Chinese Language in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Recommendations

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Abstract

This study identifies potential challenges for learners, teachers, and curriculum designers regarding the recent inclusion of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in the Saudi education system, according to an in-depth review of previous research. This review focused on issues related to CFL learning, pedagogy, and curriculum. Factors were grouped into five categories: 1) CFL learning difficulty, 2) learner motivation and aptitude, 3) learner culture, 4) pedagogical effectiveness, and 5) curriculum design. To gain a deeper understanding, a sample of 25 foreign language learners and 15 curriculum designers was selected randomly from a university in the north of Saudi Arabia to complete a questionnaire. Descriptive statistics were employed to highlight the most important issues. The data analysis revealed serious concerns among CFL learners, such as language difficulty, learner motivation and aptitude, and learner culture. CFL pedagogy could also pose a challenge. However, no concerns were found related to CFL curriculum. Implications and recommendations are offered to help incorporate CFL into the Saudi education system and encourage further research.

Keywords: Chinese as a foreign language (CFL), challenges, motivation, aptitude, culture, pedagogy, curriculum

1. Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed China's ascent to become one of the largest economies in the world, transforming Mandarin Chinese into a global language. It has been predicted that users of Chinese online will exceed those using English due to increasing popularity among non-native Chinese speakers (Chua, 2015). Economic, cultural, security, and political motives have prompted many countries, including those in the Middle East, to offer Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in their education systems. The Saudi government has started offering CFL as a non-compulsory subject at public universities. During this initial implementation, it is important to consider challenges to curriculum design, pedagogy, learning, resources, and cultural concerns. Each of these factors comprises subcategories of factors, such as learner motivation, aptitude, attitude, psychology, and language difficulty.

The most obvious challenge to teaching and learning CFL in Saudi Arabia is the large gap between CFL and Arabic in virtually all areas (e.g., writing, pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, culture). Of these, one of the biggest challenges is the Chinese logographic writing system, which requires one to learn thousands of characters (hanzi). The need to learn deeper cultural contexts increases the difficulty of learning to write in terms of form, sound, and meaning (Lin, 2017). This system is quite different from the abjad, or consonantal alphabet, used to write Arabic or the Latin alphabet Saudi learners might be familiar with from studying English. Therefore, learning CFL would require a long period of time and considerable effort to memorize the strokes and components of characters (Lee & Kalyuga, 2011), a difficulty compounded by the lack of strong, direct connections between hanzi forms and their modern pronunciations (Sung & Wu, 2011), although pinyin, an alphabet using 25 letters from the Latin alphabet, has been introduced to facilitate learning pronunciation (Lee & Kalyuga, 2011). Furthermore, Chinese is a tonal language with numerous words distinguished only by tone (Wang, Liu, & Perfetti, 2004), which is not lexically distinctive in Arabic.

Most research on CFL has focused on current implementation and the effectiveness of teaching, while scant research has been conducted on teaching CFL in a new educational context. Thus, studying CFL before implantation is a must to avoid possible challenges. Ma, Gong, Gao, and Xiang (2017) and Gong, Lyu, and Gao (2018) believed that most previous research was focused on criticisms related to the teaching of Chinese by Confucius Institutes, which represent the Chinese government and seek to disseminate Chinese language and culture (Larsson, 2008). Regardless of the validity of these criticisms and concerns, which mostly focused on

finance, academic viability, legal issues, relations, politics, and ideological resistance and attitudes, studying these challenges would save much time and effort for all involved. Since the public decision to implement CFL in the Saudi education system has already been made, this study has sought to shed light on challenges for the learner, teacher, and curriculum designer.

2. Literature Review

Teaching and learning CFL has received growing global interest (Tsung & Cruickshank, 2013), leading to a rapid increase in learners, exceeding 400 million in the first decade of the 21st century (Xia & Guo, 2012). Each nation, including Saudi Arabia, has its own motives to teach CFL in schools, mostly driven by political and economic reasons, such as developing business with China. However, research on the challenges of implementing CFL has largely been confined to investigating specific factors during implementation. In Saudi Arabia and internationally, it appears no research has explored possible challenges prior to implementing CFL. However, a few studies have surveyed literature on CFL to shed light on common areas of interest. For example, Ma et al. (2017) conducted a literature review and found that related research focused on language policy and planning, language learning and use, language pedagogy, teacher development, and language testing.

In a similar effort, Gong et al. (2018) reviewed 1,358 related Chinese articles and 175 English articles published from 2004 to 2016. The focus was on different issues with different perspectives showing few cross-border collaborations among leading researchers and institutions in the field. Sunny (2015) examined how lingua francas have been displaced or compete with each other over time. A modern case is English's dominance being contended by Chinese. Non-native speakers of a global language seek to use it for objective political and economic reasons. Therefore, the Saudi education system should seek to establish an optimal environment to invest in teaching CFL and overcome possible obstacles.

Despite the technical hurdles to learning CFL, countervailing forces are at work, such as China's growing soft power and vast interests in the Arab world, a leading reason for collaboration between China and Saudi Arabia to overcome the language barrier. Wu (2009) found the challenges of teaching and learning CFL stemmed from three dimensions related to language policy, namely language management, language practices, and language beliefs, although associated issues are more complicated.

2.1 CFL Worldwide

The first European country to establish university courses in Chinese studies was France (Bellassen, 2007). The number of colleges and schools teaching Chinese in France nearly doubled from 111 in 1998 and more than tripled to 352 in 2008. Historically, after WWII, the US showed the highest interest around the world in teaching Chinese. The UK has also been involved in teaching CFL, albeit with less interest until recently. In Germany, due to a complicated education system requiring local curriculum consistent with the target language before implementing CFL, and with 16 districts with different curricula, Chinese education has remained less advanced than in other European countries, especially France. However, according to Starr (2009), around half of specialist language colleges were most interested in teaching Chinese in Germany. Although Spain has no historical interest in teaching Chinese, a rapid increase in the number of students and institutions has recently adopted CFL. For example, since 2007, 30 universities started teaching Chinese to around 5,000 students (Starr, 2009). Europeans mostly learn each other's languages with much less effort and time than is needed to learn Chinese due to the overlap in vocabulary, which sometimes reaches 70%. Similarly, Chinese overlaps more with Korean, so Korean students learn Chinese faster than Europeans.

Most important research challenges and criticisms related to teaching Chinese in Europe have been linked to the role of the Confucius Institute program, an arm of the Chinese government in disseminating Chinese worldwide. According to Starr (2009), Chey (2007), and Larsson (2008), these challenges are mostly practical, including finance, academic viability, legal issues, relations with the Chinese partner university, and long-term support from their own institutions. Another facet is political and ideological resistance and attitudes toward Chinese language and culture. Saudi policymakers and curriculum designers should consider these challenges when dealing with Confucius Institutes in terms of their support for CFL, connection to the Chinese government, and related human and physical resources. Such concerns can be handled in Saudi Arabia, especially in terms of finance and administration, but providing CFL teachers, textbooks, and curriculum with the ability to preserve the local culture of learners would be a critical concern.

In Africa, the challenges mentioned above are far less apparent, perhaps due to the financing offered by Confucius Institutes that may be rejected in Europe (Kemi, 2018). As for cultural challenges, Africans do not feel the CFL curriculum clashes with their local values and identity, especially in that CFL instruction is governed by a curriculum that mostly focuses on games, dancing, and music. This could be a reason for the greater spread of CFL

education in Africa (Einashe, 2018). In Uganda, Chinese lessons were added as compulsory to the high school curriculum, while Kenya plans to teach Chinese to elementary school students starting in 2020 (Yinka, 2018).

Chinese as a possible global language has likewise been attractive in the Arab world, especially in terms of economic, political, and cultural factors. In 2011, the first Confucius Institute in the Gulf region was founded in Dubai in the UAE, where there is an increasing number of students studying CFL (Mimi, 2015). The two other such institutes in the Gulf are in Abu Dhabi in the UAE and in Bahrain. These institutes are also involved in holding cultural exchanges and events to strengthen ties and reinforce CFL learning and culture among Arab communities. In Jordan, a Confucius Institute was opened a decade earlier according to the Chinese Embassy in Amman (2009), which indicated that around 71 similar institutes were open in the Middle East to disseminate Chinese language, culture, and bilateral cooperation. The same phenomenon has been observed in Egypt among university students.

Saudi Arabia has similar cultural and educational experiences to neighboring countries, meaning data on those countries might be applicable to Saudi Arabia. Taking into account there are 548 Confucius Institutes in 154 countries, including the Middle East (Confucius Institute Headquarters, 2019), King Saud University was the first national world prestigious institute to sign an agreement with this program to establish a Chinese language department. The university also works on establishing a Confucius Institute at its campuses to reinforce cultural communication between China and Saudi Arabia (Chen, 2019). This effort underlies previous work by the Saudi Ministry of Education with the Confucius Institute Headquarters to strengthen the training of Chinese teachers and promote Chinese instruction in Saudi schools (Chen, 2019).

A Confucius Institute delegation visited the Saudi Ministry of Education in April 2019 to discuss CFL in Saudi Arabia. They agreed on establishing a coordination mechanism for Chinese teaching, setting up a Confucius Institute in Saudi Arabia, training Chinese teachers, compiling textbooks, and deciding on examination sites for the Chinese proficiency test (Confucius Institute Headquarters, 2019). Only 45 days after this visit, an agreement was signed in Beijing for the provision of Chinese instructors to King Saud University. Such rapid progress from planning to implementation has left several open questions, including whether potential challenges were taken into account, what research was considered by the Ministry of Education and King Saud University before implementation, what planning steps were taken, whether risk management was considered, and what curriculum design will be implemented.

2.2 Challenges to CFL in Saudi Arabia

Potential challenges to teaching and learning CFL in Saudi Arabia are related to the nature of the language, curriculum and pedagogy, culture and identity, learners, and instructors.

2.2.1 Language

Mandarin Chinese is a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family and the official language of China (Lurent et al., 2019). Although it is considered one of the most difficult languages to learn, depending on one's native language, a growing number of learners are studying it as a foreign language, 670,000 of which took the Chinese proficiency test in 2010 (Liu, 2011). Over 2,000 hours of intensive study in two years are needed to learn Chinese (Niquet, 2011). Curriculum designers in the Saudi Ministry of Education should consider these facts when designing textbooks and establishing expected learning outcomes. Offering CFL as an elective course for 45 contact hours might not enable students to acquire even the basics of the language, which requires far more contact hours.

Chinese vocabulary can be classified into four areas of concern: phonological comprehension, orthographic comprehension, phonological production, and orthographic production (Yi, 2004). Yi (2004) found these four areas were interrelated in terms of their influence on CFL. Phonological comprehension, for example, represents the largest proportion of the learning process but contributes the least to learning language skills. The relative effort required to learn these areas and their relative influence on acquisition should be taken into account when designing CFL curriculum and pedagogy. For example, hanzi and tones should be addressed before implementing CFL courses since they increase the workload for learners.

When most written languages use an alphabet or similar writing system, Chinese employs logograms, with over 47,000 characters in the *Kangxi Dictionary*, although most of them are archaic and obscure. The Chart of Generally Utilized Characters of Modern Chinese contains around 2,500 common characters, a much more manageable but still considerable challenge for learners (Huang, 2009). According to Mair, however, hanzi are hard to learn, and a learner might not be able to read a newspaper comfortably even after learning 2,000 basic characters (as cited in Liu, 2011).

Mandarin has four common tones—flat or high level, rising or high-rising, falling-rising or low, and falling or high-falling—and a fifth "neutral" tone (Lee & Kalyuga, 2011). While tones are used to express emphasis or emotion in Arabic and many other languages, they are used to distinguish meaning in Chinese. For instance, the word *chou* as spelled in pinyin, can signify "book," "tree," "great heat," "to relate," "the Aurora Borealis," "accustomed," and "loss of a wager" (Quin, 1941). Therefore, tones are a major factor in the difficulty of learning CFL. There are many courses in Standard Mandarin and Cantonese offered to speakers of English online or via podcasts with software to help pronounce, read, and translate Chinese into English and other languages. However, the Chinese language itself remains a major obstacle.

Learners of CFL are subjected to great cognitive demands when they process semantic, phonological, orthographic, and grammatical information in the language. These demands include the need to produce lexical tone, be familiar with the extensive use of homophony, recognize tone alternation, be aware of a broad range of semantic changes, identify and write hanzi, segment a string of characters meaningfully, and connect phonological, orthographical, and semantic information. This is evident in many related works (e.g., Hallé, Chang, & Best, 2004). Perhaps only learners with the highest level of motivation can handle these linguistic difficulties, and while useful, the pinyin alphabet cannot truly replace hanzi. Therefore, learning CFL requires a long period of time and enormous effort to memorize all strokes and components of characters (Lee & Kalyuga, 2011), worsened by the opaque or vague connection between hanzi form and pronunciation (Sung & Wu, 2011). A further stumbling block is the connection between hanzi and Chinese culture and history.

2.2.2 Culture

According to Yang (2009), teaching CFL requires learning about Chinese culture, with all CFL textbooks built to serve this aim as language and culture are never separated. Due to the conservative education system of Saudi Arabia, this factor could pose a barrier, as curriculum may need to be designed instrumentally rather than in an integrative manner, at least in preliminary implementation.

Lin (2017) found CFL students and their teacher had a similar notion of what constitutes culture. Normally, the teacher makes use of cultural values, comparisons, and change to connect the teaching of cultural products or practices with their corresponding cultural perspectives. However, teaching CFL could be challenge due to the Islamic education policy in Saudi Arabia conflicting with the focus of CFL learning on culture. However, Du (2008) examined how foreign language learning facilitated cultural awareness in CFL. Cross-cultural competence and student perceptions of the relationship between language and culture increased as a result of acquiring the target language.

2.2.3 Pedagogy and curriculum

Important issues associated with CFL pedagogy include the integration of information and computer technology (ICT), online vs. face-to-face classes, using traditional vs. modern communicative approaches, and using the target language from the beginning of the teaching process. Teaching CFL in the Saudi context should take into account the importance of technology, and online learning would be expected to include CALL multimedia, and related resources. Neglecting this integration would constitute a challenge for learners and teachers. Furthermore, difficulties with pronunciation accuracy, listening comprehension, reading, and word recognition could be improved with the appropriate tools, such as text-to-speech, speech-to-text, and machine translation. Curriculum designers should be aware of such problems and provide appropriate solutions in advance (Yeh, 2014).

Chung (2003) investigated the roles of pinyin and concluded that presenting a character first and its associated prompts as feedback improved learning. Without a clear understanding of such effects, the teaching strategies for CFL should take into account the variation of techniques to avoid becoming barriers to learning.

Zhang and Chen (2014) suggested a model using technology integration based on radical awareness, sound-meaning connections in characters, sound-meaning-form connections in characters, and evaluation. To solve problems facing CFL pedagogy, the Saudi education system could use its well-established technology infrastructure to integrate ICT into the CFL classroom.

Using a face-to-face CFL classroom versus an online mode could be unwise since integrating would allow for individual strategies and styles of learning. In addition, using modern teaching strategies, such as the communicative approach, would be more effective than traditional strategies, such as grammar translation or audio-linguilism, as the former would rely on an elective pedagogy following the most appropriate teaching strategies that fit each learner's needs. Therefore, a student-centered approach would be the best solution to pedagogical issues.

This literature review highlighted the most prominent challenges facing CFL instruction in Saudi Arabia, including language difficulty, learner motivation and aptitude, learner culture, instruction and pedagogy, and curriculum design. To avoid these challenges, CFL curriculum should be built in light of Saudi education policy, culture, and societal needs. The curriculum should clearly indicate the parties involved, the mode of instruction (student-centered), the desired learning outcomes, assessment methods, tasks and content, and required resources.

3. Study Rationale

3.1 Statement of the Problem

Recent attempts to incorporate CFL into the Saudi education system are still in a preliminary stage but face many challenges for policymakers, curriculum designers, instructors, and learners. Learners face language learning difficulties and cultural, motivational, and aptitude constraints. Another dimension includes mode of teaching and pedagogical strategies. Curriculum designers face concerns regarding planning the CFL curriculum and pedagogy given the challenges facing teachers and learners.

3.2 Objectives and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify major challenges to teaching and learning CFL in the Saudi education system for learners and curriculum designers. It also sought to find meaningful solutions to these challenges by examining the perspectives of learners and curriculum designers. The study was guided by the following research question: What challenges might CFL Saudi learners and curriculum designers encounter? This question was supplemented by five sub-questions:

1. What linguistic difficulties could a Saudi CFL learner encounter?
2. To what extent are Saudi students motivated and willing to learn CFL?
3. What cultural constraints could a Saudi CFL learner encounter?
4. What pedagogical challenges could a Saudi CFL learner encounter?
5. What challenges could a Saudi CFL curriculum designer encounter?

3.3 Significance of the Study

To the best knowledge of the researcher, the learning and curriculum design challenges of implementing CFL have not been investigated in the Saudi context or many other contexts. The results could inform learning and teaching CFL in Saudi Arabia and those interested in studying and teaching a foreign language in a new environment. The findings could help Saudi curriculum designers, policymakers, and teachers improve CFL instruction. The methods and findings could also lay the groundwork for future research.

4. Method

This study was built around two phases. In the first, the researcher conducted an in-depth review and analysis of the most prominent problems in teaching and learning CFL according to prior research. All documents were obtained from databases, including EPSCO, Eric, and university e-library databases with dissertations, theses, and journal articles. Based on this review, the second phase involved investigating the views of concerned parties regarding the phenomenon.

4.1 Sample

The sample was selected randomly and contained 25 male and female English majors in their seventh level at a university in northern Saudi Arabia. This sample was selected because participants were already familiar with learning a foreign language (English). Sampling from CFL learners would have been difficult since none were found in the Ministry of Education's database. The sample also contained 15 Saudi EFL curriculum designers working in the Ministry of Education and who had also worked as foreign language instructors. Due to participants' expected lack of knowledge about CFL, the researcher gave participants a brief orientation on CFL and the purpose and nature of the study.

4.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Based on related research (e.g., Chen, 2016; Liu, 2009; Luo, 2014; Spencer, 2015, Weber, 2017; Yang, 2018), two questionnaires were developed, one for learners and one for curriculum designers. The questionnaire items were on a 5-point Likert scale (from Strongly Agree = 5 to Strongly Disagree = 1) and were designed to measure participants' views. The first consisted of three parts with 16 items: CFL learning difficulty (6 items), CFL learner motivation and aptitude (7 items), and CFL learner culture (3 items). The second questionnaire consisted of two parts with 11 items: CFL pedagogy (5 items) and CFL curriculum design (6 items) (see Appendices A and B). The

questionnaire was distributed to participants by hand, all of which returned the questionnaires completed with no missing items. These data were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

5. Results

5.1 CFL Difficulty

Based on the responses to the questionnaire items about CFL difficulty (Items 1–6), the majority of Saudi learners believed Chinese was very difficult to learn ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.15$). Most participants (80%) strongly agreed "Chinese language is more difficult than Arabic" ($M = 4.44$, $SD = 1.16$). Table 1 shows the frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations of responses related to CFL difficulty.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for CFL Difficulty

Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		M	SD
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
1.	17	68	2	8	1	4	3	12	2	8	4.17	1.38
2.	18	72	2	8	1	4	3	12	1	4	4.32	1.25
3.	18	72	2	8	1	4	3	12	1	4	4.32	1.25
4.	2	8	19	76	3	12	1	4	0	0	3.88	0.60
5.	20	80	2	8	1	4	2	8	1	4	4.44	1.16
6.	18	72	2	8	1	4	3	12	1	4	4.32	1.25
Average											4.24	1.15

5.2 Learner Motivation and Aptitude

Responses to the items related to motivation and aptitude (Items 7–13) indicated the majority of Saudi learners were either unmotivated or unwilling to study CFL ($M = 2.69$, $SD = 0.67$). Most participants (80%) strongly disagreed with Item 12 "My aptitude at learning Chinese is very high" ($M = 1.28$, $SD = 0.61$). However, the majority (76%) were also uncertain (neutral) about studying Chinese for traveling or business purposes ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.78$). They were also uncertain (neutral) about whether speaking Chinese would be embarrassing ($M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.78$). Table 2 shows the frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations of responses related to CFL motivation and aptitude.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for CFL Learner Motivation and Aptitude

Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		M	SD
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
7.	2	8	2	8	19	76	1	4	1	4	3.12	0.78
8.	2	8	2	8	19	76	1	4	1	4	3.12	0.78
9.	0	0	1	4	3	12	19	76	2	8	2.12	0.60
10.	0	0	4	16	3	12	18	72	0	0	2.20	0.50
11.	2	8	19	76	3	12	1	4	0	0	3.88	0.60
12.	0	0	0	0	2	8	3	12	20	80	1.28	0.61
13.	2	8	2	8	19	76	1	4	1	4	3.12	0.78
Average											2.69	0.67

5.3 Learner Culture

Responses to the items related to Chinese culture and its relation to studying CFL (Items 14–16) indicated participants were uncertain ($M = 3.17$, $SD = 0.87$). Most participants (72%) disagreed with Item 16 "The Chinese won't affect my Islamic culture and values negatively" ($M = 2.52$, $SD = 0.96$). However, 68% expressed interest in studying Chinese culture ($M = 3.80$, $SD = 0.65$). Around 60% were not sure if they were interested in studying Chinese language more than Chinese culture ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 1.00$). Table 3 shows the frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for responses related to CFL learner culture.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for CFL Learner Culture

Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		M	SD
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
14.	3	12	4	16	15	60	1	4	2	8	3.20	1.00
15.	2	8	17	68	5	20	1	4	0	0	3.80	0.65
16.	2	8	2	8	2	8	18	72	0	0	2.52	0.96
Average											3.17	0.87

5.4 Pedagogy

In the second questionnaire, for curriculum designers, responses showed general agreement with the items related to CFL pedagogy (Items 1–5) ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 0.85$). For example, most participants either agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (40%) that teaching CFL by native speakers of Chinese from the beginning of the course was not encouraging ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.86$). Most participants (80%) also agreed using traditional approaches, such as memorization, to teach CFL were equally effective ($M = 3.87$, $SD = 0.64$). However, 73% of participants were unsure if using digital tools would be effective in teaching CFL ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.68$). Table 4 shows the frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for responses related to CFL pedagogy.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for CFL Pedagogy

Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		M	SD
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
1.	1	6.7	12	80.0	1	6.7	1	6.7	0	0.0	3.87	0.64
2.	1	6.7	12	80.0	1	6.7	1	6.7		0.0	3.87	0.64
3.	10	66.7	1	6.7	1	6.7	2	13.3	1	6.7	4.13	1.41
4.	1	6.7	2	13.3	11	73.3	1	6.7	0	0.0	3.20	0.68
5.	6	40.0	7	46.7	1	6.7	1	6.7	0	0.0	4.20	0.86
6.	0	0	0	0	2	8	3	12	20	80	1.28	0.61
7.	2	8	2	8	19	76	1	4	1	4	3.12	0.78
Average											3.85	0.85

5.5 Curriculum

In the second questionnaire, curriculum designers generally agreed with the items related to CFL curriculum ($M = 3.86$, $SD = 1.06$). For example, most participants either agreed (6.7%) strongly agreed (66.7%,) that CFL curriculum should clearly describe the involved parties, reflect learning outcomes, and indicate learning resources. However, 73% were unsure of whether the CFL curriculum should be task-based ($M = 3.20$, $SD = 0.68$). Table 5 shows the frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations for responses related to CFL curriculum.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for CFL Curriculum

Item	Strongly Agree		Agree		Neutral		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		M	SD
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%		
8.	10	66.7	1	6.7	1	6.7	2	13.3	1	6.7	4.13	1.41
9.	1	6.7	12	80.0	1	6.7	1	6.7	0	0.0	3.87	0.64
10.	10	66.7	1	6.7	1	6.7	2	13.3	1	6.7	4.13	1.41
11.	10	66.7	1	6.7	1	6.7	2	13.3	1	6.7	4.13	1.41
12.	1	6.7	2	13.3	11	73.3	1	6.7	0	0.0	3.20	0.68
13.	1	6.7	10	66.7	2	13.3	2	13.3	0	0.0	3.67	0.82
Average											3.86	1.06

6. Discussion

The results of this study were consistent to some extent with similar research on teaching and learning CFL. The linguistic difficulty barrier may hinder CFL learners from acquiring basic language skills. Most participants agreed that Chinese characters were very hard to read, write, or memorize. They also indicated that speaking or listening to Chinese would be difficult. Saudi learners compared the level of difficulty of their mother tongue (Arabic) with Chinese when they were required to express their impressions in learning Chinese. Since Saudi learners believed in the high difficulty of learning Arabic, if they felt Chinese was more difficult, this could discourage them from seeking to learn it. This finding that CFL learners would be exposed to great cognitive demands when processing the semantic, phonological, and orthographic information of the language is supported by Hallé et al. (2004), Shu (2003), and Wayland and Guion (2004). Chinese linguistic difficulties include morphology, syntactics, and phonology, such as tonal production and perception. Therefore, this study would encourage the Ministry of Education and other stakeholders to initiate a rigorous research project on Chinese language difficulties before implementing CFL in the Saudi education system.

Saudi CFL must have a high level of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to overcome language difficulties. Participating Saudi students showed poor motives to learn Chinese. For example, they reported not being interested in learning Chinese to travel to China, do business, or study in China or other East Asian countries. A related issue was a reported lack of aptitude for learning CFL. According to Hallé et al. (2004), motivation is a crucial affective factor in learning a foreign language. This lack of reported motivation poses a problem for learners, teachers, curriculum designers, and policymakers and must be addressed for successful CFL implementation.

Another major concern addressed in this study is the cultural dimension. Most Saudi learners were unsure about the relation between learning a foreign language and learning about a foreign culture, despite the strong link between language and culture. Du (2008) found that cross-cultural competence and student perceptions of the relationship between language and culture increased as a result of acquiring the target language. The Saudi learners appeared uninterested in Chinese culture, another obstacle to CFL instruction in Saudi Arabia. In addition, participants indicated that learning Chinese might negatively affect their Islamic culture and values. Thus, these concerns should be addressed before implementing CFL.

Foreign language pedagogy should be built around learner needs. Most responses in this study supported traditional teaching, such as grammar translation and memorizing, to learn CFL. The curriculum designers might be right in that internalizing the basics of a language as different from Arabic as Chinese could require more memorization. This would explain why curriculum designers who participated in the study preferred using face-to-face teaching rather than online learning or integrating ICT or digital tools. In fact, the teaching of CFL now has developed and could provide CFL learners with a learning dependent upon an alphabetical system of Chinese, where learners can access the target language using an alphabetical keyboard. For example, it is true that this system may not replace the target language entirely, but it may compensate and initiate learners' basic knowledge and skills about Chinese.

Since Saudi CFL curriculum design would be under the direct oversight and administration of the Saudi Ministry of Education, some of the concerns about the curriculum and culture might be moot. According to participants, the curriculum would describe all parties, which would help provide an effective curriculum and avoid potential

cultural concerns. Other elements of curriculum design, such as the appropriateness of learning outcomes, content, tasks, and the availability of assessment criteria, would also help incorporate CFL into the education system.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study sought to determine the biggest obstacles to introducing CFL into the Saudi education system and to find potential solutions. According to the results, learner factors, especially beliefs about language difficulty, motivation, aptitude, and cultural concerns, as well as pedagogy were the core issues that might hinder CFL implementation. This study recommends policymakers and curriculum designers take these findings into account and support CFL learners by conducting research on learner concerns and language difficulties before implementation. CFL instruction could also benefit from using modern, student-centered teaching methods. In addition, the government could offer incentives to increase learner motivation, such as offering future jobs and business in China and other East Asian countries. CFL learners need to be prepared through courses and training on the basics of Chinese before implementation and need to be open-minded about the target language culture if they want to acquire Chinese successfully. Future research could build on these findings by examining CFL learner motivation, CFL pedagogy, and the use of technology in CFL learning.

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