

A Comparison of Foreign Language Learning Social Environments, Motivation, and

Beliefs between Chinese and American Students

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Abstract

For the purposes of revealing and comparing the social, cultural, and motivational differences between American and Chinese undergraduate students learning foreign language, a sample of 100 students at University of Wyoming was asked to fill out a Foreign Language Learning Motivation and Beliefs questionnaire and 61 respondents completed the surveys. The results revealed that American students commonly believed that foreign language learning can help break cultural biases, and Chinese students generally reported that learning foreign languages is an essential skill to survive the present day competitive society. The implications of these findings are discussed.

Keywords: learning environments, motivation, beliefs, language learning, comparison

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A Comparison of Foreign Language Learning Social Environments, Motivation, and

Beliefs between Chinese and American Students

Never before in the history of the world have foreign language learning been prized more than they are today (Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2008). In today's global community, business, government, world politics, cultures, communications, media and education are interconnected as a whole. Increasingly, it is becoming more common for qualified professionals to speak, read, and write in more than one language. Learning foreign languages allows learners to develop better understandings of different cultures and countries, conduct business more effectively, and enjoy traveling abroad more. In the 21st century, there are more foreign language courses offered in the post-secondary educational institutions than ever before. Under the current circumstances, it is important for educators to understand some main factors influencing successful foreign language learning.

The current survey involved a comparison of American and Chinese undergraduate students at a Western university to reveal differences in their respective foreign language learning social environments, as well as differences in beliefs and motivations between these two groups of students.

Background

Since the 1980s, the term globalization has been used to reflect the increasing integration of economies around the world, particularly through trade and the flow of finances (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). As Brysk (2003) pointed out, globalization is beyond economics, and it is a combination of other elements, such as politics and techniques. Globalization has led to inevitable changing work practices, which require different kinds of preparations and trainings. Foreign language learning is one kind of preparations, upon which cross-cultural and international communication abilities are built.

Mehan (1984) suggested that cultural groups have distinctive value systems that ultimately shape individuals' aspirations and achievement, because of the differences of cultural, national, geographic, linguistic, racial, and religious beliefs. An understanding of the social environment for foreign language learning and the factors that influence motivations and beliefs in the globalization environment is essential for foreign language educators to understand. Hence, a presumption of the present research project was that American and Chinese students have different beliefs stemming from distinctive social settings, which predispose individuals to learn—or

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not to—learn foreign languages. Understanding these different beliefs will help educators comprehend why some students have less interest in foreign language learning based on their cultural perspectives.

Culture is about the knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, values, and emotions that we, as human beings, have added to our biological base (Jarvis, 2006). Culture affects all aspects of our lives, which include our teaching and learning activities. The foremost challenge of education and training at every level is to create equitable and successful learning environment for all learners (Wlodkowski, 2008). To accomplish this goal, educators need to respect the cultural integrity of every learner while enhancing every learner's motivation and learning. Foreign language learning is more complex than simply mastering new information and knowledge, because, although it is a communication coding system that can be taught as a school subject, it is also the most important channel of social organization embedded in the culture of the community where it is used (Dornyei, 1994). Thus, cultural factors need to be of concern of foreign language teachers in their teaching practices.

The idea that social, cultural, and political factors have an impact on an

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individual's motivation for foreign language learning is not new (Turner, 1974), although there is limited research exploring the influences of socially constructed beliefs and motivations on language learning and that has examined these issues internationally. Some recent research has examined universals among "good language learners" (de Courcy, 1997) the learning strategies they employ (Watanabe, 1990), individual traits and characteristics (Mollica & Nuessel, 1997), or variations in learning styles (Lombardo, 1990). Research involving the social context of language learning has primarily focused on the classroom context (Graham & Brown, 1996) and how culture is transmitted in formal and informal settings (Hull, 2000).

Motivation is another significant factor which can deeply influence foreign language learning. Oftentimes, motivated individuals surpass less-motivated people in performance and outcomes, even though both have similar capabilities and the same opportunities (Wlodkowski, 2008). In terms of education, when there is no motivation, there is no learning (Walberg & Uguroglu, 1980). Therefore, foreign language educators need to know how to design suitable curriculum and instructional strategies which can help to enhance learners' motivation to learn.

Gardner and Lambert (1972) argued that language learning motivation was

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qualitatively different from other forms of learning motivation, since language learning entails much more than acquiring a body of knowledge and developing a set of skills. The language learner must be willing to identify with members of another ethno-linguistic group and to assume subtle aspects of their behavior, including their distinctive style of speech and their language.

Motivation and beliefs are closely tied together, thus they equally have an impact on learning. Rubin (1975) noted that: beliefs are important because learners hold their beliefs to be true and these beliefs then guide how they interpret their experiences and behave. Since then, the nature and effects of learner beliefs on language learning have been increasingly recognized (White, 2008). Riley (1996) argues that beliefs will directly shape learners' strategy use as well as their attitude and motivation. Horwitz (1985) contends that researchers in language learning have not paid sufficient attention to students' beliefs as they conduct and analyze the results of their studies. Wenden (1999) suggests that teachers should try to understand learner beliefs about language learning and also help them to adopt a more reflective approach to their learning.

However, limited research has been conducted to compare different learning

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environment of different countries for learning foreign language at postsecondary level. The overall objectives of this investigation were to explore, describe, and analyze perceptions of a sample of American and Chinese university students about learning foreign languages, and to identify beliefs and attitudes that might promote positive forms of motivation for language learners specifically, the investigator addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the dominant factors in this survey which influences foreign language learning of a sample of American and Chinese university students?
2. What are the differences of beliefs and motivations of learning foreign language between American and Chinese undergraduates?

Based on the above information, this survey questionnaire was designed to address the following issues. First, it was designed to collect information about the social environment of foreign language learning. It was hoped that findings reveal the world social, cultural and political factors that differ among American and Chinese students' learning and affect their learning differently. Moreover, the questionnaire asked questions about why students choose to learn foreign languages and what factors enhance their motivation to learn foreign languages.

Method

Development of the Survey

Based on a similar survey which Kouritzin, Piquemal, and Renaud (2009) designed for measuring socially constructed language learning motivation and beliefs in France, Japan and Canada, we modified the questionnaire for the present investigation. Compared with the original version of the questionnaire with seven sections designed for collecting information from different countries, our questionnaire was adjusted to fit this particular study in one university. We did not include the original instructional section because this study focused on learning rather than teaching. Furthermore, we revised several questions due to the changes of learning environment. For example, instead of asking whether students often read newspapers in foreign language, our questionnaire asked whether they often visit websites in foreign language.

The current questionnaire (see Table 1) is comprised of questions relating to the following four areas: (a) social norms in foreign language learning, (b) advantages of foreign language learning, (c) personal experiences in foreign language learning, and (d) demographic information. As in the original survey, we also used a 6-point

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Likert-scale (from 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree).

This questionnaire was reviewed by two professors who taught research courses in the College of Education. They produced feedback on the clarity of questionnaires, and the survey was modified as needed. We also conducted a split-half reliability test and the results for the first half and second half was .89 and .82, respectively.

In order to have Chinese students better understand this survey, we translated the questionnaire into Chinese. To ensure our translations were clear and unambiguous, we asked two of our fellow graduate students at University of Wyoming from China, who are also native speakers of Chinese, to help review the translations and provide feedback. The questionnaire was revised based on this feedback.

We combined 34 the items into seven scales. The purpose of the combination was to effectively analyze those items that best reflected the certain factors they served to represent. The seven scales included: (1) education environment, (2) social environment, (3) job-related motivations, (4) other advantages (of learning FL), (5) personal interests, (6) communication experiences, and (7)

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family environment. The meanings of the seven scales are represented in Table 1.

Participants

The respondents included traditional full-time undergraduate students at a Western university. We targeted students into two groups: those who were born in the United States and those who were born in China. The Chinese students included students who are fluent speakers of their native languages and who have at least 10 years of learning a foreign language (English).

We did not employ randomized sampling techniques in selecting the participants because it would be very difficult to have many students to respond the questionnaire. We used convenient sampling and contacted the students we were able to gain access. We sent 50 copies of our cover letter in Chinese attached with the Chinese version questionnaire through school e-mail to Chinese students at this University. Eventually we collected 30 completed surveys from the Chinese students. We also randomly selected a class at this university and got permission from the professor who taught visual literacy, and then surveyed his class. Ultimately, we gathered 31 completed surveys from American students out of 50.

Reliability

The first three parts of the questionnaire: (a) social norms in foreign language learning, (b) advantages of foreign language learning, and (c) personal experiences in foreign language learning consisted of 34 items. The Cronbach's alpha calculated for the 34 items was .91, which suggested a high reliability. The 34 items were split into two halves: the split-half reliability for the first half and second half was .89 and .82, respectively.

Results

The entire sample consisted of 61 undergraduate students, born either in China (n=30) or the United States (n=31). Within the Chinese group, the mean age of the students was 21.76 (SD = 2.38) and 50% were female. The proportion of students enrolled in their first, second, third, and fourth year was 50.0%, 30.0%, 16.7%, and 3.3%, respectively. Within the American group, the mean age of the students was 20.64 (SD = 2.38) and 71% were female. The proportion of students enrolled in their first, second, third, and fourth year was 35.5%, 19.4%, 29.0%, and 16.1%, respectively.

The results revealed the types of languages that people commonly refer as

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foreign languages. For the majority of American students, Spanish was the most popularly learned foreign language. Some of the students reported that they are capable of speaking French and German. English is a foreign language that all the Chinese participants speak since they are currently international students at this university. Moreover, some of them also reported that they can speak Japanese and Korean, among other Asian languages.

An independent t-test was calculated to measure whether any statistical differences between the Chinese and the American student groups existed in terms of the seven sections. The results showed differences in education environment, job-related motivations, communication experiences, and family environment. There were no obvious differences between the two groups in other sections. The statistics are represented in Table 2.

The results indicated that the Chinese students had higher means than the American students in respect to education environment, job-related motivations, communication experiences, and family environment. These results suggested that Chinese students generally reported more confidence in their educational system ($M=24.93$) and family environment in terms of supporting foreign language learning

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($M=12.73$) than American students ($M=14.03$; $M=9.64$). Compared with their American peers, Chinese students' motivations of learning foreign languages apparently have a job-related tendency ($M=15.93$) compared to American students ($M=10.96$). Moreover, Chinese students ($M=16.23$) reported more positive communication attitudes as well as experiences than American students ($M=10.29$).

Factor Analysis

A maximum likelihood factor analysis was conducted. Nine factors' eigenvalues are greater than one, but the factors are not interpretable. According to the scree plot, another maximum likelihood factor analysis with two factors was attempted. Factor one (eigenvalue = 10.43) and Factor two (eigenvalue = 3.88) totally accounted for 42.06% of the variance.

We performed a maximum likelihood factor analysis with Varimax rotation.

Table 3 shows the factor structure and the top five items for the two factors.

Factor one consisted of items about students' concerns of their academic achievement and future job. It accounted for 30.67% of the variance. Factor two consisted of items about students' personal interests and culture-related beliefs. It accounted for 11.40% of the variance.

We also conducted a principal component factor analysis of the seven scales.

According to scree plot and eigenvalue greater than one, the number of factors was determined as two. Factor one (eigenvalue = 3.62) accounted and Factor two (eigenvalue = 1.08) totally accounted for 67.16% of the variance.

Table 4 shows the factor solution of the seven scales. The results were consistent with the above factor analysis because the first factor was more directed towards job-related motivations, and the second factor focused on students' personal interests and believes.

Correlation

Table 5 shows the correlation of the seven scales. Education environment and job-related motivations were highly related ($r = .77$). Moreover, students' communication experiences were greatly related to job-related motivation ($r = .66$).

Last, we also ran bivariate correlation of the 34 items in sections a, b and c. The results revealed that governments policy and attitudes towards foreign language learning played significant role in students' belief in foreign language learning, which was equally important to other subjects ($r = .69$). The participants' belief that

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foreign language learning was important at their high schools correlated highly with their belief to learn a foreign language to get a good job ($r = .73$).

Discussion

For the first research question: What are the dominant factors in this survey which influences foreign language learning of a sample of American and Chinese university students, this study revealed that there was a general positive social environment that supports students to learn foreign languages such as government policies. Both Chinese and American groups reported that foreign language speakers are respected in their societies, despite the fact that people from both countries believe foreign language learning is difficult. However, the social environment showed slight differences. Most Chinese students do not agree that Chinese-only is good enough for them. To the contrary, most American students think English-only is good enough for them. This result suggests that the American students might think that they do not need to learn another foreign language because for a long time English has been regarded as a world language, and/or there is no standard tests for foreign language learning.

The advantages of learning foreign language apparently also have a strong

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impact on the students in the sample. American students and Chinese students in general believe that people who speak more than one language would have more economic and educational opportunities. Furthermore, both American and Chinese students believe that learning foreign language can help break cultural biases. Furthermore, both American and Chinese groups believe that globalization makes foreign language learning more important than ever before.

The results of this questionnaire also revealed many differences in the beliefs and motivations between Chinese and American students, which address the second research question: different beliefs and motivations of learning foreign language between American and Chinese undergraduates. The first major difference between the two groups was that Chinese students believe their education system positively supports their foreign language learning while American students do not believe their education system lays much emphasis on foreign language learning for instance, in China, there are foreign language standard tests at all school levels. The second major difference between the two groups was that Chinese students choose to learn foreign language in order to gain more economic opportunities while the motivation of American students varies. Chinese students reported that they usually

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see more job advertisements asking for foreign language speakers than American students do. In addition, the results revealed that the two group students have different family environments for their foreign language learning. In particular, most Chinese parents tend to tell their children that learning a foreign language is important while to American students, their parents influence on language learning is relatively less. Moreover, the results suggested students from United States generally believe that foreign language learning can help break cultural biases and enhance their interest of learning foreign languages, while Chinese students believe that learning foreign languages is an essential skill to survive in the present competitive society and to enhance their job-related motivations. Knowledge of these differences between the two groups of students has various pedagogical implications for policy makers, school administrators, and foreign language teachers.

Chinese students also reported more positive attitudes toward communication with foreign language speakers than American students. Since Chinese students in this study were currently studying abroad, we expected them to be more actively engaged in learning foreign languages than American students.

The factor analysis and correlation test revealed that both American and

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Chinese students related their beliefs of education to job-related motivation.

Apparently, college students from both countries believed that getting educated and getting a good job cannot be separated.

There are various factors that need to be considered to best understand the survey results. Firstly, foreign language learning is mandatory through middle school to high school in China. However, most students only take foreign language course when they are in high school in the United States. Also, foreign language is one subject in which standardized tests are required in China. Actually, foreign language teaching and learning has become a great concern in present-day Chinese education driven by globalization. English has been a priority and compulsory course in Chinese schools for the last few decades (Yu & Wang, 2009). Furthermore, in Chinese culture, parents are usually involved themselves in their children's learning. Almost every Chinese participant in this survey is the only child in their family, which means their learning is the center concern of their parents.

The current study has a number of limitations. First, we only collected a small sample (n=61), which affected the significance of the t-test. Second, compared with American group, the Chinese group included some students who did

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not qualify as traditional undergraduate students. They were slightly older than American students and some of them had a few years of experiences of learning in Chinese colleges before they studied abroad. As Oyen (1990) pointed out, one must exercise caution in the interpretation of international comparisons, and as such, cross-cultural, international and comparative research constraints are imposed by the roles of languages and cultures and the multiple contexts in which data are collected.

Despite its limitations, we believe this study contributes to a greater understanding about why American and Chinese students choose to learn or not learn foreign languages, and what factors influence their learning. This study provided evidence that in the present globalization world, students believe learning foreign languages can benefit them in multiple ways. Moreover, foreign language instructors should consider the social-cultural background of their students since this study revealed that American students and Chinese students have distinctively different beliefs and motivations regarding learning foreign languages.

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Table 1

The Meanings of the Seven Scales

Education Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● American/Chinese education supports learning more than one language. ● Students need to learn a foreign language in order to get into university. ● American/Chinese people believe that the study of foreign languages is equally important to core subjects such as mathematics, sciences, social studies, and language arts.
Social Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● America/Chinese people respect people who speak more than one language. ● There are government policies which encourage America/Chinese people to learn foreign languages. ● America/Chinese are becoming more interested in learning a foreign language.
Job Related Motivations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People who can use more than one language have more economic opportunities than those who do not. ● I need to learn a foreign language to get a good job.
Other Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Learning foreign language helps to break cultural biases. ● Globalization is making it important to know at least one foreign language.
Personal Interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I chose to take a foreign language course because I am interested in an aspect of the traditional/popular culture associated with that language.
Communication Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● I often try to communicate with people who speak the language I am learning. ● I often visit the websites in a foreign language. ● I like listen to the songs in a foreign language.
Family Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● While I was growing up, I remember admiring people who speak more than one language. ● My parents told me that learning a foreign language was important.

Table 2

Factors that influence foreign language learning of American and Chinese students

Factors	<u>American</u>		<u>Chinese</u>		<i>df</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>
	M	SD	M	SD			
Education	14.03	5.02	24.93	3.09	50.13	10.23	.000
Environment							
Social	30.03	5.12	31.26	4.65	59	.98	.329
Environment							
Job Related	10.96	2.89	15.93	1.76	49.81	8.12	.000
Motivations							
Other	17.06	3.09	18.73	2.11	53.12	2.46	.017
Advantages							
Personal	20.70	5.59	22.56	3.82	59	1.5	.137
Interests							
Communication	10.29	3.67	16.23	3.35	58.82	6.59	.000
Experiences							
Family	9.64	2.67	12.73	2.85	58.45	4.35	.000
Environment							

Table 3

Factor Structure of Foreign Language Survey

Items	Factor 1	Factor2
FL is equally important to other subjects	.863	
Need to learn a FL to get a good job	.843	
Job advertise asks for FL speakers	.831	
FL learning is important at our high schools	.810	
Students need to learn a FL to get into universities	.777	
I like learning FL		.662
I admire FL speaker		.575
Learning FL for the traditional culture		.569
Learning FL helps to break cultural biases		.543
Made a conscious decision to learn FL		.465

(Note: FL= Foreign Language)

Table 4

Factor solution of the Seven Scales

Items	Factor 1	Factor2
Job- related	.874	
Communication experience	.842	
Education environment	.784	
Other advantages	.716	
Personal interests		.771
Other advantages		.218.
Communication experience		.214

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Table 5 *Correlation of the Seven Scales*

Scales	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Education environment	-						
2. Social environment	.37**	-					
3. Job related	.77**	.32*	-				
4. Other advantages	.36**	.45**	.60**	-			
5. Personal interests	-	-	.37**	.44**	-		
6. Communication experience	.58**	.28*	.66**	.50**	.56**	-	
7. Family environment	.57**	.27*	.48**	.26*	.27*	.53**	-

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

APPENDIX A

Foreign Language Learning Motivation and Beliefs Survey

(A) Social norms in foreign language learning

In this section, answer according to what you think is the general social attitudes toward learning foreign languages based on the following scale: (Please circle your selection)

(1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree, (3) Slightly Disagree, (4) Partially Agree, (5) Agree, and (6) Strongly Agree (Please circle appropriate response option)

1. Americans/Chinese respect people who speak more than one language.
1 2 3 4 5 6
2. American/Chinese education supports learning more than one language.
1 2 3 4 5 6
3. English-speaking Americans/ Chinese think that knowing English/Chinese only is good enough.
1 2 3 4 5 6
4. The media makes me aware of people who speak more than one language.
1 2 3 4 5 6
5. There are government policies which encourage Americans/Chinese to learn foreign languages.
1 2 3 4 5 6
6. Americans/Chinese believe that learning foreign languages is just a normal part of life.
1 2 3 4 5 6
7. American/Chinese celebrities who speak more than one language frequently use foreign language words and phrases in public.
1 2 3 4 5 6
8. Most Americans/Chinese are fluent in a foreign language by the end of high school.
1 2 3 4 5 6
9. Americans/Chinese are becoming more interested in learning a foreign language.

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1 2 3 4 5 6

10. Americans/Chinese believe that learning a foreign language is difficult.

1 2 3 4 5 6

11. Students need to learn a foreign language in order to get into university.

1 2 3 4 5 6

12. Americans/Chinese believe that the study of foreign languages is equally important to core subjects such as mathematics, sciences, social studies, and language arts.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(B) Advantages of foreign language learning

In this section, express your personal opinions about the advantages or disadvantages of foreign language learning.

Scale: (Please circle your selection)

(1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree, (3) Slightly Disagree, (4) Partially Agree, (5) Agree, and (6) Strongly Agree

1. The daily reality of life in United States/China reinforces the idea that speaking more than one language is important.

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. People who can use more than one language have more economic opportunities than those who do not.

1 2 3 4 5 6

3. People who can use more than one language have more educational opportunities than those who do not.

1 2 3 4 5 6

4. I often see job advertisements asking for people who speak more than one language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

5. I need to learn a foreign language to get a good job.

1 2 3 4 5 6

6. Learning foreign language helps to break cultural biases.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(C) Personal experiences in foreign language learning

Scale: (Please circle your selection)

(1) Strongly disagree (2) Disagree, (3) Slightly Disagree, (4) Partially Agree, (5) Agree, and (6) Strongly Agree

1. I chose to take a foreign language course because I am interested in an aspect of the

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traditional culture associated with that language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

2. I chose to take a foreign language course because I am interested in an aspect of the popular culture associated with that language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

3. I chose to take a foreign language course because it was mandatory in my school.

1 2 3 4 5 6

4. I chose to take a foreign language course because I thought it would be easy.

1 2 3 4 5 6

5. Globalization is making it important to know at least one foreign language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

6. I remember making a conscious decision to learn more than one language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

7. I often try to communicate with people who speak the language I am learning.

1 2 3 4 5 6

8. While I was growing up, I remember admiring people who speak more than one language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

9. While I was growing up, I remember hearing more than one language spoken in my family.

1 2 3 4 5 6

10. My parents told me that learning a foreign language was important.

1 2 3 4 5 6

11. In my high school, learning foreign languages was considered important.

1 2 3 4 5 6

12. I often visit the websites in a foreign language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

13. I like listen to the songs in a foreign language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

14. I always want to learn a foreign language.

1 2 3 4 5 6

15. I always have a lot of opportunities to practice speaking a foreign language outside of school.

1 2 3 4 5 6

16. Some languages are more useful than others.

1 2 3 4 5 6

(D) Demographic information

1. Sex: Male Female Transgender

Running head: COMPARISON LANGUAGE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

2. What was your age on your last birthday? ____ Years
 3. Where were you born? _____
 4. How long have you studied at this university? _____ Years
 5. List the foreign language you can speak as a beginner: _____
 6. List the foreign language you can speak as an intermediate level speaker: _____
 7. List the foreign language you can speak as an advanced level speaker: _____
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Thank you very much for your help!