

The Study of Chinese English Major's Current Situation of Selecting and Learning SFL Courses and Its Influencing Factors

Junyi Fei

College of Foreign Languages, Zhejiang Normal University, Jinhua, Zhejiang, China
1109334680@qq.com

Abstract: The urgent need of multilingual talents and the requirements of the education policies promote more universities in China to start offering second foreign language courses to English majors. Using the questionnaire as the research instrument and involving 126 English major students from a university in Shanghai as the research subjects, this study intends to explore the current situation of selecting and learning second foreign language (SFL) courses as well as the relevant influencing factors. Findings reveal that so far Japanese and French are more popular among the course selection and learning SFL courses helps improve students' proficiency in SFL, enhancing their overall SFL proficiency and even intercultural communication skills. Meanwhile, the factors influencing SFL learning situation mainly consist of students' interests, occupational development, language difficulty and usage extent.

Keywords: SFL courses, Course selection, Learning situation, English major students

1. Introduction

Languages other than English (LOTes) used to be the Cinderella of research on language learning motivation: The vast majority of the empirical investigations were devoted to the study of global English [4]. However, multilingualism: the ability of an individual speaker or a community of speakers to communicate effectively in three or more languages [6], has gained popularity in China, fostering its development among students in universities. The second foreign language, also referred to as the third language or the second LOTE, has become compulsory course for English majors [9]. Current available studies on language learning motivation focus overwhelmingly on learning English as a second language, and little attention has been paid to languages other than English [3]. It is being more popular for researchers to study what stimulates students to learn the specific LOTE and what motivates them to sustain the learning process [9].

Foreign Language Curriculum Standards for High School issued in 2017 regulates that three more LOTes (German, French and Spanish) must be added to the existing foreign language courses in National College Entrance Examination [9]. Universities are allowed to set up different second foreign language courses for English majors based on students' practical situation. Moreover, according to the document *Key Points of Higher Education* published by the education bureau of China, the second foreign language courses are encouraged to set up in universities which own relevant teaching resources in order to deepen the reform of foreign language teaching. To build a community with a shared future for mankind, China has issued the "Belt and Road" initiative to increase win-win cooperation with other countries. Multilingualism has become the focus of social attention and a new trend. Under the circumstance above, English majors in China have been required to choose a second foreign language to study for at least four semesters in recent years. Students are able to learn Japanese, German, French and Korean in most of the universities.

This study will mainly focus on students' practical learning situation and factors that influence their selection and learning of SFL. To carry out the research, the survey targets at English major students of freshman, sophomore, junior, senior who are currently learning second foreign language in one university in Shanghai, trying to investigate the impact of SFL courses provided by the college and different motivations contribute to students' continuation of study. More precisely, the research aims to find out Chinese English Majors' current learning situation of SFL and the factors that influence their study, additionally, providing pedagogical implications with insight into SFL learning motivation and improvement suggestions for SFL courses design.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Questions

In order to examine the course selection situation of Chinese English Major students, the impact of SFL courses on their study and factors contributing to students' selection and continuation of study, this study attempts to figure out the answers to the following two questions:

- (1) What's Chinese English majors' current SFL selecting and learning situation?
- (2) What are the factors influencing students' SFL selecting and learning situation?

2.2. Participants

Due to convenient sampling, the university where the author studies is selected to be the resource to carry out the survey. The foreign language college of this university in Shanghai provides compulsory SFL courses like Japanese, French and German. As is shown in table 1, in the entire survey, there are one hundred and twenty-six research subjects participated in the questionnaire. Respectively, there are twenty-two freshmen, thirty-seven sophomores, thirty junior students and thirty-seven senior students. Besides, the survey also divides participants into different groups according to their choice of second foreign language. To make the survey more reliable and valid, participants are allowed to choose other SFL groups according to their own language preferences if not included in the options offered by the school. Moreover, participants are all voluntary students who are willing to contribute to the conclusion of the research and their privacy is protected. Below is the chart of participants investigated in the survey, which will be further discussed in the following chapter.

Table 1: The participants investigated in the survey.

	Number	Japanese	France	German
Freshman	22	59.09%	18.18%	22.73%
Sophomore	37	24.32%	59.46%	16.22%
Junior	30	26.67%	50%	23.33%
Senior	37	43.24%	21.62%	35.14%

2.3. Research Instrument

The questionnaire is used to gather data from the participants. Some parts of the questionnaire are drawn from previously established questionnaire by Xin (2021) with adequate validity and reliability. Besides, the questionnaire is modified and improved through the help of second foreign language professors in the foreign language college. It was firstly tested by author's own class which includes 26 students and it shows that the overall Cronbach Alpha is 0.889, which indicates a relevantly good reliability. There are sixteen questions altogether and the questionnaire is divided into three parts. In the first part, from number one to number three, the multiple-choice questions are used to find out students' grade, SFL selection and motivation. From four to six, alternative questions are used to find out students' attitude towards the process of SFL acquisition and their satisfaction level of the courses provided by school. It helps figure out whether it is necessary to improve or reform the relevant courses in college. In alternative questions, participants are allowed to add more details when answering negative. They can offer their brief reasons to support their answers which may provide suggestions for further improvement of SFL courses in college. For the second part, Likert scale questions are applied to get the degrees that participants think of their SFL learning situation from the perspective like the impact of courses on students' SFL abilities and skills, the impact of external and internal motivation on students' practical SFL learning, etc. Different from the alternative questions and multiple-choice questions, it helps understand participants' levels of agreement to the sentences. The components in this type of questions adopted statement-type items rated on five-point Likert scales, with "1" indicating "strongly disagree", "2" indicating "disagree", "3" indicating "not sure", "4" indicating "agree" and "5" indicating "strongly agree". For the last part, semi-open questions and open-ended questions are provided for participants to offer their diverse and various thoughts towards SFL courses. Through the data from the third part of the survey, we are able to make the findings more precise and diverse. There are three open-ended questions in the third part of the survey. Respectively, in the first question, students should briefly describe their experience of applying multilingual ability to their work or internship; in the second question, students are required to give their opinions on SFL acquisition's other kinds of impact on their individual development; in the third question, students are going to give more details about the other factors that

influence their choice of SFL and learning situation.

2.4. Data collection and analysis

The data collection process was done through the site Wenjuanxing. The QR code of the survey in Wenjuanxing was sent to four grades of the English majors through social media platforms such as WeChat with the help of classmates from each grade. The language of the questionnaire can be chosen to be either Chinese or English, so it's easier for students to answer the questions. Eventually, the data was successfully collected from the website. The site Wenjuanxing also support SPSS service, being able to extract the data to form an Excel chart which later will be put into SPSS version 26 for further analysis such as reliability and descriptive analysis.

Eventually, altogether, there are one hundred and twenty-six valid questionnaire answers' copies collected by the Wenjuanxing website. For the first part of the survey, the percentage of answers to multiple-choice and alternative questions are used to directly present students' diverse motivations, levels of satisfaction and attitudes, while for the second part of the survey, the data of Likert scale is extracted and put into SPSS version 26 for descriptive analysis in order to know the details of students' learning situation of SFL. The mean score represents the level of SFL courses' impact on students. Lastly, for the open-ended questions, excluding those with vague meanings or irrelevant answers already, there are clear and concise answers helping to know participants' exact response and thoughts. Based on text analysis, some representative and relevant ones are chosen to analyze more about English majors' motivation to learn second foreign language and what influence their current learning situation.

3. Findings

3.1. Current situation of Chinese English Majors' selecting and learning SFL

It is found out that Chinese English majors are more interested in French and Japanese courses and most of them show a positive attitude towards it, regarding the courses as personal development. But there are still few students show negative feelings towards the courses due to its shortcomings like fast progress, boring content, limited number for each SFL class and teachers' irresponsibility. With growing interest, students are performing well in class and their overall second foreign language abilities are developed. Students even develop intercultural communication competence during the class. However, after class, students may not have a suitable learning habit for themselves to improve SFL, which indicates a low self-motivation level during the SFL acquisition.

The proportion of SFL selection varies. Due to the limited second foreign language courses provided by college, participants basically choose their SFL among Japanese, French and German, in spite of some situations where some students may learn other languages by themselves or in other institutes. According to table 1, among all the participants, forty-six English majors choose Japanese as their second foreign language and forty-nine of them choose French, while thirty-one students choose German. Respectively, each grade differs in the number of second foreign language courses. For sophomore and Junior students, French is the most popular SFL course among all, which accounts for about fifty-nine percent and fifty percent respectively. For both freshman and senior students, Japanese is the most popular SFL course among them, accounting for about fifty-nine percent and forty-three percent respectively. Altogether, French is the most popular SFL course, followed by Japanese and German, however, there is only a little distance in the number of students choosing French and Japanese as their SFL, from which we can also see the popularity of Japanese language among English majors.

Next, we are going to talk about students' learning experience or situation of the SFL courses by discussing the table 2 below. As the table 2 shows, in the first question, the mean score is 3.62, indicating that most students are motivated by SFL courses in university and have desire to learn second foreign language. Most students show their positive attitude towards the classes. The course makes them more interested in multilingual acquisition and improve their understanding of the target language. In the second question, the mean score even exceeds 3.7 and arrives at 3.73, indicating that the SFL courses do help students enhance skills and abilities in learning SFL. The mean score of the third question, however, only arrives at 3.02, saying that the SFL courses may not provide students enough motivation to form their own SFL learning habits or self-motivation which help carry on SFL learning process. Except for those who have a definite and precise goal to learn SFL, it's hard for students to form a favorable learning habit during the SFL class in university. In the fourth question, the mean score arrives at 3.40, which indicates that the SFL courses, to some extent, may help students improve their second foreign language

acquisition, making them know how to speak, read, listen and write in the target language. In the fifth question, the mean score is 3.56, showing that SFL courses can motivate students to pay more attention to intercultural communication and help them form the ability to interact with people from other countries. Students may not only widen their horizon, but also improve their understanding of the target culture by learning and using the language. The document: *Teaching Instruction of College English* published by Chinese education bureau are calling for more efforts paid to enhance students' ability to have their intercultural communication, therefore, the SFL courses can meet the goal. Lastly, the No.6 and No.7 question are closely related to both their learning situation and the factors influencing it. The mean score is 3.21 and 3.37 respectively. Whether be unemployed or employed, English major students show positive feedback to the questions, admitting the influence of SFL courses on their future development, especially in job market.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of SFL Learning Situation.

	N	Mean	SD
1. The SFL courses can raise your interest in learning second foreign language.	126	3.62	1.003
2. The SFL courses can improve your performance in SFL acquisition.	126	3.73	.958
3. The SFL courses improves your SFL learning habits.	126	3.02	1.066
4. The SFL courses helps improve your overall SFL ability (such as reading, listening, writing, speaking, etc.).	126	3.40	.980
5. The SFL courses improves your intercultural communication ability.	126	3.56	0.951
6. Choosing a different SFL has an impact on your job selection.	126	3.21	1.076
7. The SFL courses increases your advantage in job markets.	126	3.37	1.041

Then, students' attitude and satisfaction level towards SFL courses will be further discussed. The data from the alternative questions in the first part of the survey shows that about seventy-five percent of students like their current SFL and eighty-six percent of them are satisfied with the courses provided by the university. However, there are still few students showing negative attitude towards it. About twenty-four percent of students dislike their current SFL. According to the additional feedback, we can know the detailed reasons. Here, several concise and clear answers are chosen.

Extract 1

I wanted to choose French as my SFL, but due to the limited number for each SFL class, I was forced to choose German.

Extract 2

The teacher pushed the course progress so fast and unreasonably that I couldn't catch everything in the class.

Extract 3

The courses were sometimes too boring for me because teachers were just reading the PPT.

Extract 4

There are only three SFL classes in one week, which is not enough for me to enter the field of SFL.

From the extracts above we can see different reasons given by the participants. The SFL courses provided by the school are still not integrated so there may be some negative points such as fast progress, limited number of each SFL course, boring content, only a few class hours, etc. Moreover, limited student number for each second foreign language class hinders students from choosing their ideal SFL, which may lead into negative attitude towards the courses and even develop an extremely passive learning behavior during the SFL acquisition. Through the framework of PREMA, Li & Liu (2023) saw the connection between SFL learning experience and emotions intertwined with the experience of engagement, relationship, meaning and accomplishment ^[5]. As the sense of engagement and accomplishment decreases, the class effectiveness will drop sharply and class environment may also be affected. Thus, especially for students who are not good at language learning or choose an unideal SFL, the integration and improvement of SFL courses are in urgent need. Though more than fifty percent of the students are satisfied with the second foreign language courses provided by the college, there are still many of them show dissatisfaction and disappointment towards the courses, which accounts for about thirteen percent. According to the extracts, some say that the progress of the class goes too fast while others think the content is so boring that they can't focus on the learning task. In addition, some students share their feelings towards teachers, hoping their teachers can be more helpful and responsible for their SFL learning in spite of the fact that they are not second foreign language majors. These results directly

describe participants' attitude towards the courses, which may offer suggestions for further improvement and constructions of the class.

In conclusion, despite the course's positive impact on students SFL learning, there are still some problems to be solved. The limited number for each SFL class may hinder students from choosing their favorite second foreign language, which may later lead into low self-motivation and even dissatisfaction. The progress should be improved in order to give students more time to digest the content. Moreover, teachers' attitude towards SFL teaching may also vary. Some students are more and more concentrated on SFL class partly because of teachers' dedication into SFL teaching while others are affected by teachers' irresponsibility so that they show low satisfaction towards the courses. Therefore, the SFL courses provided by the college should be improved in order to meet students' demand.

3.2. Factors influencing students' SFL learning situation

It is found out that there are external and internal factors that influence English majors' selection and learning of SFL, including personal interest, occupational development, language difficulty, language usage extent, etc. Students who show personal interests in target SFL mostly have a stronger motivation towards target language learning, followed by the factor of occupational development for themselves to add competitiveness in job market. Moreover, the language difficulty and usage extent, to some degree, will influence students' selection and learning of SFL. Lastly, learning experience during the class may also have an impact on their continuation of SFL acquisition. Below is the table 3 describing factors that influence students' choosing of SFL as well as their learning situation.

Table 3: Factors influencing students' choosing of SFL and learning situation.

Factors	Number
1. Personal interest	37.3%
2. Language difficulty	15.08%
3. The usage extent of the language	15.08%
4. Occupational development	26.19%
5. Others	6.35%

Firstly, it is the occupational development such as market demand or the need of multilingual talents that motivates English majors to choose different second foreign languages, which accounts for about twenty-six percent. It was found out that career and social factors greatly influenced students' choice of SFL by examining various domains of learners' ideal L2 selves as well as speech genres ^[7]. Before choosing the target language, students are encouraged to have a broad understanding on the current situation of job market, apart from those who learn languages because of their interest. Companies, especially foreign enterprises which are in high demand for multilingual speakers in order to successfully communicate with customers from different countries, are more willing to accept and offer opportunities to students who have multilingual skills. Below are the selected answers to the Q3 in third part of the questionnaire.

Extract1

I am a freshman student and I choose Japanese as my SFL because I want to go to Japanese enterprises in the future.

Extract2

SFL widens my job selections. When dealing with customers from various countries, different demands provide me with different job content, so combining English and SFL will bring me advantages.

Extract3

The product in my company originally targets Japanese market, but it later also turns to European market, which needs me to acquire relevant languages.

For freshman and sophomore students, only few of them may have an internship or job currently. Thus, due to their expectations to future career development, they choose different SFL. For junior and senior students, half of them is currently working in companies, including those demanding multilingual abilities in order to sell products according to the need of customers from different countries. More than twenty percent of English majors are having SFL courses outside the university, moreover, the number also varies according to different grades of the participants. The proportion of positive answer increase with their grades raising. Most of the positive answers are provided by junior students and senior students. With the graduation days come closer, the pressure from market competition makes additional skills more

important and precious. Additionally, different SFL learners show different levels of occupational motivation ^[1]. For example, Japan, a neighboring country, owns more companies in China compared with Germany and France so Japanese language is widened in job market. Students would see it as an opportunity to add competitiveness in job market so that they are inclined to learn Japanese.

Secondly, besides occupational factors, according to table 3, students' personal interests may also affect their SFL choosing and learning situation, which accounts for about thirty-seven percent. Their interest in the language may come from previous experience in the culture of target language country or contact with its language, which increase students' willingness to learn the language. It seems that students are more likely and more willingly to choose SFL based on their preference for the culture. Zhao and Li (2014) divided SFL learning motivation into five parts, which include instrumental type as education development, instrumental type as occupational development, interest type as language learning, interest type as culture appreciation and conformity type. However, the mean score of interest type as language learning and culture appreciation exceeds other types, which indicate a greater impact of personal interests on students' selection of SFL. For example, it was found out that the English majors who choose Japanese as their SFL show a higher level of cultural interest than the students who take European languages (German, French, and Spanish) ^[9]. Culture may have a great impact on students' life, such as Japanese animation, music, traveling, movies, etc. It all comes from their experiences accumulated in daily life. Here, de Burgh-Hirabe (2019) sees personal interests as intrinsic motivation and students' enjoyment of learning the language and love for Japanese motivated their learning ^[2]. Thus, as an intrinsic motivation, students who choose their preferred SFL shows a higher willingness to continue SFL studying and a better attitude towards SFL class.

Thirdly, language difficulty may affect students' learning situation as well as their selection of SFL, which accounts for about fifteen percent. In addition to learners' perceived level of learning difficulty, language distance also plays a vital role ^[9]. Some languages are similar to each other, Chinese English majors may be able to recognize some words similar to Chinese vocabulary or English vocabulary, for instance, when learning Japanese, English majors may find out that there are some similar pronunciation and words that have the same meaning, which will greatly reduce the difficulty of learning the language. In addition, Chinese students have a better understanding of Chinese character, which may have a positive transfer learning impact on Japanese learning. Languages like German and French also include letters in English vocabulary, which may help contribute to their progress of learning to some extent. Extracts below are selected from the answers in the third part of the questionnaire. Students are inclined to learn the languages that have a closer language distance which may reduce learning difficulty. For example, in table1, a large percent of participants chooses Japanese languages among all.

Extract1

I love Japanese culture and I think it is much easier to learn because the words are recognizable and familiar to me.

Extract2

French may be more suitable for me because I want to choose a language closer to English learning patterns.

Fourthly, language usage extent accounts for about fifteen percent. When the region of target language goes wider, numbers including native speakers and foreign speakers, the popularity of the target language learning will increase and the trend may affect more people throughout the world, moreover, the demand of job market for target language may also grow higher.

Extract1

I like French culture and it's a powerful nation. There are now around three hundred million French speakers in the world so I want to master it and apply it to my future practice in different social contexts.

The extract shows that there is a huge French speaker population, which partly contributes to student's French learning. To deepen the exchange with countries with wide language usage extent, government have always been issuing policies encouraging more people to master the target language. The environment of the society will also be affected by the increasing popularity of the target language, resulting into more people trying SFL learning. People may also form the belief that learning the target language may benefit themselves to some extent. As it was said that contextual and individual factors affecting the participants' SFL learning motivation were divided at different levels, namely social cultural and institutional ^[1]. Be more precisely, the factors include language environment, language policies in social cultural level, corporate, department in institutional level and language belief, identity among

individual factors.

Last but not the least, other factors also account for about six percent, which can be concluded as learning experience. Three components in SFL motivational system are concluded, which are the ideal SFL self, the ought-to SFL self and SFL learning experience^[9]. And the factors influencing students' learning experience included class environment, teacher quality, interactions in class and so on^[8]. For example, some students show positive attitudes towards teachers' teaching method and attitude which may provide them with encouragement and motivation so that they choose the target language and continue SFL learning, while some students are forced to choose their SFL due to the limited number of each SFL class, which shows the shortage and defect of SFL courses provided by the university. Teachers' teaching attitude and methods will also affect students' enthusiasm in class interaction with both classmates and teachers. Based on the learning experience which includes their learning performance and teachers' teaching performance in class, students show different levels of willingness to continue their SFL studying. Some of them may eventually give up SFL learning in the future. Others may still focus on it and develop multilingual abilities such as intercultural communication skills. They can even have more opportunities to contact with more people from different countries and foreign enterprises, which may offer chances in individual development. Teng (2012) discussed two types of motivational orientation of SFL learning, which are integrative motivation and instrumental motivation respectively. The factors influencing students' choosing of SFL mainly included cultural influence, personal interest, opportunity to communicate with foreigners, job stress, improvement of personal ability, etc. According to the data selected from the open-ended questions, it is found out that most participants expect to acquire second foreign language skills and be offered more chances to communicate with people from target language country. They take emphasis on practical skills that help them apply their knowledge learned in class to real situations in order to deepen multilingual acquisition and improve their confidence to communicate with foreigners. In a word, students pay great attention to their learning experience in second foreign language courses in college and their practical experience of using different languages, hoping to get individual development. Thus, we can see students' great eagerness to have a practical communication during their SFL learning, which may influence their attitude and satisfaction towards the courses.

4. Pedagogical Implications

For pedagogical implications, the study offers suggestions for improvement of the courses provided by college. Since many problems have been mentioned by participants in the survey, it can be concluded that teaching progress may be a little fast for some students. Teaching content may also be too much or excessive for students to grasp in few days, along with mechanical teaching methods given by teachers, which causes students' dissatisfaction and boredom towards SFL study. In other words, second foreign language courses provided by college can be improved by focusing on these issues. Firstly, teachers could incorporate online teaching methods to supplement their offline classes, providing more opportunities for students to interact with both teachers and classmates^[10]. Secondly, to arouse students' interests in SFL, teachers can start the course with target SFL's culture introduction and experiencing activities such as film watching. Teachers can also offer more opportunities for students to apply SFL into real practice, such as adding oral or audio activities. Last but not the least, students should also give more objective and fair feedback to teachers in order to create a better studying environment for the class.

References

- [1] Cheng Q, Wang Y, Zhao K. *LOTE learning motivation in multilingual workplace*[J]. *CIRCULO de Linguistica Aplicada a la Comunicacion*, 2021, 86.
- [2] De Burgh-Hirabe R. *Motivation to learn Japanese as a foreign language in an English speaking country: An exploratory case study in New Zealand*[J]. *System*, 2019, 80: 95-106.
- [3] Huang T, Steinkrauss R, Verspoor M. *The emergence of the multilingual motivational system in Chinese learners*[J]. *System*, 2021, 100: 102564.
- [4] Liu M, Oga-Baldwin W L Q. *Motivational profiles of learners of multiple foreign languages: A self-determination theory perspective*[J]. *System*, 2022, 106: 102762.
- [5] Li Z, Liu Y. *Theorising language learning experience in LOTE motivation with PERMA: A positive psychology perspective*[J]. *System*, 2023, 112: 102975.
- [6] Nordquist, Richard. "What Is Multilingualism?" ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-multilingualism-1691331>. 2019.

- [7] Nakamura T. *Understanding motivation for learning languages other than English: Life domains of L2 self* [J]. *System*, 2019, 82: 111-121.
- [8] Qing T. *An Investigation into English Majors' FSFL Learning Motivation*[D]. *ShanDong University*, 2012.
- [9] Peixuan X. *Exploring Chinese English Majors' Motivation for Learning Languages Other than English: An Investigation in Two Universities in Eastern China*[D]. *Shanghai International Studies University*, 2021. DOI:10.27316/d.cnki.gswyu.2021.001106.
- [10] Hongyan Y. *A Study on the Current Situation and Implications of Learning Japanese as a Second Foreign Language among Post-90s English Majors in China*[J]. *Western Education*, 2020, (08):44-48.
- [11] Jizhu Z, Shoushi L. *An Empirical Analysis and Implications of College Students' Foreign Language Learning Motivation: A Case Study of Second Foreign Language Learning Motivation among English Majors* [J]. *Foreign Languages Research*, 2014, (02): 40-45. DOI:10.13978/j.cnki.wyyj.2014.02.015.