

Undergraduate German as a Second Foreign Language Learning Experience and Improvement Strategies

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Abstract: *In order to speed up international cooperation and exchange, the government is encouraging higher education institutions to provide more foreign language courses in addition to English in light of China's progress in reform and opening up. This study used interview and questionnaire surveys to analyze the current state of German language education as a second foreign language and student learning involvement in it in China. The goal was to understand students' experiences learning German as a second foreign language. Additionally, suggestions were made to enhance the structure of college German courses for non-German majors.*

*Science Insights Education Frontiers 2022; 12(2):1719-1728.
Doi: 10.15354/sief.22.or061*

How to Cite: Zhang, L. (2022). Undergraduate German as a second foreign language learning experience and improvement strategies. Science Insights Education Frontiers, 12(2):1719-1728.

Keywords *German as the Second Foreign Language ("German as SFL"), Course Perception, Learning Involvement*

ONE of the most widely spoken languages in the world, German is most commonly spoken in the European Union. The German language has significantly influenced art, philosophy, and other facets of global culture since the Middle Ages. Because of Germany's dominance in global health and chemistry, learning German has become crucial for academics in these fields. The study of German is becoming more popular among college students nowadays as a result of the rapid expansion of Sino-German commercial and cultural ties; some of them choose to study German alongside English as their primary foreign language (hence referred to as "German as SFL"). China has seen a 33% increase in the number of German language learners between 2015 and 2020, making it one of the nations with the greatest rate of growth in the world (Li & Roelcke, 2019). Little research has looked at how college students learn when studying German as SFL; the majority of studies on German instruction to date have concentrated on the issues with and solutions for its classroom teaching. A crucial determinant of learning quality is the student learning experience. Examining student learning is a crucial step in determining how well the course "German as SFL" is teaching its students. Additionally, two important aspects of students' learning experiences are course perception and learning engagement (Chen & Jia, 2020). Course perception is the degree to which students are satisfied with the course content and the caliber of the instruction; learning engagement is the extent to which students engage in particular practices, such as devoting time and effort to the study of the course (Ma, 2020). The purpose of this study is to investigate how students perceive the course "German as SFL," how engaged they are with it at the moment, and how course perception affects student involvement in learning. Pertinent suggestions are made to enhance the caliber of the curriculum and the learning results of the students.

Literature Review

Students' practical perception of learning processes as well as their behavioral and mental involvement in them are all included in the learning experience (Li, 2001). Students are aware of the course's quality through their learning experience since they are active participants in both in-class and out-of-class learning.

Individuals' direct reactions to a learning setting are their course perceptions (Shi & Yan, 2009). Their view of the learning environment has a significant bearing on their learning strategies and outcomes. In the middle of the 20th century, Ramsden et al. examined student perception of various aspects of a course, such as classroom instruction, classroom tests, and teaching quality, using questionnaires, interviews, and other methods. They concluded that ideal course perception consists of five essential components: effective classroom instruction, clear course objectives, acceptable learning loads, scientific testing methods, and learning autonomy. These are the five criteria specified by Ramsden for the Course Experience Questionnaire.



Alexander W. Astin, a well-known scholar in the field of assessing the quality of undergraduate education in the United States, conceived “learning involvement” as one of his earliest academic concepts. He argued that learning engagement is a significant element influencing student learning outcomes and that student academic achievement is favorably connected with the amount of time and effort invested in meaningful learning activities (Lu & Lyu, 2015). The current study examines learning involvement in three dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, and emotional involvement, in order to obtain more detailed information about student learning experiences in studying German as an SFL and to provide more targeted recommendations for improving course quality.

Research Design

Research Subjects

Students majoring in non-German subjects from colleges and universities in Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, were polled for the current study. A total of 211 questionnaires were returned from an online survey that was conducted. With English majors making up 40.76% of the 211 students, other foreign language majors making up 13.74%, and non-foreign language majors making up 45.50%, all 211 students decided to acquire English as their first foreign language. We further filtered the sample using “learning German as SFL” as a criterion and discovered that 40.76% of the respondents were doing so. In order to conduct this study, 86 valid questionnaires were gathered. We discovered through the earlier literature analysis and student interviews that most higher education institutions offer the course “German as SFL” in the second or third academic year, so we did not focus our questionnaire survey on freshmen and seniors. Sophomores made up 65.4% of the final sample, followed by juniors with 23.22%.

Research Methodology

The two main methodologies used in this study were questionnaires and interview surveys. Interviews were primarily performed for two reasons: to aid in the questionnaire design and to aid in the interpretation and analysis of the statistical results. Three interviewees (01-M, 01-F, and 02-F), who teach German in colleges and universities in Jiangsu Province, participated in extensive online and in-person interviews. 02-F serves as the dean of the German Department at a famous university in Nanjing. 01-M and 01-F are lecturers in the German Departments of their respective schools and have been teaching “German as SFL” for many years. A 31-question questionnaire with both single-answer and multiple-answer questions was developed based on the analysis of the interview’s contents and a review of pertinent literature. Data on the implementation of the courses, students’ perceptions of the courses (such as the duration of the course, the teaching method, etc.), and student learning involvement (such as the average weekly time input in after-class learning) were gathered in addition to the respondents’ personal information (such as gender, grade, school ranking, etc.). The data from the questionnaire survey was then statistically analyzed using SPSS 28.0. The analytical approach chosen to investigate the impact of students’ perceptions of “German as SFL” on their learning involvement is multivariable linear regression.

Research Findings

Student Course Perception of “German as SFL”

The learner’s personal experience shapes how they perceive the course, which includes a range of genuine, direct, and focused emotions. The “German as SFL” course standards, classroom satisfaction, the complexity of the teaching materials, the alignment of class hours and course content, and more are all covered in the questionnaire (such as duration of the course and weekly class hours). The outcomes of the data analysis are as follows:

In general, student satisfaction with “German as SFL” courses is extremely high. A total of 89.5% of the students surveyed rated the course’s classroom instruction as “satisfactory” or “very satisfactory.” In the interview with Teacher 01-F, he stated that his “German as SFL” class has been thriving due to high student attendance, active student participation in classroom activities, and outstanding academic environments. His institution has established a Sino-German cultural center that provides an exceptional language environment and high-quality learning tools for both German majors and “German as SFL” students in order to suit their educational demands. The institution provides additional training and tutoring to “German as SFL” students in order to assist them pass the College German Test-4 and -6 (optional for Chinese undergraduates).

The majority of institutions offer “German as SFL,” which lasts 150–160 total class hours over one or two years with four–two hours of instruction per week. According to 86% of the students who responded to the survey, this amount of time was “sufficient” or “absolutely adequate” for them to accomplish this course. Learners of “German as SFL” in China utilize the textbook as their primary source of instruction (two volumes in total). While 51.2% of the students believed that before-class preparation and after-class study were necessary for a basic understanding of the topic, 45.4% of the students thought that its content was rather simple. Most schools blended the traditional teacher-centered instructional model with the learning-through-practice approach as their primary teaching strategies for this course. Teacher lectures took up 65.1% of class time; student in-class practice took up 27.9%; group work, presentations by students, and teacher comments took up 5.8%. Teachers’ interviews provided additional support for this data analysis finding. Due to the initial phase of learning German’s complexity and the course’s short class period, instructor 01-M noted that teachers must spend a significant amount of class time imparting knowledge. Both teachers (01-M and 01-F) indicated that the college and its German department, with the help of German majors, would organize pertinent activities like German recitation contests and oral German-based games in order to give “German as SFL” learners more opportunities to practice oral German. Nevertheless, 62.8% of the respondents thought that the manner in which the teaching of content was presented needed to be changed, and 45.4% of them recommended boosting classroom engagement.

Student Learning Involvement in the Course

Before the course, 76.7% of the students had no foundation in German, and 18.6% of them had only a little bit of fragmentary knowledge; during and after the course, 66.8% of them acquired the fundamental rules of reading and writing German as well as a certain level of vocabulary and grammar, and 10.4% claimed that they had mastered almost all the grammar knowledge and acquired a large vocabulary, capable of communicating with native speakers. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of the students received a

grade of 80% or above on their most recent final test. The aforementioned results demonstrated that these “German as SFL” students were eager to put time and effort into their language studies and had a good attitude toward learning both in and outside of the classroom. This study tried to assess student behavioral, cognitive, and emotional involvement in the course in order to explain student learning involvement in “German as SFL” (Chen et al., 2021).

Behavioral Involvement

A fundamental part of learning participation is behavioral involvement, which is a clear representation of student learning engagement. When filling out this questionnaire, “German as SFL” students’ behavioral involvement was evaluated based on how much time they spent studying after class and whether they used online resources to continue their studies. While the remaining students spent 2-3 hours or more doing this, 62.8% of students spent 1-2 hours per week reviewing what they had learned in class and getting ready for the material they would learn the following week. About 83.7% of them stated they would continue learning German using online resources after class, such as watching web videos or online courses to strengthen grammar learning; using learning apps to help them remember words (like German Assistants); participating in social forum discussions about learning strategies for “German as SFL,” etc.

Cognitive Involvement

Cognitive involvement describes the efforts made by students to develop learning processes. The students who participated in the survey set several learning objectives for their “German as SFL” course and created matching learning plans. According to the questionnaire results, 78% of the students planned to concentrate on their majors and go on with their German studies in line with the curriculum; the remaining students worked to meet the requirements for German majors and get credentials in German-related fields. Approximately 25.6% of the students have short-term learning objectives (e.g., to obtain qualification certificates via tests), and 22.1% of them are capable of creating comprehensive plans that take into account both their language proficiency and learning objectives. The College German Test-4 requires students to increase their vocabulary to between 2,500 and 3,000 words, which necessitates additional study strategies outside of the course objectives, according to Teacher 01-F, who was also questioned. About 97.7% of those who had set explicit plans could carry them out and adjust them in light of new information.

The students who participated in the poll were also acutely aware of the difficulties they encountered while learning “German as SFL” and actively engaged in looking for answers. For example, 82.6% of them thought German grammar was quite complicated. They would study the teachings after class and prepare for the following lesson to ensure classroom effectiveness as a means of overcoming this challenge, as well as consult the teacher in their free time. In addition, 58.1% of the students felt they had few chances to practice speaking German. As a result, they would search for language friends on social media, watch movies and read books after class to immerse themselves in the language.

Emotional Involvement

The key indicators of student emotional involvement are their favorable attitudes toward learning activities and their motivation to continue their studies in the same field. On the one hand, students are generally satisfied with the “German as SFL” course. Of them, 91.9% responded “Yes” to the question “If given the opportunity to reconsider the choice, would you still pick German as the second foreign language?” despite the difficulty of the language they perceived after beginning the course (such as the time-consuming word memorization caused by complex word formation and part-of-speech division). It was compelling proof of the students’ emotional investment in the lesson. However, a minority number of students did become dissatisfied with the course as a result of German’s comparatively greater level of difficulty when compared to most other foreign languages. For instance, 7% of students decided not to continue studying German after the course because of the pronunciation issues they encountered, which made the beginning of the course extremely difficult for them.

The Effect of Student Course Perception on Learning Involvement

To examine the impact of course perception on learning involvement, two variables from sub-dimensions of learning involvement were used as dependent variables: student after-class time input in “German as SFL” and higher-order pursuit and extra input in the course, which were the best indicators of student time and energy investment in it.

The Impact of Student Course Perception on their After-class Time Input in “German as SFL”

A multivariable linear regression model was developed in order to investigate the impact of course perception-related variables on student after-class time input in “German as SFL.” According to **Table 1**, the independent variables associated with course perception might account for 13.8% of the variation in the amount of after-class time students spent participating in “German as SFL.” As a result, there was a favorable overall influence of student course perception on their after-class participation in “German as SFL.” Students’ impression of the course’s weekly class hours in particular had a significant positive impact on how much time they contributed outside of class, demonstrating that after-class time contributions were positively connected with class hours. In other words, students become more invested in the language the longer they study it in class, and as a result, they become more driven to continue learning it outside of class. In contrast, students’ perceptions of the textbook’s difficulty had a significant negative impact on the amount of German they learned outside of class. This demonstrates that students are less motivated to learn German after class, the harder it is considered to be.

The Effect of Student Course Perception on Higher-order Pursuit and Additional Input in the Course

In order to investigate the effect of student course perception on their higher-order pursuit and additional input in “German as SFL,” this study used a multivariable linear regression model. **Table 2** demonstrates that the course perception-related independent variables could account for 10.5% of the variance in student higher-order pursuit and

Table 1. The Effect of Student Course Perception on Their After-class Time Input in “German as SFL”.

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Regression Coefficients		Standardized Regression Coefficients	t	p
	Beta	S.E.	Beta		
Intercept	1.770	0.729		2.428	0.017
Timing of the Course (1st yr=1, 2nd yr=2, 3rd yr=3, ≥ 4th yr=4)	-0.132	0.115	-0.133	-1.143	0.256
Duration of the Course (1 yr=1, 2 yrs=2, ≥ 2 yrs =3)	-0.120	0.096	-0.135	-1.241	0.218
Weekly Class Hours (< 2=1, 2-4=2, > 4=3)	0.297	0.136	0.245	2.185	0.032
Adequacy of the Class Hours (Completely Adequate=1, Adequate=2, Inadequate=3)	0.115	0.144	0.096	0.801	0.425
Difficulty of the Current Textbook (Too Easy=1, Easy=2, Difficult=3, Too Difficult=4)	-0.220	0.121	-0.201	-1.825	0.072
Course Satisfaction (Very Satisfactory=1, Satisfactory=2, Uncertain=3, Unsatisfactory=4)	-0.044	0.117	-0.044	-0.376	0.708
df (Total)	86				
R ²	0.138				
F	2.108				
Durbin-Watson value	1.941				

extra input in “German as SFL,” indicating that, generally speaking, student course perception had a positive impact on their higher-order pursuit and extra input in “German as SFL.” Additionally, this learning involvement-related dependent variable was most positively impacted by students’ perceptions of the timing of the course, suggesting that the earlier students start learning German as a foreign language, the more likely it is that they will set more ambitious and clear goals for it.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In general, students studying German as a second language were relatively pleased with the course, particularly with regard to the teaching materials, textbook selection, and evaluation of their performance. However, they agreed that classroom instruction should be adjusted to be more student-centered. Some students responded to the questionnaire survey that they were dissatisfied with the traditional teacher-centered classroom model and wished that teachers would convey educational content in more effective ways and provide more possibilities for student participation.

The student learning participation in “German as SFL” is, nevertheless, far from satisfactory. Only 37.2% of them, as revealed by the survey findings, were willing to dedicate two hours after school each week to course review and preparation, which is certainly insufficient time for learning a somewhat challenging language. From the

Table 2. The Influence of Student Course Perception on their Higher-order Pursuit and Extra Input in the Course.

Independent Variables	Unstandardized Regression Coefficients		Standardized Regression Coefficients	t	p
	Beta	S.E.	Beta		
Intercept	1.026	0.683		1.502	0.137
Timing of the Course (1st Year=1, 2nd Year=2, 3rd Year=3, ≥4th Year =4)	0.280	0.108	0.306	2.588	0.011
Duration of the Course (1 yr=1, 2 yrs=2, ≥ 2 Yrs=3)	0.035	0.090	0.043	0.388	0.699
Weekly Class Hours (< 2=1, 2-4=2, > 4=3)	-0.103	0.127	-0.092	-0.808	0.421
Adequacy of the Class Hours (Completely Adequate=1, Adequate=2, Inadequate=3)	-0.054	0.135	-0.049	-0.400	0.690
Difficulty of the Current Textbook (Too Easy=1, Easy=2, Difficult=3, Too Difficult=4)	0.128	0.133	0.127	1.135	0.260
Course Satisfaction (Very Satisfactory=1, Satisfactory=2, Uncertain=3, Unsatisfactory=4)	0.077	0.110	0.085	0.704	0.484
df (Total)	86				
R ²	0.105				
F	1.547				
Durbin-Watson Value	1.763				

viewpoints of students and instructors, we made an effort to pinpoint the causes of this phenomenon based on discussions with three interviewees. First off, the lack of opportunities for language usage, at least in the near term, is the main cause of students' poor engagement in "German as SFL." As stated by Teacher 01-F, most schools offer this course in the second and/or third academic year, when English majors are still unsure of their plans to sit for the postgraduate entrance examination (where a second foreign language qualification is required) and other students have not yet made up their minds about continuing their studies in German-speaking countries after graduation. Second, the development of the course has not received enough attention from the foreign language teaching community because "German as SFL" is not a required course at all universities. This has led to a shortage of German language instructors, outdated teaching materials, and outdated teaching models, among other issues.

The aforementioned issues with "German as SFL" diminished student learning experiences because the caliber of classroom instruction has a direct impact on student learning involvement (Biggs, 2003). The study makes the following suggestions for future enhancements to the course's student learning environment:

Strengthening Team Building of German Language Teachers

First, as staff shortages have led to high workloads for German teachers and subpar teaching outcomes, schools and institutions should hire more German language instructors to bring down the student-teacher ratio. Second, in order to improve teaching quality, schools should develop a system for selecting and keeping skilled German instructors for this course. Instead of learning a second language to pass language proficiency exams, most university students prefer to do so in order to use it as a tool to access professional materials relevant to their majors. This explains why some instructors and learners may not be serious about learning a second foreign language. Skinner's theory of reinforcement can be used to impose positive reinforcers (such as pay raises and promotions) on the conscientious and responsible instructors while imposing negative reinforcers on the less qualified ones to get them to stop acting irresponsibly. Thirdly, schools should offer chances for professional growth to "German as SFL" instructors, such as in-service training, further education, and peer interaction. To satisfy their unique training needs, teachers should be able to choose the training materials and formats on their own. To enhance the teaching quality of "German as SFL," it should be encouraged to conduct teacher education research and exchange ideas internationally.

Increasing Class Hours for the Course and Personalizing Student Learning

The majority of "German as SFL" students begin the course with no prior knowledge of the language. Despite having a significant capacity for language acquisition, individuals may nonetheless face difficulties at first due to interference from English. A challenging language cannot be mastered in one year with only 150 teaching hours. Schools can increase the number of hours spent in class each week while maintaining the course length in order to accommodate the time needed to learn a language. For college students with particular needs, they can either extend the course's duration or extend it to the fourth academic year. In most schools, the second or third academic year is when the course is offered. Students cannot develop language skills sufficient to pass the postgraduate entrance exam or to meet the standard of working language in such a short period of time spent cramming instruction. Instead, this type of instruction can only prepare students for the GER A1 and A2 tests or the College German Test-4.

Optimizing the Course Design and Enriching the Avenues of Learning German as SFL

Since "German as a Second Foreign Language" is an introductory course, the difficulty of the course material should be kept at an acceptable level in order to gradually pique students' interest in the language. The emphasis of instruction should shift from the interpretation of grammar to the comprehensive training of students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Also, students' knowledge of literature and art should be increased by acquiring a second foreign language.

In addition, colleges and universities can enhance students' understanding of the cultures of German-speaking nations by assisting them in finding language partners, organizing lectures, and sponsoring knowledge competitions after class. Familiarizing students with relevant cultures is favorable to sparking a stronger interest in foreign language acquisition. Additionally, interdisciplinary collaboration can be introduced

into the “German as SFL” curriculum. For instance, German language can be taught in conjunction with important disciplines such as German literature, philosophy, and sociology, as well as English, the sister language of German, to broaden the course’s learning material and increase its attractiveness.

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Received: 27 June 2022

Revised: 15 July 2022

Accepted: 29 July 2022