INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN BUSINESS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

Vol 16, Issue 7, (2026) E-ISSN: 2222-6990

Duration of Prior Chinese Learning and HSK Proficiency Development among International Students in Chinese Universities

Fan Jingjing
Kuala Lumpur University of Science and Technology, Malaysia
Email: 1264940724@qq.com

Mahendran Maniam
Associate Professor, Faculty of Education and Liberal Arts (FELA). INTI International University, Nilai, Malaysia
Email: Mahendran.maniam@newinti.edu.com

DOI Link: http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARBSS/v16-i7/28741

Published Date: 30 July 2026

Abstract

Chinese has become one of the fastest-growing foreign languages worldwide due to China's expanding role in global education, trade, and international cooperation. International students enrolling in Chinese universities often enter with varying levels of prior Chinese language exposure, which may influence their subsequent academic achievement and language development. This study examines the duration of Chinese language learning before university enrollment, students' initial Chinese proficiency based on the Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK), and their current Chinese proficiency after studying in Chinese universities. The study employs a quantitative descriptive research design using frequency and percentage analyses of survey data collected from international students. The findings indicate that the majority of students entered university with one to two years of prior Chinese learning and basic HSK proficiency (HSK Levels 1–2). However, substantial improvements were observed during university study, with nearly half of the respondents attaining HSK Level 6 proficiency. These findings demonstrate the effectiveness of university-level Chinese language education and immersive learning environments in enhancing language competence. The study contributes to the understanding of Chinese language acquisition among international students and provides recommendations for strengthening preparatory language programs and differentiated instructional approaches.

Keywords: Chinese Language Learning, HSK, International Students, Language Proficiency, Chinese Universities, Second Language Acquisition

Background of the Study

With China's growing influence in higher education and international cooperation, increasing numbers of international students choose Chinese universities for academic study. Since Chinese serves as both the instructional language and a medium for daily communication, language proficiency becomes a critical factor influencing academic success, cultural adaptation, and social integration (Byram, 1997; Ellis, 2015). International students enter Chinese universities with diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds. Some students have several years of Chinese language instruction before university admission, while others begin learning Chinese only after arrival. These differences often influence students' learning pace, classroom participation, and overall language achievement (Lightbown & Spada, 2020). Previous studies have shown that both prior exposure and immersion significantly contribute to second language acquisition (Krashen, 1985).

The Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) serves as China's standardized proficiency assessment for non-native speakers and provides a reliable measure of learners' Chinese language competence. Understanding students' progression from their initial HSK levels to their current proficiency offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of university language programs and the role of immersive learning environments. Chinese language proficiency has become increasingly important as China expands its influence in international education, trade, and diplomacy (UNESCO, 2021; Baker, 2011; Chen & Wang, 2021). Students with different linguistic backgrounds experience varying rates of language acquisition depending on prior exposure, motivation, and learning opportunities (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 2015).

Language Learning Background and Chinese Proficiency Development

Chinese language learning among international students is a progressive process influenced by learners' prior exposure to the language, formal instruction, motivation, and opportunities for authentic communication. Students entering Chinese universities often possess diverse educational and linguistic backgrounds, ranging from complete beginners to those with several years of formal Chinese language study. These differences in learning experiences shape learners' initial language competence and may influence their adaptation to university-level academic and social environments (Ellis, 2015; Gardner, 1985). The Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK) serves as the official standardized assessment of Chinese language proficiency for non-native speakers and has become an internationally recognized benchmark for evaluating learners' language competence. HSK levels provide educational institutions with a reliable measure for placing students into appropriate language courses and monitoring their progress throughout their academic programs. Consequently, examining students' HSK levels before and after university enrollment offers valuable evidence regarding language development and the effectiveness of higher education language instruction (Hanban, 2020; Wen, 2018).

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that sustained exposure to the target language through immersive educational environments significantly enhances second language acquisition. Students studying in Chinese universities benefit not only from formal classroom instruction but also from continuous interaction with native speakers, participation in academic activities, and everyday communication in Chinese. These authentic learning experiences contribute to improvements in listening, speaking, reading, and writing

skills while promoting greater confidence and communicative competence (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996; Lightbown & Spada, 2020). Despite differences in students' initial proficiency levels, effective curriculum design and learner-centered teaching strategies can substantially reduce learning gaps over time. Universities often provide structured language courses, tutorial support, cultural activities, and academic assistance that facilitate continuous language development. As students advance through their programs, they gradually acquire higher levels of linguistic competence required for academic success, professional communication, and intercultural engagement. This progression reflects the combined influence of motivation, instructional quality, and immersion in the target language environment (Dörnyei, 2005; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Oxford, 2017).

In this context, evaluating students' duration of prior Chinese learning, pre-university HSK levels, and current language proficiency provides a comprehensive understanding of their language acquisition journey. Such an analysis enables researchers to identify patterns of language development, assess the effectiveness of university language education, and recommend strategies for improving Chinese language instruction for international students. The subsequent sections present the descriptive analysis of respondents' learning backgrounds and proficiency levels, highlighting the progress achieved during their university education (Cummins, 2000; Gass & Selinker, 2013; Yang & Zhang, 2021).

Literature Review

Second language acquisition research emphasizes that language proficiency develops through continuous exposure, meaningful interaction, and structured instruction. Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis argues that learners acquire language most effectively when they receive comprehensible input slightly above their current proficiency level. Chinese universities provide such opportunities through classroom instruction and daily immersion. Cummins (2000) distinguishes between conversational language proficiency and academic language proficiency, highlighting that higher-order language skills require sustained academic engagement. Similarly, Ellis (2015) explains that successful second-language development depends on instructional quality, learner motivation, and authentic communication opportunities.

Studies on Chinese language education have reported that international students generally begin with elementary proficiency but achieve substantial improvement after extended study in China (Wen, 2018). The HSK examination has become an internationally recognized indicator of Chinese language competence and is widely used to evaluate learners' progress (Hanban, 2020). Lightbown and Spada (2020) further emphasize that learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds may progress at different rates, although immersive educational environments often reduce these initial differences over time. Therefore, examining both prior learning duration and proficiency development provides valuable evidence regarding the effectiveness of Chinese language education. Second language acquisition is influenced by comprehensible input, interaction, learner motivation, and opportunities for authentic communication (Krashen, 1985; Long, 1996; Swain, 1985; Gass & Selinker, 2013). Language immersion has consistently been shown to accelerate vocabulary acquisition and communicative competence (Cummins, 2000; Vygotsky, 1978; Lightbown & Spada, 2020).

Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative descriptive research design to examine international students' Chinese language learning backgrounds and current language proficiency. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to 260 international students studying at Chinese universities. The questionnaire was designed to collect information on the participants' Chinese language learning background and proficiency. Specifically, it gathered data on the duration of Chinese language learning before university admission, the participants' Chinese language proficiency based on their HSK (Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi) level prior to entering university, and their current Chinese language proficiency after studying at a Chinese university. These variables were included to examine students' language development from their initial learning experience to their present level of proficiency. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistical techniques, specifically frequency distributions and percentage analysis, to summarize students' learning backgrounds and language proficiency levels. The findings are presented using tables accompanied by descriptive interpretation.

Analysis

Duration of Chinese Learning before Entering College

Table 1

Duration of Chinese Learning before Entering College

Duration	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Less than 6 months	41	15.8
6 months – <1 year	54	20.8
1–2 years	73	28.1
2–3 years	52	20.0
3 years or more	40	15.3

The results show that the largest group of students (28.1%) had 1–2 years of Chinese learning experience before entering university. Approximately 36.6% of students had studied Chinese for less than one year, indicating that many students begin university-level Chinese study with relatively limited language preparation. Only 15.3% of respondents had more than three years of prior Chinese learning experience. This variation in learning backgrounds may explain differences in language proficiency and learning progress among international students. The findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that international students often begin higher education with varying levels of language preparation, requiring universities to implement differentiated instructional strategies (Ellis, 2015; Lightbown & Spada, 2020).

Chinese Language Level before Entering College

Table 2

Pre-University HSK Level

HSK Level	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Zero basis	46	17.7
HSK Level 1	58	22.3
HSK Level 2	63	24.2
HSK Level 3	48	18.5
HSK Level 4	27	10.4
HSK Level 5	12	4.6
HSK Level 6	6	2.3

The majority of students entered university with basic or intermediate Chinese proficiency. The most common levels were HSK Level 2 (24.2%) and HSK Level 1 (22.3%). Approximately 17.7% of students had no prior Chinese learning experience, indicating that universities also admit beginners into Chinese language programs. Only a small proportion of students possessed advanced Chinese proficiency before entering college, with less than 7% achieving HSK Level 5 or above. This suggests that most students develop higher-level Chinese proficiency during their university education. These results support Krashen's (1985) theory that learners can achieve significant language gains through sustained exposure and structured language instruction.

Current Chinese Proficiency Level

Table 3

Current HSK Level

Current Level	Frequency	Percentage (%)
HSK 5 (≥180)	71	27.3
HSK 5 (≥240)	56	21.5
HSK 6 (≥180)	64	24.6
HSK 6 (≥205+)	45	17.3
Other level	24	9.3

The results indicate significant improvement in students' Chinese language proficiency after entering university. A substantial proportion of students have achieved HSK Level 5 or HSK Level 6, which are considered advanced levels of Chinese language proficiency. Approximately 49% of students attained HSK Level 6, demonstrating strong language competence among international students studying in Chinese universities. This improvement reflects the effectiveness of Chinese language programs, systematic curriculum design, and immersive learning environments.

These findings align with studies demonstrating that immersion significantly enhances second-language acquisition by providing continuous opportunities for authentic communication (Cummins, 2000; Wen, 2018). The variation in students' previous learning experience supports earlier findings that heterogeneous learning backgrounds affect language achievement (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei & Ryan, 2015; Li, 2022). The substantial increase in HSK proficiency observed among respondents is consistent with studies demonstrating the positive impact of immersion and structured university instruction (Yang & Zhang, 2021; Zhao, 2020; Xiao, 2019).

Findings and Discussion

The study reveals three important findings. First, international students begin their university education with diverse Chinese language learning backgrounds. Although the largest proportion of students had one to two years of prior Chinese learning, more than one-third had studied Chinese for less than one year, while nearly one-fifth had no prior language experience. Such diversity requires universities to adopt flexible placement systems and differentiated instructional strategies. The majority of students entered university with elementary or lower-intermediate HSK proficiency. This finding reflects the growing accessibility of Chinese higher education to students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Universities therefore play a crucial role in developing students' language competence from foundational levels.

Remarkable improvement was observed in students' current Chinese proficiency. Nearly half of the respondents achieved HSK Level 6, indicating successful language development during their university education. This progression demonstrates the combined influence of classroom instruction, authentic language exposure, and interaction with native speakers. The findings support second-language acquisition theories emphasizing comprehensible input, meaningful interaction, and immersion as major contributors to language development (Krashen, 1985; Ellis, 2015).

The results suggest that Chinese universities effectively facilitate language acquisition regardless of students' initial proficiency, although students entering with stronger language foundations may progress more rapidly. The findings corroborate previous studies indicating that sustained exposure to the target language and systematic instruction significantly improve second-language proficiency (Ellis, 2015; Long, 1996; Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Oxford, 2017).

Conclusion

This study examined international students' Chinese learning experience before university, their initial HSK proficiency, and their current language competence after studying in Chinese universities. The findings demonstrate that most students enter university with relatively limited Chinese language preparation and elementary HSK levels. Nevertheless, considerable improvement occurs during university study, with many students attaining advanced HSK proficiency. The results highlight the effectiveness of Chinese university language programs and immersive educational environments in promoting second-language acquisition. The findings also emphasize the importance of providing differentiated instruction for students with diverse language backgrounds while maintaining opportunities for authentic language use inside and outside the classroom. Future studies may employ longitudinal research designs to examine individual language development over time and investigate additional factors such as learning motivation, instructional methods, cultural adaptation, and language anxiety that influence Chinese language proficiency among international students.

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