

Original Paper

Survey on the Acquisition of Chinese Vocabulary by International Students—A Case Study of Southwest Petroleum University

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Abstract

Vocabulary is the basic unit that constitutes a language, and is an important carrier for conveying information and constructing meaning. The study of Chinese vocabulary acquisition in China is mostly on the analysis of bias. The study adopts questionnaire survey method which take foreign students from Southwest Petroleum University as an example to study the vocabulary acquisition of the Chinese everyday language. The phenomenon of investigation was analyzed from Atkinson's social cognitive perspective. The results of the study indicate that vocabulary of everyday terms has not been fully learned by international students even they got certificates. And everyday language vocabulary should receive attention from teachers to international students. In teaching process, it's vital to give full play to the alignment between the social environment, social activities and learners, which could help international students improve their language competence.

Keywords

social cognition, everyday language, vocabulary acquisition, alignment

1. Introduction

For language learners, vocabulary is an essential aspect of language acquisition. As the basic units of language, vocabulary conveys information and constructs meaning. Gass (2001) notes that while

grammatical errors often lead to comprehension issues with sentence structures. Errors in vocabulary can have varying impacts, ranging from mild effects on communicative activities to severe disruptions. Therefore, words, as significant autonomous units for semantic expression, integral components of syntactic structures, and conveyors of communicative intentions, play a crucial role in successfully mastering a foreign language.

Hence, in the early stages of language learning, it is important to focus on vocabulary accumulation, including both content words and function words, as well as common and fundamental vocabulary. Yang Huiyuan (2007), a scholar in Chinese education, mentions the two transformations in language learning. The first transformation involves converting linguistic elements into skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while the second transformation involves utilizing these skills for communicative purposes. Within communicative activities, commonly used words, or daily expressions, play a significant role. Yang Jichun (2011) proposes in his study on teaching basic category vocabulary that common words are frequently used in people's daily lives and have a high frequency of occurrence. In other words, daily expressions have the characteristics of high input and high output. Additionally, the widespread and frequent use of daily expressions makes them easier to capture and observe. Therefore, this article aims to sample and analyze the acquisition of Chinese daily expressions vocabulary, providing reference materials for foreign students learning Chinese daily expressions vocabulary and also serving as a reference for teaching Chinese to international students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Vocabulary Acquisition Research

Widdowson (1978), starting from the perspective of communicative functions, found that native speakers can better understand discourse that is not grammatically accurate but uses words accurately, highlighting the centrality of vocabulary in conveying meaning. Hu Mingyang (1997) emphasized the freedom of vocabulary as the essential component of language, stating that "language ultimately consists of the combination of words, with pronunciation representing the concrete realization of words and grammar summarizing their specific usage; without words, there would be no language." Dai Manchun (1998), discussing the interface issue of interlanguage systems, highlighted the importance of vocabulary acquisition. Vocabulary learning in Chinese poses challenges, and researchers have also explored external factors. Existing research, such as that conducted by Liu Yanmei (2002), found that the higher the word repetition rate, the better students mastered the vocabulary. Adopting teaching methods that increase the repetition rate of new words can facilitate vocabulary learning. Zhou Zhengzhong (2018) proposed in his research on the influence of input and output frequency on the acquisition of second language productive knowledge that reinforcing input frequency is effective for acquiring language chunks, while reinforcing output frequency allows for a deeper processing of language forms and facilitates the acquisition of language structures. Throughout the entire process of vocabulary acquisition, the ultimate goal is the output of vocabulary (Wang Xiaoli, 2015). Daily

expressions vocabulary, characterized by high input and output, are essential elements for maintaining social interpersonal relationships. Sapir, in his theory of environmental determinism, highlighted the influence of the environment on language learning. He used the example of Eskimo vocabulary for “snow” to emphasize the impact of the environment on language. Atkinson (2002) proposed the social-cognitive theory of second language acquisition, advocating for a holistic social-cognitive approach and emphasizing the joint influence of social and cognitive factors on the process of second language acquisition (cited in Yang Mei, 2014, p. 41). Unlike the cognitive approach, which views language as a psychological phenomenon, the social approach considers language as a social phenomenon. They argue that the essence of language learning is a social-mediated process, a product of constant adjustments between mental and social activities. The social-cognitive perspective emphasizes the close relationship between the learning environment and learners (Dong Chenfeng, 2018). From a social-cognitive viewpoint, humans rely on dialogue and information exchange to understand and adapt to each other, and conversational communication is where language truly comes alive. Therefore, the role of daily expressions vocabulary in communication is crucial. This study will investigate the acquisition of daily expressions vocabulary in the early stages of communicative interactions, observing whether learners benefit from the characteristics of high input and output of vocabulary and how psychological and social factors contribute to the acquisition of daily expressions vocabulary.

This article aims to analyze the acquisition of daily expressions vocabulary in Chinese by international students from a social-cognitive perspective. It seeks to identify the reasons why beginner Chinese language learners still struggle to engage in normal daily conversations with native speakers in practical contexts.

2.2 Vocabulary Knowledge Definition

Defining the vocabulary knowledge of foreign students in terms of daily expressions has always been a topic of debate. From Cronbach's (1942) definition of vocabulary testing to Richards' (1976) description of vocabulary ability based on descriptive linguistic theory, and Nation's (1990) framework of receptive and productive vocabulary knowledge, these studies have revealed that vocabulary knowledge frameworks progress from simplicity to complexity. However, their frameworks or descriptions are challenging for beginner second language learners and even difficult to achieve (Chen Wanhui, 2008, p. 26). Considering the target learners in this study are beginners, this article adopts the vocabulary knowledge development continuum framework proposed by Paribakht and Wesche, which categorizes vocabulary knowledge into five stages (Kuang Fangtao, 2010):

- 1) Complete unfamiliarity with the word.
- 2) Recognition of the word but uncertain about its meaning.
- 3) Recognition of the word and belief that learners can produce synonyms or equivalents in another language.
- 4) Understanding the meaning of the word and ability to produce synonyms or equivalents in another

language.

5) Ability to use the word in a sentence.

Based on our investigation of Chinese beginner learners, we made some modifications to the determination of vocabulary acquisition. Acquisition is considered successful when learners understand the meaning of a word and can use it correctly in context.

3. Research Design

This study selected international students from Southwest Petroleum University as the survey participants and used a questionnaire survey method to investigate their acquisition of daily Chinese vocabulary. The research design is as follows:

3.1 Survey Participants

The survey participants of this study are international students from Southwest Petroleum University. A total of 9 individuals participated. All participating students are male, with 5 from Bangladesh, 1 from Togo, 1 from Kenya, and 2 from Ethiopia. However, one participant did not complete the questionnaire, so the actual number of respondents was 8.

Table 2. Information on Surveyed International Students from Southwest Petroleum University

Nationalities	Bangladesh	Togo	Kenya	Ethiopia
Number of people	5	1	1	2
Study duration	Less than one year	One to two years	Three years or more	
Number of people	8	0	1	
Educational background	Students with HSK Certificates	Language learning students		
Number of people	6	3		

3.2 Questionnaire Survey

This survey primarily aims to assess the proficiency of international students in everyday Chinese vocabulary. Based on the frequency of commonly used language in daily life, the content of this survey questionnaire is selected from the book “Everyday Spoken Chinese” written by Zhang Pengpeng (2008). The surveyed vocabulary of everyday language is categorized into nine groups based on their usage. The purpose of this questionnaire survey is to understand the basic acquisition of everyday Chinese vocabulary by international students after coming to China, as well as their usual learning methods. The objective is to explore the acquisition situation of high-input and high-output everyday

Chinese vocabulary among international students. Additionally, the survey seeks to examine the correlation between the social coordination ability of international students in a new environment and their proficiency in everyday Chinese vocabulary. Moreover, international students will be asked to provide suggestions regarding the acquisition of everyday Chinese vocabulary, aiming to assist them in better integrating into campus life in China. As common words are high-frequency vocabulary, no specific criteria have been defined, and the vocabulary selection is randomly chosen from everyday spoken language.

Table 1. Vocabulary List

Vocabulary Category	Common Vocabulary
Greetings	您好, 请问, 打扰, 幸会
Introductions	我的名字, 你是, 您是?, 您的名字
Expressions of Thanks	谢谢, 感谢, 多亏了, 麻烦了
Farewells	再见, 下次见, 稍后见, 先走了
Praise	很棒, 太棒了, 恭喜, 厉害
Negations	不是, 没有, 不想, 不要
Emotions	生气, 不开心, 开心, 高兴
Inquiries	可以么, 几点, 多少钱, 多少个
Time	上午, 早上, 下午, 晚上, 中午

3.3 Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) How do international students perform in acquiring high-input and high-output Chinese daily vocabulary in questionnaire surveys?
- 2) Is there a difference between the acquisition of actual Chinese daily vocabulary and ideal Chinese daily vocabulary?
- 3) What is the correlation between international students' social coordination abilities in a new environment and their level of Chinese daily vocabulary acquisition?
- 4) Is the acquisition of basic Chinese daily vocabulary challenging for international students, and if so, what are the contributing factors?

4. Results and Discussion

The author performed statistical analysis on the data from the questionnaire survey and obtained the following Table 3.

Table 3. Acquisition of Chinese Daily Vocabulary among International Students at Southwest Petroleum University

Vocabulary Category	Common Vocabulary	Ideal Proportion	Word Acquisition Probability	Actual Difference
Greetings	您好(8),打扰(5), 请问(5),幸会(4)	10.50%	7.23%	3.27%
Introductions	我的名字(8), 你的名字(8), 您是? (6), 你是(6)	10.50%	9.86%	0.64%
Expressions of Thanks	谢谢(8), 感谢(4), 多谢(4), 麻烦了(3)	10.50%	6.25%	5.05%
Farewells	再见(5), 下次见(5),稍后见(2), 先走了(4)	10.50%	5.26%	5.05%
Praise	很棒(7),恭喜(7),太好了(5),厉害(4)	10.50%	5.28%	4.33%
Negations	不是(6),没有(6),不想(4),不要(5)	10.50%	7%	3.61%
Emotions	生气(4),不开心(7),开心(5),高兴(4)	10.50%	6.57%	1.63%
Inquiries	可以么(6),几点(6),多少钱(6),多少个(5)	10.50%	7.56%	2.94%
Time	上午(1),早上(4),下午(5),晚上(3),中午(3)	13.10%	5.26%	7.84%

Note. The numbers in parentheses represent the number of participants who acquired the respective word.

The Table is divided into four main sections. The first section consists of the tested vocabulary words. The second section represents the ideal probability of complete acquisition for this category of words, assuming that each person fully acquires them. The cardinality of individual words is 8. Dividing it by the total cardinality of ideal acquisition for all words (360), the ideal probability is obtained. The actual probability is calculated by dividing the actual acquisition cardinality of each word by the total cardinality of ideal acquisition for all words.

Table 4. Learning Methods of Participants for Chinese Daily Vocabulary

Learning Methods	Classroom Learning	Chatting	Reading and writing	Mother tongue translation	Participating in Activities
Frequency	77.7%	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%	11.1%

4.1 Data Analysis

From Table 2, it can be observed that the 8 students are beginner learners who have been studying Chinese in China for almost a year. This provides an opportunity to explore the acquisition of Chinese

daily vocabulary and investigate the language proficiency of international students. In Table 3, the vocabulary known by all participants includes common daily phrases such as “您好” (Hello), “我的名字” (My name), “你的名字” (Your name), and “谢谢” (Thank you), which belong to the categories of greetings, introductions, and expressions of gratitude. According to the findings of Liu Yanmei (2002), the higher the word recurrence rate, the better the students’ mastery of the vocabulary. This suggests that these words are frequently used by Chinese beginner learners to establish basic social relationships. Based on Atkinson’s (2010a) proposition that language is a social tool, it can be understood that communication is the purpose of language learning from a social cognitive perspective, and this purpose is achieved through language. For beginner learners, the starting point of their social interaction is precisely the vocabulary with a higher recurrence rate, gradually constructing their understanding of the new environment. The meaning representation of daily vocabulary is achieved through the combined influence of social activities and learners’ cognition, with the social environment serving as the benchmark for normalization. Therefore, the acquisition of Chinese daily vocabulary depends on the learners’ level of social and self-awareness, their coordination, and the interplay between them.

Based on the above analysis, it appears that international students face challenges in acquiring Chinese daily vocabulary. Ordinary input only remains at the semantic level, and mere comprehensible input does not draw learners’ attention to the underlying language forms (Swain, 1985). At the initial stage of learners’ cognitive development of the vocabulary depth continuum, they may not have acquired certain vocabulary yet. On the other hand, it may be attributed to the phenomenon of vocabulary development and attrition. After coming to China, international students have a limited acquisition of daily vocabulary. However, the balance between the accumulation of vocabulary during the gradual development process and social activities is uneven. From Table 4, it can be seen that only 11.1% of learners choose to learn Chinese through participating in activities and mother tongue translation. However, only high-intensity output, rather than high-intensity input, can contribute to a deeper processing of language forms. Therefore, when engaging in language communication, international students need to consciously participate in social activities and diversify their expressions. Additionally, teachers should provide more opportunities for learners to practice speaking and writing in daily vocabulary and provide manual intervention when necessary.

4.2 Analysis of Differences

Comparison of Actual Acquisition and Ideal Acquisition

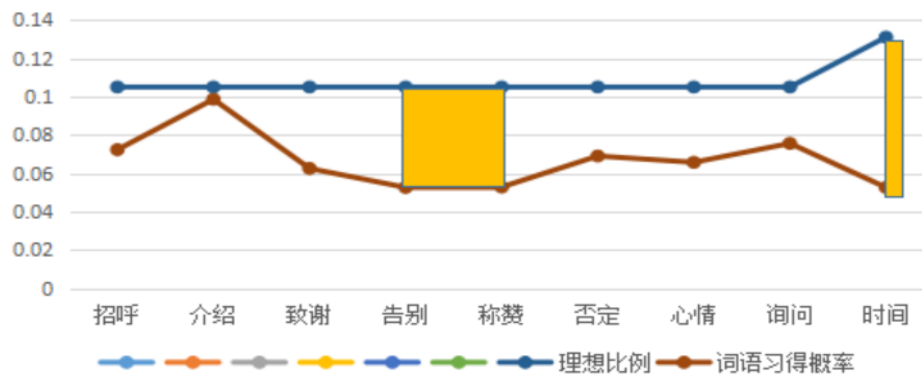


Figure 3. Comparison of Actual Acquisition and Ideal Acquisition

Note. The three categories of daily vocabulary with significant differences are highlighted in yellow in the figure.

“Difference” refers to the numerical gap between the ideal acquisition probability and the actual performance probability of beginner learners. As shown in the figure, the three categories with the largest differences are daily vocabulary related to “farewells,” “praise,” and “time.” The researcher suggests that the low values in “praise” and “farewells” categories may be attributed to the limited social interaction of beginner learners. Additionally, the significant difference in the “time” vocabulary indicates that international students use such words less frequently in their daily communication. It is speculated that in a coordinated context, the acquisition of new lexical items related to time is rapid (Mestres-Misse, 2007). Therefore, the difficulties faced by international students in acquiring these words may be due to the limited synergistic effect of the environment. The sociocognitive theory of second language acquisition emphasizes that language and language learning are social phenomena while acknowledging the psychological and cognitive aspects of language (Atkinson, 2007; 2010a; 2010b).

Furthermore, in my interactions with them, I have observed that beginner learners tend to form communication circles or small groups with friends from the same place of origin, and they use their native language during these interactions. Atkinson emphasizes the interdependence and interaction between the environment and learners from the very beginning of the learning process, forming an integral part of their learning cognition. Language is acquired through interaction, and in the process of social interaction, learners can receive cultural and linguistic forms and internalize them as elements of their language framework. The above observations indicate that beginner learners do not actively use language as a tool to participate in social activities in the new environment. They are unable to establish primary social relationships with native speakers or obtain language and cultural assistance from social activities to help them construct a new cognitive system. Their level of synergy in the new environment is very low, and they are unable to experience an ecological environment and engage in multiple identities. With the assistance of numerous sociocognitive tools, they can participate in

cooperative interactions (Liu Ji, 2009, p. 89). This will impact the continuous developmental process of their second language acquisition, which may play a decisive role. However, the cognitive understanding of other vocabulary indicates that even in the absence or limited participation in social activities, the role of high input can compensate for some deficiencies.

Additionally, even in a foreign language environment with high input of daily vocabulary, beginner learners may not fully acquire the vocabulary. This could be influenced by factors such as learner personality and the constraints of national culture. Another aspect could be the interference of dialectal environments. Apart from classroom instruction in standard Mandarin, learners are exposed to and receive more language information in the form of Sichuan dialect in their daily activities. For example, in standard Mandarin, “nǐ hǎo” is pronounced with the third tone for “hǎo,” but in Chengdu dialect, it is pronounced with the fourth tone. These “differences” from the textbook cause difficulties in their cognitive understanding.

5. Conclusion

Daily vocabulary plays a significant role in interpersonal communication, providing learners with relatively high input opportunities in listening and speaking compared to course materials, literary readings, or specialized content such as journals. These opportunities arise from classroom environments and social contexts. However, at the same time, there may be shortcomings in the output aspects of writing or reading, which largely rely on the guidance of teachers and learners' self-control. Based on the collected data and information, it is believed that “attention” is an important pathway for learners to convert language input into internal knowledge in the process of second language acquisition (Schmidt, 1990). “Attention” can facilitate second language acquisition (Schmidt, 2001). Even if high-input daily vocabulary is not given sufficient attention and does not have enough space for output, the level of acquisition remains unsatisfactory. Only when attention is paid to the acquisition of daily vocabulary can learners fully utilize their language abilities when entering the next stage of the developmental continuum.

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