

Creating Motivational Language Learning Experiences during the “Critical Period”

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Abstract

Few studies have touched upon language learning motivation of advanced-level learners of Chinese, even fewer have proposed a pedagogical framework to understand and create motivational pathways. This paper aims to fill the gap by addressing a critical period of foreign language training where students are transforming from learning the foreign language to learning domain knowledge in the foreign language. Having drawn upon Confucian concepts and contextualized curricular examples, this paper proposes a framework suggesting that learners at this stage experience a less discussed psychological complexity due to their high level of language proficiency and lack of multilingual domain capacities. They are also gradually transforming into autonomous language users who expand their social milieu through demonstrating domain expertise. As such, the pedagogical implications place an emphasis on helping advanced-level Chinese learners to establish domain-specific vision and linguistic capability so that they can perform in multicultural contexts. In particular, motivational pathways during this stage should be constructed to encourage learners to constantly reflect on their recent past self and establish visions of the future one.

Keywords: Motivation, Learning Chinese as a foreign language, Domain, *Analects*

1. Introduction: Defining “Critical Period”

Studies of first language acquisition have adequately discussed the critical period for human beings to develop first language skills at a young age. In contrast to that, the “critical period” proposed in this paper refers to a specific stage of mastering a foreign language, when students make the psychological and behavioral shift from learning the foreign language to learning *in* the foreign language. In the field of second language (L2) acquisition, students’ learning motivation has been a favored research topic. More researchers have come to an agreement that discussing L2 learner motivation without a subject-included context is not very helpful to understand learner’s behaviors and learning outcomes (Ushioda, 2009). However, few studies have touched upon the language learning motivation of Chinese learners at advanced and superior levels (Jia, 2019). To understand how motivation is constructed during the critical learning period for advanced-level learners of Chinese, this paper focuses on three aspects: first, reviewing literature and identifying the critical differences between learning Chinese as a foreign language and learning domain knowledge in Chinese; secondly, adopting two concepts from the *Analects*(note 1), “*xi* 習 (practice)”and “*xing* 行 (doing things with rules),” to conceptualize motivation construction during this transitional learning process; last but not least, a discussion of pedagogy is initiated to create motivational learning experiences in a domain-oriented Chinese language program.

Considering that Midwest US-China Flagship Program (MF Program) is one of the few Chinese programs in the United States that trains American students to work in Chinese language and culture, the pre- and first-year curriculum of the program was selected to contextualize the discussion of the “critical period.” Students at this stage are experiencing a shift in the learning process, specifically, they are adapting to many changing factors in the learning process such as self-managed learning materials, extended interaction with educated native speakers of Chinese, and manifold methods of evaluation and feedback. Learners are also transferring from being the receiving end of the language learning process to becoming the contributors. Most importantly, they are experiencing the transition from “learning Chinese” to “learning about their domains in Chinese.”

2. Literature Review: Learning Chinese VS. Learning in Chinese

Some transitional features of the “critical period” are introduced in this session, namely, how curriculum shifts, self-regulated learning mode develops, complex social interaction constructs, and extended learning cycle shapes.

2.1 Curriculum Shift

The MF Program trains advanced to superior-level Chinese language learners to function in Chinese working environments as young professionals with certain domain knowledge. The two-year program generally divides the training into two periods of time: students take language and content courses on the U.S. campus during the first year and spend their second year of study at a Chinese university and an internship in an organization in China. Students

are expected to graduate with some working experiences in China, and a domain-related research thesis written in Chinese. These students are advanced-level Chinese language learners who expect to bring their Chinese proficiency to an even higher level and gain the ability to demonstrate expertise in their chosen domains. Although the definition and description of advanced-level language proficiency has been well discussed, relatively little has been explored about advanced-level Chinese learners' nonlinguistic variables including their overall domain expertise (McAloon, 2015; Zeng, 2018). Zeng in her recent work states the importance of helping advanced-level language learners to develop their domain specific knowledge and language use in multicultural contexts (Zeng, 2018, p. 675).

One domain-based research and methodology development course students take in the MF Program well represents the demanded curricular shift, namely an emphasis beyond language proficiency. Within this course, each student decides on a research domain in which they have a demonstrable interest. Their domains vary from public health, marketing, arts, international relations to new technologies. Each week, students as a group meet with their professor to give a presentation in Chinese on their domain research. One key component of the course is that each student is assigned a domain tutor to meet with them once a week for an hour. Some of these domain tutors are visiting professors from China who have years of experiences teaching Chinese as a foreign language. These domain tutors as well as other people who are interested in the students' research are encouraged to attend the students' weekly presentations and provide feedback on their research. Being very different from a regular foreign language course, the focus of this domain-based course is how students use Chinese to establish their knowledge in their selected fields, convey their understanding of the topics, and negotiate with the audience. By the end of the first year, students are required to participate a summer program in China where they can further explore their domain-related topics and deliver public presentations to Chinese audiences every week. The Chinese audiences have been expected to play a significant role in the curriculum and engage the presenters on the content of the talks and react to the style of the presentation.

2.2 Self-regulated Learning Mode

It is not reasonable to organize a beginning or intermediate-level foreign language course without providing prepared learning materials. However, once the training goal transits from learning the target language to learning in the language, students are encouraged to search for learning sources under the guidance of the professor and their domain tutors. Walker in *The Pedagogy of Performing another Culture* presented two types of instruction which help to consider the domain-level learners' mechanism of language learning and knowledge construction. He stated that "beginning students of Chinese have no inventory of cultural knowledge, words, phrases, or even potential cognates on which to draw for communicative purposes, such an inventory must be presented, practiced, and refined in a linear arrangement of dialogues, drills, exercises, simulations and situations that can be followed by the learners. As the learners accumulate knowledge and skills to the point that they can produce generalized responses to novel situations, the role of LMI (Learning Model Instruction) within the curriculum gradually diminishes in favor of acquisition model instruction" (Walker, 2010, p. 58). This shift from LMI to the Acquisition Model Instruction (AMI) AMI

is also the transition from providing students language items to imparting strategies and skills for them to use their learned language items to construct domain knowledge.

It is obvious to most people that lower level students are not able to accomplish the tasks designed for students at advanced levels. However, fewer people have come to realize that the AMI learning mechanism has to occur at a certain point in order for students to bridge language learning into their broader knowledge structure and remain motivated language learners. Conducting research in Chinese seems to be a completely new task to most students even at the AMI stage, but to which degree this task is “new” depends on learners’ previous learning experiences. One important notion is that this transformation from “learning Chinese as a foreign language” to “learning in Chinese” is certainly not a sudden turning point, nor should it be a completely unfamiliar task to the learners. In fact, a successful language learner has to gradually develop different aptitude abilities at different stages (Robinson, 2007; Thompson, 2017). Students need to be guided to establish the awareness and abilities of interacting with audiences of different ages and social roles. As Gardner (2010) stated, “Motivation itself is very complex. It is not simply the effort expended on the task, the desire to attain a goal, the evaluation associated with relevant activities, the persistence, the concentration, the attributions, or the reasons for performing the activity. It is a complex of all of these, and in the socio-educational model of second language acquisition, it is proposed that it can be measured adequately by the first three” (p. 25). Students at this level have had some experience of studying in China for a short period of time, but few of them have rich experiences of interacting with native speakers of Chinese in an environment outside the classroom. Through using media materials and assigning students social roles during class activities, students should demonstrate efforts on tailoring their language and cultural behavior according to the specific context. More importantly, as Gardner (2010) suggested, they need to have a clear goal and a strong desire to achieve it, namely interacting with Chinese outside of regular course-work. As a result, when students in the MF program begin their independent research courses, they have already developed some capacity for using authentic learning materials and learning through interacting with educated Chinese speakers who are not their language teachers. That also means that for learners at this stage to maintain motivation there needs to be more than authentic learning materials and native-speaker interaction. To be specific, motivated learners at this stage should possess the autonomy to explore authentic learning materials that fit their domain interest, and develop reciprocal relationship with native speakers of Chinese who share common interests.

2.3 Complex Social Interaction

As K Anders Ericsson and his colleagues stated about expertise that “the performers will gradually acquire mechanisms that increase their ability to control, self-monitor, and evaluate their performance in representative situations from the domain and thus gain independence from the feedback of their teachers” (Ericsson, Charness, Hoffmnan, & Feltovich, 2006, p. 694). The higher language level students reach, the more independent and self-regulated they need to be. Students at the beginning level are graded by instructors frequently so that they know if their performance meets expectations and in which specific areas they need to invest more effort. The advanced-level language learners ideally obtain most of their language

knowledge through AMI, therefore, should no longer consider the grades or feedback given by the professor or tutor as the only evaluation of their performance. Instead, the students should be guided to develop a mechanism to assess their own progress and self-monitor the learning process through interacting with native speakers of the target language. This understanding of sustaining learners' motivation also builds on the theories of Dörnyei and scholars along similar lines (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Muir & Dörnyei, 2013; Kubanyiova & Crookes, 2016) where they suggest that visioning possible ideal selves helps to "consciously create a motivational surge of energy which can focus action towards a specific target in the future" (Muir & Dörnyei, 2013, p. 359). They view vision as "the sensory experience of a future goal state, or in other words, a personalized goal that the learner has made his/her own by adding to it the imagined reality of the goal experience" (Dörnyei & Chan, 2013, p. 454). The physical and social configurations among the students, tutor, instructors, and native speakers together construct an advanced-level learners' vision of performing in the foreign language. For example, during the first year at MF Program, students are guided to present their domain topics in Chinese to an arranged audience. The weekly presentation is an important activity in the advanced-level curriculum where students establish memories of interacting with native speakers to extend their domain knowledge. As mentioned, when this paper was composed, most domain tutors in the program were visiting scholars from China, and several of them have taught Chinese as a foreign language. These tutors mentor the students and take a course titled "professional networking and relations" with the students where they learn Chinese and American cultural practices. Within that course, the students have an opportunity to establish a reciprocal relationship with their tutors and other native speakers of Chinese. This type of learning experiences is crucial for advanced-level language students as the foreign language becomes the mean of communication instead of merely the target of learning.

Working on a project in Chinese propels students into a community where they have the chance to exchange opinions and seek feedback from native speakers of Chinese who share common interests. Instead of getting explicit feedback from instructors, students at this stage receive feedback in the process of negotiating meanings. In a broader sense, the audience who participate in the students' presentations every week and the students themselves serve the important role as evaluators in the learning process. After each presentation, students receive questions and feedback from the audience. Students also ask each other questions and comment on the respective works. This type of learning activity, giving speeches in front of a large group, is familiar to most of the American students. However, when one needs to do the speech in a foreign language to introduce his research, it is a specific genre and a challenge to all the advanced-level language learners. One important feature of expertise is the capability to monitor one's current levels of mastery and understanding, which is also described as metacognition in some studies (e.g., Brown & Smiley, 1977). Through interacting with the peers, tutors and other audience, students expand their understanding of the topic as well as construct metacognition. In the MF Program, this type of speech training continues into the second semester and the summer afterwards. However, students face a multitude of challenges when they are then exposed to a much larger audience mostly consisting of native speakers of Chinese. In comparison with previous learning contexts, students now interact

with an audience mostly consisting of people who are interested in the domain content.

Classroom is a crucial location for students to establish language capacities and motivation. However, classroom should not be the ultimate playground where language students can grow into a self-regulated motivated learner (Lou & Noels, 2016; Stockwell, 2013; Sun, Franklin, & Gao, 2017). A well-designed foreign language curriculum should always prepare students for interaction with Chinese audience. In *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, Pink points out that “Autonomy, as they see it, is different from independence. It's not the rugged, go-it-alone, rely-on-nobody individualism of the American cowboy. It means acting with choice—which means we can be both autonomous and happily interdependent with others” (Pink, 2009, p. 88). In the domestic learning environment, the audience is usually designed and prepared by the program. Students have the chance to take risks and practice interacting with native speakers of Chinese. An “autonomous while interdependent” learner gradually takes full advantage of the resources to modify their research project and tries different strategies to deliver the ideas. After all learning is a social phenomenon. An autonomous and motivated language learner is someone who seeks interaction with native speakers and from which they improve their performance. It is impossible for students to achieve a high level of foreign language proficiency and expertise in communication without expanding their social milieu.

2.4 Extended Learning Cycle

In David Kolb's work *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, three models of the experiential learning process are introduced (Kolb, 1984, p. 21). Among these three learning models, the Lewinian model, later well known as Kolb's learning cycle, provides a foundation for us to understand how learning occurs. One important notion is that beginning-level language learners meet with their language instructor every day, which makes their learning cycle one day or even shorter. If we take their classroom experience as step one in their learning cycle, students need to observe and reflect on what they have learned and form their abstract assumption within 24 hours. On a more micro-level of discussion, students repeat these four steps several times within one class. However, advanced language learners of the MF Program meet once a week to give presentations on their domain topic. Their optimal learning cycle has to be different from the daily cycle of beginning-level students. In this stage, students learn how to monitor their learning progress in their domain research throughout a weekly cycle (Fig.1). Students meet an hour per week with their individual tutor, an hour and a half with their pronunciation tutor. Depending on their own schedule, students had different arrangements of those two and a half hours. Some students met with their tutor for an hour right before their presentation, while others smartly divided that hour into two meetings with the tutor and spread the meetings throughout the week. How these meetings are distributed also reflect a learner's metacognition in establishing expertise. Curriculum during the critical period should be designed to encourage a constant self-reflection mechanism receiving and searching for feedback from people other than professors and peers.

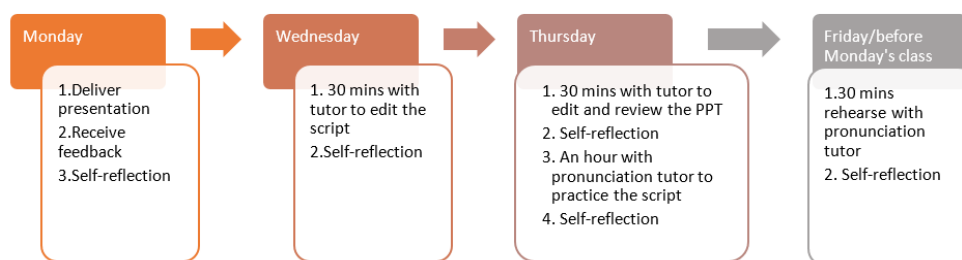


Figure 1. Optimal Learning Cycle of the Weekly Research, Based on Lewinian Cycle

This transition of focusing on domain knowledge development extends the learning from a daily to a longer weekly cycle, and requires learners to exert their intrinsic drive for learning and improving their performance. As Brantmeier (2005) reported, learners' level of enjoyment is correlated with their self-assessed abilities, the higher the level of self-assessment the higher the level of enjoyment (p. 501). The mechanism of self-reflection should be explicitly emphasized with the students. Devoted beginning-level language students also constantly reflect on their own performance, but they heavily rely on provided curricular requirement and teachers' feedback. Learners during the critical period, on the other hand, should be encouraged to self-initiate the process, seeking for feedback from various resources and reflecting on their own performance accordingly. The difference in time arrangement and learning sequence also determines when and where motivating learning experiences occur, which will be further explored in the following discussion.

3. Framework Drawn upon the *Analects*: *Xing*, *Xi*, and Pleasure of Learning

In this session, *Xing* 行 and *Xi* 習, two parallel concepts in the *Analects*, are adopted to construct a framework to understand learner motivation during the critical period.

3.1 Philology of *Xing* and *Xi*

In the oracle writing system, the pictographic character of *xing* originated from the image of crossing roads where people walk on. The modern character of *xing* derived its shape from the *xiaozhuan* 小篆, which is a much later writing system of oracle. In the *Analects*, the character of *xing* occurred 81 times in several grammatically different structures and contexts. However, instead of universally translating the *xing* into modern Chinese with the meaning of to do, to walk, or to operate, this paper considers the philology of the character when understanding the concept of *xing*. *Xing* in the end is not any type of doing as some translations misleads us, but rather those doings with a pre-selected pattern and design. For example, Chinese language students going to China and behaving as if they were in the US is not *xing*. *Xing* in the context of foreign language learning involves the recognition and practice of cultural regulations.

The philology of *xi* 習 reveals even more about the crucial practicing stage of learning. *Xi* in the oracle writing system is composed of two parts: the character of bird feather (羽) on the

top and the character of the mouth (口) or the character of the sun (日) on the bottom, both indicating the stage of a young bird learning to fly towards the sun. Later in the *xiaozhuan* system, the bottom part of *xi* changed into the character of the color white (白), still referring to the practice stage of learning new skills. The meaning of *xi* in modern Chinese had misled some of the scholars to translate *xi* into a broader concept of learning (*xuexi* 學習), or even reviewing (*fxi* 複習). However, within the three entries that contain the concept of *xi* in the *Analects*, it is clear that *xi* is not a broader process of learning, nor the stage of reviewing. *Xi*, translated as “practice” in this paper, refers to those certain types of practice a young bird repeatedly conducts to learn how to fly, namely a process of practice that takes certain amount of time, awaits an opportune time, allows failure, and witnesses differences in behaviors.

3.2 The Concept of *Xing* and *Xi* in the *Analects*

Xiao & Wang (2014) discusses the character *xing* in the *Analects*, where they categorized all the entries that contain the character *xing* into seven groups: 1) To walk, to drive, 2) To do, 3) Operable, 4) Doing, 5) To go, to leave, 6) To manage, to operate, and 7) Messenger. Among these seven categories, group two, *xing* used to mean “to do” has the most entries, 26 in total. The discussion here will only focus on the entries of *xing* where it means to do or doing. Three features of the concept *xing* are concluded through examining the usage of *xing* and its collocation within the text.

Analects 1.11 子曰：父在，觀其志；父沒，觀其行；三年無改於父之道，可謂孝矣。[The Master said, ‘While a man's father is alive, look at the bent of his will; when his father is dead, look at his conduct. If for three years he does not alter from the way of his father, he may be called filial.’] (Confucius & Legge, 2013, p. 142)

Xing in this entry is used as the object of the action of *guan* 觀, to observe. It indicates that *xing*, when meaning doing, is an observable behavior. What’s more, the observed doing can be adopted as the criteria to assess one’s morality, in this entry, one’s filial piety. What’s also interesting about this entry is its suggested relationship between *zhi* 志 and *xing*: *zhi* is the criteria used to assess one’s morality when he is guided by models while *xing* is used as the criteria when there is no one directly guiding the behaviors. To conclude, *xing* is what a person does and it reflects one’s values and thoughts. And we should always be aware that what one does is always associated with the specific culture and the rules people agree upon in that culture.

Analects 2.18 子張學干祿。子曰：多聞闕疑，慎言其餘，則寡尤。多見闕殆，慎行其餘，則寡悔。言寡尤，行寡悔，祿在其中矣。[Tsze-chang was learning with a view to official emolument. The Master said, ‘Hear much and put aside the points of which you stand in doubt, while you speak cautiously at the same time of the others then you will afford few occasions for blame. See much and put aside the things which seem perilous, while you are cautious at the same time in carrying the others into practice--then you will have few occasions for repentance. When one gives few occasions for blame in his words, and few occasions for repentance in his conduct, he is in the way to get emolument.’] (Confucius & Legge, 2013, p.151)

As indicated in the entry of [2.18], the second important feature of *xing* is that, unlike *xi*, it is associated with a public consequence, therefore should be dealt with adequate care. The action of *shen xing* 慎行, carefully doing, accompanies with *duojian quedai* 多見闕殆, seeing other's fault and danger often. *Xing*, in Confucius' description, should only take place after observing other's mistakes, which also indicates that there is a proper timing for one's *xing*.

Analects 5.16 子謂子產：有君子之道四焉：其行己也恭，其事上也敬，其養民也惠，其使民也義。[The Master said of Tsze-ch'an that he had four of the characteristics of a superior man -- in his conduct of himself, he was humble; in serving his superior, he was respectful; in nourishing the people, he was kind; in ordering the people, he was just.] (Confucius & Legge, 2013, p.178)

Another notion of *xing* is that it is used in the compound word of *xing ji* 行己 (operating oneself), which generates the assumption that *xing*, contrasting with *shi* 事 (to serve) and *shi* 使 (to make) in the same sentence, has an emphasis on those action one takes to monitor oneself. In other words, the concept of *xing* is highly associated with one's inner self that includes one's knowing and morality. When Confucius being asked about the features of a *shi* 士 (officer), he described that *shi* 士 is someone who behaves oneself with a judgment of shame (行己有恥). Moreover, this inner moral standard that one can base his *xing* upon is certainly not innate, but learned.

Comparing with the various entries of *xing*, *xi* only occurred three times in the *Analects*. While different scholars have provided more than a few interpretations and translations of these three entries, this paper tends to regard *xi* as a learning procedure and agree with Walker (2010) who has translated *xi* into “practice, try out” (p. iv). Since *xi* is by nature a close concept with learning, these three entries containing *xi* together well reflect the pedagogy of the *Analects*.

Analects 1.1 子曰：學而時習之，不亦說乎？ [Confucius said, “To learn and at the right time to put into practice what you have learned, is this not pleasure?”] (Walker, 2010, p. iv)

Being the very first but perhaps the most commonly misunderstood line of the *Analects*, Confucius wisely talked about the pleasure of learning. The problematic words here are *shi* (timing) and *xi*, which were mistranslated into “often” and “review” by some previous scholars. The character *shi* 時 occurred 11 times in 9 chapters in the *Analects*, none of these *shi*-s can be translated as “often” under the given context. Instead, most of these *shi*-s indicated a proper timing for certain actions, for instance, “*shi min yi shi* 使民以時 (have people work according to seasonal timing)” and “*bu shi bu shi* 不時不食 (do not eat when the timing is not right).” What's more, in the *Analects*, a superior man is expected to know the right timing for certain action. Confucius here clearly pointed out that there is a right timing for *xi*. A timing that learners can sense the pleasure through trying out.

Analects 1.4 曾子曰：吾日三省吾身——爲人謀而不忠乎？與朋友交而不信乎？傳不習乎？ [The philosopher Tsang said, ‘I daily examine myself on three points:-- whether, in transacting business for others, I may have been not faithful;-- whether, in intercourse with friends, I may have been not sincere;-- whether I may have not

mastered and practiced the instructions of my teacher.’] (Confucius & Legge, 2013, p. 139)

The traditional translation of James Legge’s version interpreted this entry from learners’ perspective, examining if one has practiced what was taught by his teachers. However, Tsang, later well known for his teaching, could also be saying “*chuan bu xi hu* (傳不習乎)” from a teacher’s perspective: one should not pass things that they themselves haven’t tried out to others. The idea of practice at the right timing as an important process of learning applies both on students and teachers.

Analects 17.2 子曰：性相近也，習相遠也。 [By nature we are close to each other, by practice distant from one another. (Walker, 2010, p. iv)

It is recognizable that some of the learners are instrumentally more prepared for certain activities than others, but researches of successful people in different fields have shown that the assumed genetic talent is not an accountable condition for high levels of performance (Colvin, 2008). As Confucius suggested in the above words of wisdom, what distinguishes a high-level performer from the rest is his devotion to practice. Although the concept *xi* only occurred three times in the *Analects*, its importance is clearly stated as in the opening line: to achieve the pleasure of learning which helps to sustain a learner’s performance through the advanced level, learning should always be accompanied with practicing at the right time.

3.3 *Xing and Xi during the “Critical Period”*

Before we associate these two Confucian concepts with our discussion of motivation construct during the “critical period”, we shall consider one more question: the relationship between *xi* and pleasure of learning was demonstrated explicitly in the first line of the *Analects*, but is *xing* also related with any kind of pleasure? The answer is: not in the *Analects*. *Xing*, doing things with rules, is considered as a subsequent as well as much more serious stage than *xi*. While *xi* is a stage during which mistakes are common and allowed, *xing* always comes with an observable consequence, and therefore, should be dealt with caution. The pleasure of learning is much weaker in the stage of *xing*. What’s more, one’s morality and inner self is assessed by exposing their *xing*. If we consider *xi* as the stage where our language students are trying out by using some newly-learned language patterns and expressions, *xing* would be the stage when language learners effortlessly use their language skills to interact with native speakers of the target language. The potential social risk involved in an actual interaction is much higher than it is in the classroom environment. *Xi* is the stage from “don’t know” to “know”, while *xing* is the stage where knowing is observable and assessed through one’s doing.

When considering language learners at the transitional stage, one layer of the broad context is clear to us: they are transferring from practicing (*xi*) Chinese language knowledge to doing things in Chinese language (*xing*). However, a more hidden but equally critical aspect of this stage is that these learners are practicing doing things in Chinese language in the school setting so that in the near future they will be able to act upon those rules and do things (*xing*) in a working environment in China (Fig.2). This complexity influences learners’ behavior and motivation in many ways. Along with Confucian understanding of the concept of *xing*, when

learners use their language knowledge to interact with native speakers and acquire domain knowledge, minimal guidance on conducting the action exists outside of public judgment of their knowing. When the target of the class transfers from learning Chinese as a foreign language to learning in Chinese, it is very common to observe students at this level being careful and less active in the classroom. Considering students as the users instead of learners of the language, native speakers have higher expectation for the communication. Students who realize that expectation sometimes will be less willing to take the risks. As indicated, the stage of acting upon rules, *xing*, involves more seriousness and less possible pleasure than practicing, *xi*.

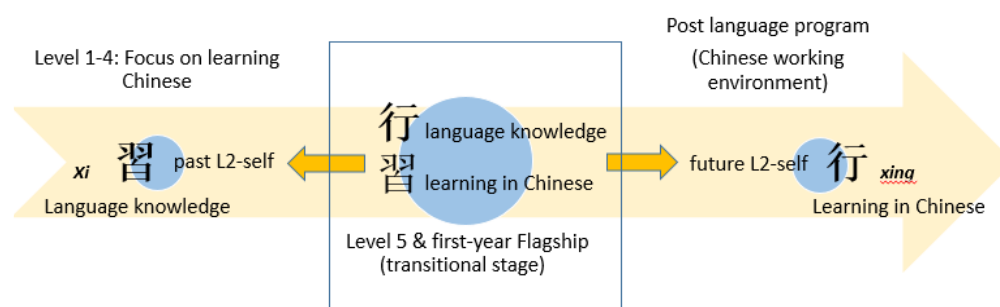


Figure 2. Complexity of *Xing* and *Xi* during the Critical Period

It is also very commonly claimed by learners at this level that they sometimes know how to do certain things in a Chinese manner but lack the willingness to do so. We need to refer to the second layer of the context when discussing this specific attitude. Most students have studied Chinese for years before they reach this level of instruction, and many of them have gained relatively rich experiences of using Chinese to interact with Chinese people. Their memories of using Chinese in various contexts convinced those students that they know how to accomplish many things in Chinese culture (*xing*). They are not completely wrong. However, living and studying in China as an international student is a significantly different context from working with provided cultural rules. Most students during the critical period haven't had a chance to work in a professional Chinese environment. In other words, they are at advanced *xing*-level in learning Chinese as a foreign language, but in terms of learning in the language, they are at the *xi*-stage. As discussed, a practicing stage always accompanies with waiting, failure, reluctance, and slow change in behaviors. Previous studies of intercultural-self more than often lead the discussion to identity conflict and development (Guilherme, 2002; Norton, 2000). I will instead argue that, first, during the practice stage, it is fully natural for students to hesitate about adopting a new cultural persona and changing their behaviors accordingly. Second, I propose that one explanation of students' reluctance to adjust their behaviors could be due to the lack of a vision of their ideal future self, which is further explored in the following section.

4. Pedagogical Application of the Framework of Xing and Xi

4.1 Domain Knowledge and Transferable Skills

Establishing expertise in a foreign language is not different from any other domain in terms of the investment of time and deliberate practice. First-year MF Program students are in the process of discovering their research interest, and establishing their expertise in that specific domain. Meanwhile, both the teachers and students should be aware of and motivated by the fact that the expertise of Chinese language is established together with a dynamic mechanism that includes many other transferrable skills, as Robinson (2007) suggested.

Students during the critical period should be guided to use only Chinese to discuss research topics with their faculty professor, tutors, and classmates. They also need to display their appreciation or dissatisfaction in the target language. For someone who conducts research in a foreign language for the first time (*xi*-stage), mistakes and misunderstandings are guaranteed. Students at this stage are not familiar with the discourse of criticism in Chinese. Pishghadam & Khajavy (2013) finds that “the correlation between total metacognition and foreign language achievement is higher than the correlation between total intelligence and foreign language achievement” (p. 178). In the context of learning during the critical period, how well students can take criticism to some degree affects how they further deepen their understanding of the research topic. Each student is expected to negotiate their opinions with professors and tutors. The process of the negotiation sometime matters even more than what opinions students hold by the end. Besides interpersonal communication skills, students also develop research and analytic skills through conducting their individual project. They use both Chinese and English references in their research. They learn how to locate and assimilate new information from academic papers, websites, and communication with Chinese people. They also need to understand complex information and synthesize it. Some of the students start with a broad interest at the beginning of the semester, and gradually develop a more specific interest under that broad topic. The process is accomplished with the help from professor and tutors, but students should develop a high autonomy in searching for their interest, as alluded to in Pink (2009). Students also learn how to analyze and solve research problems, including locating the access to the reference, specifying the topic, adjusting the methodology and tailoring the presentation to meet different audience’s expectation. Not everyone who attends student’s presentations is familiar with their topics. Students practice how to convey the ideas to an audience with more or little knowledge of the domain. This ability of conveying information to the non-expert is an important transferrable skill once students step outside classroom setting. Effective curriculum during the critical period no longer provides students pre-selected learning materials and interactive language partners. Instead, the program should focus on transmitting our language students into active, self-regulated and interest-driven language users who are prepared for unknown and unexpected situations in the target culture.

4.2 Visioning Future Self

As discussed above, most learners at the transitional stage have rich experiences of interacting with Chinese people. Many of them have studied abroad and established good

relationship with their Chinese teachers and language partners in a school setting. However, few of them have any working experience in a professional Chinese working environment. When being asked to adjust their native culture behaviors and conduct tasks that are culturally appropriate in Chinese business contexts, students do not recognize convincing reasons of doing it. It is suggested by Muir & Dörnyei (2013) that the ideal future self should be an image that is sufficiently different from a learner's present self, but achievable through procedural strategies at the same time. One important feature of the stage *xing*, in Confucius' perspective, is that it is only carried on after conducting observation of other's mistakes. This statement can be associated with Thompson (2017)'s significant notion of how an anti-ought-to-self could affect learners' motivation. Visioning a future self does not mean designing a flawless model. Instead, one needs to observe both success and failure through visioning to be able to understand the progressing and develop the learning autonomy.

It is also observed that students in the MF program can greatly improve their skills and interest in public speaking by delivering twelve presentations during one semester. Two factors particularly contributed to the consequence of learning and vision construction. First, the professor and mentors, who play the role of audience and judges, need to give detailed feedback to each speech, and a comprehensive comment on student's efforts, space for further improvement, and suggestions for the right next step of study. Through demonstrating what one can achieve within a week, teachers can help students set short term goals and a detailed vision of their next presentation. Secondly, an ideal future-self is usually built upon an image who performs better but not dramatically better than the student himself. There is more than one way to provide that image as a motivational pathway in a foreign language program. But as Jia (2019) suggested, one of the most efficient learning environments is where learners at similar but different levels to interact with each other and conduct one learning activity within the same space. Being exposed to a role model who had highly similar training background creates a good chance for the students to vision their future self, and also an opportunity for senior students to reflect how much they had achieved. This type of learning activity should also be a two-way motivational pathway for both ends. As suggested in Figure 2, students at this critical stage have reached a *xing* (doing without too much guidance) stage of using Chinese language in classroom setting, but they are beginners in terms of learning and working in Chinese. When they are provided a chance to meet their very possible self who reaches a *xing* stage of learning in Chinese and accomplishing things in China, students are expected to be more motivated to work towards that concrete goal. Indeed, the role this future self plays just cannot be substituted by teachers or learning materials, especially considering that students often tend to consider the teaching setting and learning contents as demotivating factors in the learning process (Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009; Pavičić Takač & Berka, 2014).

4.3 Reflecting on the Past Self

One aspect in which I would like to refine Dörnyei's theories is by proposing the framework of *Xi* and *Xing* is the importance of the past-self. We all have experienced the pleasure of repeating a newly achieved skill, the power of contrasting and reflecting on one's recent past self. When we just learn how to do something that the recent past self could not do, we are

motivated to practice this new skill repeatedly.

However, as Thompson (2017) suggests, “it is likely that students with lower anti-ought-to selves could shut down in the classroom if presented with activities that they perceive to be too difficult because their lack of enjoyment for challenges” (p. 48). It is particularly necessary to constantly remind students to reflect on their past self and identifying their language and domain achievement. The previous discussion has introduced how different the learning cycle is at this level of instruction from the beginning level (Fig.1). In a beginning-level curriculum, students learn new vocabulary and sentence structures on a daily basis. It is relatively easy for students to realize the difference between the current and recent past self, and sense the progress. Instead, students who focus on domain knowledge find it hard to monitor their progress in language proficiency. Self-regulated learning plays an important role at certain stage of learning, and one of the many skills students obtain through domain training is the metacognition of monitoring their own progress and weakness in performance.

In a broader sense than language learning, we constantly imagine our future-self performing in predictable contexts through reflecting on the current- and past-one. This transition period soon in turn will serve as the “past self” students can reflect on when they move forward to an even higher level of learning. When they do so, it would be obvious to the learners that there was a change in their learning behavior and communicative capacity. Students by the end of the MF Program are required to write a thesis in Chinese, which is considered as a great challenge to any foreign language learner at this level. Knowing when and how to reflect on the past self helps students to sustain their motivation to accomplish this challenging task. During the first year of training, students are not required to submit papers to the professor, but they submit written scripts of their presentation every week. Tutors edit the script with students and some of them require students to submit a second draft. One feature of these scripts is that it is a combination of both written and spoken language. Students learn how to write on different levels about their specific topic with specific terms and conjunctions, and transform the script into an oral presentation every week. There are two noticeable positive outcomes of this approach: first, when composing presentation scripts, students have a clear idea who is the target reader and potential audience. Both reading and writing are socially constructed activities in this learning process. Based on the feedback given by the people who attend the presentation, students tailor their writings to the expectation of the audience, and select readings accordingly. Secondly, these presentation scripts serve as the most accessible materials for students to reflect on when they write the thesis. Reflection materials that record one’s own mistakes, images and efforts serve as the most ideal resources in terms of motivation construction.

The biggest challenge of the language learning during the critical period is no longer a language issue, but what I would identify as an issue of “continuous transforming.” As displayed in Figure 2, many of these learners have reached the *xing* stage of learning in Chinese, but that is certainly not the end of the journey. Living in China, particularly functioning in a Chinese working environment demands these language learners continuously practicing (*xi*) newly assigned roles, such as being a manager, a coordinator, or a teacher.

Someone who does not have a vision of a possible successful self with multicultural capacities will find it hard to sustain their long-term journey of learning Chinese (Jia, 2019). One also needs to be aware that students' transition during the critical period provides them a transferrable past-self to reflect on, which serves as a critical motivational pathway for them to continue their journey of growing into more possibilities.

5. Conclusion: Design rewarding experiences based on *xing* or *xi*?

Foreign language educators over the past few decades have been paying adequate attention to what is being taught in the classroom setting. However, as a curriculum designer, one should always have a higher awareness to design, capture and reward “the flying moment of a young bird.” A “flying moment” in a beginning-level class can be guiding students to perform a task that students would not be able to accomplish without devoted practice, such as performing a brief contextualized dialogue in the class with few errors. In the transitional advanced-stage discussed in this paper, learning in Chinese is the target of practice. Therefore, most of the feedback and rewarding experiences should be designed with an emphasis on students' skills of using the language instead of only assessing their language proficiency. In addition, as the first line of the *Analects* suggests, good timing is the key. As Thompson (2017) clearly illustrates, challenging students at a demanding level when students are not prepared could be harmful to learner motivation. And the moment of flying wouldn't even be exciting without having invested efforts and experienced some failures. Constructing learner motivation, to a certain degree, is to design learning tasks where challenges can be met after a reasonable amount of trying and failures. Once students have a full command of a certain skill and act upon it without too much guidance and attention, they are at a more natural, effortless but less rewarding stage of doing (*xing*).

When considering motivation construction during the critical period, one should focus on and design based upon what is being practiced as well as the method with which students practice. The stage of *xi*, practice at the right timing, is where failure, continuous attempts and ultimately pleasure derived from learning occurs. In summary, learner motivation during the “critical period” should not be understood as a fixed psychological existence or a given production. Instead, motivational pathways are constructed through designed activities, particularly, reflecting on the past self and visioning the future one.

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Note

Note 1. The *Analects* (contents stemming from the Warring States period, 475-221 BC), is a collection of the ideas of the Confucius and his disciples. It is one of the most significant works of wisdom in Chinese history that has influenced the overall values and beliefs of Chinese people. Both the term *xue* (learning) and the motivation to learn are the major discussions in this work.

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