. Thinks he has an aptitude for languages; no hesitation about continuing, despite it being hard. Finds VCE Chinese requires a disproportionate amount of time compared to chemistry, physics, Maths Methods. Sees value of his local Chinese immigrant community; feels socialisation really important to try out skills. Attended speaking competition in China. Finds it unfortunate that the bulk of VCE assessment is reading and writing (80%); feels listening and speaking is actually the most useful when it comes to the real world. Students not engaged in Years 7-9, course interesting and fun; learnt more in Year 10 than previous 3 years. Very small class Year 10 onwards; same teacher who was a huge support and motivating factor. Identified learning strategies: reviews his work to correct and improve, especially essays; consults character history book to see what they're about and memorise by radicals; does extra reading from books or online outside of set homework (as encouraged by teacher); enjoys weekly buddy system with international students, good to have another perspective. Sees a connection between effort and reward, but found if you don't use it you lose it straight away. Has a Hanban Scholarship to attend Beijing University in 2012 for 1 year.

NOAH post-Year 12 by 1 year

Very ambitious, goal-oriented student, who took VCE Chinese as an academic pursuit to maximize marks. Strong family encouragement to continue with Chinese, high expectations, felt he was pushed into it. Very slow rate of improvement from Years 7-10, not engaged, didn't like resources nor teaching style. Increased workload in Year 11, in Year 12 enjoyed teacher-student relationship, worked most on Chinese than any other subject, did more work than most classmates (top 2 or top 3 in year level for class work). Identified learning strategies: VCE study strategy based on assessment tasks, particular focus on oral exam, work was more about memorisation than proficiency, conferred with classmates and measured priorities against them, did not focus on what he personally needed to improve on. Strong sense of discontent regarding VCE outcome; feels Chinese reduced his TER (96.75 TER, 27 Chinese raw, 39.5 Chinese marked up). Feels curriculum should include more exposure to real, authentic Chinese and more explicit teaching of tones. Two school trips to China easily the highlight of 6 years of language learning, greatest enjoyment came from holding a conversation on the streets. Restricted from doing Chinese in first-year university, had a weekly home tutor but too unstructured. Investigating travel, study-tour or exchange, although hesitant to go to China for 1 year. Confused about what to do with Chinese now.

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