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**Factors Affecting Students' Proficiency in French and Chinese: A Case  
Study of Bachelor of Business Administration Students in Hotel and  
Tourism Management, Silpakorn University International College**

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### **บทคัดย่อ**

การเรียนการสอนวิชาภาษาต่างประเทศมักถูกบรรจุในหลักสูตรการโรงแรม เนื่องจากทักษะภาษาต่างประเทศมีความสำคัญอย่างมากสำหรับผู้ทำงานในอุตสาหกรรมบริการที่ต้องติดต่อกับผู้คนจากหลากหลายประเทศ ดังนั้น บุคคลที่มีความสามารถทางด้านภาษาต่างประเทศมักมีความได้เปรียบสำหรับโอกาสในการทำงาน งานวิจัยชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการศึกษาปัจจัยที่มีผลต่อความสามารถทางภาษาฝรั่งเศสและภาษาจีนซึ่งเป็นภาษาที่วิทยาลัยนานาชาติ มหาวิทยาลัยศิลปากรกำหนดให้มีการเรียนการสอน รวมทั้งเสนอวิธีการเพื่อช่วยให้ผู้สอนสามารถกระตุ้นและส่งเสริมการเรียนภาษาต่างประเทศของนักศึกษาที่ไม่ได้เรียนภาษาต่างประเทศเป็นวิชาหลัก ผลการศึกษาพบว่าปัจจัยด้านความเชื่อของผู้เรียนและทัศนคติมีความสัมพันธ์กันทั้งสำหรับภาษาฝรั่งเศสและภาษาจีนของทั้งผู้เรียนที่มีพื้นฐานและไม่มีพื้นฐานก่อนเข้าเรียนในระดับอุดมศึกษา สำหรับนักศึกษาที่ไม่มีพื้นฐานในการเรียนภาษาฝรั่งเศสมาก่อนนั้น ยังพบว่าปัจจัยด้านความเชื่อของผู้เรียนและอิทธิพลจากผู้สอนยังมีความสัมพันธ์กันอีกด้วยแต่อยู่ในระดับที่ต่ำกว่า ส่วนสำหรับภาษาจีนนั้น ด้านความเชื่อของผู้เรียนและอิทธิพลจากผู้สอนมีความสัมพันธ์กันสำหรับผู้เรียนทั้งสองกลุ่ม นอกจากนี้ อิทธิพลจากผู้ปกครองยังส่งผลต่อความเชื่อและทัศนคติของผู้เรียนภาษาจีนอีกด้วย

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## Abstract

Foreign languages have been always included in hospitality curricula as foreign language proficiency is regarded as highly important for service providers who interact with people from different countries. Therefore, graduates with multiple language abilities can have a competitive advantage over others in the job market. This study investigated the factors which could contribute to student proficiency in French and Chinese and proposed how teachers can motivate students and enhance the foreign language learning of the students who do not study languages as their specialization. Pearson's correlation was used to examine whether there was a statistically significant relationship between student proficiency in French and Chinese and five factors (parental support, teacher influence, attitude, perception and classroom environment). From 82 respondents of the questionnaires for the French language and 77 for the Chinese language, it was found out that there was very strong correlation between Perception and Attitude for both French and Chinese courses for students with and without background in the language. For students without a background in French, student perception was also found to be correlated with teacher influence, but not as strongly as with student attitudes. Unlike the French courses, perception was correlated with teacher influence regardless of student background in Chinese. Only for the Chinese language was parental support correlated with students' perception and also with attitude.

**Keywords :** Hospitality Curriculum, foreign language, language proficiency

## Introduction

The curriculum of Bachelor of Business Administration in Hotel and Tourism Management taught at Silpakorn University International College uses English as the medium of instruction for all courses. Language proficiency is one of the requirements in providing superior cross-cultural services, such as the tourism and hospitality industry. While English language proficiency is useful, this demanding industry appreciates multiple languages. As a consequence, students who are not native speakers of French and Chinese are required to study both of these languages. It is, thus, important for instructors to understand the nature of the learners. Therefore, this study

aims to investigate the factors contributing to student proficiency in French and Chinese which can explain the occurrence of underachievement in learning. The research can help to adapt the teaching methods to better stimulate student learning, as well as to better understand the nature of student ability in foreign languages. Furthermore, it also aims to examine which factors can predict student achievement (grades) in French and Chinese.

## Literature Review

International hospitality and tourism is a driving force for global economic growth. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2011), today, the business volume of

tourism, which represents 5% of direct global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), equals or even surpasses that of oil exports, food products or automobiles. The hospitality and tourism industry has become a highly competitive sector. Hoteliers are in charge of delivering services to customers who come from multicultural backgrounds. If hospitality workers are not encouraged to become effective communicators in other languages, this can have an adverse effect on the industry, which is heavily reliant on foreign markets (Kavanagh L., 2010, p.2).

Littelljohn (1985; 2003), (Chanay & Martin, 2007; French, 2007; Stone, 2006; Ferraro, 2005; Guirdham, 1999), cited in Gannon J. (2008, p.2), agreed with this notion and stated that "the hospitality and tourism industry by its very nature is international. (...) Communication between persons of different cultures, or intercultural communication, is imperative for successful performance in the contemporary business world". Gannon J. (2008, p.6-7) continued that "language proficiency among international hotel managers was a key characteristic of this occupational group. (...) Several companies claimed that their UGMs (Unit General Managers, added by the authors) typically spoke between four and five languages. All the companies agreed that language ability was imperative for international management careers". Moreover, Luring, 2008 (as cited in Kim, E., & Mattila, A. (2011, p.1)) added that "language is not only a medium of communication, but also linked to an individual's identity". Kim, E., & Mattila, A. (2011, p.2), stated that language can influence different aspects of the service encounter for

English as a second language customers.

Thailand is also facing competition in the tourism and hospitality industry. In the United Nations World Tourism Organization's ranking of world tourism expenditure, although Thailand recorded the largest increase in the Asia-Pacific region, with over 3 million tourists, it is ranked as the most visited country behind China, Malaysia and Hongkong (UNWTO Tourism highlights 2012 Edition). Furthermore, as the tourism industry is one of the eight professions in which the ASEAN Economic Community allows the free flow of skilled labor, students must be equipped with proficiency in foreign languages to respond to labor demand with appropriate qualifications. To internationalize the curriculum of business and management, it should include four aspects which would indicate the true internationalization of hospitality management education (Gannon J.; 2008, p.5):

- Faculty (faculty exchange, undertaking joint international research, consultancy and publications with overseas partners).
- Students (exchanging, operating double degree and integrated joint programmes).
- Curriculum content (internationalization of disciplines, adding language courses, providing work or study opportunities).
- International alliances (exchanging faculty, exchanging students, setting programmes).

These aspects concerning language courses will contribute to intercultural skill development. Not only is proficiency in English a huge advantage, but second and third foreign languages can add value to future employees as language is a fundamental part of workers' human capital (Kitjaroonchai N., 2013, p.22).

In Silpakorn University International College's curriculum, students who are not native speakers of the French and Chinese languages are required to study both of these languages. France is well-known as the creator of the *savoir-vivre* and is often used as a reference in the field of hospitality and catering. On the 16<sup>th</sup> November 2010, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared French gastronomy as intangible heritage. One reason which satisfied the selection criteria was that the gastronomy of the French plays an active social role within its community and is transmitted from generation to generation as part of its identity ([www.unesco.org](http://www.unesco.org)). There are many hospitality/tourism and culinary French terms used widely in the industry. Thus, it is essential to equip students with fundamental knowledge of this language as stated in the course descriptions of French for Hospitality I and II respectively:

1: Improvement of the skills in using the French language in a professional environment focusing on grammar, writing, reading, listening and speaking skills in the hotel and restaurant trade for efficient communication in professional situations

2: Enhancement of French language skills for professional situations; practicing advanced spoken French vocabulary and terminology used in today's professional hospitality environment for a good mastery of oral communication related to the hotel industry.

Concerning the importance of the Chinese language, as referred to by the Tourism Authority of Thailand, China moved from second rank in 2011 to first in 2012 in terms of the

number of tourists coming to visit Thailand. Moreover, in the world economy, China is one of global business leaders. Chinese visitors to Thailand will indubitably keep increasing.

Despite the importance of these two languages for hospitality students' future careers, not all of them achieve the objectives of the courses. They face many challenges and it is, therefore, easy to conceive reasons why hospitality students specializing in the business and managerial aspects of the industry would be reluctant to spend much time learning a second language (Kavanagh L., 2010, p.5). As a consequence, this study aims to investigate the factors that contribute to student proficiency in their second and third foreign language in order to adapt the teaching methods. Investigating the factors which contribute to language proficiency might partially explain the occurrence of underachievement in learning (Yahaya and al. (2011, p.1)).

In this research, proficiency is defined in accordance with Richard, Platt and Platt, (1992) as an individual's skill in language use for a specific purpose (cited in Gharbavi A. & Mousavi S. A, 2012, p. 111). In most research works, proficiency is measured by considering the four language skills. As a consequence, **proficiency** means the "ability of the learners in using the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing for a specific purpose". This definition corresponds to the course description of Chinese and French courses which are provided to instructors before the classes start. Thus, their grades are used as a measure of students' proficiency in this research.

Data used in this research consist of

(1) The grades of the French and Chinese language students for the entire population

(2) The results of the questionnaire which examines the variables that affect student proficiency in French. The dependent variables are the grades for French I ( $Y_1$ ), French II ( $Y_2$ ), French III ( $Y_3$ ) and Chinese ( $Y_4$ ). And the independent variables are as follows:

- Student background
- Parental Support ( $X_1$ )
- Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ )
- Attitude ( $X_3$ )
- Perception ( $X_4$ )
- Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )

## Methodology

### (a) Population and Samples

The target population of this research is fourth year students as French and Chinese are compulsory subjects for these students. The collected grades are for their previous French and Chinese language classes. There are 82 students in total who have already studied French I, French II and French III and 77 students who have registered for Chinese I. All of them are the respondents of the questionnaires, which are adapted and developed from Yahaya Aziz et al. (2011).

#### Pretest and Reliability Test

In the pretest, 30 questionnaires were distributed to third year students to verify the reliability of the questionnaire in terms of the similarity with the questions in the original research. SPSS was used to calculate Cronbach's Alpha. The results, as shown in Table 1, are 0.884 and 0.908 for the questionnaires for the French and Chinese courses, respectively, which means that the questionnaires are reliable.

**Objective** To identify the relationships between the students' grades and the factors which are: Parental Support ( $X_1$ ), Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ ), Attitude ( $X_3$ ), Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )

### (b) Data Analysis

The descriptive analysis presents the statistics of the independent variables as follows:

Regarding the background of the students, there are 22 students out of 82 or 26.8 % who have studied French before entering the university while 33 students out of 77 or 42.9 % have some knowledge in Chinese before the Chinese I course is taught at SUIC.

The results for parental support, which indicate whether this factor could contribute to the students' language proficiency, show that for French, parental support is moderate as the overall mean is 2.53 (Ketsing W. (2012)). The highest mean at 2.99 is for "My parents regularly ask me about my abilities in the French language", which is very close to the question "My parents encourage me to study extra French classes outside the university" at 2.96 while the lowest mean of 1.41 is for "My parents can speak French".

For Chinese, the overall mean of 2.89 is higher than for French. The highest mean of 3.36 for "My parents encourage me to speak Chinese" shows that the respondents moderately agree that parents consider the ability to speak Chinese to be important. Similar to French, the lowest mean of 2.47 is for the parents' ability in Chinese.

The results on the teacher influence in the questionnaire, which examines whether the

teachers influence the respondents' language proficiency, show that for French and Chinese, the influence of the teacher is high. The overall mean for French and Chinese is at 4.21 and 4.04, respectively and the result for each item on teacher influence is higher than 3.8. Furthermore, the highest mean for both languages is the same for "My lecturers translate from French/Chinese into English for me". The results do not contradict the lowest mean of both languages for the question "My lecturers speak in French/Chinese all the time". Therefore, it shows that most students rely on their teachers and seem more confident if the teacher explains in the language that they are familiar with.

Concerning the students' personal attitude toward French and Chinese, the results show that the students' attitude toward French is high whereas their personal attitude toward Chinese is moderate. However, when considering the scores of the overall mean for each language, it is found out that there is no significant difference between these two languages as the overall mean for French and Chinese is at 3.50 and at 3.37, respectively. The highest mean for French at 3.93 is for "I am interested in studying French". High means for this variable are for "I enjoy lessons that are in French" and "I pay attention when someone is speaking in French". For Chinese, the highest mean of 4.06 shows that the students agree that they enjoyed the lessons in Chinese. The questions "I am interested in studying Chinese" and "I am not afraid to speak to Chinese speakers whenever I can" also obtained high means. For these two languages, the lowest

mean is for "I frequently read and write French/Chinese". The results imply that students in management do not have much opportunity to practice French and Chinese, which are not their specialization, as they have to focus on management courses and practicum. This supports the view of Kavanagh L. (2010, p. 3) who stated that as the majority of the hospitality programs are heavily orientated towards practicum and business & management courses, students give priority to these subjects and often overlook language courses.

The results from the questions in the questionnaire which determine whether students' perception towards French and Chinese influences their proficiency in French and Chinese show that the level of influence is high for both languages, as shown in the overall mean at 3.71 and at 3.76, respectively. The highest means of 4.00 and 4.14 respectively for French and Chinese are for "I believe that being good at French/Chinese will help me in my future career". It means that the respondents are aware of the importance of foreign languages in the hospitality industry and agree that third or fourth foreign language skills are an asset for hoteliers and can help increase employability. Moreover, the result of the lowest mean is also the same for these two languages; students moderately agree that French and Chinese language classes are not difficult.

Concerning the last variable on the classroom environment, the results reveal that the overall mean for both languages is high at 4.02 for French and 3.95 for Chinese. The score ranking for the two languages is the same. The respondents agree that a small group of

students (not more than 20) is efficient for language learning. This item is followed by the question “My friends sitting close have an important role in my learning”, which is also rated high. The lowest means of 3.79 and 3.66 for French and Chinese is for “Classroom environment (size, facilities, light, noise etc.) is suitable for studying”. Although the level of their satisfaction is high, the classroom environment can be improved in order to enhance the efficiency in studying foreign languages.

## Findings

### (a) Statistical results

In order to examine whether there are statistically significant relationships between the students' proficiency in French and Chinese and the factors ( $X_1$  -  $X_5$ ), Pearson's correlation was used. The results are presented in the following table.

**Table 1** Correlation Analysis between the factors and language proficiency

FRENCH I	With background	Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.693**
	Without background	Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.733**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ )	0.372**
		Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.365**
		French I grade ( $Y_1$ ) and Perception ( $X_4$ )	0.354**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.309*
FRENCH II	With background	Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.693**
	Without background	French II grade ( $Y_2$ ) and Perception ( $X_4$ )	0.529*
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.733**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ )	0.372**
		Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.365**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.309*
FRENCH III	With background	Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.693**
	Without background	Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.733**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ )	0.372**
		Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.365**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.309*
		French III grade ( $Y_3$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.287*
CHINESE	With background	Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.712**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ )	0.617**
		Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.469**
		Parental Support ( $X_1$ ) and Perception ( $X_4$ )	0.390*
		Parental Support ( $X_1$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.367*
	Without background	Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.660**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ )	0.453**
		Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.451**
		Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Classroom environment ( $X_5$ )	0.367*
		Teacher Influence ( $X_2$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.347*
		Parental Support ( $X_1$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ )	0.304*

From the correlation analysis results, it was found that there is very strong correlation between Perception ( $X_4$ ) and Attitude ( $X_3$ ) across the board for both French and Chinese courses for students with background and without background as presented in Table 1. This means that positive student perceptions are strongly linked to positive attitudes.

For students without a background in French, students' perception ( $X_4$ ) is also found to be correlated with teacher influence ( $X_2$ ), but not as strongly as with student attitude. This means that teachers influence the beliefs of students learning a new language. Unlike French courses, perception is always correlated with teacher influence regardless of students' background in Chinese. This may be because the Chinese language is taught in the third year or a few years after their high school graduation. That is why there is no difference between the students with and without background in Chinese, as both groups consider the Chinese language as a new subject for them. The results above also demonstrate that when it is the first time for students to study a language, teacher influence is linked to the classroom environment. As shown in Table 1, teacher influence was found to be correlated ( $X_2$ ) with classroom environment ( $X_5$ ) for French and Chinese.

Only for the Chinese language is parental support ( $X_1$ ) correlated with students' perception ( $X_4$ ) and also with attitude ( $X_3$ ). This means that parents influence students' attitude and perceptions towards the Chinese language whereas no correlation was found between parental support ( $X_1$ ) and students' perception ( $X_4$ ) or between parental support ( $X_1$ ) and

attitude ( $X_3$ ) for the French language.

### (b) Discussion

For the French language, it is found that students' perception towards the French language can influence students' proficiency for the beginner courses (French I and French II). It means that their performance as shown by the French grades depends on how they perceive the language as (...) *behavior can be described as the result of how he sees himself, how he views the world about him, and the interrelation of these two* (Combs, 1967) cited in Muller R. (1974). When the students reach the intermediate level (French III), the factor which contributes to their success is the classroom environment. Students at this level seem to give more importance to the learning environment when facing contents which are more complex. A small group of learners per class and a friend seated next to him/her can affect their learning as shown previously in the data analysis. Therefore, classification by language level is in question. Lecturers should observe whether students whose French skills are at a good level have a role in stimulating their friends or lack interest in studying because the class does not seem interesting because the lecturer has to repeat some parts of the lesson for those who have difficulty learning a third language. Those who feel bored might distract their friends instead of helping their classmates.

Regardless of background differences, it is shown that there are relationships between attitude and perception. These results are confirmed by previous research mentioned in Atek et al (2012, p.4) who stated that a learner's



perception of teaching and learning may directly influence or even determine their attitude, motivation or behavior when learning a particular language. However, the results from the students who have experienced learning French before entering the university demonstrate that their attitude influences their perception more than students without such a background. This may be because the students in this group are keen on studying French and have noticed the usefulness of the French language since they were in high school. If students possess a good attitude towards the language, they are motivated to learn and improve their skill as they think that the French language will be advantageous for them in their future career. It is observed for the students with no French background that although teacher influence does not affect French language proficiency, it does have an influence on students' perception and the class environment. Teachers are the key people who can influence the beliefs and perceptions of their students and can create effective learning in the classroom by maintaining the interests of students. They also should be aware of students' perception or beliefs. It is also found that the classroom environment, such as friends in the class, can help build students' perceptions towards the French language. Students at this level tend to adopt the ways of thinking and beliefs of their friends at the same age and at the same time, so positive perceptions can create a good classroom environment.

For the Chinese language, the results in this research support Gardner (1972)'s argument cited in Saracaloglu (2005, p.45) that

there is no relation between parents and language progress. However, the perception and attitude of the students who studied Chinese at high school have been influenced by their parents. As China is one of the world economic leaders, parents are aware of its importance and try to encourage their children to learn Chinese for their benefit in the future. Therefore, students acquire these beliefs and perceptions from their families. Not only parents, but also teachers have an important role in the students' attitude and perception. Teachers play a part in enhancing the students' interest in studying Chinese and making students believe that if they put effort into studying, their proficiency will improve. Regarding the students with no Chinese background, the results are not very different from the previous group concerning parents' influence on students' perception. Moreover, it is noticed that for beginners, the classroom environment is a significant element in their learning. There is a relationship between the classroom and the teacher's influence. A small class size facilitates better teaching and learning, and teachers can better assist students when they have difficulties. A relationship between the classroom environment and students' perception is also found. Their surroundings in the class can also contribute to their perceptions towards Chinese language learning.

## Conclusion and Further Research

From the results, it is seen that in most of the cases, there is an association between attitude and perception, and that perception can

influence students' language learning. The language proficiency of the students in business management could be increased and considered important for them if their perception towards the languages included in the program is positive. Therefore, the advantage of having a third or fourth language for a graduate's employability should be introduced to students by a teacher at high school during an orientation class and should also be emphasized by language lecturers before the class begins. Various websites indicating multiple foreign language skill requirements for hospitality job opportunities can be used as examples to

demonstrate how these skills can be beneficial to employees, hoteliers and service providers. Moreover, it is found from the present study that, unlike management courses, the level of the students in language classes is heterogeneous. The proportion of students with and without a language background should be taken into account in order to consider whether the language class should be organized according to students' level. The research on this matter can be further developed. As this study is limited to a small sample size and one demographic group, further research is encouraged to extend population sampling.

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