

The Influence of Individual Differences of Chinese Learners of German on Their Choices of Internship

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Abstract: This study aims to explore the influence of individual differences on the internship choices of Chinese undergraduate students in German major and to provide better career service suggestions targeting at foreign language students. This study has significant implications, considering the challenges that final-year undergraduate students in German are faced with and the limited number of previous studies which address these issues. The current study interviewed 23 third-year undergraduates majoring in German to investigate their internship choices and experience, as well as individual differences including language learning motivation, anxiety and character. Only four of them were engaged in German-related internships, eleven were engaged in internships that are not German-related, and eight had no internships yet. Fifteen of them believe that motivation can improve their academic performance. It can be seen that students with integrative motivation will be engaged in German-related internships. Twelve people believe that anxiety has a positive impact on German learning, and one third of whom believe that anxiety improves their German performance to a certain extent, which promotes them to be engaged in German-related internships. However, the influence of character on German learning is uncertain. The results revealed a direct influence of learning motivation on interviewees' choice of German-related internships, indirect influence of learning anxiety, and no relationship between character and internship choices. This study has implications for better career support to German-major undergraduate students.

Keywords: motivation, anxiety, character, German major, internship

1. Introduction

There is an increasing demand for proficient users of foreign languages against the backdrop of the continuous strengthening of China's foreign trade and the in-depth advancement of the "One Belt One Road" initiative. Therefore, many foreign languages universities and colleges have launched programs in foreign languages other than English, such as Japanese, French, German and Spanish. However, the overall employment situation of college students in recent years is grim [1]. The final-year students in foreign languages majors are confused about their future career choice. Therefore, career planning plays an important role for these students and should be integrated in the curriculum colleges and universities. Although Guo believes that the graduates in minor foreign languages majors are relatively easy [2]. But in related they are faced with great challenges in the

job market due to the continuous expansion of enrollment in higher education and consequently the increasing number of graduates seeking potential job opportunities. The employment rate for final-year graduates in some majors is not optimistic. For example, according to the information from the Employment Office of Dalian Vocational College of Translation and Interpretation, the employment rate for graduates in the major of Applied Japanese in 2008 was 98%, whereas the rate for the 2009 and 2010 classes dropped to 92% and 95% respectively. However, there are few studies on the career choices of German-major students. In response to this research gap, this article aims to explore how German-major students' career choices are affected by their individual differences and provide suggestions for better career service for students in foreign languages majors. Since most scholars have focused on the career choices of students after graduation, few people study students' internships before graduation. However, it is believed that internships play an important role in the cultivation of interpersonal skills that cannot be formally taught in higher education, the improvement of the employment ability of the first professional position, and the promotion of long-term career success [3]. Therefore, this article mainly focuses on student' internship choices, instead of their after-graduation career paths.

2. Literature review

According to previous studies, career choices are affected by students' individual differences, such as motivation [4–6], intelligence [7], anxiety [8–10], learning styles [11], cognitive styles [12], character [13–15]. It can be observed that motivation, anxiety and character are the main dimensions of individual differences that are investigated by previous researchers. Motivation can affect students' job preferences. Students with stronger integrative motivation are more likely to choose the jobs that are directly related to their majors [5]. Anxiety tends to have a negative impact on students' choice of major-related jobs. With the increase of anxiety level, it becomes difficult for students to make career choices [9]. Character can influence the type of jobs that students may choose. For example, extroverts prefer jobs that entail more oral communication, while introverts tend to choose jobs with more written work [16].

2.1. Motivation

Gardner and Lambert investigated second language (L2) learning motivation from the perspective of social psychology and paid special attention to the role of learning environment [17–19], which reflects the integrated relationship between individual environment and group environment, particularly the target language environment. Gardner and Lambert categorized language motivation into integrative motivation and instrumental motivation [17]. The former refers to language learners' strong desire to learn because they want to communicate better with the target language community, while the latter refers to their desire to learn for some practical purposes, such as passing the exam and studying abroad. However, their theory on L2 learning motivation has the following problems. First, integrative motivation and instrumental motivation are not necessarily suitable for the foreign language learning environment, where language learners have limited contact with the actual society and have no strong desire to integrate into the target language society. In case of Chinese learners, their language learning is mainly carried out in the classroom environment, which is the main form of foreign language instruction [20]. Thus, their L2 learning motivation model may not be applicable to foreign language learning. Second, their theory implies a causal relationship between motivation and achievement. However, Ellis argues that learning motivation is not always the cause of proper or awful educational performance [21], but can also be the result. Good academic performance will improve learning interest and motivation. Therefore, language learning experience is very important.

Since Gardner and Lambert's classical model, many new influencing factors on motivation have been identified by researchers. Williams divided motivation into two categories [22], i.e., internal and external factors, by synthesizing a large number of research results and defining motivation from a multidimensional perspective. Internal factors include potential interest in learning activities, evaluation system of learning activities, inter-language awareness, knowledge mastery, self-concept, overall attitude towards language learning, emotional factors (anxiety, fear or self-confidence), age and gender. External factors generally include influential relatives, friends and teachers, interplay with others, studying surroundings and social environment. Williams extended the model initially proposed Gardner and Lambert by including external factors that exert influence on learning motivation [17, 22]. However, this model is only a theoretical framework and too complex to be empirically tested. Therefore, the practical significance of the model is very limited [23].

To address the limitation of Williams' model, Dörnyei proposed the second language motivation self-system theory under the influence of Higgins' self-gap theory [24–25]. Dörnyei's model includes three components: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and L2 learning experience [24]. The ideal L2 self refers to the envision that language learners aspire when they become highly proficient users of the language that they are learning. The ought-to L2 self refers to the characteristics that should be possessed in order to meet the expectations of others and avoid possible negative results in the process of second language learning. L2 learning experience focuses on the influence of learners' previous learning experience and current experience, and refers to the motivation associated with specific learning situations (such as the influence of second language teachers, curriculum, peer groups and successful experience). The theory not only covers L2 learning motivation and learning situation, but also includes some factors that were not included in the previous models and articulates the relationship between the influence of second language teaching activities and learners' motivation [17]. However, this theoretical framework does not reflect the learners' assessment of their own learning status, and it emphasizes the pulling effect of the ideal self.

Therefore, a comprehensive framework of L2 learning motivation proposed by Dörnyei is more suitable for this study [26–27], which categorizes all motivation factors into three levels: language, learner and environment. The three-level model of learning motivation accords with the three simple factors in the system of foreign language learning: foreign language, foreign language learner and foreign language learning environment. Under this theory, many people have investigated and studied Chinese learners of Japanese [28–29]. At the language level, the motivation of the vast majority of Japanese-major students to learn the language can be divided into the motivation of cultural interest in Japan, yearning for the country and practical needs such as examination and work [30]. At the learner level, students' interests and achievement need account for the majority of their learning motivation. In addition, the perspective of individual differences has emerged from the studies of Japanese learning motivation. Scholars have found that the differences between major, grade, gender and region may affect the types and levels of learners' motivation. At the third level, i.e., learning environment, the previous studies are primarily concerned with classroom teaching but overlook the relationship between classroom teaching and learning motivation [31–32].

To sum up, it can be seen that there is a large gap in the investigation of L2 learning motivation at the level of learning environment, and there is no empirical research for reference in this regard. Therefore, in the current study which focuses on German-major students, more attention should be paid to the complex relationship between learning environment and learners' motivation.

2.2. Anxiety

Anxiety has been found to have both positive and negative influences on foreign language learning, and therefore is divided into promoting anxiety and hindering anxiety [33]. Based on this categorization, Scovel believes that the impact of these two kinds of anxiety on academic performance can be represented by an inverted U-shaped [34]. That is, promoting anxiety can provide motivation for learners and urge them to redouble their efforts to complete learning tasks. However, when promoting anxiety reaches a certain critical point, it will turn into obstructive anxiety. Horwitz put forward a more comprehensive foreign language anxiety (FLA) theory and provided a more fine-grained categorization of anxiety [35–39], such as trait anxiety, state anxiety, achievement anxiety, and facilitating-debilitating anxiety. He argued that language anxiety has a generally adverse impact on foreign language learning. Although this theory is a breakthrough in the study of language anxiety, it still remains controversial. The empirical studies on FLA revealed mixed results. Spielmann and Radnofsky verified the negative impact of foreign language learning anxiety on language learning [40]. On the contrary, Papi found that foreign language anxiety helps students to study more actively [41]. He believes that foreign language anxiety is positively correlated with achievement. Yet, Marcos-Llina and Garau found that anxiety had no significant effect on achievement [42].

So far, the research on the impact of anxiety on language learning in China has only investigated Chinese learners of English and Japanese. Previous studies mainly focused on the different types and sources of anxiety that may affect language learning, and there is no relevant investigation and research on German language.

2.3. Character

Character can be divided into extroversion and introversion [43]. At present, there are two theoretical hypotheses about the relationship between learners' character and their second language acquisition [21]. The first is that extroverted students tend to perform well in oral tasks in foreign language learning, and they prefer face-to-face communication or dialogue. They are active in the classroom and face mistakes calmly. Therefore, extroverted learners can master interpersonal communication skills better because they have strong social skills. The second is that introverted learners like reading and writing activities, and they often actively listen to others. In contrast to extroverted learners, introverted learners try to avoid answering questions in public. If they make mistakes, they will feel uneasy. Therefore, introverted learners have more advantages in developing language cognitive abilities.

The theoretical hypotheses have been corroborated by a number of empirical studies. Bunch found that Japanese college students with extroverted character scored higher in English speaking tasks [44], while introverted students scored higher in reading and grammar. Similarly, Strong reported that talkative and communicative character has an impact on foreign language learning and found a salient positive relationship between the learners' communicative ability and the rate of learning English [21]. For Chinese learners of English, the character English-major students in colleges and universities has an obvious impact on English learning. Extroverted students had better achievements in dictation and speaking tasks, while introverted students had advantages in reading comprehension and grammar [45]. It can be observed that the majority of previous studies on the influence of character on language English have focused on English learners and overlooked other languages such as German, and even fewer studies investigate the impact of character on career choice of language-major students.

Considering the importance of the aforementioned three individual differences in language learning and career choices and no relevant empirical research on German-major undergraduate

students, this article aims to investigate how these individual differences affect the internship choices of Chinese German learners by attempting to answer the following three research questions:

- How does learning motivation affect internship choices of Chinese German-major undergraduate students?
- How does anxiety affect internship choices of Chinese German-major undergraduate students?
- How does character affect internship choices of Chinese German-major undergraduate students?

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

The interviewees ($N = 23$) in this study were third-year undergraduate students majoring in German in a college in Guangdong Province, China. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years old, including 4 males and 19 females. They had been studying the German language for nearly three years. Four of them were participating in German-related internships during the summer when the interview was conducted, eleven were engaged in non-German-related internships, and the remaining seven had no internships at the time of the interview.

3.2. Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate German learning motivation, anxiety, and learner character. The interviews were conducted in the form of online real-time written correspondence with each participant due to the restricted travel permission during the COVID-19. Therefore, the process of transcription was unnecessary. In order to ensure that the interview questions could be understood and the participants could better express their opinions, the interviews were conducted in the native language of the participants, i.e., Chinese. The interviews lasted about 40-50 minutes for each interviewee. During the interview, when the interviewees' answers were not very clear and comprehensive, the researcher asked further questions to request the interviewees to clarify their responses.

3.3. Coding

After the interviews, the coding was conducted in NVivo 12. The coding was divided into three stages. Firstly, the interviewee's original words and phrases were coded into 24 initial codes such as stress, self-efficacy, self-achievement etc. Then, these initial codes were summarized into seven categories of learner, language, environment, promoting anxiety, hindering anxiety, introversion and extroversion. Finally, three themes, i.e., motivation, anxiety, and character, were identified out of these seven categories. To ensure the inter-coder reliability of coding, a second coder was invited to code 47.8% ($N = 11$) of the interview texts. The exact percentage of agreement between two coders was 90%. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussions between the coders.

4. Results

4.1. How language learning motivation affects internship choices?

The interview results reveal that half of the interviewees chose to learn German as an undergraduate major in the university. Some of them wanted to learn a language that is relatively less common in China, while others wanted to avoid challenging majors such as mathematics. Also, some interviewees passively chose to learn German because they had been rejected by other majors. The

next two important reasons are integration motivation and language itself. After the admission into the university, most interviewees made efforts to learn German mainly because of self-achievement, passing the examinations and finding a job as their main learning motivation. Among them, a quarter of the interviewees reported that their main motivation to learn German was to pass the final examinations at the end of each semester so as to successfully graduate from the program. As mentioned by one of the interviewees, “Since I studied German as a major, I must draw a perfect end to my four-year study in college.” When asked about whether learning motivation had an impact on their academic performance, 15 interviewees believed that learning motivation improved their performance, three of whom were engaged in German-related internships. Six interviewees believed that learning motivation had no effect on their grades, and only one of them was engaged in an internship related to German. This shows that although learning motivation will affect German learning and academic achievements, it may not promote learners to find internships related to German.

4.2. How anxiety affects internship choices?

According to the results of the interviews, about 45% of the interviewees reported that they felt a great sense of confusion when they started to learn German because it shares a large number of similarities in vocabulary with English, which is a foreign language that they had learned for about ten years and been deeply rooted in their mind. However, in terms of grammar, German brings in much complexity and hence perplexity among beginners because German words have a variety of parts of speech, changes in case and tense. Most interviewees were much anxious about grammar, as said by one of the interviewees that “I think German grammar is very difficult. I once thought of changing my major to English.” Another interviewee commented that “when it comes to grammar, everyone in every language is in pain forever.” Their learning anxiety was even heightened before the final examinations, as reported by 43% of the interviewees. They were afraid of failing an examination because in that case they needed to re-sit the exam or retake a course. Thus, failure in an exam could lead to graduation without diploma or degree certificate. Based on the German learning anxiety of the above interviewees, 30% of the interviewees believed that their German learning anxiety is becoming more and more serious, which is mainly reflected in the fear that failing the Exam will affect the development after graduation and graduation. Some interviewees also mentioned that they were unable to deal with German due to their anxiety about German learning, and had turned to new fields for learning. In addition, 15 interviewees believed that anxiety could promote German language learning. 12 interviewees believed that learning anxiety had a positive impact on German learning, and four of them were engaged in German-related internships. This showed that learning anxiety could not only promote German learning and have a positive impact on German learning, but also promote students’ engagement in German-related internships.

4.3. How character affects internship choices?

About 74% of the interviewees categorized themselves as extroverted, and most of them agreed that extroverted character had a positive impact on German learning. However, less than half of them liked oral assignment in German language learning, and nearly half of the interviewees liked grammar and reading exercises. Interestingly, when asked about whether character would affect their internship choice, extroverted interviewees tend to have the same number of writing internships and oral internships. One of the interviewees gave this explanation: “Although I am outgoing and enjoy talking to people, I may still choose paperwork because I am afraid of making mistakes. I don’t want to deal with oral tasks that are too specific and professional.” Besides, two

interviewees with outgoing character were engaged in German-related internships. Their specific work content was related to written translation of German. However, both interviewees mentioned that they actually wanted to be engaged in oral internships, but they failed to do so because oral internships were scarce and their speaking proficiency was not high enough to satisfy the job descriptions. When these extroverted interviewees were asked whether they preferred to communicate with German friends or strangers, 53% of the them gave no preference as to with whom they liked to communication.

On the other hand, six interviewees thought that their character was introverted, and five of them thought that introverted character had a negative impact on German learning. One of them said that “because I am introverted, I don’t want to speak first, but I should speak when learning a language. I don’t have the courage to speak.” Interestingly, the number of introverted interviewees who chose writing internships was the same as the number of interviewees who thought their interviewees had no impact on their internship choices. More than 80% of the interviewees said that they preferred writing assignment and usually preferred grammar and reading exercises. Among them, two interviewees were engaged in German-related internships in e-commerce companies. Main internship tasks involved communicative activities such as replying e-mail in German. However, one of the interviewees mentioned that “In fact, the main reason is that my speaking German is not good enough. If my speaking proficiency is high, I prefer to do speaking jobs. In other words, what affects my internship is not my character, but my German proficiency.” In addition, half of the introverted interviewees said that they preferred to communicate with German friends, since it will be more comfortable in front of friends.

It can be seen that although extroverted interviewees believe that extroverted character has a certain positive impact on language learning, which is mainly reflected in more fluent oral expression and more willing to communicate with strangers; Introverted character has a certain negative impact on language learning, some introverted character also said: “Although introverted character is not conducive to oral expression, it is easier to calm down and help me learn.” Correspondingly, some extroverted interviewees also mentioned the shortcomings of extroverted character on language learning: “I sometimes play too much. If I were a little ill-minded, I might listen to the teacher and study hard. I think an appropriate extroversion is conducive to learning German.” Furthermore, on the impact of character on internship choice, extroverted interviewees pointed out: “I think it’s mainly for me to adapt to the internship. I want to try both writing and oral work.” To sum up, it is not entirely certain whether character has a positive or negative impact on German language learning, and introversion and extroversion character do not show very obvious differences in German language learning. Character has no fundamental impact on internship choice.

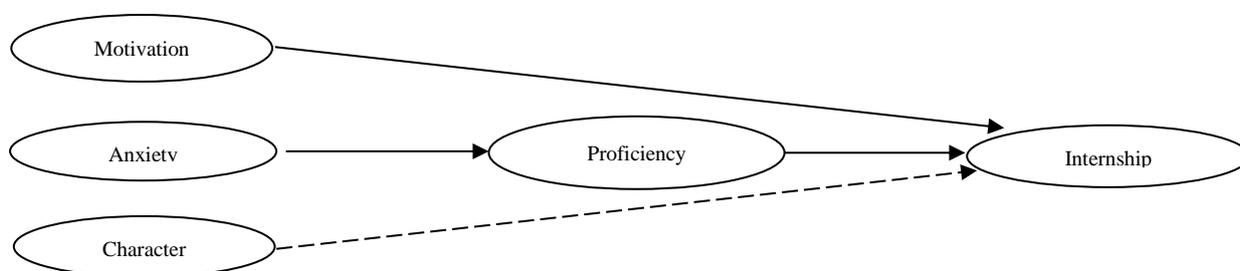


Figure 1 The Influence of Three Individual Difference Factors on German Language Proficiency and Internship Choices

Note. The solid line represents a significant effect, while the dash line represents an insignificant effect.

5. Discussions

This study suggests that learning motivation has a certain positive impact on German learning. Among the four interviewees engaged in German-related internships, three were motivated by integrative learning motivation, which is consistent with the conclusion by Hedge that integrative motivation is more effective than instrumental motivation in the long-term process of second language acquisition [46]. More than half of the interviewees who did not engage in German-related internships studied German as a major, and many of them were forced to choose German as their major due to China's college admission policies [47]. As a result, compared with the interviewees who actively chose German majors, most passive interviewees were not highly motivated to learn German, which also affected their choice whether to engage in German-related internships or not.

Learning anxiety has a significant positive impact on German learning. As Papi found in an empirical study of 1,011 senior high school students [41], English anxiety helps students to learn more actively. However, the impact of learning anxiety on internship choice is not direct. Although almost every interviewee expressed certain levels of anxiety about learning German at the beginning, with the passage of time anxiety also changed with their different mastery of German learning and future planning. This is consistent with Ellis that learning anxiety plays different roles for different language learners [21].

Introversion and extroversion may affect different aspects of second language acquisition. However, there is no significant relationship between learners' introversion and extroversion and second language acquisition performance. Generally speaking, it does not determine the level of German language. This is consistent with Wu's study which found no significant relationship between extroversion, introversion and academic achievements [48]. According to the interview results, character will not directly affect the choice of interviewees internships.

In addition to the above three major influencing factors, there are other factors that lead them not to engage in German-related internships. For graduates majoring in German, they have almost no other advantages except going to German enterprises and other foreign enterprises. Only when the job can frequently contact foreigners can they give play to the value of the language. However, when recruiting talents, many German enterprises not only require students to have a high level of German, but also must have a high level of English. Under this background, it is more difficult for German graduates [49]. In addition, if small language graduates are engaged in teachers, foreign trade, tour guides and other industries, because these industries are more traditional, minor foreign languages majors has not become an advantage [50]. Based on this situation, many students majoring in German choose to change careers or take postgraduate studies. For example, some graduates will engage in new media and other industries or turn to Japanese and other languages for learning because of their personal interest or strengths.

6. Conclusions

To sum up, learning motivation has an impact on the internship choices of German-major students. Higher level of learning motivation increases the likelihood of the interviewees to choose the German-related internships. On the contrary, the interviewees who have participated in German-related internships report a low level of learning anxiety, while those have not participated report a higher level of learning anxiety. There seems to be a negative relationship between learning motivation and German-related internships choices. However, the effect of learning anxiety on internship choices is not direct, but mediated by the interviewees' proficiency in German. Finally, there is no relationship between character and internship choice.

This study examined the impact of learning motivation, anxiety and character on the internship choices by German-major student in a Chinese university. Despite some interesting findings, this

study has the following limitations. This study used a convenience sampling method, which resulted in relatively small sample size and uneven distribution of the participants. Therefore, the research findings should be interpreted with caution since the participants came from only one Chinese university.

In summary, this study extended the research scope of learning motivation, anxiety and character, provides suggestions for better curriculum design of German major, calls for teachers to pay more attention to the impact of students' individual differences on German learning, encourages students to effectively use different strategies to improve German learning, and stresses the importance of more high-quality internship opportunities provided by the career service department in the universities.

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Appendix

Do you have an internship? What is your internship position?

Why do you choose this position for internship?

Do you think learning German can help you find a good job?

Did you choose German major out of interest in German culture?

In the process of learning German, what help did German bring you?

Do you have any plans to study in Germany?

What motivates you to learn in the process of learning? Is it to pass the exam, or to meet the needs of self-achievement, or to have a good job in the future?

Do you think this learning motivation will affect your grades?

Have you ever dreamed of communicating with foreigners in fluent German? Do you think you can now? If not, are you willing to continue to work hard?

Do you think you are influenced by your classmates / roommates in the process of learning?

How does it affect?

Do you think the classroom atmosphere will affect your language learning?

Are you interested in these courses in school?

Do you think these courses are useful to you and the internship?

Do you think you have learned these courses well?

Do you prefer to interact with teachers or the class mode of “teachers speak and students listen”?

Do you think the competition and activity setting of German major can stimulate everyone's learning motivation?

Do you think classroom learning should be individual, cooperative or competitive?

Do you think the practice opportunities of German major will be less than those of other majors?

Do you think schools should provide more such opportunities?

Do you find German difficult? What makes you anxious about German?

Will this anxiety in study urge you to practice more?

Under what circumstances will you feel anxious in German learning?

What do you think is the reason for your anxiety about learning German?

Has your anxiety changed since you first learned German? How did it change? Why?

Do you think German anxiety has a positive or negative impact on you? What is the positive?

What is the negative?

Do you think this anxiety affects your language performance?

Do you think your character is extroverted or introverted?

How do you think this personality will affect your language learning?

Do you think character has a positive or negative impact on learning German?

Are you willing to communicate with your classmates in German? Do you feel comfortable communicating with your German friends in German, or with strangers, or is it the same?

Do you prefer written homework to oral homework?

Do you think you are active enough in class?

Do you prefer reading comprehension and grammar?

Do you think your character will affect your choice when looking for an internship (more writing or speaking)?

Do you think your character has any influence on language learning?