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Understanding Discontinuation in Chinese Language Classes: Factors within and beyond the Learning Experience

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Abstract

The recent decline in language study in the US, notably the decrease in learners advancing to higher-level Chinese language courses, signals a pressing concern for Chinese language educators. This study conducted interviews with five students from three American colleges to explore the factors impacting their motivation to discontinue studying Chinese. The findings highlight the crucial role of a supportive teaching environment, instrumental motivation, and the influence of institutional policies on learners' decisions. While learning experience is important for motivation, ideal-L2, and ought-to-L2 motivations might be more significant, as negative experiences can be offset by strong intrinsic motivation, whereas systemic educational barriers can still cause discontinuation despite positive experiences and strong motivations.

Keywords

learning experience, demotivation, Chinese as a Foreign Language

中文学习中断的原因探析：学习经历以及相关因素研究

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摘要

近年来美国语言学习人数总体呈现下降趋势，尤其是继续学习高年级中文课程学生人数显著减少，这已成为中文教育工作者亟待解决的重要问题。本研究通过对三所美国大学的五名学生进行访谈，探讨了影响他们中断中文学习的动机因素。研究表明，良好的教学环境、工具性动机以及学校政策在学习者决策中起到了关键作用。研究发现，尽管学习经历(learning experience)对学习动机至关重要，但“理想二语自我”(ideal-L2)和“应该二语自我”(ought-to L2)可能有更大的影响力。因为强烈的内在动机能够在一定程度上抵消负面的学习经历带来的影响，而系统性的教育障碍则可能导致学生即使拥有积极的学习体验和强烈学习动机，却仍然选择中断学习。

关键词

学习经历，动机消退，汉语作为第二语言教学

Introduction

In recent years, American universities have faced a decline in world language enrollment, particularly in courses beyond the introductory level. While 70% to 90% of language enrollments are in beginner courses, it is alarming that few progress to advanced stages. This pattern significantly challenges the academic consensus on the necessity of extended and consistent engagement to achieve language mastery (MLA, 2019, 2023; Nagle, 2021). Despite China's growing role in global affairs, enrollments in Chinese language courses have dropped by 14.3% since 2021 (Lusin et al., 2023). The consistent downturn in enrollments across American colleges has sparked an investigation into students' disengagement with Chinese language courses in the United States (Duff et al., 2013; Wen & Piao, 2020). While the decline in language learner numbers is acknowledged, the specific factors contributing to the discontinued rate in Chinese language courses remain under-explored.

This study responds to the scant exploration of the underlying causes behind this decline. It is situated within Dörnyei's (2009) L2 Motivational Self System (L2MSS), a leading model in second language motivation studies. Although the model is a recognized framework in language motivation research, the learning experience component within this model—which includes the effects of the immediate learning environment, teacher-peer interactions, and curriculum content—has been relatively overlooked, often considered the 'Cinderella' component, overshadowed by the other two more prominent components, the ideal L2-self and ought-to L2, despite its potential as a potent motivational catalyst (Dörnyei, 2009, 2019). While it is generally assumed that learning experiences significantly impact language learning trajectories, the nature of these experiences and their interaction with the discontinuation of language learning in Chinese language studies at the college level in the U.S, remains inadequately addressed within research on Language Other Than English (LOTE) motivation studies (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Huang, 2019). In addition, while there are several large-scale survey studies available (Humphreys & Spratt, 2008; Wander & Lin, 2000), there is a notable lack of in-depth, qualitative research that explores the complexity underlying learners' perceptions and experiences with language learning (Lam et al., 2025).

To fill this gap, this study adopted a qualitative research method to explore how these factors, especially learning experiences-related factors impact the motivation of American college students studying Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL). The aim is also to uncover and analyze potential strategies that may reignite student interest and promote enduring engagement with Chinese language learning. In sum, through an in-depth analysis of five learners' experiences at various U.S. colleges, this research provides a comprehensive understanding of the

discontinuation phenomena and proposes informed solutions to the challenges faced by learners in the current declining trend of language study in the U.S.

Literature Review

Within second language acquisition studies, Dörnyei's L2MSS stands out as a foundational model for investigating learners' motivational dynamics. This framework encloses: a) Ideal L2 Self, reflecting one's envisioned successful L2-using future; b) Ought-to L2 Self, reflecting attributes believed necessary to meet external expectations and avoid negative outcomes, and c) L2 Learning Experience, relating to the immediate learning environment, encompassing factors such as teacher influence, curriculum, peer dynamics, and the experiences of success or failure in language learning. Research has thoroughly explored the Ideal L2 Self and Ought-to L2 Self, but the L2 Learning Experience has not been as prominently featured in academic inquiry or theoretical discourse due to its distinct historical roots and lack of theoretical development (Dörnyei, 2019).

Although there is not enough conclusive empirical evidence positioning the learning experience as a definitive predictor of motivated behavior (Huang, 2019; Pavelescu, 2019), there is an increasing amount of research indicating that negative learning experiences often lead to decreased motivation for language study, commonly referred to as demotivation. Motivation and demotivation exist as dynamic states along a spectrum, with demotivation emerging from different factors that erode ongoing action's motivational basis. Existing studies have identified a range of demotivating factors, which can be categorized as internal—such as attitudes, emotions, and self-perceptions—and external—including ineffective teaching methods, uninspiring course content, unconstructive classroom dynamics, unfavorable interactions, resource shortages, and overemphasis on complex grammar (Chambers, 1993; D'Orazzi, 2020; Dörnyei, 2009; Evans, 2020; Gao & Liu, 2022; Jung, 2011; Kikuchi, 2009; Kikuchi & Sakai, 2009). These factors can profoundly affect learners' motivation long term. Consequently, educators must understand the relationship between demotivation and learning experience to maintain and enhance students' engagement. This is vital to cultivating a supportive educational climate that encourages and perpetuates motivation.

Recognizing the role of learning experiences in motivation provides a framework for remotivating students' enthusiasm for language learning. The concept of remotivation, as outlined by J. Falout and M. Falout (2005), entails revitalizing interest by addressing the source of demotivation. Previous research has suggested strategies to help prevent L2 demotivation or rebuild motivation. Song and Kim (2017) identified key external factors in remotivation, such as adopting new study methods and drawing inspiration from peers, alongside internal factors like an enhanced appreciation of the languages and engagement with the cultures. Additionally, educators play a pivotal role in remotivation through the avoidance of pedagogical approaches that could induce learner demotivation, such as employing a diverse instructional technique that sparks student interest (Albalawi & Al-Hoorie, 2021; Kikuchi, 2015, 2019; Falout, 2012). In other words, educators are instrumental in this process, capable of rekindling motivation by innovating teaching methods and cultivating a positive learning environment.

Language learning also extends beyond learner motivation, with systemic and institutional factors influencing language continuation decisions. Diao and Liu (2020) highlighted several macro-level factors that impact foreign language education in American universities, including the influence of institutional norms and ideologies on students' decisions to discontinue language learning. Transitioning to college often involves adopting new academic identities aligned with institutional priorities, such as focusing on STEM fields, exploring diverse

coursework, and adhering to Eurocentric language policies, which may deprioritize foreign language study. D'Amico and Sterling (2023) identified barriers to students' language progress, including internal conflicts where students valued language learning but faced scheduling conflicts, prioritized major requirements over language courses, and experienced redundancy due to prior high school fulfillment. Linford (2023) and Crum and Kivik (2023) further observed that while academic requirements drew students in, they seldom led to sustained engagement in advanced language study. The observation prompted a reevaluation of the broader educational framework to support language proficiency aspirations.

While motivation research in language acquisition is extensive, there is a lack of comprehensive understanding of learning experience, demotivation, and remotivation, particularly within the context of CFL. Previous studies did not fully explore the interplay between learners' learning experiences and other demotivating factors. A nuanced approach is needed to capture these complexities and enhance the support for learners in language education (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011). Studies specific to CFL studies indicated that motivational factors might not be directly transferable from English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Dörnyei & Al-Hoorie, 2017; Huang, 2019; Li & Liu, 2023) due to unique challenges, including its orthography and tonality, personal or career-oriented motivations, and learning environment dynamics (Xie, 2014; Zhang et al., 2021). The termination of CFL studies often resulted from a combination of factors, like linguistic hurdles, geopolitical issues, and insufficient support. Furthermore, research in CFL motivation identified instrumentality as a significant motivator. Evidence suggests that instrumentality-prevention, focusing on meeting external obligations, significantly influences beginners and intermediate learners. Meanwhile, instrumentality-promotion, driven by career goals or cultural affinity, becomes more prominent at advanced proficiency levels. This trend indicates a potential shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation as learners progress and view themselves as part of a multilingual professional sphere (Campbell & Storch, 2011; Rueda & Chen, 2005; Wen, 2018, 2022; Wen & Piao, 2020; Yu & Downing, 2012).

In sum, CFL discontinuation is multifaceted, influenced by learning experience, internal and external motivations, learning environment dynamics, and broader institutional factors. Recognizing and addressing these varied influences is crucial for fostering sustained engagement in language learning. The following research questions guided the present study,

RQ1. How does students' learning experience influence their decisions to continue or discontinue learning Chinese?

RQ 2. Beyond the scope of the L2 learning experience, what factors impede language learning motivation/commitment?

Methodology

Participants and school setting

The study recruited student participants from three distinct universities in the United States. Jessy and Mary were recruited from X University. The X University is a large, R1 public university in the western United States, with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 25,000. This university only offers a Chinese minor program, and there is no foreign language requirement at this state university.

Lily and Rachel were recruited from the Y University. The Y University is a small private, liberal arts college in the midwestern United States, with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,400. This university offers Chinese major and minor programs, and there is no foreign language learning requirement for all students.

Vick was recruited from the Z University. The Z University is a small public, senior military college with a liberal college setting in the southern United States, with an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 1,500. This university offers a Chinese major and minor program. Foreign language studies are only required for students with Bachelor of Arts (BA) majors. For participants detailed demographic profiles, see Table 1. All participants and university names are pseudonyms.

Table 1
Participant's Profiles

Participants*	YoC ^a	Major & Minor	YoL ^b	University*	FL ^c requirement
Lily	Junior	Spanish Minor: Chinese	0.5 years in high school 3 years in college	Y	No
Rachel	Senior	International Relations and Chinese	4 years in high school 2 years in college	Y	No
Jessy	Sophomore	Mechanical Engineering	4 years in high school 1 year in college	X	No
Mark	Sophomore	Economics and Business Minor: Math	2 years in college	X	No
Vick	Sophomore	International studies Minor: Business	2 years in college	Z	For BAs

Note: ^aYoC=Years of College, ^bYoL=Years of Learning Chinese. ^cFL= Foreign Language, *All participants and university names are pseudonyms.

Data Collection

The recruitment of student participants was executed in two phases by the research team. The initial phase targeted students who had previously discontinued learning Chinese or suspended their learning but eventually resumed their Chinese studies within the past few years. The second phase focused on currently enrolled students, gauging their inclination to discontinue learning Chinese and obtaining their consent for interviews. Six students volunteered to participate in the interviews and five of them were selected as one did not meet the requirement of having discontinued or intending to discontinue studying Chinese. All of whom either stopped learning Chinese one to two years ago or expressed their intent to discontinue studying the Chinese language beyond the current semester.

All students' interviews were conducted in May 2022, coinciding with the end of the school semester. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were carried out face-to-face or via Zoom, with each session lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded. The interview protocol consisted of general questions that tapped into the student's background and reasons to start learning Chinese (Questions 1-3), perceptions on learning experience (Questions 4-5), factors contributing to discontinuation (Questions 6-7), and questions tailored to those with re-engagement experiences (Question 8). See Appendix for the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

This study followed the principles of qualitative research and employed multi-case study approach to explore the Chinese learning experience of students. The primary data source was the students' interviews. The researchers adopted a holistic exploration of each participant's learning context while also enabling cross-case comparisons to identify commonalities and differences among cases. Interview data were systematically examined to identify patterns across cases. The initial coding process involved reading through the interview transcripts and assigning preliminary codes to segments of text. These initial codes were then grouped into broader categories based on similarities and patterns. Throughout the analysis, the codebook was iteratively revised to incorporate new insights and ensure consistency in coding. This process included regular discussions among the researchers to resolve discrepancies and refine the definitions of each code. Coding differences were discussed among the researchers, and a consensus was reached, achieving interrater reliability of 93%. This analysis was carried out using the qualitative data analysis tool, QDA Miner lite.

Results

Unsupportive teaching demotivates, supportive teaching remotivates: Lily and Rachel

Lily and Rachel, both students at Y College, highlighted the critical role of a supportive learning environment in motivating and demotivating students in their Chinese studies. Despite their initial high motivations, the lack of supportive teaching led them to consider discontinuing their studies. However, the presence of encouraging and supportive teachers eventually reignited their passion for learning.

Lily, a Spanish major with minors in Chinese and teaching English as a second language, aspired to teach English abroad. She had a positive high school experience with a supportive language teacher, motivating her to continue learning Chinese in college. However, at Y College, she encountered Professor M, who did not adequately address her needs. The professor criticized her dedication and performance, leading to a significant drop in her motivation. She repeatedly used terms such as *negative*, *trauma*, and *disturbed* when referring to this issue. The theme of the unsupportive teaching style directly influencing motivation and engagement recurred many times during the interview with Lily. For instance, Lily expressed concerns about her comfort working with Professor M,

- (1) He at one point pulled me aside in the hallway and told me directly, 'I am questioning your dedication. You need to do better.' That was really hard for me... I did not enjoy class anymore after that dynamic came about because I felt very pressured.
- (2) I had a very negative experience with the professor who was teaching at the time. ... I found out on social media that he posted some things that made me feel disturbed as a young woman, so I didn't feel very safe working with him, and I didn't feel supported in class, no matter how hard I worked.
- (3) ...I had a lot of traumas from working with the previous professor who was not supportive and who I felt unsafe around. I just decided to drop my minor briefly.

After taking a semester off from Chinese studies, Lily was reached out and encouraged by another Chinese professor who had previously known her and learned about her Chinese learning journey and believed in her abilities. This support had a profound impact on her. The teacher sent her a heartfelt letter, offering comfort and inspiration during tough times. In contrast with the negative learning experience she has received, supportive teaching styles can enhance student motivation and re-engagement. Lily's re-engagement with Chinese studies after receiving support from a new, encouraging teacher can exemplify this pattern.

- (1) I started class with a much more supportive environment, ... a much better teacher. ...my incredible teacher reached out to me and gave me a really sweet letter that I printed [out]so that when I have a bad day, I can read it. ...She changed my life, saying, 'Hey! I believe in you. I see that you can do this. I am here to support you.' I read her email, and I cried. This amazing woman is gonna support me. She believes in me. I have to go back. I feel very supported by this amazing teacher, and I know I can do this.
- (2) I have some trauma, but I care about Chinese, and I wanna learn it and I am gonna be supported, and I know I am gonna have fun because she is super fun.

Similarly, Rachel, an international relations and Chinese double major, had a similar demotivation pathway due to the unsupportive learning experience. Rachel had taken four years of Chinese in high school. She chose to study at Y College because of its Chinese program. Despite understanding the importance of studying Chinese for her career, she struggled with the teaching style of Professor M during her second year. Rachel reported that the misalignment between her preferred learning style and the professor's instructional approach contributed to her demotivation. The evidence could be tracked in the following samples,

- (1) I am scared of him, and he is disapproving of my spoken Chinese... My motivation was low, and I just stopped studying. I stopped doing homework and stopped trying.
- (2) I prefer my teacher [to be] stricter, with homework throughout the week, whereas, in Teacher M's class, we had a huge homework assignment due on Thursday. I feel like homework throughout the week is more suitable."

Rachel ended up dropping the Chinese major but added it back multiple times. Her remotivation involved not only getting support from another professor but also receiving adequate support from peers. This example shows how peer support and positive experiences with teachers can sustain a student's motivation over time.

- (1) One of the reasons I added it back was because of CXX (her friend), as I got her into the major, and then me pulling out just did not feel all right. Another reason was that I felt comfortable with my Chinese level while abroad. Taking Teacher X's class last winter made me happy again.

In summary, the experiences of Lily and Rachel underscore the pivotal role of a supportive teaching and learning environment in either motivating or demotivating students in their language-learning journeys. Both began learning Chinese with high motivation, but unsupportive teaching styles, such as harsh criticism and lack of support, significantly impacted their enjoyment, leading to their decisions to discontinue their studies. However, when these teaching-related issues were addressed and resolved with a more supportive and encouraging learning environment, they re-engaged with language learning.

Lack of instrumentality with a mediocre learning experience led to demotivation: Vick

Among all the participants, Vick's interview exemplifies how the absence of instrumental motivation led to his discontinuation of learning Chinese, which was beyond the scope of a pure learning experience.

Vick, an international studies major with a minor in business at Z College, initially chose Chinese for its long-term benefits, given the global direction. In other words, he started to learn Chinese because of a strong ought-to-L2. Despite this, Vick decided to stop learning Chinese after two years of learning. Throughout the interview, Vick acknowledged his limited dedication to the class and negative learning experience, attributing these perceptions to his lack of instrumental motivation.

First, he struggled with adapting to varied teaching methodologies. His first-year experience involved a relaxed and self-paced learning environment, while the subsequent year emphasized accuracy in homework completion rather than mere participation. This shift in teaching styles challenged him, leading to uncertainty and reluctance to submit assignments. Although he expressed certain concerns in terms of teaching, he still acknowledged the benefits he received from the class and therefore considered as a moderate learning experience.

The primary reason for him to discontinue the learning was the absence of instrumentality. Vick expressed no future career use for Chinese and focused on fulfilling academic requirements rather than practical applications. Vick did not anticipate needing Chinese in his career after graduation and did not anticipate achieving fluency in this language. Vick also highlighted those external incentives, such as study-abroad programs, could also play a crucial role in sustaining motivation for some students. However, for those who lack a long-term commitment to learning Chinese, these external incentives may not be sufficient to maintain their interests, leading to feelings of being lost in the learning process. The theme of lack of instrumentality occurred repeatedly in his narratives,

- (1) At this point ... get my credits and graduate and that will probably be about the end of my experience in Chinese... There is not a... large enough Chinese presence in Texas for me to need to know Chinese.... the likelihood that I will need Chinese in my career is pretty low. It is there. If at a later date, they want me to learn Chinese it will probably be easier to pick back up, but I don't think it is very likely.
- (2) The problem is intrinsic motivation, especially this year, compared to the other years I have done Chinese. I was really motivated to learn Chinese... there is a strong correlation between how much effort I put in and how much progress I make. The issue is that I would almost always rather spend time on my other obligations because Chinese is probably the lowest priority thing I have going on.
- (3) A lot of people want the Taiwan trip, so they will work harder on Chinese so that they are not lost when they go to Taiwan... But if you are not interested in [the study-abroad program] or learning Chinese long-term, then you do not really care and you get lost quickly.

Vick's interview highlights the critical impact of the absence of instrumental motivation on language learning. He indicated a diminishing sense of his ideal L2 self, no longer envisioning becoming highly proficient in Chinese. He often prioritized other obligations over Chinese learning, leading to disengagement and a suboptimal learning experience.

- (1) The reason I did not pay attention in class is... unless I studied like 30 minutes or an hour before the class period... [when] I walk into class, I have no idea what is going on. So instead of staring at a screen blankly confused, I will work on something else, whether [working on] emails or reading something or popping on my phone, that is just like maximizing use of time."

In summary, Vick's overall learning experience is considered mediocre, with both positive and negative experiences. However, the absence of instrumental motivation, coupled with limited intrinsic motivation and insufficient long-term commitment, significantly contributed to Vick's demotivation and discontinuation of Chinese language learning. This highlights the importance of both intrinsic and instrumental motivations in sustaining student engagement in language learning.

Systematic educational barriers matter despite positive learning experience: Jessy and Mark

Jessy, a mechanical engineering major, took four years of Chinese in high school before enrolling in one year of Chinese at the X college. During her interview, she consistently highlighted her delightful experience with Chinese learning at college. She expressed satisfaction with her Chinese teacher and class, noting no dissatisfaction with the learning experience itself. However, despite her keen interest, Jessy struggled to balance an excessive number of credits with her major's demands, which compelled her to focus on her core engineering courses. She revealed that her curricular restrictions were related to her busy schedule, stating that taking 20 credits, including Chinese, would be overwhelming and leave her with insufficient time to manage her academic workload effectively. When faced with scheduling conflicts and an overload of credits, Jessy was forced to prioritize certain courses over others, potentially leading them to discontinue their Chinese language studies despite their interest and enthusiasm. Jessy recounted, "Usually, I would say it is 15 to 18 credits. It is an average semester... like my first semester, I was able to add it on and that put me at 17 credits. But then, if I continue taking Chinese, I think I would have been 20 credits... I just do not have enough time for that."

Similarly, Mark, an economics and business major with a minor in mathematics, decided to take Chinese because he saw its value in doing business. He had never studied Chinese before X college and expressed satisfaction with his learning experience at the school. However, Mark emphasized that his inability to continue studying Chinese was due solely to schedule constraints. He explained, "I do not have the space for my credits to take next semester, but I do hope to do something with Chinese maybe later... The schedules, the only reason [that makes me discontinue learning Chinese]."

Both Jessy and Mark highlighted that despite their enthusiasm and satisfaction with their Chinese language studies, the rigid curricular requirements and heavy academic workloads led them to discontinue their studies. These two examples both demonstrate how curricular restrictions, an overloaded schedule, and credit limitations can force students to deprioritize language courses, despite positive learning experiences. This illustrates how macro-level factors and systematic education barriers can significantly impact students' decisions to discontinue language courses, even when they have a strong interest and positive experiences. This pattern underscores the importance of considering institutional policies and their impacts on student's academic choices, particularly in foreign language education.

Discussion

General discussion

This interview-based qualitative study illuminates learners' perceptions of their learning experiences and their decisions to discontinue Chinese language learning. This study identifies three main factors influencing learners' decisions to discontinue Chinese studies: the need for a supportive learning environment, the importance of instrumental motivation, and the impact of institutional policies.

Lily and Rachel's experiences underscore the critical role of a supportive learning environment in sustaining motivation. Both started with high motivation but were later significantly impacted by negative learning experiences. Lily's motivation dropped due to criticism from a professor but was reignited by an encouraging teacher. Similarly, Rachel struggled with a teaching style that did not align with her preferred learning methods, leading to a decrease in motivation. Both cases illustrate that negative learning experiences, particularly teaching-

related issues can demotivate students, while supportive and encouraging teaching can rekindle motivation and commitment.

Beyond the learning experience, Vick's case highlights the impact of the absence of instrumental motivation on language learning. Initially motivated by the perceived long-term benefits of learning Chinese, Vick's motivation waned when he could not see the practical benefits. Vick had a normal and moderate learning experience, but his lack of intrinsic motivation exacerbated his disengagement, as he prioritized other obligations over Chinese learning. This suggests that without clear instrumental motivation and intrinsic interest, students are less likely to stay engaged in language learning.

Deterrents identified in other LOTE studies, such as course conflicts and a preference for major-related courses (D'Amico & Sterling, 2023), also apply to Chinese. The interviews with Jessy and Mark reveal how institutional policies and academic workloads can impact students' ability to continue language studies, despite positive learning experiences. Jessy enjoyed her Chinese classes but struggled to balance her demanding course load, leading her to prioritize core engineering courses over Chinese. Mark was satisfied with his Chinese learning but could not continue due to schedule constraints and credit limitations. These cases highlight that even with strong interest and positive experiences, rigid curricular requirements and heavy academic workloads can force them to discontinue language courses.

The role of learning experience in learners' discontinuation of language learning

Our studies reveal that teacher support, instrumentality, and institutional policy interact significantly. The absence of any one element can potentially lead to the discontinuation of language learning. Learners' decision-making processes are profoundly shaped by their learning experience, which can either decrease motivation or inspire continued engagement. However, learning experience, while influential, might not be the most significant factor in this dynamic.

At Y College, despite strong ideal-L2 and ought-to-L2 motivations, Lily and Rachel initially discontinued their language studies due to negative learning experiences. However, once these issues were resolved, their persistent motivations allowed them to reengage. This exemplifies how unsupportive teaching and learning environments can undermine students' ideal L2 self and Ought-to L2 self, leading to discontinuation, while supportive conditions encourage re-engagement (Baguley et al., 2014; Venugopal-Wairagade, 2016). At Z College, Vick began learning Chinese for its perceived instrumental value, a key component related to his ideal L2 self, but he lost motivation over time despite a moderate learning experience. His reduced motivation to use Chinese for his career suggested a weaken of ideal L2 self, which ultimately lead to his discontinuation. This implies that while learning experience is significant in language learning, losing the ideal-L2 and ought-to-L2 motivation makes it hard for him to continue learning. In other words, learning experience might not be as crucial as ideal-L2 and ought-to-L2 motivations. At X College, Jessy and Mark both had positive learning experiences, and strong ideal L2 and ought-to L2. However, institution's policy on language courses prevented them from continuing language learning. Huang (2019) posited that learning experience predicts student motivation. However, our findings suggest that negative experiences do not always correlate with diminished L2 motivation. Positive learning experiences alone do not guarantee retention if institutional systemic barriers exist. Thus, while learning experience is an essential indicator of motivation, it is not as critical as ideal-L2 and ought-to-L2 motivations. Negative experiences may lead to discontinuation, but improved experiences can remotivate students if ideal-L2 remains intact. Conversely, positive

experiences and strong motivations cannot overcome systemic educational barriers, which may also lead to discontinuation.

Demotivation as a Self-Reinforcing Cycle

Among all three findings, Vick's case was found to be an interesting but complicated example, highlighting the complex interplay of multiple factors influencing CFL learners' decisions to discontinue their studies. The decision-making process is shaped by various elements of learning experiences, with certain experiences leading to motivational decline. This can initiate a self-reinforcing cycle of demotivation, as seen in Vick's experience. Teaching-related factors, such as inconsistent teaching approaches by different instructors contribute significantly to his disengagement, but uncertainties about the future utility of Chinese amplify his demotivation. Vick's gradual behavioral and emotional disconnection from the class is exacerbated by academic challenges and problematic teaching practices. The cumulative effect of these factors drives him into a state of demotivation, where meeting the bare minimum requirements becomes his only reason to remain in the classroom.

Taguchi et al. (2009) identified a significant correlation between instrumentality-promotion and the ideal L2 self. In Vick's situation, the loss of instrumental motivations and perceived future value in language learning eroded his ideal L2 self, contributing to his demotivation and reduced effort in the CFL classroom. This highlights the need for a holistic understanding of the factors such as instrumental motivation and the broader framework of L2MSS when examining learners' decisions to continue or discontinue their CFL studies. Educators can intervene this self-reinforcing cycle by addressing instrumental motivations that contribute to the development of a clear and achievable ideal L2 self, alleviating uncertainties about language utility, and enhancing the learning environment. The experiences of Vick reveal that sustaining an ideal L2 self, coupled with sufficient external support, can rekindle motivation. In contrast, for learners who have abandoned their ideal L2 self, regaining motivation is considerably more challenging.

Pedagogical implications

As student retention emerges as a significant concern for CFL teachers, the research findings offer several valuable implications for both CFL teachers and college programs in the U.S., especially targeting elementary-level learners.

Firstly, as discussed in the previous session, it is imperative to cultivate an inclusive and supportive learning environment. Inclusivity extends beyond teaching methods and classroom climate. It also encompasses providing supportive facilities that cater to diverse students' needs, which includes respecting students' backgrounds, offering flexible teaching approaches to accommodate varying learning styles, and ensuring access to resources such as tutoring services. Teachers should adopt differentiated instruction strategies to meet the varying learning paces of students. This is particularly crucial for beginners, many of whom are adjusting to college life. For these students, often freshmen, the provision of a nurturing educational setting is critical during their sensitive transition period.

Secondly, CFL educators should balance confidence with a realistic outlook. Chinese is categorized as a Category IV, super-hard language, according to Foreign Service Institute(n.d.), requiring 2200 class hours for native English speakers to reach professional working proficiency. Many CFL teachers might have the misconception that the unique orthographic system of Chinese poses significant challenges for learners. However, our findings indicate that all participants did not primarily cite the complexity of Chinese as a major reason for

discontinuation. Instead, negative learning experiences and various other factors played more significant roles. As Holman et al. (2006) and Lindström (2008) pointed out typological distance between languages does not equate to objective difficulty when learning either language. Therefore, CFL teachers should dispel the notion that students cease learning Chinese solely due to its inherent difficulty for English speakers.

Nevertheless, it is also necessary to recognize that for many U.S. students, Chinese may not be a primary academic focus. Low retention rates, while concerning, should not automatically be attributed to deficiencies in teaching or the learning experience. As observed in the research, positive experiences do not always translate to continued study. By adopting an optimistic and practical approach, instructors and program administrators can focus on understanding the diverse needs and motivations of students, allowing them to develop more effective and tailored strategies to improve retention rates.

Conclusions

This study represents one of the initial attempts to explore the factors leading to the discontinuation of Chinese language studies by delving into the learning experience and beyond and seeking strategies to reignite learners' motivation. Our findings contribute to the understanding that L2 learning experience comprises a multidimensional array of elements within L2 motivational studies. Moreover, it underscores the importance of considering factors beyond the learning experience that impact learners' decision to pursue language studies, particularly among beginners.

While this qualitative study research provides valuable insights into learners' perceptions of their learning experiences and the motivation trajectories of CFL learners, it is essential to acknowledge several limitations that may impact the generalizability and interpretation of the findings. Firstly, the reliance on participants' self-reported retrospective accounts of their learning experiences may introduce memory bias. Participants may not recall events accurately or may omit certain factors that influenced their decisions. Secondly, participants may have provided socially desirable responses or omitted certain factors that influenced their decisions. Thirdly, it is imperative to include teachers in further interviews and surveys to provide insights into the role of educators in supporting and motivating students. To address these limitations, future research could incorporate longitudinal studies that follow students throughout their language learning journey. Such studies would allow for a more comprehensive and dynamic exploration of learners' motivations, challenges, and changes over time. Future research could also benefit more from combining qualitative methods, such as interviews, with quantitative approaches to provide a broader and more nuanced perspective on the factors influencing CFL learning.

Appendix

1. What is your major and minor?
2. What Chinese courses are you currently taking? Have you taken any Chinese classes before college? If so, when and for how long?
(If not major/minor) Would you consider Chinese as a major or minor in the future? Does your major require any foreign language courses?
(If a Chinese major/minor) What are the language requirements at your school?
3. Why did you choose to study Chinese initially? Why choose Chinese over other languages? What are your career aspirations involving Chinese?

4. Can you share your overall perception of your Chinese learning experience? What aspects do you find most rewarding and are any challenges you have faced during the process? (follow-up: teaching method, learning material, interactions with teacher and peers, etc.)
5. During your process of learning Chinese, have you ever felt a lack of motivation? If yes, could you please elaborate? Could you give an example? What do you think are the primary reasons for that? Are there any other reasons that make you reluctant to learn Chinese?
6. (For students who have dropped the class) Why did you drop the class? Were the reasons you just mentioned factors in your decision to drop the class?
7. (For students consider discontinuing) Are you planning to discontinue learning Chinese? If so, why? What is discouraging you from wanting to learn Chinese?
8. (For returning students): You have dropped class before. What motivated you to return to learning Chinese? What convinced you to continue? How have you adjusted yourself in the learning? Have you taken any steps to motivate yourself?
9. Do you have any suggestions for the Chinese class, teachers, or the school?

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