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A Study on Long-Term Chinese Learning Engagement Among General-Elective Learners at Central-Asian Higher-Education Institutions: A Longitudinal Investigation Based on Taraz-University Participants

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Abstract

Driven by the continuous advancement of the Silk-Road Economic Belt, China and Kazakhstan have deepened multi-faceted partnerships covering economy, education, trade and cultural exchange. Taraz, one vital stop along the Belt-and-Road routes, has witnessed growing market demand for work-ready Chinese-speaking talents in recent years. Nevertheless, Chinese courses offered by local tertiary institutions in Taraz are mostly delivered as general-interest electives. Such programmes lack dedicated talent-training frameworks, graded progressive syllabi and coherent academic pathways; additionally, no on-campus HSK test facilities have been put in place. Under this elective-based teaching model, local learners frequently suffer fading learning drive: participants start with keen curiosity yet gradually lose enthusiasm as linguistic content grows more sophisticated, resulting in poor long-term learning persistence. Drawing on second-language motivation theories, this research targets second- and third-year non-Chinese majors taking optional Chinese modules at Taraz International University of Humanities and Innovation. Empirical evidence is gathered via questionnaire surveys and semi-structured one-on-one conversations. Research outputs reveal defective course structures, limited awareness regarding Chinese-language career prospects and language-learning-related anxiety as primary triggers for motivational decay. Correspondingly, this paper puts forward context-adapted operational suggestions to maintain learners' study drive. It may serve as practical reference for revising Chinese elective arrangements at less-prominent Central-Asian universities and supply actionable experience supporting the sound progression of global Chinese education.

Keywords

International Chinese education; general-elective curriculum; long-term learning motivation.

1. Introduction

Within the China-Central-Asia-West-Asia Economic Corridor, Kazakhstan functions both as the initiative's birthplace and a pivotal connectivity hub. As the core city of the Jambyl Region, Taraz represents not merely an ancient Silk-Road junction but also a modern platform boosting bilateral commercial and cultural ties between China and Kazakhstan. Expanding cross-border commerce, cultural communications and infrastructure collaboration raise grassroots demand for locally competent Chinese-language practitioners. Against such a backdrop, local universities and social training organisations in Taraz have launched numerous open-access Chinese electives and short-term training programmes to foster learners' basic communicative competence for regional socioeconomic needs.

Unlike formal degree-oriented language majors, these university-run Chinese electives suffer structural constraints: systematic talent-cultivation blueprints and hierarchically-organised

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progression pathways remain absent. There are neither official HSK examination venues nor supporting services linking language proficiency to further academic pursuits. Based on on-site teaching observations in this region, most novice learners exhibit great fascination for Chinese language and culture at first. Yet course-specific features, rising learning difficulty and ambiguous career expectations combine to erode study enthusiasm in mid-to-late learning phases, even triggering course dropout. Transient curiosity cannot evolve into durable learning momentum. This phenomenon hinders localised talent cultivation for international Chinese education and imposes obstacles to its sustainable development.

Existing scholarship on motivational dynamics within global Chinese education largely centres on overseas students enrolled in Chinese higher-education, formal Chinese-major undergraduates and non-degree attendees. Comparatively few studies examine participants taking Chinese as a general campus elective across secondary cities in Central Asia. Research work focused on Kazakhstan mainly explores innovative pedagogies, AI-enhanced classroom tools and specialised syllabus construction; insufficient attention has been paid to the gradual loss of long-term learning willingness among course-takers.

Given this research gap, the present paper selects general-elective Chinese learners as research subjects. Rooted in authentic university classroom realities, it explores underlying causes for diminishing sustained motivation and proposes locally-adapted measures to revive learning engagement. It intends to deliver practical pedagogical references for elevating teaching quality of Chinese education across this geographic zone.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Studies on Sustained Second-Language Learning Motivation

In 1972, Gardner and Lambert pioneered social-psychological-oriented second-language-motivation research, building a dual-category analytical framework that distinguishes integrative motivation from instrumental motivation. Their empirical outcomes demonstrated that integratively-oriented learners, who identify themselves with target-language communities, show stronger perseverance. By contrast, instrumental motivation stems from short-term practical gains such as job-hunting or certificate acquisition[1].

Proposed by Deci and Ryan in 1985, Self-Determination Theory highlights three indispensable psychological prerequisites: autonomy, competence and relatedness. According to this theoretical framework, stable long-run motivation emerges only when all three psychological needs get fulfilled. Deficiency in any dimension will dampen learning willingness and may produce apathy or abandonment behaviours. Excessive external pressure, rigid evaluation criteria and overly demanding academic tasks may damage individuals' sense of competence. Teaching content disconnected from daily real-world requirements undermines learner autonomy. Insufficient cross-cultural interaction and lack of language-exchange partners weaken relatedness perceptions. Any of these deficits may bring about continuous motivational decline. Nonetheless, this theory was formulated before widespread digital-teaching popularisation. Few prior investigations apply it to multilingual optional Chinese programmes run in Central-Asian contexts, nor have scholars integrated local socioeconomic, cultural and educational resources to design targeted motivation-boosting strategies[2].

Dörnyei established the L2 Motivational Self-System in 2009, breaking the limits of conventional binary-division theories. Three core components are defined: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self and language-learning experiences. Under this framework, the ideal L2 self serves as the strongest predictor of learning persistence. Participants motivated predominantly by the ought-to L2 self (e.g. credit requirements, certification pressure or job-market concerns) face considerable risks of discontinuing language studies. Negative classroom encounters, for instance frustrations caused by logographic character systems or tedious teaching materials,

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may directly impair intrinsic drive originating from the ideal L2 self. This theoretical lens effectively explains motivational divergence among non-major foreign-language learners. Even so, most existing empirical research targets English-language populations within Western, European or East-Asian contexts. Longitudinal tracking research for Chinese general electives in Kazakhstan and comparable Central-Asian territories, as well as context-specific motivational intervention schemes, remain under-investigated[3].

2.2. Research on Motivational Profiles of University-Level Chinese Elective Learners

This paper reviews academic outputs retrieved from Web of Science Core Collection and Scopus databases concerning overseas university students studying Chinese via open-access elective modules. Existing literature concentrates heavily on Southeast-Asian, European, American, Japanese and South-Korean contexts. Research objects consist mostly of university elective attendees and non-major participants from Confucius-Institute projects. Scholars commonly adopt Gardner's dual-factor motivation model, Dörnyei's L2 Motivational Self-System and Self-Determination Theory to implement questionnaire-driven surveys. Analytical priorities lie in how employment-related practical value, cultural curiosity, family expectations and short-term in-class experiences shape learners' willingness to keep studying Chinese. Comparative analyses contrasting Chinese majors and elective-course participants also appear frequently.

Review of current scholarship reveals that many papers offer fragmented curriculum-recommendation proposals, without embedding regional features and local cultural traits into customised, context-grounded solutions. There exists an obvious research gap focused specifically on Central-Asian teaching environments.

2.3. Research Landscape of Chinese-Language Teaching in Kazakhstan

Since the Belt-and-Road Initiative was unveiled, China-Kazakhstan collaboration covering trade, culture and infrastructure has expanded continuously, prompting year-on-year growth of academic studies regarding Chinese education within Kazakhstan. Available publications predominantly examine teaching realities in well-known cities, flagship public universities and Confucius-Institute sites. Researchers also explore topics including grammar-acquisition patterns, cultural-teaching innovations and learner-specific difficulties. These works lay preliminary groundwork for localised Chinese education. Still, most existing projects assess short-term classroom effectiveness or draw conclusions merely from semi-structured interview materials. Longitudinal research tracing learners' extended-term study trajectories and motivational shifts remains scarce. Targeted countermeasures addressing motivational decay among Chinese-elective enrollees have not yet been systematically developed.

3. Research Methodology and Design

3.1. Participants

Respondents for this investigation are non-Chinese-major undergraduates taking general-education Chinese modules at Taraz International University of Humanities and Innovation. Participants aged 18-22 come from varied disciplinary backgrounds; the majority hold zero or elementary Chinese proficiency. Besides student respondents, front-line instructors delivering these optional Chinese courses also took part in interview sessions.

3.2. Mixed Research Instruments

This study combines questionnaire administration and qualitative interviews. Survey instruments cover instrumental-motivation dimensions, integrative-motivation dimensions and factors producing demotivation. Questionnaires were distributed at semester

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commencement and semester completion to support dynamic comparative analysis, quantifying motivational-shift tendencies and contributing factors. In addition, group-based semi-structured interviews were conducted with students and teaching staff to explore root causes for fading motivation, identify genuine learner demands and carry out causal attribution analysis.

3.3. Research Procedures

The whole investigation falls into four sequential stages: initial questionnaire distribution at semester start; in-semester classroom observation plus preliminary data sorting; follow-up questionnaire circulation together with teacher-student interviews towards semester end; final data synthesis, analytical processing and result summarisation. Covering the complete teaching cycle of Chinese general-elective courses, this workflow delivers sustained observational evidence helping unpack drivers behind diminished long-term Chinese-learning motivation.

4. Empirical Findings and Context-Adapted Intervention Measures

4.1. Interpretation of Research Outcomes

4.1.1. Key Variables Triggering Diminished Long-Term Learning Motivation

Synthesised questionnaire outputs and qualitative-interview transcripts highlight several major barriers preventing Taraz university students from sustaining Chinese-study commitment.

First of all, structural defects exist within current curriculum frameworks. Chinese language classes function purely as optional modules, lacking proficiency-based streamed teaching and progressive class groupings. Difficulty levels only rise loosely alongside academic years. Restricted by limited instructional hours, each semester covers limited content volume, trapping most learners persistently at beginner proficiency without viable advancement pathways. Moreover, local higher-education institutions lack on-site HSK test venues and supporting preparatory services. Learners therefore hold ambiguous study objectives and receive few certificate-driven incentives. Once early-phase curiosity towards Chinese culture and basic conversational abilities fades, long-run learning engagement drops rapidly.

Secondly, students possess insufficient understanding about Chinese-language occupational value. Even when learners master basic conversational competences, they rarely grasp how Chinese applies to China-Kazakhstan cross-border commerce, cultural-tourism services or infrastructure projects run by Chinese-funded enterprises. Presently, Chinese is largely treated as a credit-earning elective subject. Few students form clear long-term occupational outlooks. Learners fail to recognise Chinese's instrumental value for local-market employment and personal development, so they lack persistent drive to treat Chinese as a practically-useful tool.

Thirdly, logograph-related learning anxiety undermines sustained motivation. Written Chinese adopts a logographic script system, fundamentally different from phonetic Kazakh and Russian writing systems. Novice learners encounter multiple obstacles associated with stroke sequencing, radical components, character structures and standard handwriting. Cumulative cognitive burdens from repeated character memorisation may produce academic burnout and psychological resistance, acting as one prominent barrier against stable long-term engagement.

Fourthly, classroom scenarios cannot match local-region developmental requirements. Current elective-course content mainly revolves around daily conversational scenarios including navigation, restaurant consumption and shopping. Teaching materials seldom incorporate context-specific themes derived from Belt-and-Road-driven local commercial development. Constrained by limited class time and fixed teaching rhythms, syllabi stay narrow-scoped. Individualised learning demands and tiered teaching arrangements cannot be realised, making it hard to maintain continuous curiosity and willingness for further exploration.

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Fifthly, out-of-class language-practice opportunities remain scarce. Under existing scheduling and curriculum arrangements, universities have not built regular Chinese conversation corners, recurring Sino-Kazakh cultural-exchange events or stable language-partner matching mechanisms. Such platforms are essential to consolidate in-class knowledge and enable real-world language application. Their absence further weakens sustained learning enthusiasm. As bilateral commercial ties strengthen, higher-education institutions ought to cooperate with Chinese-invested local infrastructure-sector firms to build off-campus practice and internship bases. Such collaborative initiatives immerse Kazakh learners within authentic commercial contexts, helping them master standard expressions and industry-specific vocabulary. They foster practically-oriented Chinese-language talents satisfying market needs and fulfil Belt-and-Road-related requirements for linguistic-cultural professionals.

4.1.2. Motivational Variations Across Different Grade Cohorts

Longitudinal classroom surveys reveal grade-related heterogeneity in motivational patterns. First-year undergraduates are primarily guided by integrative motivation. They show strong fascination towards Chinese festivals and folk customs and demonstrate high enthusiasm upon course commencement. Nevertheless, shaky foundational linguistic competence impedes complete self-expression in Chinese, creating high risks of motivational decline.

By comparison, second- and third-year participants are dominated by instrumental motivation. They pay greater attention to assessment outcomes, scholarship-application possibilities and employment prospects offered by high-quality local businesses. Still, the absence of local HSK testing facilities, insufficient dissemination of recruitment-related policies and inadequate career counselling produce an overall downward trend for instrumental motivation among this cohort.

4.1.3. Dynamic Patterns of Overall Motivational Change

Cross-comparison of two-wave questionnaire datasets and semi-structured-interview materials demonstrates that aggregate Chinese-learning motivation drops substantially from relatively high levels at semester opening to lower levels by semester end. Integrative motivation undergoes mild attenuation, whereas instrumental motivation experiences far more marked decline. Further analysis indicates that the lack of local-based standardised Chinese-proficiency testing removes assessment-driven learning incentives. Insufficient real-world language-application scenarios prevent knowledge consolidation. Limited outreach regarding overseas-study policies and inadequate vocational guidance also play contributory roles. Collectively these factors dilute the practical value perceived for Chinese-language acquisition and constitute core explanations for declining sustained motivation among local student populations.

4.2. Locally-Tailored Strategies to Maintain Long-Term Learning Motivation

Based on causal analysis of motivational-decay mechanisms for Kazakh learners and available local resources within Taraz, this section proposes actionable, replicable intervention approaches for sustaining Chinese-language-study engagement.

4.2.1. Optimise Teaching-Examination-Further-Study Linkages and Strengthen Objective-Oriented Guidance

To mitigate insufficient test-driven incentives caused by absent on-campus HSK examination centres, teaching staff should maintain regular communication with Chinese higher-education partners. Institutions can organise online thematic sessions introducing HSK requirements, Chinese-government scholarship schemes and overseas-student sharing seminars. These activities clarify HSK grading criteria, application workflows and preferential policies for studying in China and help local learners define concrete learning targets. Connecting advanced

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Chinese-proficiency levels with further-study pathways effectively reinforces long-term learning willingness.

4.2.2. Integrate Domain-Specific Chinese-Language Content to Boost Practical Perceived Value

Growing China-Kazakhstan economic exchanges mean local small-and-medium-sized enterprises increasingly demand Chinese-proficient employees familiar with investment-related business contexts. Therefore, local Chinese teaching should align with learner requirements and regional developmental traits. Curriculum design may embed scenario modules drawn from cross-border-trade consultation, cultural-tourism hospitality and workplace meetings within infrastructure industries. Learners can experience practical Chinese-language usage within simulated real-world contexts and recognise its utility for local corporate development. Aligning classroom content with regional talent requirements sustains participants' ongoing study drive.

4.2.3. Deploy Generative-AI-Assisted Pedagogy to Alleviate Learners' Study-Related Stress

For absolute beginners, Chinese logographic writing creates substantial barriers compared with phonetic Kazakh and Russian orthography. Generative artificial-intelligence tools support differentiated character-learning instruction. Zero-level and novice groups may access animated stroke demonstrations, radical parsing modules, digital handwriting-tracing exercises and daily-vocabulary drills. More advanced learners receive scenario-driven character-writing tasks, sentence-building exercises and collaborative creative assignments. Tiered progressive teaching workflows mitigate learning-related anxiety and apprehension, reviving intellectual curiosity and consolidating integrative motivation.

4.2.4. Build Sustained Extracurricular Practice Platforms and Expand Language-Use Contexts

To offset constraints imposed by class scheduling and fixed syllabi, universities can host recurring on-campus Chinese-corner events enabling immersive communicative training to enhance practical linguistic competences. Leveraging Sino-Kazakh cultural-exchange resources, institutions may roll out diversified activities: comparative food-culture experiences, traditional-festival thematic events, Chinese-language open days, short-video-creation showcases, dubbing competitions and singing contests. Off-campus partnerships with local enterprises can establish physical internship stations. Real-world working scenarios covering commercial negotiation, tourist-service reception, engineering-site operations and conference services facilitate knowledge internalisation through hands-on practice. High-quality language input-output cycles can be established to form virtuous learning feedback loops.

4.2.5. Host Local-Industry Career-Sharing Events to Improve Occupational-Outlook Awareness

Given vague long-term vocational planning and limited recognition of Chinese's employment-related value, teaching and administrative teams can co-organise thematic sharing workshops. Guest speakers may include front-line personnel employed by Chinese-invested enterprises, cross-border-trade agencies, cultural-tourism organisations and Chinese-oriented consulting firms, alongside returnee alumni who pursued studies in China. Speakers can introduce job duties, compensation ranges, talent-demand characteristics and career-development trajectories for Chinese-relevant local-market posts. Such sessions deliver realistic, comprehensive understanding of Chinese-language professional value and motivate continuous learning behaviour.

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5. Conclusion

Taking Taraz-based higher-education institutions as case subjects, this longitudinal research adopts mixed-method research combining questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. It explores root causes behind fading sustained motivation among non-Chinese-major undergraduates taking general-elective Chinese modules and investigates feasible locally-adapted measures to revive learning engagement. Empirical outputs confirm that incomplete curriculum frameworks, misperceptions regarding career value, character-learning-linked anxiety, constrained teaching hours and content coverage plus inadequate out-of-class practice opportunities together weaken learners' long-term Chinese-study motivation. Noticeable motivational heterogeneity exists across different grade cohorts.

Correspondingly, this paper constructs a replicable localised intervention framework covering five dimensions: clear-target guidance, AI-supported differentiated instruction, domain-integrated Chinese-course design, expanded language-practice contexts and occupational-cognition support. This research fills gaps within existing literature investigating sustained motivation for general-elective Chinese courses across non-core Central-Asian cities and supplies actionable insights advancing high-quality regional international-Chinese-education development. Future investigations may enlarge sample scales, implement multi-city comparative research and evaluate practical effects of motivational-enhancement interventions, generating more robust empirical evidence supporting Belt-and-Road-era international Chinese education.

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