
Title	Reasons for poor performance in Chinese: Eight case studies
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Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 5(2)68-74
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

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REASONS FOR POOR PERFORMANCE IN CHINESE: EIGHT CASE STUDIES

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Introduction

Sometime ago, Dr. Tay Eng Soon stated that "schools, pupils and parents must make the effort to study the second language. Although a very small number find this heavy going, in fact for the majority of our students, the second language presents little problem."¹ Interestingly enough, the "very small number" mentioned included a group of very high ability students who either failed or performed very badly in the 'O' Level Chinese as a Second Language (CL2) examination for that year. We wanted to find out why, so we located eight of the students (the majority of whom had a minimum of five distinctions in the 1982 GCE 'O' Level examinations), and interviewed them. At the time of the interview, they were all in either junior colleges or the polytechnics. We were particularly interested in the *psychological* factors that accounted for their poor performance in CL2, how these factors could be explained, and what lessons could be learnt from this experience.

Attitudes and Motivation

We found that the two most important factors that accounted for the high-ability students' poor performance in CL2 were their own attitudes and motivation towards the learning of the language. The greater the amount of attitudinal and motivational deficits, the poorer was the student's performance in the language. What were some of these deficits?

In terms of *attitudes*, all the students gave some form of intellectual assent to the importance of Mandarin in Chinese culture but they felt that learning it was not *that* essential as a means of preserving the culture. There were many other ways of making one feel very much a Chinese (e.g. participating in Chinese

cultural activities and festivals, subscribing to certain Chinese beliefs, speaking in one's own dialect). Of course, knowing Mandarin helped in fostering a better appreciation of the culture but it was not a necessary condition that must be fulfilled to claim identification with that culture. Therefore the students saw their having to learn Mandarin as having little meaning for them as a way of preserving the Chinese culture.

A second attitude the students had was that Chinese was relevant only as a school subject whereas in daily life they need not use it often. In school, English was their main linguistic environment. Outside of school their difficulties in Chinese (mainly in reading and writing it) posed no disadvantages to them, since they could get by with Mandarin. So, what was the point of having to master it especially since English was the major language of commerce and study at all levels of education?

Thirdly, in terms of their school experience, they had a dislike for the language as early as primary four. They described the learning of Chinese as unpleasant, personally dissatisfying because of the difficulty of the language itself and other factors which we will look at later. Their negative attitudes affected subsequent learning and by the time they entered secondary school, these attitudes about learning Chinese were progressively hardened into attitudes of self-defeat and hopelessness. In fact, they felt that their secondary school experience in second language learning was even more unpleasant than before. Their feelings of dislike for the language were more intense.

One contributory factor to this was the language policy of making CL2 an entrance requirement for junior college and the National University of Singapore. This heightened further the negative feelings associated with the learning of Chinese. The students began to see the language as a barrier to their future education.

Furthermore, some students believed very strongly that they just did not have the aptitude to learn Chinese. Such a belief was, unfortunately, enough to cripple the students' wanting to put any effort into overcoming their language difficulties. There was the constant lament of "I just can't do it, so why bother?" Given all these factors, it was no wonder that their performance in the 'O' Level CL2 examination was poor.

What about their *motivation* to learn the language? We found that the students' cumulative negative attitudes towards Chinese affected their motivation and subsequent efforts to learn it.

Firstly, they had no motivation to study Chinese other than having to meet the language requirement for admission to junior college and university. Such an attitude, in terms of orientation to the learning of a language, could not sustain the long-term motivation needed for the very demanding task of second language learning.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier on, the perceived difficulty of the language itself resulted in the lack of motivation to learn it. The students felt that Chinese was difficult to learn for various reasons: (a) the sound of a word has no relation to its written form, thus making the retention of the characters difficult in the students' minds; and (b) it was difficult to recall the strokes that form a character – writing required a lot of tedious memory work. The result was that, even as early as primary school, they could not understand the lessons or keep up with the rest of the class.

For many of them, the first “red mark” they ever got was in CL2. Bearing in mind that they were high-ability students who gained good marks in all other school subjects with just a little effort, the learning of Chinese, in contrast, required greater time and effort just to “cope with it”. In fact as they progressed from primary to secondary school, their marks kept falling as the CL2 syllabus became more difficult. The overwhelming effect on the students' motivation and effort was to do what they could, without any extra effort, and hope for the best. For many of them, they already expected the worst as far as their 'O' Level CL2 results were concerned, and this ultimately proved to be true.

Thirdly, some students confessed that they really did not put in enough effort to learn Chinese and one even admitted that he was lazy! However, the more dominant factor that dampened motivation to learn Chinese was their lack of interest in the language and negative learning experiences associated with it.

Other Factors

Besides attitudes and motivation, the lack of language exposure at home contributed to the students' poor performance in CL2. In the majority of their homes, English was the language

used. But this is not to say that the home environment was totally devoid of exposure to Mandarin. For example, there were always the Chinese programmes and news broadcasts on television. The students reported that they did make some attempt to watch these but, unfortunately, they were unsustained efforts amounting to insignificant exposure to the language. As for reading other Chinese materials, this did not even feature since the majority of the students did not bother to read beyond their Chinese textbooks.

We were also interested to see if parental attitudes had significant effects on the students' second language learning, especially in getting them to spend more time on CL2. When questioned, the majority of the students stated that their parents felt it was a good thing for them to learn Chinese as a process of acculturation, but to make it a prerequisite for further studies was a different matter altogether. The parents felt it was too stringent to make L2 an admission requirement. One student summed it up nicely when he described his parents' attitudes towards the second language requirement mentioned as "an obstacle that I can do without".

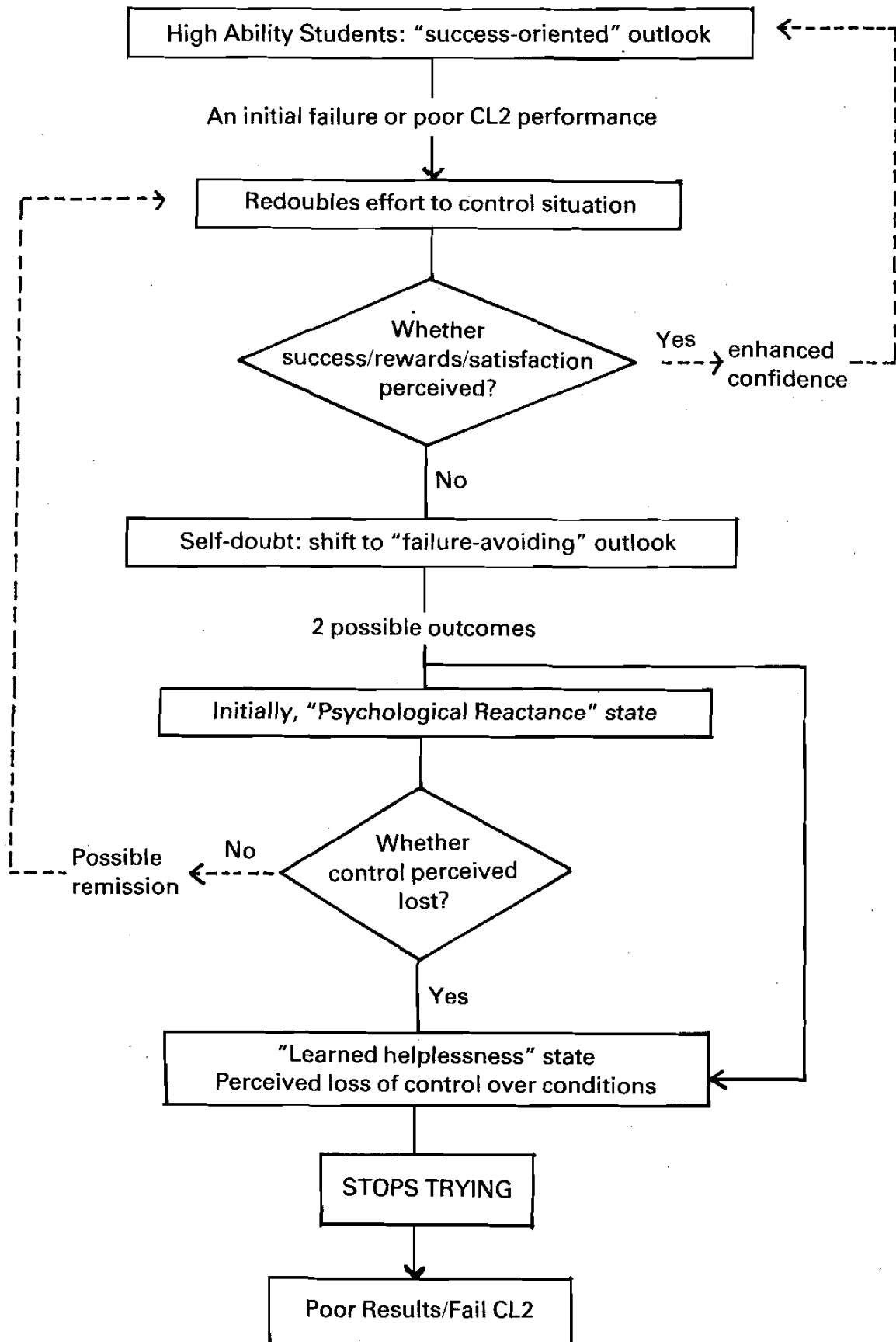
None of the students reported their parents as putting the pressure on them to excel in CL2. They merely desired them to meet the language requirement but did not persistently nag at the students to do so. Therefore, in general, we found that parental attitudes and concerns had little effect on the students' effort to learn Chinese. The students all agreed that to a great extent they were solely responsible for their poor performance in CL2.

A Psychological Explanation of Poor Performance

How do we explain all this? That is, what psychological processes were involved leading to these high-ability students' poor CL2 performance?

Figure 1 is a simple model to explain "failure". It begins with high-ability students being generally found to be "success-oriented". Students like these see success and failure in academic tasks as being dependent on the quality of their effort (Covington and Beery 1976). To them, ability is not the issue, so they would attribute failure to a lack of proper effort (Weiner and Kukla 1970). Failure to them is a signal to try harder and it can motivate the already successful student.

Fig. 1. A Model to Explain Learned Helplessness and CL2 Failure



So when at first the high-ability student finds that he fails or performs badly in Chinese, he will redouble his efforts. At this stage, he sees the situation as “controllable” and if his efforts are rewarded, then there will be an upward spiralling of achievement and enhanced confidence. But if he does not perceive any accompanying satisfaction and rewards in proportion to his efforts in tackling CL2, but continues to experience low grades, frustration or failure, he doubts himself and from being “success-oriented” he now becomes “failure-avoiding” in his outlook.

In this state, failure is seen as threatening his self-respect (especially since he is a capable student), so the student has little choice but to minimize pain by trying to avoid failure. *Moreover, as he does not seem to be on top of his situation, he increasingly moves towards perceiving that, perhaps, his actions do not influence a desired outcome.*

Initially, he may still expect that he can do better in CL2, and all is not lost. If so, he should increase his motivation to exert control as a process of psychological reactance, and improved performance should occur. But if despite this and no significant gains are commensurate with his efforts, the student begins to learn he is helpless (Wortman and Brehm 1975). That is, he becomes convinced that he has no control over the desired outcome. When he is in this state, he stops trying since his actions do not influence anything. The student is now said to be in a state of “learned helplessness”. It does not matter how hard he tries because in his experience, the outcome is nearly always the same – fail CL2 or perform badly in it. For some, they may reach the state of “learned helplessness” faster than others. And, of course, the eventual reality confirms this state when the student actually fails his ‘O’ Level CL2 paper.

Remedial Implications

Having understood the psychological processes of “learned helplessness” accounting for failure or poor performance in CL2, it seems clear that changing the student’s belief system is the key to helping students with such learning problems. His belief that he has no control over his situation must be eradicated. To do this, there must be tangible success – the student must actually see the gains in order to sustain the new belief (that he can actually regain control over the learning situation). This can be brought about through the following means:

1 Breaking learning material down into smaller units

By doing so, the task is no longer seen as overwhelming. Each step is perceived as a manageable task with success in sight. The student is challenged to try, especially crucial at the point of first encountering difficulties, when the situation is not yet serious.

2 Increasing the supply of rewards

Rewards must be pegged to what the student is *capable* of achieving, and is challenged to achieve rather than only for successful learning. If this is done, then rewards should be within the reach of many more students.

One of the most effective ways of increasing rewards by pegging them to endeavours is through individual goal-setting. Get each student to set the goal that he would like to reach in a specified time span. Supervise him in this. Once a particular goal is reached, encourage the student, spurred by his own success, to go on and set the next and higher goal. Often the student's own success is his reward. This strategy is straightforward enough to implement, although it will require teachers to set aside some time to meet and discuss with the students their needs and goals.

To conclude, we are convinced that if the student's belief system can be changed and rewards made more available, then we can begin to see the state of "learned helplessness" being replaced by "hopefulness"!

Footnote

- 1 From the talk entitled "Some Issues on Education" given at the National University of Singapore on 26 November 1982, subsequently published in *Issues Facing Singapore in the Eighties*, Ministry of Culture, Singapore, n.d.

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