

The Cause and Influence of Inadaptation in Peer Group: The Case of a Preparatory Undergraduate from Mongolia in Chinese Learning

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Abstract. This study investigated stability of class composition, peer pressure and language learning objects of a preparatory foreign student studying in China and how the factors interrelated with her academic performance during the education process. Giving attention to individual difference in class and considering different factors affecting motivation have significance with filling the gap of preparatory education research in China. This qualitative research adopted the method of watching the replay videos and one-on-one interview with the research subject to gather the data. The result demonstrates that in the language class, the level of language level affects the self-positioning of students in the class. For students with introverted personalities and high self-demand, the incompatibility to the uncommon class composition is more obvious, and it directly affects their oral language output and academic performance. The result also explores the role of social-emotional learning in self-regulated learning and intervention from teacher in reducing this negative influence, and finally gives suggestions for teachers and students to strengthen adaptability in language class.

Keywords: Preparatory education in China, second language learning, peer pressure, social-emotional learning, narrative inquiry.

1. Introduction

Foreign students studying in Chinese universities, in addition to degree students such as undergraduates and graduates, also include preparatory students, who study Chinese language and professional courses before entering undergraduate studies. Some well-known Chinese universities have their own self-funded preparatory programs, and since 2005, the China Scholarship Council has started to set up scholarship preparatory programs in various universities [1]. Preparatory students who study for two semesters (10 months) in this program are supposed to pass a unified exam to enter the university. Such an intensive program requires a high-intensity teaching system. In order to achieve teaching goals more efficiently, preparatory students ought to take placement tests before starting their studies, and then students with similar levels and backgrounds will be grouped together in one class.

The research object of this study was a preparatory student who had reached HSK4 level before entering the preparatory program. This university considering Chinese language learning backgrounds classified students who have reached HSK3 level or above into an "advanced class" after the placement test. However, in the second semester, a group of self-funded ethnic Chinese students from Southeast Asia were demanded to study professional courses as well and were merged with the "advanced class". The case of this research object showed obviously different academic performance from before. Motivation and engagement are critical determinants for foreign language learners, and individual differences and how they are associated with other factors also need to be explored [2]. Therefore, this study focuses on the case of the individual who has shown significant changes in academic performance when she is re-grouped with students who have different learning objectives, Chinese language backgrounds, and proficiency levels. The research method involves observing and recording the classroom performance of the research subjects by watching course replays from September 2021 to June 2022. Afterward, one-on-one interviews were conducted with the research object. The aim is to explore the psychological changes and reasons for individual

students and discuss the positive and negative effects of such an unusual class composition, and provide suggestions to teachers and students on how to strengthen their adaptability.

2. Method

2.1. Research Object

One Female Mongolian student, living in China since 2019 for learning Mandarin is the research object. In this research her real name and university are hidden, and the pseudonym ‘Ling’ is used in the study. Ling had studied Mandarin for two years in city C of China and passed HSK Level 4 before she became a preparatory student in September 2021. She was supposed to enter the university as a freshman after one year of preparatory courses by passing the final test in city B of China. In the first semester, from September 2021 to January 2022, her 7 classmates were all foreign students (non-ethnic Chinese), and their Chinese proficiency were at HSK level 3-5. In the second semester, from March 2022 to June 2022, 7 more ethnic Chinese students from Southeast Asian countries were arranged to have the same course called Economic & Business Chinese with 8 foreign students who were non-ethnic Chinese. All these students were taking online classes.

2.2. Research Procedure

Based on the research methods of watching course replays and interviewing the research object, this research studies the phenomenon that the individual student has a sense of inferiority among her peers who have a higher level of language than herself. The research divides the results of course replays into three stages. The interview was face-to-face, and the research object was asked questions after video analysis. The interview questions are mainly about the different psychological activities and reasons, self-regulation measures of the research objects in the three stages, the role of teacher intervention and the influence of this kind of class composition on herself.

3. Result

3.1. Video Analysis

3.1.1 The First Stage: September 2021- January 2022

Half of grammar and new words of the teaching contents were that Ling had learned before. The classroom interaction was active and serious, and almost every homework was completed greatly on time. In September, during the self-introduction of the students in the first session, she was very calm and actively interacted with the teacher and other students. Although she was shy, she blended in very well with the classroom atmosphere and gave a deep impression on the teacher. Under the arrangement of the management teacher, she spoke at the opening ceremony as a student representative. She was calm and confident, and the teachers and classmates gave her very good compliments. Engagement is a very important factor that could make learners experience positive feelings [3]. Ling was actively engaged in the group so her emotions toward peers and studying was relatively positive.

In November, at the Commendation Conference for International Students in the first semester, she won "First Prize in the Chinese Midterm Examination", "First Prize in the Chinese Character Writing Competition", and "Perfect Attendance Award in the First Semester". In January, she had excellent grades on the final exam of the first semester and won "First prize" in the Mandarin oral competition. It was theoretically and practically discussed that interdependent happiness plays an adaptive role in the academic context [4]. Ling's academic achievement was very excellent, previous literature indicated that for second language learners, enjoyment influences academic achievements mutually [5,6].

3.1.2 The Second Stage: March 2022

In the second semester, a new course was added. This course was a professional Chinese course related to economic theory. The new words and text contents were very difficult to understand. In order to save the resources of teachers, under the arrangement of the college, her class of non-ethnic Chinese students took this online class together with other 7 ethnic Chinese students from Southeast Asian countries.

Due to the adjustment of classes and courses, the teachers were also changed: Teacher A, the class teacher, had been changed from teaching comprehensive Chinese to professional Chinese. The Listening class teacher had to be changed from Teacher B to Teacher C. The comprehensive Chinese teacher has become the new Teacher D. On the first day of the second semester, she expressed to her teacher on WeChat: "I feel a little sad today. I have gotten used to the teaching methods of Teacher A and Teacher B. The new teachers are very good, but I feel very empty. I don't know what's wrong."

In the self-introduction session of the first professional Chinese class, the ethnic Chinese students had accents that were different from Mandarin and most of them spoke quite fast. Compared with other foreign students, her nervousness was more obvious. Completely different from the first semester, her voice was tense when she spoke, her facial expression was not relaxed, and she didn't smile at all. In class activities, when she officially answered the teacher's question for the first time, her tone was flustered, and she made mistakes in the simplest grammar. Even though she actively raised her hand to answer other questions, after answering, she always bowed her head and looked unconfident, and she lost her calmness like last semester. When answering questions in Chinese, she looked overwhelmed, suddenly didn't know how to express herself, and the frequency of wrong sentences was high.

In the second professional Chinese class, when she presented the oral homework submitted before in class, there were very obvious grammatical and pronunciation errors. When answering questions, she took deep breaths more frequently and paused a lot.

In the third professional Chinese class, she couldn't understand the meaning of a very simple Chinese question. After the teacher explained, she only said two or three words, and then corrected the answer under the teacher's guidance. After this class, the teacher held a class meeting with all non-ethnic Chinese foreign students and asked everyone how they felt about this new subject. The students said that the content of the text was complicated and difficult to understand, and even if they previewed the new words before class, they would still forget the meaning. Moreover, the ethnic Chinese students answered the questions fluently every time, which made them feel very urgent, and wanted to speak quickly, even ignoring the grammar. Therefore, after discussing with the students, starting from the homework of this class, these non-ethnic Chinese foreign students would watch the recorded lesson resources of the next day's learning content firstly, familiarized themselves with the pronunciation and meaning of new words, and took notes, so that they would be more confident during the next day's class time.

In the fourth professional Chinese class, in order to make the two groups of students more familiar, a group discussion session was set up in this class. In the group discussion, this research object was not as active as before and spoke more passively. After the students in the same group asked questions, she would simply give her answer. However, due to the small number of people in the group, she was more relaxed giving the expression during communication with the ethnic Chinese classmate.

After the first week of class, the head teacher observed that she was not adapting well to the new class, so the teacher asked her about her recent status. She said that she felt very panicky in class this week. The main reason was that she felt that the new students were better than herself. They talked too fast and were worried that she was not doing as well as they are.

3.1.3 The Third Stage: April 2022 – June 2022

With the change of the homework, group discussion every week, and gradually getting used to the learning method, it can be seen that the panic and lack of self-confidence of this student in class were gradually decreasing, and she never slackened in homework. She asked for help from teachers and

classmates if there might be a question. In the last class, every student expressed their thoughts about this subject, and other students mentioned Ling specifically, feeling that she worked very hard in the process, improved a lot, and became more confident. Ling also expressed her gratitude to the teachers and classmates for their help, and she gradually overcame her psychological difficulties.

3.2. Interview

This study also adopted the method of the face-to-face interview to furtherly understand the students' psychological activities and self-coping in different stages. According to the student's description, most of the learning contents in the first stage were learned before, and the companions were all at the same level as her, so there was no psychological discomfort. In the second stage, she was affected by the change of the course teacher, she said, "At the first class I was not used to the new teacher (Teacher D)'s teaching method, so I felt psychologically uncomfortable. On this basis, I immediately started the new professional course, and met ethnic Chinese students at a higher level than myself." She believed that she was easily nervous in an uncertain environment, and always had the thought that "I can't be worse than others, if others can do it, you should also be able to do it." She also expressed that she was very worried that other peers would think what she said is not well. She believes that after the teacher's intervention and her own adjustment to learning methods, she could gradually become familiar with the content of the more difficult professional Chinese course. In order to make enough preparations for herself before class, in the third stage she not only developed a good habit of earnestly previewing, but also got used to searching for economic information in self-study. "A good foundation has been laid so that when I have any difficulties with my major courses now, I am able to solve it by self-study." It supported that peer pressure affects the academic performance of students as well as their study habits [7].

4. Discussion

4.1. Causes of Psychological Discomfort

4.1.1 An uncommon arrangement by school

Classifying students with different levels in the same class to learn the same content will indeed cause psychological pressure on students with lower levels. Except for this student, the other seven foreign students in the original class all showed different degrees of nervousness and discomfort in the early stage, but the subject of this study showed more intense performance. Peer pressure brings anxiety and panic to some different extent on individuals, however, the pressure which Ling felt also occurred to other non-ethnic Chinese learners, and it was suggested that peer pressure is more likely to be in a negative way although there are some instances that it is a positive way [7].

On the premise of retaining the same curriculum as before, if the teacher is changed, the teaching method will also change accordingly, and students will naturally feel unsuitable with the new teacher. When the college made course arrangement, the impact of changing teachers was ignored. Stability is also important but easily ignored factor for a foreign language learner. Some small changes would affect learners' motivation [8]. During the face-to-face interview, the research object mentioned her own personality traits a few times. First of all, she has always been afraid of giving oral speeches in front of many people. When she was asked why she didn't seem too nervous to speak in front of many people during the opening ceremony (the First Stage), she said that the speech had written materials to rely on, and it is easier to read out than to express her opinion in Chinese.

4.1.2 Personality and the influence of family education

In her character, there is a trait of forcing herself to be consistent with people who are at a higher level than herself, and she will always spur herself to be like them. She said that her parents have educated and encouraged her in this way since she was a child. But she neglected that the Chinese language environment of the ethnic Chinese students was totally different from hers from birth, and these students were not supposed to pass the final exam. So her spurs would put more pressure on

herself, and this pressure was more likely to be negative. Other non-ethnic foreign students accept the high level of ethnic Chinese students and would not compare themselves with them, so they could adapt to the new class faster.

4.2. The Ways for Solving Discomfort

4.2.1 Intervention of the teacher

On the second day of the second stage, the teacher held a class meeting with the original class students and the ethnic Chinese students respectively. First of all, the teacher appeased the non-ethnic Chinese students, telling them that the ethnic Chinese students do not need to pass the final exam, but they must take this course, so just accept the arrangement of the college first. The teacher reminded them that they need to pay attention to whether they have fully mastered the new words and grammar that need to be learned in class. If they do not understand, they must ask the teacher. In the class meeting with the ethnic Chinese students, the teacher told them that the non-ethnic Chinese students in the original class may not be confident about their Chinese in front of them. If they study together, it's better that everyone can help and understand each other on an equal footing.

In the class content, some in-depth discussion sessions have been added to cater to the learning needs of ethnic Chinese students. But before that, the non-ethnic Chinese students must first learn new words and grammar, which is to meet the learning needs of passing the entrance exam.

After the first week, the assignments of the two types of students also became different. Non-ethnic Chinese students were required to take exams, so the daily homework has added preview assignments, including previewing new words and grammar according to the online recorded resources, and reading the text. Same as the ethnic Chinese students, they also ought to prepare an oral economic report that was equivalent to their own Chinese level. Since then, students have indicated that such homework.

4.2.2 Self-regulation of student

Although the characteristics of the student's personality force her to compare herself with others, fortunately, this had also become a motivation for her efforts. "I have not studied so hard." This is what she said during the one-on-one chat with the teacher at the third stage. She described that she took every study step very seriously from the beginning of the daily review to completing the homework of the day, to previewing the new content of the next day, and finally to concentrating on class. Her results on the final exam for entering university were excellent.

The in-depth discussion on economic topics were originally prepared to meet the learning needs of the ethnic Chinese students, but in order to let everyone have a fair sense of participation, non-ethnic Chinese students were also required to search for relevant knowledge after class and do presentations in class. The research subject has developed good study habits in the process. Regarding preparatory education in China, there were literatures indicating the importance of self-regulated learning ability. Besides, it was also suggested that teacher and class management have great significance in preparatory student's motivation even in directing self-regulated study [9]. "Now when I am studying professional courses independently, I am very good at searching for the knowledge I need to learn by myself. This is a good habit developed during preparatory studies." This was what she said in a face-to-face interview, when she had passed the exam and become a freshman at the university. Social-emotional learning (SEL) theory suggested SEL interventions may change social processes in a classroom peer network and may break down barriers of social segregation and improve academic performance [10]. Ling acknowledged social-emotional intervention with the teacher's help by herself, gradually overcame the anxiety from the class and improved her self-regulated learning ability. According to the learning process of Ling, this study visualized the model of interactions with academic performance and other factors.

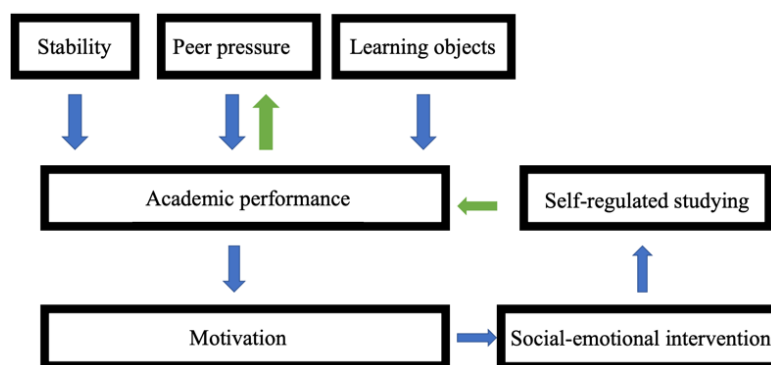


Fig. 1 The model of how academic performance interacting with factors

As Fig.1 shows, in the second stage, the stability of the class composition, peer pressure, and difficult learning objects brought a negative influence on Ling's academic performance. Her unwell performance compared to the last stage let her down, and gave a negative influence on her motivation on learning. But she and her teacher realized the change and moderated gradually the intervention of social-emotional learning with instruction. This also affected her self-regulated studying and improved her learning habits. After all, this self-regulated studying way improved her academic performance, and strengthened her adaptability in group, reduced peer pressure. However, even though there was a positive influence in this model of Ling, in the interview, she still comments that in the entire process, she had to keep on working on the negativeness.

5. Conclusion

The reason why the classification for preparatory education is important in a language class is that if teaching objectives, teaching methods, and student composition suddenly change, both teachers and students need to have an adaptation process. Multi-person class is both a learning environment and a certain degree of sociality for second language learners. Therefore, when learning a language, once learners are in the same environment with peers whose level is largely different from their own, peer pressure will easily appear. Language is both a learning goal and a social tool in the class, so the party with a significantly lower language level is often at a disadvantage in communication. Therefore, an ideal language classroom will not easily make major changes or arrange students with very different learning goals and second language backgrounds to study the same course except for special circumstances.

In addition, in the interview, the research subjects said that during the past two years of learning Chinese before preparatory education, most of the teachers had not been replaced within half a year, and there was no situation that different teachers taught the same class, and she did not learn the language with students whose level was much higher than her own. Therefore, the change in the second stage was different from her previous Chinese learning course model, and her incompatibility was related to her connection with her different learning experiences in the past. Her incompatibility was also affected by emotional factors. One was the pressure to pass the final exam before she could enter the university. The content of the professional Chinese class was also difficult, so she thought at the beginning that she could only pass the exam if she reached the level of her peers. The second was her own pressure. Her personality traits would make her feel unconfident and worried about the judgement of her peers. Her discomfort also directly affected her thinking, thus affecting her oral ability, which made her performance in class looked different from usual.

This study obtains first-hand data by watching videos and interviews, and organizes the factors of the subjects' adaptation difficulties in the second stage into a model. It can be seen that students who are relatively introverted and have high demands on themselves cannot quickly adapt to changes in the environment when learning a second language, which will bring them obvious pressure and psychological discomfort.

The teaching organization should consider how to arrange the class reasonably with considering factors, such as stability, learning objectives, emotion, academic achievements, etc. Although ideally, students with similar learning goals should be in the same class. Sometimes under the premise that objective factors, like arrangement from school, cannot be changed, the self-regulation of students and the intervention measures of teachers in this study are also worth learning. Teachers must be sensitive to this situation, adjust their teaching arrangements in a timely manner, and meet the needs of different students on the basis of ensuring basic teaching tasks, even direct learners to learn how to deal with negative social emotions. This study finds that students with low language proficiency can also work hard to do well even on language tasks that are slightly more difficult. Teachers should also give feedback and encouragement fairly. When learners do not adapt to the situation, they should adjust their mentality in time, clarify their learning goals, take a correct view of the new environment, and turn pressure into motivation. If the student really can't make self-regulation, they should ask for help from teachers and peers in time.

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