

A Qualitative Study on Self-Regulated Learning of Chinese as a Second Language

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Abstract: The characteristics and challenges of learning Chinese as a second language (CSL) warrant a deeper understanding of the learning process from various perspectives to promote learning development. In the domain of second language acquisition research, the concept of self-regulated learning (SRL) has been gaining increased attention from researchers. SRL encompasses a broader and more profound connotation than previous models, as it emphasizes the strategic application of learning techniques to facilitate language development. This theoretical shift has yielded fruitful research results in the field. By investigating SRL, we can examine the dynamic and cyclical process of CSL learning from multiple dimensions and identify learning problems from the learners' perspective, ultimately finding solutions. This study aims to conduct qualitative research on SRL among five CSL learners with different cultural and educational backgrounds, utilizing qualitative study methods. The research focuses on exploring the characteristics and patterns of SRL among CSL learners, offering insights for teaching practices. The study will employ semi-structured interviews and reflective journals to gather in-depth data on the learners' SRL processes. Key questions include how SRL impacts CSL learning outcomes, the distinctive characteristics of applying SRL theory to CSL learning, and the effective implementation of SRL strategies to enhance learning. By addressing these questions, the research aims to fill the gap in existing literature and provide practical insights for educators to support the development of autonomous, self-regulated Chinese language learners. This, in turn, will contribute to improving instructional methods and promoting better academic achievements in CSL learners.

Keywords: Self-Regulated Learning; Qualitative Research; Learning Strategies; Learning Chinese as a Second Language

1. The Concept of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL)

Self-regulated learning (SRL) refers to “self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are planned and cyclically adapted to the attainment of personal goals”.¹ It is recognized as a core concept in educational psychology and has shown positive impacts on proactive learning and academic achievement across various disciplines.

SRL is a dynamic and cyclical process where learners set goals, monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided by their goals and environmental features. It allows students to be self-directed, self-motivated, and capable of sustaining their cognition, affect, and behavior to achieve their academic and professional goals.² According to Zimmerman, SRL includes three phases: forethought, performance, and self-reflection.¹ The forethought phase processes are used to prepare for learning and enhance its effectiveness. During the performance phase, processes are employed to facilitate self-control and self-monitoring of one's performance. The self-reflection phase occurs after learning efforts, optimizing one's reaction to the outcomes. These reflections, in turn, influence the forethought processes and beliefs about subsequent learning efforts, thereby completing a self-regulatory cycle.

Past research showed that SRL is crucial for students' academic achievement. By developing SRL skills, learners can enhance their academic performance by setting relevant goals, planning effective strategies, and closely monitoring their progress. SRL also helps students develop critical skills like goal-setting, strategic planning, and self-monitoring - essential for academic success. Additionally, SRL enables learners to better adjust their strategies based on feedback and changing conditions, making them more resilient and effective in the learning process. Ultimately, SRL helps students remain committed to their goals even when faced with challenges, empowering them to reach their full academic potential.³ The development of SRL skills is a key factor in driving student success and achievement.

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However, few studies have investigated the effectiveness of integrating SRL strategies into the instruction of Chinese as a Second Language (CSL). Thus, this study aimed to fill this gap by employing a case study research design to identify effective instructional strategies in the lens of self-regulated learning concepts and gain insights into students' perceptions in order to better their Chinese language proficiency. As Gu suggests, learning strategies have a prototypical core that involves a dynamic process with problem-solving as the central aim.⁴ By exploring the integration of SRL strategies within CSL, this research added to the growing body of research investigating the effectiveness of integrated strategy instruction in CSL and provides insights that can inform pedagogical practices and support the development of autonomous, self-regulated Chinese language learners.

2. SRL and CSL Learning

2.1 SRL in Second Language Acquisition Context

Schunk & Greene argue that integrating SRL into domain-specific instruction in formal educational settings promotes active learners and better academic outcomes.⁵ SRL principles, measurements, and practices have a solid ground for enriching second language learning and teaching. The integration of SRL principles into second language research can provide a comprehensive perspective that emphasizes not only the content of what is learned but also the processes involved in learning.

In 2005, Zoltan Dörnyei was the first to introduce the concept of self-regulation into the field of second language acquisition.⁶ He proposed that the traditional concept of learning strategy be replaced with the concept of self-regulation. This learning theory advocates examining various factors in the learning process from a holistic and systematic perspective rather than viewing their impact on the learning process and outcomes in isolation.⁷ Over the past two decades, the theory of SRL has been closely integrated with studies in second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, forming an important research area known as second language self-regulation. This holistic research approach helps us more comprehensively reveal the complexity and dynamism of language learning, thereby injecting new vitality into the development of the field of second language acquisition.

In recent years, research on SRL in second language acquisition has entered a prosperous period. The research encompasses the development and validation of measurement tools for SRL strategies, exploration of influencing factors, and the effectiveness of strategy-driven teaching methods. Recent studies further reveal that SRL in a second language exhibits distinct characteristics of being process-oriented, capability-driven, and developmental. This means that the ability of learners to effectively employ various strategies to stimulate, maintain, and adjust their cognition, emotions, and behaviors is a decisive factor in achieving learning goals.⁸ Moreover, SRL strategies in a second language are closely related to learners' motivation, emotions, and psychological factors, playing a positive role in enhancing learning outcomes and promoting individual development.⁹ These empirical studies have not only advanced the theory of self-regulated learning in second language acquisition but also provided practical and effective guidance for foreign language teaching practice.

2.2 Challenges in the Learning of CSL

Learning CSL presents a unique set of challenges for learners, particularly international students at all proficiency levels—elementary, intermediate, or advanced. Chinese, different from Indo-European languages, does require special consideration in teaching.¹⁰ These difficulties can be broadly categorized into linguistic and psychological aspects.

Chinese is a tonal language where the meaning of a word can change based on its tone. This aspect can be particularly challenging for learners whose native languages do not utilize tone in the same way. CSL learners face significant challenges due to the tonal nature of the language, which requires precise tone production and auditory discrimination. Pronunciation issues arise from unique phonemes, such as retroflex sounds and aspirated consonants. Learners must segment continuous speech into meaningful units, which demands a deep vocabulary and syntactic knowledge.¹¹ Chinese prosodic features, including intonation and rhythm, differ from those of alphabetic languages, necessitating adaptation to sound natural. Achieving fluency involves balancing tone, pronunciation, and segmentation, often resulting in hesitations. Targeted practice and feedback are essential for improving spoken proficiency.

In addition to speaking, CSL learners may face considerable challenges in listening. As mentioned above, Chinese is fundamentally different from alphabetic languages in its phonology, orthography, and morphology.¹² Particularly in Mandarin Chinese, a word can have different meanings depending on tonal contrasts signaled by modulations in pitch during articulation.¹³ The Mandarin Chinese tone system has five tonal values: high-level (Tone 1), rising (Tone 2), low-falling-rising (Tone 3), high-falling (Tone 4), and mid-flat (neutral, Tone 5). A change in tone alters the meaning of the syllable. Due to the complexity of the tonal system, many CSL learners' listening difficulties are caused by their inability to discriminate the tones.

Chinese writing system is complex, using logograms rather than an alphabet, which requires learners to memorize a large number of characters. According to Zhang, although learners have a positive attitude towards learning Chinese characters, they face significant difficulties in mastering their structure, pronunciation, and meaning.¹⁴ More than half of learners find Chinese characters the most challenging aspect of the language due to the need for new writing rules and visual habits. Writing characters is especially difficult, with common errors in stroke count, shape, and order. Synonyms are the hardest type of characters to master, followed by those with similar structures and pronunciations.

Furthermore, emotional factors, particularly anxiety, have a profound impact on CSL learners. Foreign language anxiety, characterized by feelings of apprehension and fear related to language learning, can hinder learners' performance by elevating their affective filter, which impedes the acquisition and production of the target language.¹⁵ The study by Xu et al. underscores that anxiety is a significant predictor of CSL learners' achievement, often more so than motivation or learning strategies.¹⁶

It is evident that Chinese is not an easy language to learn. Mastering Chinese is a complex and lengthy process that requires persistent effort from learners. Given these complexities, adopting effective learning strategies can help students overcome listening challenges and significantly enhance their listening performance. There is a strong need to investigate whether SRL strategies can help teachers teach more efficiently and enable learners to control and direct their learning processes. Understanding how to employ these strategies effectively is crucial.

To address the aforementioned issues, this study poses the following three research questions:

RQ1: How does SRL impact the learning outcomes of CSL learners?

RQ2: What are the distinctive characteristics of applying SRL theory in the field of CSL learning?

RQ3: How can SRL strategies be effectively implemented to enhance CSL learning?

3. Research Method

3.1 Research Instrument

SRL is a complex, dynamic, and context-dependent process, necessitating investigation from multiple perspectives using diverse measures. Traditionally, SRL research has relied heavily on self-report questionnaires to assess students' generalized actions across various settings. However, these instruments are limited in capturing the dynamic and cyclical nature of SRL, particularly how learners adapt their self-regulation processes in response to perceived progress and changing conditions. To address this limitation, Butler recommended that SRL researchers “[take] better advantage of case study designs to scrutinize how individual agency and social processes interact dynamically and reciprocally in context.” This recommendation stems from the understanding that case study research “is well suited to investigating the relationships among constructs associated with SRL as an encompassing theory of learning, one that characterizes complex synergies between emotion, motivation, cognition, metacognition, and behavior”.¹⁷

In light of this recommendation, a follow-up case study was conducted to perform a fine-grained analysis of SRL intervention effectiveness. This study employed semi-structured interviews and reflective journals as key tools. Semi-structured interviews, described as formal “verbal questionnaires,” consist of “a series of questions designed to elicit specific answers from respondents” and provide deeper insights into people's ideas, opinions, and experiences.¹⁸ Each participant was interviewed for approximately one and a half hours in Chinese, with assistance in English. The interviews were based on a semi-open questionnaire (Appendix A) and were video-recorded and transcribed into Chinese for data analysis. The semi-open

interview questionnaire is meticulously crafted to investigate self-regulated learning among learners of CSL. This instrument comprises 12 carefully structured questions that blend fixed response options with open-ended prompts. It delves into learners' motivations, initial difficulties, effective strategies, and goal-setting practices. Specific questions address the use of pre-class preparation, in-class practice, and post-class reflection, as well as the impact of personal factors such as personality and study habits. By encouraging detailed, reflective responses, this questionnaire aims to capture the dynamic and individualized nature of learners' self-regulated processes in diverse educational contexts.

Additionally, the study utilized the Study Log (Appendix B) as another critical instrument. Reflective journals, as Teng notes, "can have better access to learners' mental processing and internal changes".¹⁹ In this research, a Study Log was specifically designed for Chinese as second language learners. The Study Log features ten specific prompts that guide learners to reflect on their daily study activities. These prompts include reviewing content, learning new vocabulary and grammar, identifying and overcoming difficulties, setting and achieving study goals, planning for the next day, recognizing recent progress, seeking assistance, and preparing for the exam. By systematically addressing these areas, the Study Log helps learners to monitor and evaluate their learning process, develop effective study strategies, and enhance their language proficiency through structured self-reflection and planning. Participants were required to complete it weekly, and data were collected at the end of the semester and subsequently analyzed to gain comprehensive insights into the SRL processes.

3.2 Participants

Patton emphasizes that "the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research".²⁰ Researchers utilize purposive sampling to access a specific subset of individuals who meet particular criteria, ensuring that the selected participants are likely to provide valuable data. Rather than randomly selecting participants, researchers use their informed judgment to choose a sample that is expected to yield the necessary insights.

In this study, the researcher invited five students to participate. Each of these students had been studying with the researcher for one semester, either at two universities in Hong Kong or online. These participants were chosen because they came from diverse linguistic backgrounds and shared a strong motivation for learning CSL. Throughout the semester, the participants were required to complete a Study Log weekly and participate in a face-to-face interview at the end of the semester. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. To ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were assigned to each of them.

4. Finding and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal four key aspects of self-regulated learning among CSL learners: regulation of learning motivation, application of language learning strategies, language environment and social support, and understanding of SRL from the perspective learners:

4.1 Regulation of Learning Motivation

Motivation is "the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor process whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritized, operationalized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out".²¹ The diverse experiences of the five participants in CSL learning provide valuable insights into the interplay between motivation and self-regulated learning.

F is a 20-year-old French college student who, despite only having studied Chinese for eight months, demonstrates clear motivation and a strong drive to learn the language, primarily due to his Chinese girlfriend. In his daily life, he actively practices speaking Chinese with his girlfriend and communicates via WeChat (a social media platform), using both voice and text messages. He recounted an incident to the researcher where he struggled to communicate with his girlfriend's father, who is from Hunan province, due to his limited fluency in Chinese and the father's heavy accent. This experience underscored for him the complexity and diversity of the Chinese language, further fueling his determination to improve his

proficiency.

G is a 58-year-old woman from France. She shared with the researcher, “My parents are both English teachers. My mom could speak Chinese because she likes the Chinese language, so I have always been interested in learning Chinese but never had a good chance.” In 2017, she moved to Hong Kong for work, which provided her with many business connections in China and the motivation to formally learn Chinese. She enrolled in a short course at a university in Hong Kong for six months and has continued to learn Chinese through online tutoring with the researcher, even after returning to France in 2021. Her current motivation is less connected to work. She explained, “I am grateful when I can speak with my Chinese friends. Moreover, learning Chinese makes me feel smarter!” G’s initial motivation to formally learn Chinese was driven by career-related needs, which later evolved into a personal interest sustained through continued learning even after returning to France. G’s learning experience underscores the importance of personal, professional, and cognitive factors in motivating self-regulated learning among CSL learners and highlights how motivation can evolve at different learning stages. Thus, understanding the background of different learners and applying varied strategies in practical teaching is essential. Additionally, her journey from a university course in Hong Kong to online tutoring upon returning to France exemplifies the shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, a key aspect of self-regulated learning.

K mentioned that his motivation to learn Chinese stems from its practical benefits—many people speak Chinese, and proficiency in the language is advantageous when seeking employment in Hong Kong. He is confident in his learning abilities and practices consistently, often speaking Chinese with his younger brother or attempting to communicate with others in Mandarin in Hong Kong. However, he also expressed concerns about the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on language learning: “Learning Chinese well doesn’t seem as important because AI can help me with many things.” In response, the teacher shared their perspective on this issue, emphasizing that although AI can assist with translation, it necessitates a higher level of “discrimination” skills to evaluate the quality of the translations. Achieving this level of discernment can be as challenging as traditional learning. Therefore, without a solid foundation in the language, one cannot effectively utilize AI tools. K agreed with this viewpoint. This interaction reflects a nuanced understanding of self-regulated learning, where technology complements but does not replace foundational knowledge. It highlights the importance of a robust language foundation to leverage technological advancements effectively.

J is a 21-year-old Japanese student studying Liberal Arts. His father is from Fujian province in China, and his initial motivation to learn Chinese was to communicate with his relatives in China. This motivation has since strengthened, as he now aims to use Chinese in business dealings with Chinese clients. Similarly, T, a 22-year-old woman from Thailand, began learning Chinese due to family reasons. “My mom sent me to Chinese school,” she explained, indicating that her early learning was somewhat passive. However, her current motivation stems from “the advantage of Chinese in employment.” Although she has secured a job in Hong Kong, she noted, “I can’t always work in this company; I need to learn Chinese well to go to China, which is a bigger market.” Both J and T initially started learning Chinese due to family influences. Now, both learners view Chinese proficiency as crucial for their career development. This underscores the significant role that career prospects play in sustaining and enhancing motivation for language learning.

The participants’ diverse experiences reveal the dynamic nature of motivation in language learning, shaped by personal, familial, and professional influences. By understanding each learner’s unique background, educators can implement varied strategies that support self-regulated learning and foster diverse motivations. Long-term goals, whether stemming from relationships, career aspirations, or cognitive growth, are crucial for sustaining this motivation. To support these goals, a range of tailored approaches—from formal education and online tutoring to daily practice and technological integration—is vital for maintaining long-term language acquisition. Based on social cognitive theory, self-regulated learning not only details personal processes, but also involves environmental and behavioral impacts in reciprocal ways.²² These findings also align with Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the significance of social and cultural contexts in learning.²³ The participants’ experiences vividly illustrate how social interactions, such as familial encouragement and professional demands, and cultural contexts, such as community integration and the development of AI tools, profoundly shape their motivation. These factors not only initiate but also sustain their engagement and progression in language learning. By acknowledging

and cultivating these varied motivations, educators can more effectively guide students toward their language learning objectives, ensuring that motivation remains adaptive and evolves throughout different stages of learning.

4.2 Application of Language Learning Strategies

Language learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use to improve their progress in developing skills in a second language.²⁴ These strategies can make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, and more transferable to new situations. Through our research, we found that the participants employ various strategies in CSL learning. Additionally, each participant employs different strategies to improve their learning:

F mentioned that he has a strong memory, which differentiates him from many students from the “Non-Chinese Character Cultural Sphere” (regions or countries where Chinese characters are not used as the primary writing system, nor is the culture significantly influenced by Chinese characters) who are often stereotyped as finding Chinese characters challenging. He finds “learning Chinese characters and other aspects of learning Chinese relatively easy, but forming complete sentences is still very difficult. It’s like playing the piano; it’s easy to play a single key, but hard to play a complete piece.” In response, the researcher suggested that F first write down what he wants to say, then read the written sentences out loud. This approach can help organize thoughts and improve pronunciation by comparing it to standard pronunciations. Additionally, the researcher recommended that F increase his use of WeChat, either through text or voice messages. Now, F often sends messages through WeChat to the researcher and his friends, which makes learning enjoyable and enhances his Chinese skills.

Whereas F find Chinese characters are easy to learn, K, a Korean student from the “Chinese Character Cultural Circle” (countries like China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, where Chinese characters have historically played a significant role in writing and culture), states “writing Chinese characters the most difficult part for me. Other aspects are not very hard. I use a dictionary method to learn, looking at how words are written and what they mean. Initially, I only looked at how words were written and then wrote them down carefully. Now, besides copying, I also write down the meanings of the words.”

J told the researcher, “The phonetics of Chinese are the hardest because the four tones are often difficult to distinguish.” This challenge is very typical for students from the “Chinese Character Cultural Circle”, where character learning is not as difficult, but speaking and listening skills can be challenging. To address this, J listens to podcasts, Chinese music, and watches Chinese movies and TV shows to increase his language input. He also tries to watch Chinese movies or TV shows without looking at the subtitles to improve his listening and comprehension skills.

T is a very diligent student who often brings her written “short essays” to the researcher for correction during regular teaching. She pointed out, “I find it useful when the teacher helps me correct my essays; otherwise, I would just study on my own. I also think teachers should use more Chinese instead of English to explain.”

Unlike the aforementioned participants who mainly focus on cognitive strategies, G believes her biggest concern is “time management”, which can be attributed to metacognitive strategies. She is the only participant who has already started working. Although she has a strong motivation to learn, aside from one hour per week with the researcher, she finds it difficult to dedicate time specifically to studying Chinese. Through observation, the researcher found that, compared to other participants, her progress seems slower. The main reason for this outcome is that G has significantly less time for practice and review than others. Consequently, in every tutoring session, the researcher has to spend more time reviewing previous learning content with her. She has also tried setting up a study schedule to manage her time, but the results have not been significant. Furthermore, “time management” may indeed be a common issue that impedes CSL learning for many adult learners.

From the above interview records, we find that the learning difficulties in the learning of CSL may not be “stereotyped”, and we should further investigate individual needs. We see that the difficulty of Chinese characters for K from the “Chinese Character Cultural Circle” and F from the “Non-Chinese Character Cultural Sphere” differs from our expectations. In fact, Chinese characters pose a challenge

for students from various backgrounds, but the key difference lies in which strategies are most efficient for each learner. We also observe that specific learning strategies evolve with the learning process. For instance, K initially looked up how words were written in a dictionary and later began writing down their meanings. The researcher suggests that K try noting the meanings in Chinese instead of English in the future to improve his Chinese. Thus, it is important to monitor the student's learning progress and bear in mind that self-regulation interventions "require different methodologies to capture the dynamic nature of self-regulation".⁵ Moreover, enriching and detailing the content of simple strategies can yield unexpected results. For example, T finds that the most useful method is having the teacher correct her essays and hopes the teacher uses more Chinese to increase language input. In actual teaching, we often try to innovate with new forms and find "tricks" to attract students. However, the researcher argues that enriching and deepening existing methods under the basic principles of second language teaching—such as increasing language input and improving the frequency of repetition—can make learning and teaching strategies more practical and effective. For second language acquisition (SLA), having access to language input is critical. Language input is considered one of the fundamental external factors that influence SLA.²⁵

4.3 Language Environment and Social Support

Based on social cognitive theory, self-regulated learning not only details personal processes, but also involves environmental and behavioral impacts in reciprocal ways.²² All participants mentioned the influence of the learning environment on their studies.

K initially started learning Chinese because he attended high school in Beijing, where he made many Chinese friends. This environment motivated him to begin his Chinese studies. However, he expressed a concern about his current situation: "In Hong Kong, I don't have many opportunities to speak Chinese. I hope to find more opportunities to use Chinese to improve my level and ability." Similarly, T shared a comparable concern: "In Hong Kong, I can speak Mandarin, but there are more opportunities in mainland China or Taiwan because more people speak Chinese. So, when traveling in mainland China or Taiwan, I feel a sense of achievement when I can communicate with the locals in Chinese, but if there are communication difficulties, I feel frustrated." G's situation is even more challenging. "I cannot find anyone to speak Chinese with me in France besides my teacher. Although my mom can speak Chinese, her pronunciation is so poor that we cannot understand each other." J shares similar concerns about finding opportunities to use Chinese, so he has decided to attend a short-term language and culture program in Beijing for two weeks. F, whose girlfriend is Chinese, is currently undertaking a six-month internship in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, and hopes to use this experience to significantly improve his Chinese skills.

These examples underscore the critical role of the language environment in acquiring Chinese as a second language. Language environment is so crucial because "language environment can impact the learner's affective factors, such as anxiety, self-confidence, and motivation, which are known to play a crucial role in second language acquisition."²⁶ All participants recognize this and are eager to create better opportunities for CSL learning. CSL Teachers in Hong Kong often face the issue of a "lack of a Mandarin-speaking environment in Hong Kong" in their teaching. To address this, we suggest that students make more Mandarin-speaking friends, consider visiting Shenzhen—a neighboring city to Hong Kong in Mainland China—on weekends, or travel to China during holidays as a "temporary solution". However, in the absence of a Chinese-speaking environment abroad, constructing a conducive language and learning environment remains essential.

However, through this study, we are glad to see that the learners are proactive in seeking help by themselves and improving their external environments. For instance, F uses tools like WeChat and Xiaohongshu (a social media platform), K tries to chat with his Chinese friends in Chinese, and T often listens to podcasts. Bandura emphasizes that "individuals, behaviors, and environments interact, and environmental factors play an important role in self-regulated learning".²² We can see that "environmental regulation" is a key aspect of students' self-regulation efforts. With the rapid advancement of technology today, using platforms like WeChat, Xiaohongshu, podcasts, and even AI can not only facilitate the learning of Chinese but also help students create a Chinese learning environment and enhance cultural adaptation, making these tools "multi-benefit" resources.

4.4 Understanding of SRL from the of Perspective Learners

Through a semester of guidance on “self-regulated learning”, participants believe it is an effective method to promote learning.

Firstly, self-regulated learning improves learning efficiency. Zimmerman’s three-phase model of self-regulated learning (Forethought Phase, Performance Phase, and Self-Reflection Phase) emphasizes the cyclical nature of self-regulated learning.¹ The self-reflection phase informs and influences the forethought phase of future learning activities, creating a continuous loop of self-improvement and adaptation. For example, K mentioned that he now spends five to ten minutes before each class studying the PPT provided by the researcher in advance. This preparation makes him more familiar with the class content and thus enhances his learning efficiency. J and G both find Chinese listening particularly challenging but have never engaged in the “forethought phase”. Therefore, the researcher advises them to prepare well before listening activities by searching for the background information of the listening material. They all report that doing more preparation before listening activities helps them comprehend more and reduces anxiety during listening.

Secondly, we found the ability of “self-reflection” significantly impacts the effectiveness of CSL learning. The participants expressed that not only in Chinese classes but also in other courses, there were hardly any assignments specifically involving “self-reflection” before: What did I learn? What problems did I encounter? What methods will I use to solve these problems... Previously, these were just thoughts in the learners' minds, but now they are presented in written form through Study Log, which is a new experience. In a semester of Study Log, the researcher also discovered some valuable content for future research. For example, learners gradually use the target language (Chinese) more to complete their Study Log; learners' misunderstandings, miswriting, or lack of understanding of certain Chinese characters or language points are presented in the logs, allowing researchers to adjust teaching strategies promptly. F teaches French in his spare time and told the researcher that he asks his students to maintain a Study Log to learn French, which has proven to be an efficient method.

Additionally, SRL has been shown to enhance learners’ motivation and confidence in the Chinese language learning process. For instance, participants K and T both emphasized that SRL involves not just pre-class preparation, in-class practice, and post-class reflection, but also a constant adjustment of one’s mindset. As K noted, he no longer worries excessively about “not remembering” because he understands that the journey from “starting to learn” to “remembering” is a process that involves teacher explanation, self-practice, reflection, questioning, and repeated practice. Similarly, T shared that she rarely feels anxious about “not understanding” anymore. Under a self-regulated approach, she carefully analyzes questions before listening, records any points of confusion and questions that arise during listening, and then reflects on and follows up on those questions after the lesson. This systematic, scientific method has made her Chinese language learning more efficient and boosted her confidence. Pintrich stated that “self-regulated learning is an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning, and then monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and contextual features of the environment”.²⁷ From the examples provided, it is clear that these learners have developed a proactive, self-directed approach to studying Chinese.

5. Implications for CSL Teaching

The findings from this study on SRL among CSL learners offer several important implications for future teaching practices. By understanding and integrating SRL strategies, teachers can enhance the learning experiences and outcomes for their students. Below are key implications derived from the research:

5.1 Nurturing Individual’s SRL Ability

From this study, we can find that it is necessary to nurture students’ SRL skills, as they may not innately know or have been trained in these strategies and simply exposing students to the learning content is not enough. Many students may lack the metacognitive awareness and self-management techniques required for effective independent language learning. By intentionally developing students’ SRL capabilities, we can empower them to take a more active role in managing their own learning process.

Firstly, teachers should guide students in setting specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound goals for their language learning because “setting specific goals enhances motivation and provides clear benchmarks for progress”.²⁸ These goals can encompass improving speaking skills, mastering specific vocabulary sets, or achieving particular proficiency levels. For instance, Participant F, who struggled with pronunciation, benefited significantly from setting targeted goals for tonal practice. Similarly, Participants J and T attended the HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test), which not only supported their studies but also proved practical for job opportunities.

Secondly, teachers should incorporate regular self-reflection activities into their instruction. Self-assessment and reflection are critical elements of SRL. Paris and Paris note that these practices help learners develop metacognitive skills and foster deeper engagement with the learning material.²⁹ Tools such as learning journals or study logs, as used in the study, can help students track their progress and reflect on their learning strategies and outcomes. For instance, Participant K reported that using a Study Log was very useful for reflecting on his studies, helping him to think holistically and deeply about his learning process.

Similarly, constructive feedback is crucial in guiding students on how to modify their learning strategies for better results. For example, feedback was particularly beneficial for Participant J, who previously never paid attention to searching for background information and struggled with his Chinese listening. However, he improved the forethought phase in listening based on the teacher’s input. Additionally, the researcher argues that feedback through resources such as study logs can be a valuable supplement to teacher-student interactions, as they can help identify problems that might be overlooked or unreported in classroom teaching.

5.2 Made-to-measure SRL

Through this qualitative study, we can find that students’ motivation for learning, the difficulties they encounter, and the amount of time they can devote to learning Chinese are all different. This requires us, in practical teaching, not to simply assume that students from a similar background will face the same learning challenges and difficulties. Only by gaining an in-depth understanding can we formulate effective teaching strategies and trigger the SRL.

At the same time, one of the characteristics of self-regulated learning is that it is a dynamic and cyclical process.¹ In the study, we evidenced learning is developmental, and self-regulation is not static either. For example, K has progressed from only looking up how characters are written in the dictionary to also looking at example sentences. Therefore, CSL learners must continuously adjust learning strategies according to the progress in learning. The Chinese saying, “因地制宜，因人而异，因时而异” (adapt measures to local conditions, tailor approaches to individuals, and adjust actions to different times), is equally applicable to the concept of self-regulated learning in the Chinese context.

5.3 Integrating SRL into CSL Teaching

Chinese is widely considered one of the most challenging languages for non-native learners to acquire. Students often encounter a variety of substantial difficulties throughout their Chinese learning journey. In practical teaching, instructors commonly struggle with how to teach Chinese effectively and efficiently, given the inherent complexities of the language.

Previous studies have credited SRL strategies with significantly enhancing language learning outcomes.³⁰ This study suggests that integrating and nurturing SRL skills in CSL learners can be tremendously beneficial. However, we also find that CSL learners may lack the knowledge and training in SRL strategies. If students are well-trained in SRL strategies, such as goal-setting, self-monitoring, and reflective practices, they will be more proactive and equipped with a versatile toolset to overcome learning obstacles. Thus, by empowering CSL students to become self-directed, autonomous learners, we can improve learning outcomes and better support students in mastering the Chinese language.

Moreover, this study emphasizes the critical importance of explicitly developing students’ SRL competencies as an integral component of Chinese language education. Oxford argues that integrating SRL strategies into language teaching not only benefits learners but also provides teachers with valuable insights into students’ learning behaviors.⁸ By integrating SRL into CSL teaching, we can not only help learners

become more proactive and efficient in their learning but also enable teachers to better understand the learners' difficulties and learning processes. This understanding fosters improved interactions with students, facilitating the creation of a more constructive and supportive learning environment. This transformative approach holds significant promise for enhancing the effectiveness of practical teaching and advancing the overall understanding of self-regulated learning in the context of teaching CSL.

6. Limitations

This study offers insights into SRL among CSL learners, but several limitations should be noted.

Firstly, data collection was primarily through semi-structured questions and study logs, which may be subject to self-reporting and recall biases. The study's duration of one semester may not fully capture the long-term development and effectiveness of SRL strategies. Extended longitudinal research is necessary to observe changes over time.

Secondly, the small sample size of five participants limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the cultural and contextual focus on participants in Hong Kong restricts the applicability of the results to other regions. Furthermore, the study primarily involved motivated learners, potentially overlooking the experiences of less motivated or struggling students. Including a broader range of learners could provide a more comprehensive understanding of SRL challenges and needs. Future research should explore SRL strategies in diverse cultural and educational settings to enhance the robustness and generalizability of the conclusions.

Finally, integrating the theory and research findings of SRL with the unique characteristics of CSL learning remains an important question. Future studies should systematically examine the learning processes and challenges specific to CSL learners, and explore how SRL strategies can be effectively integrated to enhance Chinese language acquisition. This approach will help identify commonalities and distinctive features in the application of SRL strategies, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and relevance in the context of CSL education.

7. Conclusion

This study identifies key challenges in CSL learning, such as tonal discrimination and character memorization, and suggests that effective SRL strategies can mitigate these difficulties. It highlights the dynamic and cyclical nature of SRL among CSL learners, emphasizing motivation strategies, application of specific language learning strategies, and interaction among learners and teachers. Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions can be drawn regarding effective strategies and activities promoting SRL among CSL learners.

Firstly, the study concludes that SRL can cultivate CSL learners to become self-regulated learners equipped with effective motivations and strategies. Unlike traditional CSL learning, SRL-integrated learning focuses on the learning process through the forethought phase, the performance phase, and the self-reflection phase. During these phases, appropriate cognitive, metacognitive, and social-affective strategies are employed to train students to take control of their own learning and become self-regulated learners.²⁸ This dynamic and cyclical process provides CSL learners with valuable tools and strategies to become more effective learners.

Secondly, the study finds that all participants perceived SRL as beneficial for enhancing their Chinese learning abilities. SRL instruction not only helped students raise awareness of strategy use, change their learning approaches, and increase their self-confidence and self-efficacy, but also fostered learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. CSL teachers can design personalized SRL plans tailored to the specific needs and backgrounds of their students, fostering a more supportive and effective learning environment. By integrating SRL principles into language instruction, teachers can empower learners to take control of their educational journey, enhancing their motivation, persistence, and overall academic performance.⁵

Finally, the study concludes that the proactive use of metacognitive, cognitive, social, and affective strategies by self-regulated learners significantly enhances learning outcomes.²⁴ It is essential to cultivate CSL learners from passive to proactive, introduce more learning strategies, and focus on how to learn Chinese effectively. Future research should address the study's limitations by expanding sample sizes,

employing diverse data collection methods, exploring the long-term impacts of SRL in various cultural contexts, and how to better adapt the SRL into CSL setting.

In summary, developing SRL skills is crucial for successful language acquisition. By refining these skills, CSL learners can navigate language complexities more effectively, achieving greater proficiency and confidence.

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Interview Questionnaire

“学习情况调查”访谈问题 (Xuéxí Qíngkuàng Diàochá)
(Learning Situation Survey)

一. 背景情况 (Bèijǐng Qíngkuàng) (Background Information)

姓名 (Xìngmíng): (Name):

国籍 (Guójí): (Nationality):

性别 (Xìngbié): (Gender):

年龄 (Niánlíng): (Age):

学习中文的时间 (Xuéxí Zhōngwén de Shíjiān): (How long have you been studying Chinese?):

教育背景 (Jiàoyù Bèijǐng): (Educational Background):

二. 访谈问题 (Fǎngtán Wèntí) (Interview Questions)

1. 最初, 你为什么要学习中文? 在学习过程中, 这一目标是否发生了改变? (Zuìchū, nǐ wèishénme yào xuéxí zhōngwén? Zài xuéxí guòchéng zhōng, zhè yī mùbiāo shìfǒu fāshēng le gǎibiàn?) (What initially motivated you to learn Chinese? Has this motivation changed during your learning process?)
2. 开始阶段, 你认为学习中文的困难是什么? (例如: 语音、词汇、语法、文化等方面) 最大困难是什么? 为什么? 你是如何克服这些困难的? 使用了哪些具体的策略或方法? 现在这些困难还存在吗? (Kāishǐ jiēduàn, nǐ rènwéi xuéxí zhōngwén de kùnnan shì shénme? (Lǐrú: yǔyīn, cíhuì, yǔfǎ, wénhuà děng fāngmiàn) Zuidà kùnnan shì shénme? Wèishénme? Nǐ shì rúhé kéfú zhèxiē kùnnan de? Shíyòng le nǎxiē jùtǐ de cèlǜ huò fāngfǎ? Xiànzài zhèxiē kùnnan hái cúnzài ma?) (In the beginning stages, what did you find difficult about learning Chinese? (e.g., pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, culture) What was the biggest challenge? Why? How did you overcome these difficulties? What specific strategies or methods did you use? Do these difficulties still exist?)
3. 你认为学习中文, 有哪些好的方法? (你从哪里学习到这些方法的? 你觉得这些方法为什么有效? 你在使用这些方法时遇到过什么困难和感受吗?) (Nǐ rènwéi xuéxí zhōngwén, yǒu nǎxiē hǎo de fāngfǎ? (Nǐ cóng nǎlǐ xuéxí dào zhèxiē fāngfǎ de? Nǐ juéde zhèxiē fāngfǎ wèishénme yǒuxiào? Nǐ zài shíyòng zhèxiē fāngfǎ shí yùdào guò shénme kùnnan hé gǎnshòu ma?) (What do you think are some effective methods for learning Chinese? (Where did you learn these methods? Why do you think these methods are effective? What difficulties and feelings have you encountered while using these methods?)
4. 你是第一次听说“课前预习、课上练习、课后反思”这样的学习方法吗? 请描述一下你是如何在学习中文的过程中使用“课前预习、课上练习、课后反思”, 或类似学习方法的? (Nǐ shì dì yī cì tīngshuō “kèqián yùxí, kèshàng liànxí, kèhòu fǎnsī” zhèyàng de xuéxí fāngfǎ ma? Qǐng miáoshù yíxià nǐ shì rúhé zài xuéxí zhōngwén de guòchéng zhōng shíyòng “kèqián yùxí, kèshàng liànxí, kèhòu fǎnsī”, huò lèisi xuéxí fāngfǎ de?) (Is this the first time you've heard of the learning method "preview before class, practice during class, and reflect after class"? Please describe how you use "preview before class, practice during class, and reflect after class", or similar learning methods, in your Chinese learning process?)
5. 你有没有尝试过使用学习日志来学习中文? 如果有, 你觉得它对你的学习有哪些帮助? 如果没有, 你认为是什么原因让你没有尝试使用学习日志呢? (Nǐ yǒu méiyǒu chángshì guò shíyòng xuéxí rìzhì lái xuéxí zhōngwén? Rúguo yǒu, nǐ juéde tā duì nǐ de xuéxí yǒu nǎxiē bāngzhù? Rúguo méiyǒu, nǐ rènwéi shì shénme yuányīn ràng nǐ méiyǒu chángshì shíyòng xuéxí rìzhì ne?) (Have you tried using a learning journal to study Chinese? If so, how do you think it helps your learning? If not, why do you think you haven't tried using a learning journal?)
6. 你每个星期, 大概花多少时间学习中文? 时间是如何分配的? (总体时间、具体分配, 比如: 听说读写这几个方面) (Nǐ měi ge xīngqī, dàgài huā duōshao shíjiān xuéxí zhōngwén? Shíjiān shì rúhé fēnpèi de? (Zǒngtǐ shíjiān, jùtǐ fēnpèi, bǐrú: tīng shuō dú xiě zhè jǐ ge fāngmiàn) (About how much time do you spend studying Chinese each week? How do you allocate your time? (Total time, specific allocation, for example: listening, speaking, reading, writing)
7. 你会使用哪些指标或方法来评估自己的中文学习进度? 你对现在的学习成果满意吗? 可以具体谈谈你的评估方法和感受吗? (Nǐ huì shíyòng nǎxiē zhǐbiao huò fāngfǎ lái pínggū zìjǐ de zhōngwén xuéxí jìndù? Nǐ duì xiànzài de xuéxí chéngguó mǎnyì ma? Kěyǐ jùtǐ tán tān nǐ de pínggū fāngfǎ hé gǎnshòu ma?) (What metrics or methods do you use to assess your Chinese language learning progress? Are you satisfied with your current learning achievements? Could you elaborate on your assessment methods and feelings?)
8. 你认为教师在学习过程中, 对你最大的帮助是什么? 希望老师在哪些方面给予你更多的帮助? 你认为什么样的教学方式对你来说最有效? (Nǐ rènwéi jiàoshī zài xuéxí guòchéng zhōng, duì nǐ zuìdà de bāngzhù shì shénme? Xīwàng lǎoshī zài nǎxiē fāngmiàn jǐyǔ nǐ gèng duō de bāngzhù? Nǐ rènwéi shénme yàng de jiàoxué fāngshì duì nǐ lái shuō zuì yǒuxiào?) (What do you think is the biggest help your teacher has given you in the learning process? In what areas would you like your teacher to give you more help? What kind of teaching methods do you think are most effective for you?)
9. 学习中文的过程中, 你的动力是什么? (动力来源、动力变化) (Xuéxí zhōngwén de guòchéng zhōng, nǐ de dònglì shì shénme? (Dònglì láiyuán, dònglì biànhuà) (What motivates you to learn Chinese? (Source of motivation, changes in

motivation)

10. 学习中文的时候, 你会不会给自己设定一个目标? (Xuéxí zhōngwén de shíhòu, nǐ huì bu huì gěi zìjǐ shèdìng yīgè mùbiāo?) (When learning Chinese, do you set goals for yourself?) 如果有的话, 你通常如何设定学习目标? 可以分别谈谈你的近期目标、中期目标和远期目标吗? (例如, 下学期开始前、一年内、三年后) (Rúguǒ yǒu de huà, nǐ tōngcháng rúhé shèdìng xuéxí mùbiāo? Kéyǐ fēnbíe tán tán nǐ de jìnqī mùbiāo, zhōngqī mùbiāo hé yuǎnqī mùbiāo ma? (Lírú, xià xuéqī kāishǐ qián, yī nián nèi, sān nián hòu) (If so, how do you usually set learning goals? Could you talk about your short-term, mid-term and long-term goals respectively? (For example, before the beginning of next semester, within one year, after three years)
11. 在学习中文的过程中, 你遇到过哪些让你感到有成就感或挫败感的经历? (Zài xuéxí zhōngwén de guòchéng zhōng, nǐ yùdào guò nǎxiē ràng nǐ gǎndào yǒu chéngjiùgǎn huò cuòbài gǎn de jīnglǐ?) (What experiences have you had in your Chinese learning process that have made you feel accomplished or frustrated?)
12. 你认为哪些个人因素(例如: 性格、学习习惯、学习环境等)会影响你的中文学习效果? (Nǐ rènwéi nǎxiē gèrén yīnsù (lírú: xìnggé, xuéxí xíguàn, xuéxí huánjīng děng) huì yǐngxiǎng nǐ de zhōngwén xuéxí xiàoguǒ?) (What personal factors (e.g., personality, study habits, learning environment, etc.) do you think affect your Chinese language learning effectiveness?)

APPENDIX B

Study Log

学习日志 Xuéxí Rìzhì

姓名 (xìngmíng, Name) _____ 日期 (rìqī, Date) _____

一、我复习了哪些内容? What lessons did I review today?

Yī, wǒ fùxīle nǎxiē nèiróng?

二、我学到了哪些新的生词和语法点? What new vocabulary and grammar points did I learn?

Èr, wǒ xuédaole nǎxiē xīn de shēngcí hé yǔfǎ diǎn?

三、我在学习遇到了哪些困难? What difficulties did I encounter while studying?

Sān, wǒ zài xuéxí zhōng yùdào le nǎxiē kùnnan?

四、我将如何克服这些困难? How will I overcome these difficulties?

Sì, wǒ jiāng rúhé kèfú zhèxiē kùnnan?

五、我今天的学习目标是什么? 达成了吗? What were my study goals for today? Did I achieve them?

Wǔ, wǒ jīntiān de xuéxí mùbiāo shì shénme? Dáchéngle ma?

六、我未来几天的学习计划是什么? What is my study plan for the next few days?

Liù, wǒ wèi lái jǐ tiān de xuéxí xī jì huà shì shén me?

七、我最近在哪些方面取得了进步? In what areas have I made progress recently?

Qī, wǒ zuìjìn zài nǎxiē fāngmiàn qǔdéle jìnbù?

八、我需要老师或同学在哪些方面给予帮助? In what areas do I need help from my teacher or classmates?

Bā, wǒ xūyào lǎoshī huò tóngxué zài nǎxiē fāngmiàn jǐyǔ bāngzhù?

九、为了更好地准备考试, 我还需要做些什么? What else do I need to do to better prepare for the exam?

Jiǔ, wèile gèng hǎo de zhǔnbèi kǎoshì, wǒ hái xūyào zuò xiē shénme?

十、我对最近的学习状态满意吗? 为什么? Am I satisfied with my recent study status? Why or why not?

Shí, wǒ duì zuìjìn de xuéxí zhuàngtài mǎnyì ma? Wèishénme?
