What Learning Environment Factors Motivate Non-Heritage Language Learners in Middle Grades to Learn Chinese?

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Abstract

For the growing number of Chinese language learners around the world, classroom learning environment has a major effect on their L2 motivation. By analyzing non-heritage, middle grade students' voices expressed in focus group interviews over two school years, we found students enjoyed learning activities in which they could participate actively and practice what they have learned. Students felt they were able to learn more when these learning activities were presented as competitive activities and were supported with visuals and additional resources. Students also expressed wanting to learn content that can be used in everyday context and have multiple opportunities to learn Chinese words and culture. We believe our study provides empirical support to Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) L2 Motivation Self-System Model that posited that the L2 learning experience can help to create the basic motivational conditions and to generate and protect motivation. We also provide specific suggestions for teachers.

1 Introduction

There is a steady increase in non-heritage language learners of Chinese in the U.S. and around the world due to the combined efforts from the national governments, non-governmental agencies, and the Chinese government in positioning Chinese as a global language (Asia Society & College Board, 2008; Wang, S. C., 2010). The percentage of U.S. elementary students studying Chinese grew from 0.3% in 1997 to 3% in 2008; the percentage of U.S. high school students studying Chinese grew from 1% in 1997 to 4% in 2008 (Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008; Wang, S. C., 2010). While there is no comprehensive survey of the number of K-12 students studying Chinese, a study conducted in 2000 estimated that approximately 24,000 students in Grades 7-12 nationwide were studying Chinese (Draper & Hicks, 2002). Starr (2009) also found that in France, an

estimated number of 20,000 students in schools and colleges were learning Chinese and in Britain, and an estimated number of 8,500 students were studying Chinese in secondary schools. The Chinese language, however, takes an average English speaker, a non-heritage language learner, 1,320 hours to achieve limited working proficiency, compared to 480 hours by French or Spanish (Moore, Walton, & Lambert, 1992). Many second/foreign language (L2/FL) researchers have identified L2 learning motivation as critical for L2 acquisition and perseverance (see Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Yu & Watkins, 2008).

Dörnyei (2009) as well as Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) proposed an *L2 Motivation Self-System Model* that posited that the L2 learning experience can help to create the basic motivational conditions, generate student motivation, maintain and protect motivation, and encourage positive self-evaluation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). While there is emerging evidence to support this model empirically, some L2 researchers articulated that the L2 motivation field needs more situated, qualitative empirical research for a deeper understanding of how specific groups experience the learning of L2 (Ushioda & Dörnyei, 2012), especially in light of the steady increase of the K-12 non-heritage language learners of Chinese.

This study, situated in the American context, aims to find out the learning environment factors that affect the L2 motivation of middle-grade non-heritage language learners of Chinese using qualitative focus group interview data that were collected over two school years.

2 Conceptual framework

2.1 *Learning environment factors that motivate students to learn L2*

Dörnyei (2009) proposed an L2 Motivation Self-System Model and described the L2 learning experience as the situated context that enables or detracts an individual from reaching the ideal L2 self. The three main components under Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivation Self-System Model align with earlier theories on L2 motivation. Dörnyei (2009) believed that each individual is driven by an ideal L2 self, or a vision of self as an L2 speaker, which is related to the traditional integrative and intrinsic motivation components (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Ortega, 2009). Dörnyei (2009) posited that the ideal L2 self helps an individual to create the ought-to L2 self, or the desire to have specific L2 learning attributes, which is related to the extrinsic components of other L2 motivation theories (Noels, Pelletier, Clément, & Vallerand, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Dörnyei (2009) further described that L2 learning experience could enable or detract an individual from reaching the ideal L2 self. This emphasis on the learning context also aligns with the sociocultural theories (Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978, 1981).

Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) further refined their thinking of the L2 learning experience by proposing a framework that teachers can use for motivational strategies. This framework includes four components. Under this framework, the first component relates to the basic motivational conditions in the L2 learning environment, including appropriate teacher behaviors and a good relationship with students, a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom, and a cohesive learner group with appropriate norms. Under the second component, teachers can generate students' motivation through the use of five main groups of strategies. These strategies include (1) enhancing the learners' language-related values and attitudes, (2) improving the learners' expectancy of success, (3) increasing the learners' "goal-orientedness," (4) making the teaching materials relevant for the learners, and (5) creating realistic learner beliefs. Under the third component, teachers can maintain and protect motivation by using motivational strategies in the following eight areas: making learning stimulating and enjoyable, presenting tasks in a motivating way, setting specific learner goals, protecting the learners' self-esteem and increasing their self-confidence, allowing learners to maintain a positive social image, promoting cooperation among the learners, creating learner autonomy, and promoting self-motivating learner strategies. The last component is to encourage positive self-evaluation, specifically for teachers to promote attributions to effort rather than to ability, to provide motivational feedback, and to increase learner satisfaction.

2.2 Research on L2 learning environment factors in elementary and secondary schools

There is empirical evidence collected from various methodological frameworks to support the fact that elementary and secondary L2 language learners' motivation is influenced by their immediate learning environments (Ghenghesh, 2010; Lamb, 2011; Wu, 2003). A quasi-experimental study of 72 young Chinese children who were beginning learners of English found higher enthusiasm and a greater sense of achievement for children who were taught in an innovative learning environment. The innovative learning environment included activities that were moderately challenging for learners and were teacher-directed/facilitated, as well as learner-initiated activities. Under this environment, teachers served as scaffolders and supporters (Wu, 2003). Moreover, based on the focus group interview data collected over two school years from six learners of French or German in a secondary school in England, Lamb (2011) found that learners' identities were closely related to their motivation to learn. Specifically, learners' L2 identities developed when L2 teachers created a learning environment that engaged and nurtured learners' L2 identity through more opportunities for autonomy. Similarly, based on the self-reported interview data from five teachers and 20 elementary and high school students from Libya, Ghenghesh (2010) found that students' L2 motivation can be enhanced by the learning environment created by the teacher. Specifically, a learning environment where the teacher makes the lessons fun and interesting, takes time to explain specific language activities, and is friendly and encouraging was reported to enhance students' L2 motivation. These studies confirmed that students' L2 motivation is shaped by their perception of the learning environment.

In contrast, there is little empirical evidence that investigated the relationship between L2 classroom learning environment and the motivation of learning Chinese in elementary, middle, and high schools. Chua, Wong and Chen (2009) found statistically significant association between the nature of the Chinese classroom environment and students' motivation in learning Chinese. Data were collected from Singaporean ninth grade students who completed a classroom environment inventory that measured six dimensions of the classroom environment: student cohesion, teacher support, involvement, task orientation, cooperation, and equity. In a follow-up study, Chua, Wong and Chen (2011) found both teachers and students would like a Chinese language learning environment in which there is a good amount of teacher and peer support, active student involvement in learning, and cooperative learning among students. Based on her triangulation of classroom observation and student focus group interview data from an elementary charter school in the U.S., A. H. Wang (2010) found teachers' instructional practices in class have an immediate impact on how much students learn in each class and their attitude and motivation toward learning Chinese. Teacher instructional practices were measured using a standard observation rubric and included observation for teacher behaviors in a number of areas including presentation of content materials, use of classroom time for learning, frequency and use of different types of questions and feedback, and type of learning tasks given in class.

Given the increasing number of school-aged Chinese language learners, limited research in this area, and the call from leading theorists in the L2 motivation for studies that capture how groups of non-heritage language learners respond to their situated L2 learning environment, this study aims to understand the situated, learning environment factors that affect the L2 motivation of urban, middle-grade non-heritage language learners of Chinese. We focus specifically on American urban sixth and eighth graders.

3 Method

3.1 Setting and participants

This research was conducted in a public charter school located in a large city in the northeastern United States. The school serves approximately 400 low socio-economic status students from kindergarten through the eighth grade. Approximately 58% of the students were identified by the school as non-heritage learners of Chinese or students who do not have a Chinese background and

whose parents or grandparents do not speak any dialect of Chinese at home. The non-heritage learners included African Americans (30%), non-Chinese Asian Americans (49%), and other students (21%). The non-Chinese Asian Americans included Cambodian American, Vietnamese American, Laotian American, Indonesian American, and Korean American.

The school took a holistic approach toward foreign/second language education by integrating cultural folk arts into its heritage and non-heritage Mandarin Chinese language programs. This study focused on the non-heritage language programs. For the 2008-2009 and 2009-2010 academic years, non-heritage learners in grades six through eight took 160 minutes of Chinese language instruction each week, which was the equivalent of three class periods per week. This type of Chinese program has two main objectives. The first is to provide students with general exposure to language and culture so that they learn basic words and phrases. The second is to develop a foundation for future studies in the second language (Pufahl & Rhodes, 2011).

Two Chinese language instructors teach in the program. The Caucasian female full-time Chinese language teacher was a first year teacher in 2008-2009 with a certification to teach K-12 Chinese. She taught students in kindergarten through seventh grades. The Chinese American female part-time teacher had two years of administrative experience and five years of English teaching experience in a Hong Kong public school prior to joining the charter school. She taught students in sixth and eighth grades.

As shown in Table 1, a total of 29 students participated in the focus group interviews, of whom 13 participated in year 2008-2009 and 16 participated in year 2009-2010. In terms of grade levels, a total of 10 sixth graders and 19 eighth graders participated. Of all the participants, 49% of students were female and 51% male; 33% were African Americans, 46% were non-Chinese Asian Americans, and 21% were Caucasian or Hispanic Americans.

Table 1. Focus Group Participants

	G6	G8	Total
2008-09	4	9	13
2009-10	6	10	16
Total	10	19	29

3.2   Data collection and procedure

The data reported in this study were part of a larger case study of the school's Chinese language program (Kong, Wang, & Wong, 2011; Wang & Lavelle-Lore, 2011). The larger study drew upon administrator interviews, parent surveys, student focus group interviews, student surveys, teacher observations, teacher interviews, and archival records. For this study, data came from the focus group interviews of sixth and eighth grade students. Three group interviews were conducted in the spring semester of the school year 2008-2009 and the other three were conducted in the fall semester of the school year 2009-2010. Given our data collection timeline, we focused on students from grades six and eight so that we could capture as many different students' voices as possible. Table 2 lists demographic characteristics of the focus groups.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of the Focus Groups

	Grade	School Year
Focus Group 1	8	2008-2009
Focus Group 2	8	2009-2010
Focus Group 3	6	2009-2010
Focus Group 4	8	2008-2009
Focus Group 5	6	2008-2009
Focus Group 6	8	2009-2010

Focus group interviews were chosen over individual interviews to better understand the common and the unique perspectives of non-heritage language learners by grade levels and to increase the comfort level of these students (Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2009). Each focus group included three to six non-heritage language learners in one grade. All non-heritage language learners in grades six and eight were invited to participate; only those who turned in both a parental consent form and a student assent form were included in the data collection. All group interviews were conducted by two of the authors of this study, who are experienced in facilitating group discussions among students.

A list of interview questions was prepared for the group interview to facilitate and ensure the consistency of the discussion (Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Yin, 2009). This included four background questions and seven core questions. The first four questions helped collect student's background information, such as whether they were born outside of the U.S., their age when they came to the U.S., and what language(s) other than English they might speak. The seven core questions allowed the researchers to collect information on students' perceptions of Chinese, their learning experiences in Chinese, reasons for wanting to do well or not do well in Chinese, and things they hope the schools would or would not do to help facilitate their learning of Chinese (see Appendix A).

The focus group interviews were held in a quiet place, such as the school conference room or an empty classroom, and students were asked to sit in a circle so that they were comfortable and could casually interact with each other (Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger & Casey, 2009). The interviews typically began each time with an explanation of the purpose of the interview, the confidentiality of the students' responses, and the facilitators emphasized that "there are no right or wrong answers." Students took turns answering the questions but we also encouraged them to respond to each other's ideas by telling them repeatedly to "feel free to jump in any time" during the interview. Each focus group interview lasted approximately 40 minutes.

All focus group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then analyzed, using the analytic and interpretation steps recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Yin (2009). After initial analysis of the transcribed data, tentative coding categories were developed. The categories included positive current experiences, cultural events/activities (during or after school), prior experiences, opportunities to speak and converse, negative language learning experiences, practical content, homework, difficulty of learning, language activities/games, etc. This initial list of codes was refined into a final list of categories after the co-authors coded three interview transcripts together. The authors used the revised coding categories to code all the transcripts. Uncertain codings were brought back for discussion and resolution. Also, all the coded data were entered onto spreadsheets for ease of analysis. After all transcripts were coded, the first two authors reexamined the coded data across all focus groups, analyzed repeated patterns, and identified emerging themes (see Appendix B) that were discussed in the following results section.

4   Results and Discussion

An analysis of the focus group interview data indicates that the motivation to learn Chinese as a second language for middle grade, non-heritage learners is enhanced or decreased by the following factors: a) current learning experiences; b) sense of competence; c) advantages of knowing Chinese; d) challenges of learning Chinese; and e) availability of choice in selecting what foreign language to learn (see Appendix C). We discussed these factors more in-depth in the following sections.

4.1   Current learning experience

Our analyses of student focus group interview data revealed that students' current learning experience plays a big part on their motivation in learning the language. A large chunk of student conversation (67%) revolved around their current learning experiences, in which students commented on their classroom learning activities, teacher support, content of learning, homework, and

the extracurricular activities they liked. One interesting point they raised is that the competitive nature of the classroom activities seems to enhance their motivation to engage with the learning of Chinese.

4.1.1   Classroom learning activities or game-like learning activities

Students enjoyed learning activities that gave them the opportunities to participate actively and to practice using the target language in meaningful ways. Students especially favored the game-like activities such as fly-swatter, jeopardy, scavenger hunt, Chinese silent ball, and mock Chinese shop. Such game-like activities were not only fun, but also allowed students to apply their newly-learned Chinese language in various modalities, such as speaking, listening, reading, and some-times writing. As one student said, "I like playing Chinese silent ball [game], because before you throw the ball, you have to say something like a number or a color or a food. So, like, you want to win, so, in class you have to pay attention to what you learn" (Focus Group 5). Some students felt that such game-like activities were not only fun, but also made learning easy. As one student said, "I just like it when like Teacher A puts it in a game, like, we remember it more … It's a flyswatter and you have to hit it and it makes more sense because we can learn how to spell and we can also learn how to write and so that's how it makes it easy" (Focus Group 3). Some students believed that since games were fun and competitive, they would pay more attention to what they were learning.

In contrast, students complained when they did not have the opportunity to participate actively or when the learning activities were boring; as one student stated, "We just sit there, we can't talk, we can't say nothing" (Focus Group 1). Another student stated, "I don't pay attention because it is boring" (Focus Group 5). Students also seemed to lose interest when the activity was repetitive, as one student stated, "We just copy over and over and then just forget about it" (Focus Group 1).

Also, we found that students liked activities that allowed them to compete with one another. They felt that competition made learning Chinese easier. Their desire to win these competitions made them work harder and pay more attention to what they had learned and, in the process, they learned more. As one student said, "Teacher A gives out tallies and stuff so a lot of people answer questions all the time just for a tally. Yeah, there's a lot of 'oh, me, oh, me.' 'Yeah, call my name first.' People are jumping out of their chair just to answer one question. That helps us to learn. And you now remember everything" (Focus Group 2).

Students also found the competitive activities to be "fun." One student said, "Teacher A, she makes it fun, kind of fun to learn Chinese more often, competing who can say it better or who can say it faster, and who can get the point. So it is kind of fun" (Focus Group 2). Also, some students suggested having class competitions so that classes at the same level can compete against each other.

4.1.2   Teacher support

Students expressed that they liked activities in which they were able to complete the tasks suc-cessfully with the appropriate support provided. One student said, "I like learning Chinese when there's pictures on the board" (Focus Group 3). Even in taking the tests, some students thought it was cool when they were allowed to use their vocabulary sheet during an open book test and when the teacher "gives us clue words in a sentence and we learn the clue word and we could figure out what the sentence means" (Focus Group 2). Students also communicated the joy of learning and a sense of accomplishment. One student said, "I feel I learn a lot, because she has us memorize it because she has like certain strokes she tells us to memorize it" (Focus Group 3).

At the same time, some students expressed frustration when the tasks were too challenging and when they felt that they were not given adequate support. A common complaint was not having enough time to learn the content before being assessed. As one student stated, "I don't really like when we always have quizzes every week because we don't get to learn a lot of stuff in a week 'cause we only have her … three times a week" (Focus Group 6). Other students complained that

they sometimes were not able to complete their homework assignments because those assignments were "so hard" (Focus Group 5).

Generally, we found that students spoke favorably about classroom learning activities that allowed them to participate actively and that were usually of a competitive nature. When teachers provided adequate support for their successful completion of the language learning tasks, students seemed to participate more actively. On the contrary, lack of teacher support seemed to generate frustration on the part of students.

4.1.3 Homework

An analysis of the group interview data shows that students were frustrated about their homework. They complained that their homework was "too much" and "so hard" and that teacher's feedback was not helpful. As one student shared, "I don't like writing the characters. Like, when we get for homework we have to write it a lot of times, cause it's hard sometimes you may not get it right and she'll, like, circle it because, like, it's wrong" (Focus Group 1).

Despite the criticisms, students were aware of the importance of doing the Chinese homework. As one student put it, "If you do homework, in the future tests, you do very well" (Focus Group 4). The problem seems to lie in the fact that students had not been well-prepared or given the needed support to complete their homework assignments successfully. As one student complained, "Sometimes, I don't get the words and then we have to do homework, so hard, but I still don't get it" (Focus Group 5). It seems that teacher's support could make a difference as well. As one student commented, "I like Chinese class this year because if you, like, didn't hand in the homework, Teacher A will give you the sheet and you can make it up and she gives out extra credit sometimes" (Focus Group 2). These comments illustrated that similar to classroom learning activities, students need to be given the appropriate support in order for them to complete their homework assignments successfully.

4.1.4 Content of learning

The data analysis showed that students were more motivated to learn when the vocabularies learned could be used in everyday contexts, such as food, money, sports or other words that they can communicate with their friends. One student shared excitedly, "I just got to say one thing I'm happy she taught us this year is how to say I have to go to the bathroom" (Focus Group 2). Conversely, students felt frustrated when what they were learning could not be used in every day contexts. One student complained that he wanted to order food in Chinese when he was in Chinatown but he was not able to do so. Another student also said, "the stuff that we learn we can't really put into, like, practice… We just know certain things like what color or what color shirt but we don't know how to put it in a sentence to really talk to them, the people that speak the language" (Focus Group 1).

Students also expressed wanting to learn about the Chinese culture and arts. One student suggested, "I know we all can't go to China, but if we could that would be nice, but like we might go to the art museum or places like [that] to see different things Chinese" (Focus Group 5). Another student shared, "I like how we talk about Chinese New Year and stuff and how we had a party in class one time for Chinese New Year" (Focus Group 1).

4.1.5 Extra-curricular activities

At this particular research site, culturally relevant extra-curricular activities were offered to students, such as Kung Fu Class, Lion Dance Ensemble, Chinese Dance Club, Beijing Opera Martial Arts, and some other classes. Some students in this study were participating in these extra-curricular activities and they expressed liking these additional opportunities to learn the Chinese language and Chinese culture. A student shared that participating in Kung Fu class had expanded his Chinese vocabulary and said, "I took Kung Fu last year and in Kung Fu we did learn a lot of

Chinese words" (Focus Group 1). Students in the Chinese Dance Club also performed their dances at the school's Chinese New Year celebration. One student commented on how proud she was being part of the dance performance and said, "We have these ribbons and we're flying, sort of flying 'cause we're like twisting them around, we're spinning cloth on our finger and then we have these kind of cool pink costumes we're wearing. And when the concert comes, we're on the stage showing what we learned. We're just so proud 'cause we're, like, doing all that stuff" (Focus Group 2).

In summary, our analyses revealed that students enjoyed learning activities in which they can participate actively and practice what they have learned successfully. Students conveyed that they were able to learn more when these learning activities were supported by visuals, supplemental materials, and guidance from the teacher. Many students expressed that they enjoyed competitive activities because they not only work harder but also learn more. Students realized the importance of doing homework, but wanted more support in completing the homework assignments. In terms of content, students expressed wanting to learn things that they could use in everyday context and learn about the Chinese culture and arts. They also enjoyed participating in extra-curricular activities as these activities provided additional opportunities to learn about Chinese language and Chinese culture.

We found that students were not motivated to learn Chinese when the learning activities were passive, monotonous, or repetitive. Students were frustrated when the learning tasks were too difficult or when their teachers did not provide adequate learning support. In these situations, students were unable to complete the assigned tasks. Also, students expressed frustration when they were not able to apply what they had learned in class to making meaningful conversations.

4.2   Sense of competence

Our analyses of student focus group interviews revealed that students' sense of competence in learning the Chinese language plays some part in their motivation. A portion of student conversation (7%) across all six focus groups revolved around this issue. Some students mentioned that when they visited Chinatown, they became more aware when Chinese was being spoken around them, and that they had fun speaking in Chinese. One student said, "It's just like when we walk through Chinatown sometimes… we hear people talking in Chinese" (Focus Group 1). Another student added, "Like some people I'll say 'ni hao' to and they'll laugh and then they'll say 'ni hao' back" (Focus Group 1). Many students mentioned that they feel "happier" (Focus Group 6) and "really proud" now that they had learned Chinese.

To some of these teenagers, learning Chinese provided some gratification from showing off their Chinese knowledge and gave them a unique way to poke fun at their friends. As one student said, "I like Chinese because ... when I go home and stuff I can tell my friends. And they don't know what I am saying and they get mad at me" (Focus Group 2).

We also found that grades are a motivator for these students as well. They aspired to do well either because they perceived themselves as doing well based on the grades they received or because they wanted to achieve good grades. One student said, **"**Because the grades that I get is really high and I expect really high grades for myself" (Focus Group 5). Another student said, "I think I am doing better by not a lot but a little and I trying to get my grade up" (Focus Group 1). Another student explained that having good grades may not only give one "a good feeling," it may also open doors to a better high school (Focus Group 2).

In summary, our data analyses showed that students seemed to be more motivated to learn Chinese when they felt a stronger sense of competence. This occurred when they were able to recognize the Chinese language being used around them, when they were able to use their newly learned language in meaningful contexts, and when they received good grades.

4.3   Advantages of knowing Chinese

Our analyses of student focus group interviews revealed that students identified multiple uses for being motivated to learn Chinese. A portion of student conversation (9.5%) revolved around this issue. This included using Chinese to communicate with other people, to travel to China, to be accepted into a better high school, and to improve their future employment prospects.

4.3.1   Communication

Many students were motivated to learn Chinese as one student stated, "… because I can communicate with more people" (Focus Group 6). Other students echoed those sentiments. One student said she wanted to "have more conversations" (Focus Group 1) and another wanted to "understand other people, what they are talking about" (Focus Group 4).

4.3.2   Future travels

Students also indicated that knowing other languages such as Chinese would be an advantage when they travel. Students believed that knowing other languages would allow them to learn more about the country. They would be able to "know what to say" (Focus Group 3), "know where you are going" (Focus Group 5), and "find people to help me" (Focus Group 6).

4.3.3   Better high school

Several local public high schools offer Advanced Placement (AP) Chinese language. Some eighth graders thought good performance in Chinese would facilitate their entrance to these high schools. As one student stated, "I took a placement test for Chinese honors class and if I do well this year I might be able to place higher next year" (Focus Group 4). Other students expressed having strong performance in all subject areas, including Chinese, would increase their chance of enrolling in better high schools.

While some students viewed that knowing Chinese gave them an advantage in entering high schools, some other students were concerned that the high schools they ended up going to may not offer Chinese, which seemed to hinder their motivation to do well in Chinese. For example, one student complained, "I want to do well but then it's like, we've been doing it for almost five years already and we're going to high school and we've learned a lot and stuff. When you go to high school it's like, do they have any Chinese classes? Like, no, they have French or Spanish" (Focus Group 2).

4.3.4   New careers

A couple of students saw that learning Chinese opens new career possibilities. One student stated, "Yes, because I might want to do business like Chinese shoe company in China" (Focus Group 4). One student even mentioned that she knows "it's going to be good, 'cause when you go on your resume and you know more than one language, it's going to help you a lot" (Focus Group 2). Another student believed that knowing Chinese would make it "easy to find jobs" (Focus Group 4).

In summary, students identified a number of advantages of knowing Chinese. This included being able to understand and communicate with more people, allowing for a richer experience when traveling in China and perhaps elsewhere in the world, and opening more doors to their educational and career options.

4.4   Challenges of learning Chinese

Chinese is a difficult language to learn for non-heritage language learners and this could diminish their motivation to learn (Moser, 1991). Research has shown that it takes the typical non-heritage language learners much longer to become minimally proficient in Chinese than in French or Spanish (Moore et al., 1992). Our analyses of group interview data (11.7%) showed that students expressed frustration with learning the Chinese language in several ways. First, students identified that learning how to write Chinese characters is a difficult process. As one student stated, "I don't like writing the characters. Like when we get for homework we have to write it a lot of times, 'cause it's hard sometimes you may not get it right" (Focus Group 1). As another student said, "Like the hard strokes, where there's a lot of dots and strokes you can't understand it. I don't like write it" (Focus Group 3).

Second, students also identified pronunciation and memorization of specific Chinese words to be difficult. The Chinese language has a good number of homophones (i.e. words that sound the same but differ in meaning and may have different spelling) and homonyms (i.e. words with the same spelling and same pronunciation but different meanings). Furthermore, Chinese has four different tones even when the pronunciation is the same. As one student stated, "I really don't like learning Chinese because I am not used to doing it so it's kind of hard for me to say the words and actually know the meaning" (Focus Group 5).

In summary, our analyses of student data showed that some students have found learning Chinese to be difficult in several ways. This included learning how to write the Chinese characters, pronouncing these words accurately, and memorizing the meaning of these words. These findings reflect the aspects of the Chinese language that make it difficult for non-heritage language learners to master, for example, the tonal nature of the language and its use of a logographic writing system (Moser, 1991). These challenges diminish their motivation to learn the language.

4.5   Availability of language choice

The analysis of student group interview data (4.7%) revealed that students indicated that they saw the importance of learning a second language. However, they resented the fact that Chinese is the only language the school offered and that everyone was required to take it. One student felt strongly about giving students the choice to choose what language to learn and she explained her rationale in the following:

> I think it is important to learn another language but I don't think it should be forced upon the kids. I think they should have a choice because even though it may be an important language at the time, like, at first it was Italians that immigrated so they needed Italian translators, and then it was the Mexicans so they needed Spanish translators, and, so now, it's, like, the Asians and stuff so they need Chinese translators and Vietnamese and all these different kinds of translators. But it is just going to change as time goes on because there's going to be all different types of people coming and so it should be like the kids' choice cause it's what they're growing up learning. (Focus Group 1)

Many students seemed to believe that the school should offer other languages in addition to Mandarin Chinese. They listed "Vietnamese," "French," and "Spanish" as other languages that the school could offer. This indicated that these students were interested in learning other foreign languages.

5   Discussion

This study aimed to find out the learning environment factors that affected the L2 motivation of urban, middle-grade non-heritage language learners of Chinese. Analyses of the qualitative data that were collected from six focus interview groups over two school years show that the students'

language learning experience affected their motivation to learn the language, which supports Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) framework on the L2 learning experience.

Our findings on students' perception of their current learning experience seemed to indicate that students enjoyed learning activities in which they can participate actively and practice what they have learned. Students felt they were able to learn more when these learning activities were supported by visuals, additional materials, and guidance from the teacher. Many students expressed that they enjoyed and learned more during competitive activities. Students realized the importance of doing homework. In terms of content, students expressed wanting to learn things that they can use in everyday context and learn about the Chinese culture and arts. They also enjoyed participating in extra-curricular activities as these activities provided additional opportunities to learn Chinese words and Chinese culture. These findings provide empirical support for the third component of our theoretical framework, where Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) suggested that teachers can maintain and protect motivation by using motivational strategies to make learning stimulating and enjoyable and presenting tasks in engaging ways.

Our findings on students' sense of competence seemed to indicate that students reported being more motivated to learn when they feel a stronger sense of competence indicated by their perception of how much they have learned and by their grades. They were "really proud" to be able to use the language to communicate with people. This sense of success seems to inspire a curiosity about other foreign languages and, for some, a desire to continue learning Chinese in high school. These findings supported the second component of our theoretical framework where Dörnyei and Ushioda (2011) proposed that teachers can generate students' motivation by enhancing the learners' language-related values and attitudes and increasing the learners' expectancy of success.

Our findings on students' perceived advantages of knowing Chinese suggested that students identified a number of uses for Chinese. This included being able to understand and communicate with more people, using Chinese in their travels for a richer experience, and using Chinese to broaden their educational and career options. These findings aligned with the second component of Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) theoretical framework where they proposed that teachers can generate students' motivation by enhancing the learners' language-related values and attitudes and making the teaching materials relevant for the learners.

Our findings on students' perception of learning the Chinese Language showed that some students have found learning Chinese to be challenging in several ways, including learning how to write the Chinese characters, pronouncing the words accurately, and memorizing the meaning of words. These findings corroborated the fourth component of Dörnyei and Ushioda's (2011) theoretical framework in which they proposed that teachers can and should promote attributions to effort rather than ability, particularly as the Chinese language is a difficult language for non-heritage language learners to master.

5.1   Implications for Chinese language teachers

Our data analyses show that motivation is being shaped by students' perceptions of, and experiences in, their actual learning context and practices rather than a pre-existing disposition. Based on what we have learned from the student group interviews, we make the following suggestions for teachers to nurture and enhance the motivation of the non-heritage middle school students in learning the Chinese language.

First, provide multiple opportunities for students to participate actively in learning and practicing their newly-learned Chinese language in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Game-like activities, especially competitive ones seem to engage the students more as they find them to be fun and make learning Chinese easier.

Second, make the learning content meaningful to the learners (Dörnyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). When students can apply what they learn in the classroom to their real life experiences, they become more motivated for further learning. Fieldtrips and extra-curricular activities will create opportunities for students to hear and use the language in more natural situations. Extra-curricular activities also enable students to learn about the culture and the people who speak the

language. This may also help nurture an integrative orientation or an intrinsic motivation which is essential for consistent, long-lasting effort for learning (Dörnyei, 1994).

Third, help cultivate a sense of success in the learners (Dörnyei, 1994; Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Teachers can achieve this by providing thoughtfully planned support/scaffolds within students' zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) when asking students to accomplish either learning tasks in school or homework assignments. Learners feel proud of themselves when they can successfully complete the assigned work, and this sense of accomplishment motivates learners to exert more and continued effort on the learning task.

Finally, allow students' choice and voice (Dörnyei, 1994). When possible, allow students to choose the language they want to learn. To give students more of a sense of control, teachers could also invite students to help shape the curriculum and provide input on what they hope to learn. Learners are willing to put more and long-lasting effort on the tasks when they choose to do them.

6   Conclusion

For the growing number of Chinese language learners around the world, the immediate classroom language learning environment has a major impact on their motivation to acquire and persist in mastering the language. We have learned from our qualitative study that Chinese instructors can maintain, protect, and generate students' L2 motivation. They can do this by creating learning environments that encourage active student participation in class, deliver learning content to which students can relate, use guided practice in meaningful and engaging contexts, and provide multiple opportunities for students to show that "they CAN" succeed. By creating a conducive learning environment that takes these above important features into consideration, educators will help provide the learning experiences that engage the students in active learning and enable them to reach their ideal L2 self.

By analyzing the voices of students collected through focus group interviews over two school years, this study provides a situated, in-depth understanding of how groups of non-heritage, middle graders experience their L2 learning environment. Findings from this study help to bridge some of the methodological gaps in the literature where the limitations of using only self-reported survey data have been well documented (Fulmer & Frijters, 2009; McGroarty, 1998), particularly for children in middle grades or younger (Fulmer & Frijters, 2009).

However, this study examined the learning environment of one type of L2 program where L2 is offered a couple of days a week, and analyzed the voices of only 29 middle grade students. More studies could be done to examine the learning environment factors that motivate K-12 non-heritage language learners to learn Chinese across the wide variety of L2 learning programs currently in use, including traditional, immersion, online, and others. A collection of perceptions from more participants from a wide variety of schools and L2 learning programs will help develop a multi-layered understanding of how learning environment factors motivate L2 learners. It will provide Chinese language teachers and other L2 educators a bank of knowledge that they can draw from to inform their teaching practices and development as professionals.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Student Focus Group Interview Questions Non-Heritage Students

Date: __/__/__
Start Time: _: _ _   End Time: _: _ _
Select one: Grade: 6 / 8
#students: _ _   #boys: _ _   #girls:_ _
Facilitator: _____

Introduction: Thank you for agreeing to be part of this study. I will be asking questions about why you are learning Chinese, how well you think you are doing in Chinese, and what can be done to make Chinese more interesting for you. I will also ask questions about how you feel being Asian American. Your response will be treated with confidentiality. I don't want to miss anything you say so I will be using a tape recorder and taking notes. If there is anything you want off the record or if you have any questions, please let me know. Do you have any questions?

Background Questions:
1. Were you born in the U.S.?
2. If you were not, how old were you when you came to the U.S.?
3. What language other than English do you speak?
4. How well do you speak this other language?

Core Questions
5. Do you like learning Chinese? What do you like the most? The least?
6. How well are you are doing in Chinese?
    a) If doing well -- Why do you think you are doing well? (prompt: for an example, for the reasons)
    b) If not doing well – Why do you think you are not doing well? (prompt: for an example, for the reasons)
7. Do you want to do well in Chinese? Why? Why not?
8. What do you have to do in order to do well in Chinese?
9. How do you like your Chinese class this year?
    a) If like, (What do you mean? Give me an example.)
    b) If not like, (What do you mean, give an example).
10. How can the <u>Chinese teacher</u> make learning Chinese more interesting for you? (prompt: to make learning Chinese easier, to make the lesson fun and interesting)
11. How can the <u>school</u> make learning Chinese more interesting for you? (prompt: more clubs, after-school programs, books-DVDs-CDs in Chinese/about Chinese culture; whole school activities?)

Appendix B

Themes & Coding Categories

1. Current Learning Experiences
   a) Positive current experience
   b) Positive language learning activities
   c) Positive participation
   d) Negative current experience
   e) Negative language learning activities
   f) Negative participation
   g) Multiple opportunities to speak and converse in class
   h) Multiple opportunities to learn Chinese characters
   i) Language activities/games
   j) Positive practical content
   k) Negative practical content
   l) Homework
   m) Cultural events/activities (in or after school)

2. Sense of Competence
   a) Know more Chinese words than before
   b) Intrinsic success
   c) See themselves not doing well/grade
   d) See themselves doing positively

3. Advantages of Knowing Chinese
   a) Positive future experience
   b) Positive outside practice/use of Chinese
   c) Negative future experience
   d) Negative outside practice/use of Chinese

4. Challenges of Learning Chinese
   a) Difficult to learn
   b) Language difficulty

5. Availability of Language Choice
   a) Lack of choice

Appendix C

Themes & Number of Mentions

THEMES	# of mentions
Current learning experience	440 (67%)
Sense of competence	46 (7%)
Advantages of knowing Chinese	62 (9.5%)
Challenges of learning Chinese	77 (11.7%)
Availability of language choice	31 (4.7%)
Total:	656 (99.9/100)