

Motivations for Studying the Chinese Language in Kenya: A Case Study of USIU-Africa

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Abstract

The current study sought to decipher the motivations of young persons to study the Chinese language. In particular, it endeavored to delineate the reasons why USIU-Africa undergraduate students opted for Chinese from a palette of other languages on offer. The latter include French, Spanish, Arabic, and Swahili.

The survey was conducted among 100 odd students who had enrolled for Chinese in spring 2022. An open-ended questionnaire used to elicit more perspectives on the main reasons why the youth are keen on learning Chinese at USIU. Descriptive and thematic analysis was done for both quantitative and qualitative data. Information was presented through charts, tables and verbatim expressions.

Findings: Majority of the students at 76.4% were between the ages of 21 and 25 years. The sample size was balanced with equal number of male respondents to females. Majority at 61.8% were Kenyan. Overwhelming majority of students at 91.2% chose foreign language based on personal motivations, while only 2.9% were influenced by others. The motivation behind choosing Chinese language was mostly to do with the personal interests in learning and exploring Chinese language (20.6%), love for the Asian culture (20.6%), having Chinese friends (11.8%), and because of the booming Chinese economy (17.6%). Similarly, 52.9% of the students had not previously interacted with Chinese people before joining USIU. Further, 85.3% indicated that they were willing to work for any Chinese company in Kenya. It was also felt by 67.6% of the students that learning Chinese was not hard. Emerging challenges were tones and pronunciations and characters/strokes and writings.

Conclusion and recommendations: Students would want to Join Chinese language because of many motivating factors. Learning of the language is also influenced by the potential opportunities for business and interactions with Asian/Chinese people. It is recommended that lecturers can

make learning of Chinese language easier through researching and trying new interactive modes of training.

Key words: *Chinese, learning, motivation, Kenya, youth.*

1.0 Introduction

Chinese is now considered as an important language worldwide because of its increase in presence in the business world. Chinese are involved in many businesses throughout the world. Globally, it is known that if you want to increase opportunities in the business world, you must learn Chinese as a second language. Learning Chinese Language, simply means you are preparing yourself to meet the trends of now and the future, and also equipping yourself with the necessary tools and value-added skills to meet the job market demands.

In line with the above, Chinese language teaching and learning fever has rapidly caught up in many countries globally. It is understood that, exposure to foreign languages enhances cultural awareness among learners since cultural practices vary around the world (Hamidova & Ganiyeva, 2020). Once a learner has learned a different culture, they cultivate more learn respect for members of other cultures and speakers of other languages too.

Closer home, Kenya was the first African Country where the first ever Confucius Institute in Africa was set up in 2003; therefore, broadening the education horizon for learners, increasing opportunities and bringing China closer to the learners as well. Over time three (3) other Confucius Institutes and one (1) Confucius Classroom have been established in Kenya therefore taking the teaching of Chinese Language in Kenya a notch higher. Bearing in mind that the demand for teaching and learning Chinese language in Kenya is increasingly growing especially at the tertiary level, these existing avenues for learning Chinese Language are not sufficient to meet the demand (Iraki, 2006). As a result, privately owned institutions in Kenya are now introducing Chinese Language learning to cater to the large pool of the demand for the language.

USIU-Africa is among the first private universities to offer Chinese language. This is especially from the beginner level to selecting Chinese as a Minor in one's degree. A handful of other private universities in Kenya only offer Chinese language as a 3-6months Certificate course therefore giving USIU-Africa an upper hand in enrollment for advanced courses in Chinese Language in the private universities category.

By and large, the trend for Chinese language learning in Kenya is mainly concentrated at the tertiary level. This is so because, learners seek to study the language to either facilitate in sustaining a job or getting one. Chinese companies are increasingly opening doors in Kenya. China's contribution is being intensively felt in various sectors of Kenya's economic development; such as, infrastructure, education, medical research, tourism, cultural activities, trade and diplomacy. Most of these sectors require local manpower that is well versed in Chinese language and culture. Therefore, it is necessary that Kenyan learners acquire advanced skills in Chinese language so that they can attain communicative competence in Chinese language which will enable learners to be able to use the language fluently and accurately thus breaking the existing language and cultural barriers between Kenyans and Chinese. In so doing, there will be improved understanding of Kenya's and Chinese cultures for mutual benefit of both countries.

To immediately tap such job opportunities that Chinese Companies are currently offering in Kenya, it would be prudent to further develop and strengthen Chinese Language learning at the tertiary level. Students pursuing Chinese language as their minor in USIU-Africa are increasing every year. Chinese Language as a minor was first introduced at USIU-Africa in 2015. Since then, forty-eight (48) students have since enrolled to study Chinese as their Minor degree.

For that reason, the university would wish to continue nurturing such students so as to give them a competitive edge once they graduate. These students know that learning Chinese language as a major or minor option purifies their university degrees and thereby increases their chances on the job market. In this regard, China is a major option for such students as a destination to study and work.

Chinese Language Teaching at USIU-Africa

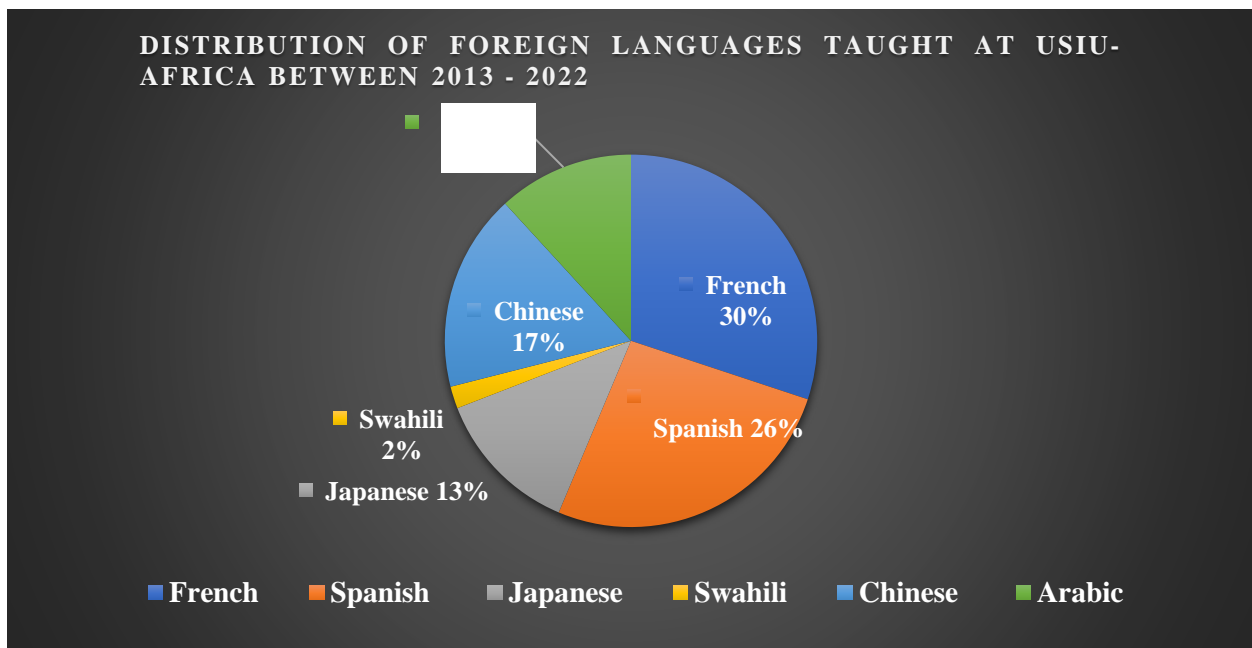
Historically, foreign languages have not been a priority for the Kenyan government. Its main concern was English, and to a lesser extent Kiswahili and indigenous languages (Mbaabu, 1996). It could be argued that the motivation for the attitude was mainly instrumental, English an international language that embodies power and prestige got a lion's share of the school timetable (Iraki, 2009).

Chinese language teaching at USIU-Africa officially began in 2015. At the time, numerous Chinese Companies had slowly established themselves in Kenya and were offering job

opportunities to graduates who had an added advantage of having working knowledge of Chinese language. Chinese language learning at USIU- Africa was imperative during the construction of the 50 Kilometre 8 lanes Thika Super Highway which was largely constructed by the Chinese natives. This Super Highway passes right outside the University. In 2015, graduates who had a good working knowledge of the language benefited through job opportunities working with Chinese as they needed locals to assist with translation.

Chinese language and Culture classes began in 2015 with 300 students in Beginner Chinese one (1), 169 students in Beginner Chinese two (2), 8 students in Intermediate and 11 Students in Advanced. That year 488 students enrolled to study Chinese. During this time, five (5) other foreign languages had already been established in the University therefore Chinese had to compete with the rest for its positioning. Since 2015 Over 3,000 students have enrolled to learn Chinese Language at USIU. Over the years, the uptake of Chinese language has spiralled as illustrated in the table below.

Reflection of the foreign languages distribution at USIU



In Kenya, of the six (6) United Nations languages; Chinese, English, Spanish, French, Arabic and Russian, only Russian and Chinese are not yet taught in Kenya secondary and/or primary schools. French and Spanish have constantly enjoyed a big following owing to the fact that they have for

many years been taught in most public and private primary and/or secondary schools. Predictably, these students enroll to continue learning French and Spanish in the University therefore explaining the big enrollment numbers at the University level.

As per USIU-Africa policy, all undergraduate students have to complete a two (2) part session of a foreign language to be allowed to graduate. As a result, students pursuing Beginner Chinese 1 and 2 have continued to swell each semester. The maximum capacity for each language class at USIU-Africa is 40 students per class. This maximum is usually surpassed every semester.

During the Covid-19 pandemic period at USIU, teaching of Chinese Language at USIU was not severely affected. Classes continued being taught as usual albeit online. This was mostly seen from March 2020 and 2021. During this time, enrollment numbers for Chinese Language slightly went down owing to the effects and strains that the pandemic brought about. The enrollment numbers have since begun improving since January 2022. This is since when the Covid-19 strain/effects subsided in Kenya and globally. The swelling of enrollment numbers was also evidenced by the resumption to face to face classes.

In February 2020, USIU became the private university to establish a Confucius Classroom. The Introduction of this Classroom will ensure that interest in students to learn Chinese language to degree level will be sustained and further developed since they will be exposed to much more cultural and historical aspects of the language which are almost like an essential before visiting China.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions;

1. To understand the demographic characteristics of students taking foreign languages at USIU
2. What motivates you to study foreign language at USIU?
3. To evaluate the previous interactions and knowledge of Chinese language before pursuing it as a second language at USIU
4. To understand the challenges that students experience pursuing foreign languages at USIU

2.0 Methodology

A cross-sectional research design was used. It was preferred since it captured the perceptions and feelings of the respondents. Cross-sectional survey design was preferred as it contributed to many students giving responses in a short period of time.

Data Collection Process:

The process of data collection was done through an online tool, where the questionnaire attached in Appendix I was converted into a Google Forms. The links were sent to the selected students attending foreign languages at USIU. Further, a sample size of 100 students was achieved, across the four different levels of studies.

Data analysis processes and presentation:

Data collected from the responses was summarized into Microsoft Excel sheet, and exported into word for more processing. For the quantitative responses, descriptive analysis was done, while for the qualitative data, thematic analysis was done. Thematic analysis involved classifying and grouping common themes together. Presentation of data was through graphs, tables and verbatim expressions.

3.0 Findings

A study was done among students of United States International University in Africa at the Nairobi Campus. The survey captured several demographic factors of the respondents like age, gender, nationality, year and area of study. Further, the study had variables related to choose of Chinese language, interaction with and knowledge of Chinese before choosing the language as a course of study, and intentions to visit China and learn the Chinese languages. The study also sought to understand the hardship experienced when learning Chinese language, and the challenges experienced when learning Chinese language.

3.1 Demographic Characteristics

The section provides details of the respondents including age, gender, nationality, year and area of study. The details are provided as shown;

3.1.1 Age of the Respondents

From the data, it was established that most of students were aged between ages 21 to 25 years, forming 79.4% of the entire sample size. Further, those aged 16 to 20 years followed with 14.7%

of the entire sample size, with none of the respondents being aged over 41 years. The summary of the responses is shown on figure 1 below.

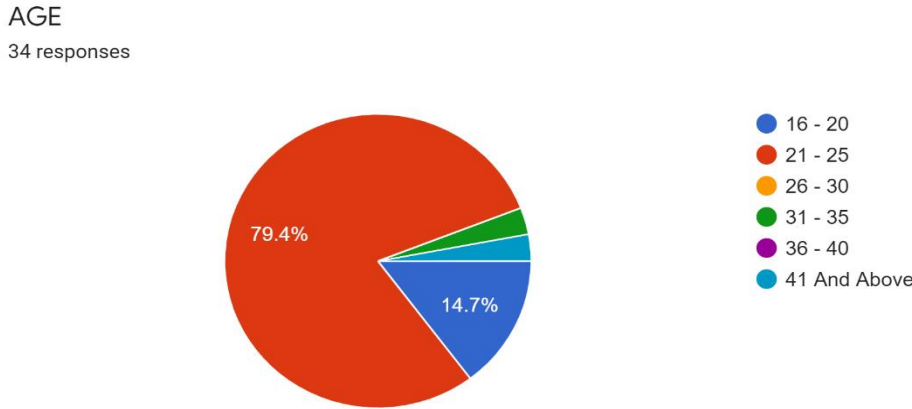


Figure 1: Age of the Respondents

3.1.2 Gender of the respondents

The study also sought to establish the gender of the respondents, where the findings showed 50% for females and the remainder for males as shown on figure 2 below.

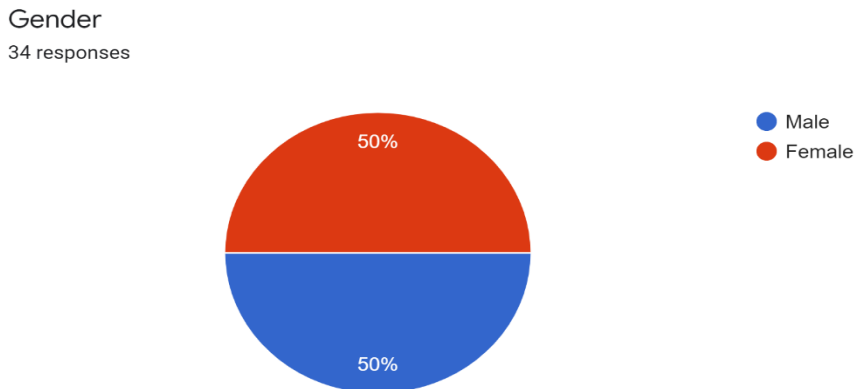


Figure 2: Gender of the respondents

3.1.3 Nationality of Respondents

The study also sought to establish the nationality of the students, where the responses were shown on figure 3. It was established that apart from Kenya, there were student nationals from countries

like Cameroon (2.9%), Nigeria (2.9%), Rwanda (5.9%), Tanzania (11.8%) and Congolese (2.9%). It was established that the Kenyan students were the majority at 61.8%.

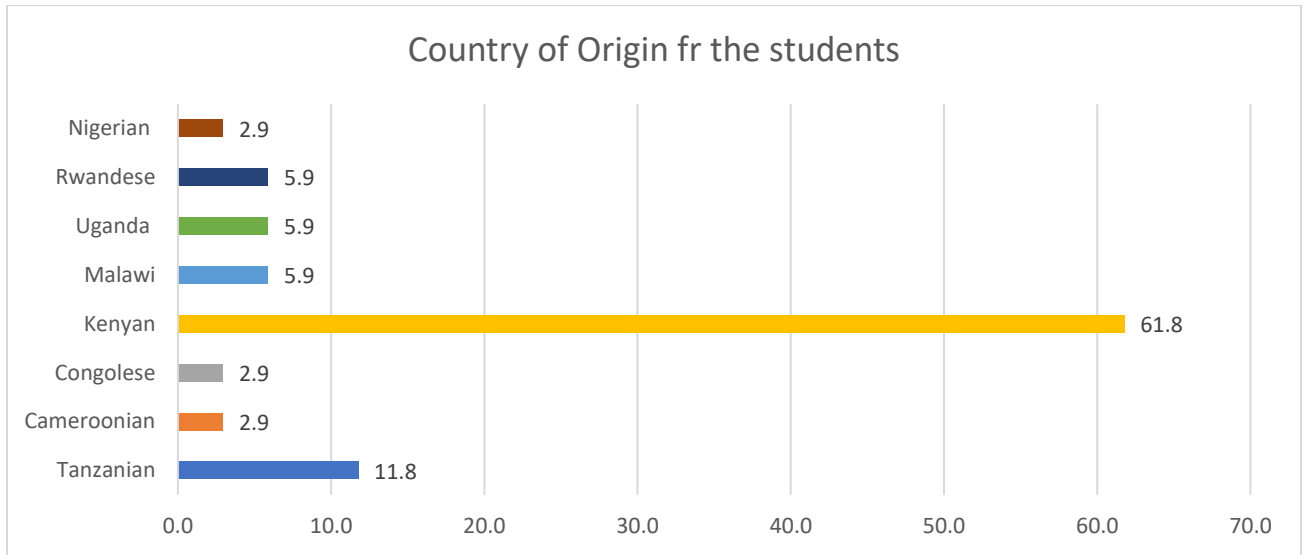


Figure 3: Nationality of the Respondents

3.1.4 Year of Study

The study also sought to establish the year of study the students were, where a significant number at 35.3% were in year one, while the least at 14.7% were in year two as shown on figure 4 below.

Year of study
34 responses

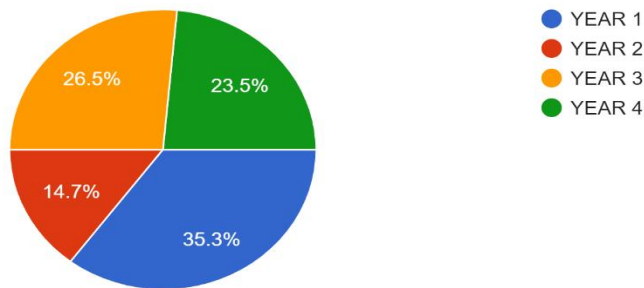


Figure 4: Year of Study for the students

3.1.5 Area of Study

Majority of the students were in international business administration (23.5%), closely followed by those in applied computer and software engineering at 20.6%, and then those from international relations at 14.7%. The summary is shown on figure 5 below.

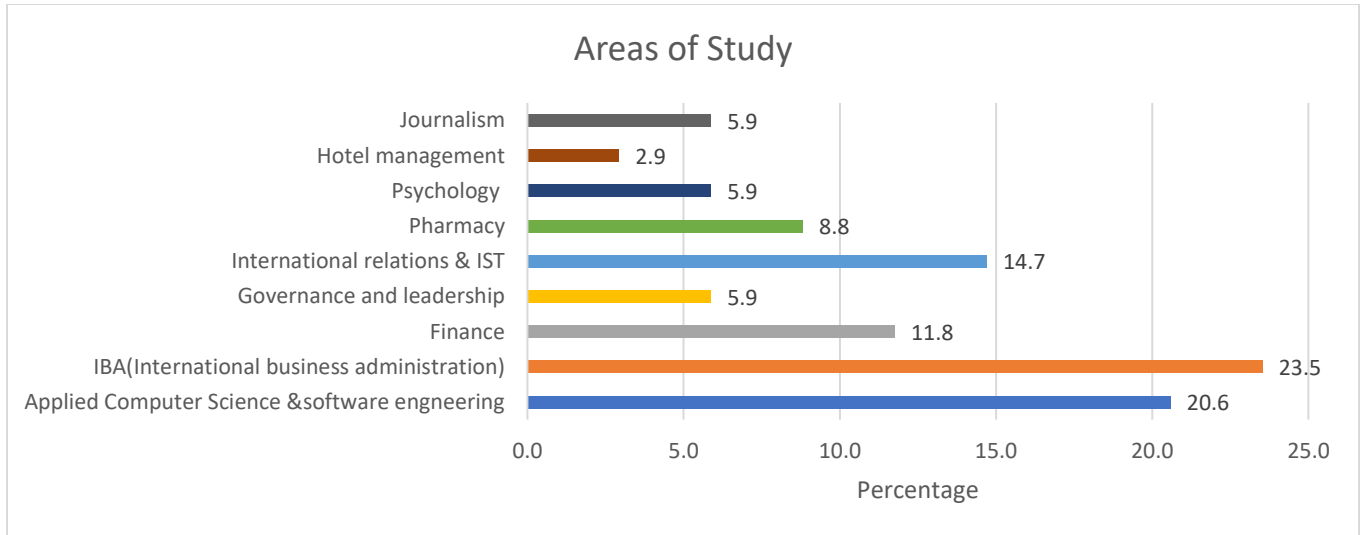


Figure 5: Area of study for Respondents

3.2 Choice of Chinese Language

The section discusses the selection of Chinese language, whether the student was influenced by external forces or self-motivated. It also discusses the awareness of existing other languages at the institution of learning, and the driving forces behind selecting Chinese language as a course.

3.2.1 Personal selection of Chinese

The respondents were asked if they personally chose Chinese language or they were influenced by someone else. The responses were that majority of the respondents at 91.2% chose the language by themselves, while another 5.9% said they were both influenced by external forces like parents and close friends, combined with personal choices. Those who entirely picked the language from external influence were 2.9%. The summary is shown on figure 6 below:

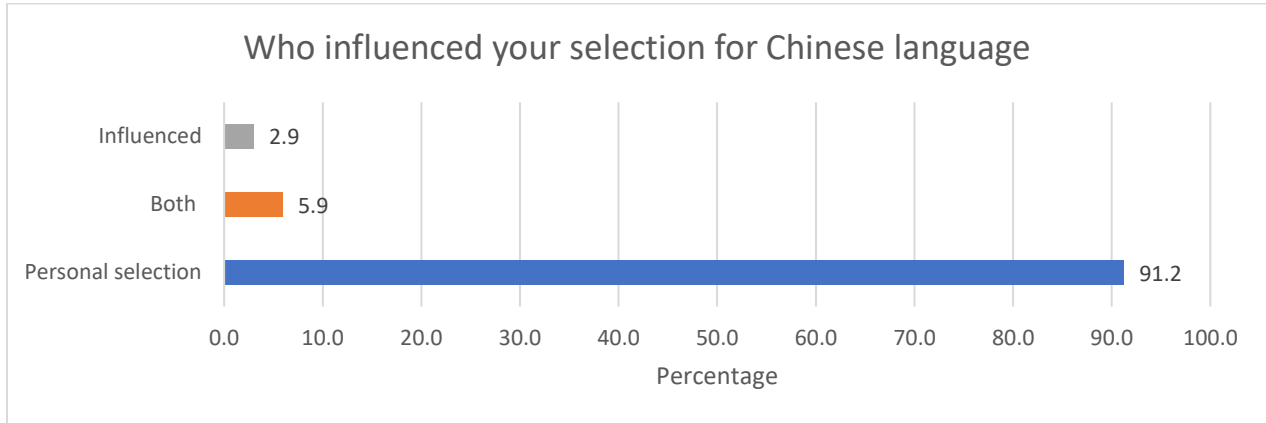


Figure 6: Personal selection of Chinese language

3.2.2 Awareness of other languages at USIU

Students were asked whether they were aware of other languages at USIU as they were joining campus. Further, all the respondents at 100% indicated that they were aware of the languages offered at USIU. This indicates that the choices made were informed and based on existing knowledge about other alternative foreign languages.

3.3 Reason for choosing Chinese

The respondents were given an option to give reasons why they chose Chinese language. Several responses were recorded, where different themes emerged. It was noted that key themes were personal interests, time convenience, breaking language barrier between Chinese and Kenyan languages like Kiswahili and English, influence by a friend or close relative, and for business/economic purposes.

The summary is as shown on figure 8 below;

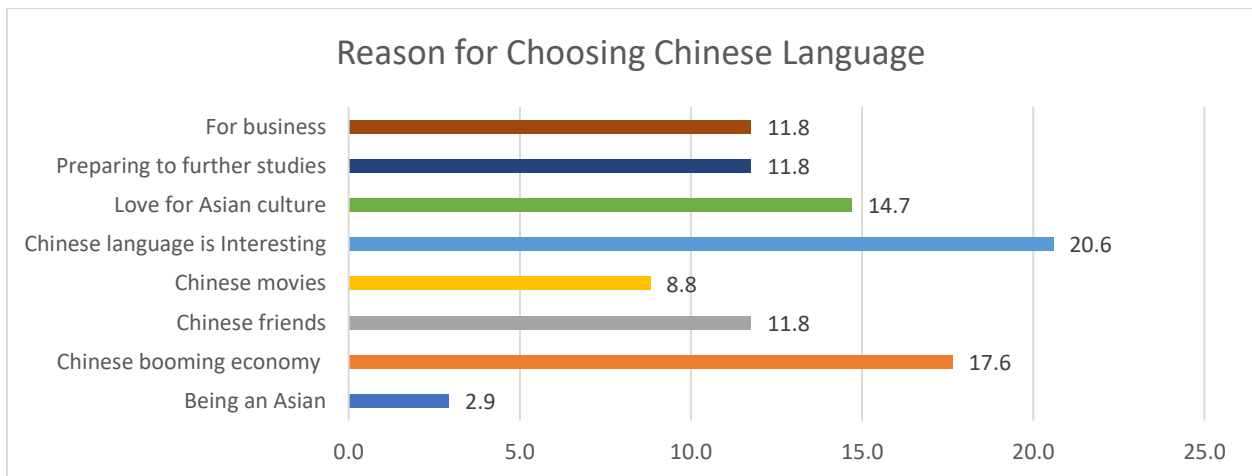


Figure 8: Reason for choosing Chinese Language

Some of the quotes were as follows:

For those who chose business as the driving reason, some said;

*I've been interested in the language and also their culture. Other than that, I would love to do business with them in future. **Female respondent, Year 2***

*China is a booming economy and I also needed a new challenge. **Male student, Year 2.***

Those who indicated love for the Asian culture and Chinese language, some said;

*I thought of the language barrier between the Chinese and Kenyan hence my decision to study Chinese. **Male, year 2 student***

*I love the language and the lecturer is amazing. **A female Rwandese student, year 3***

It was also established that the influence of the lecturer was a factor for selecting Chinese language as a unit in the campus as shown from the verbatim quote above.

3.4 Previous interactions and knowledge of Chinese Language

The part discusses whether the participants had interacted with Chinese language before, and whether they know Chinese culture. The section also asks what the respondents know about the Chinese people.

3.4.1 Previous Interaction with Chinese People before joining USIU

It was observed that slightly above half at 52.9% of the students had not previously interacted with Chinese people before joining USIU. This was opposed to 47.1% who had previous interactions with Chinese people before joining the campus. The summary of the findings are shown on figure 8 below;

Had you interacted with Chinese people before USIU?
34 responses

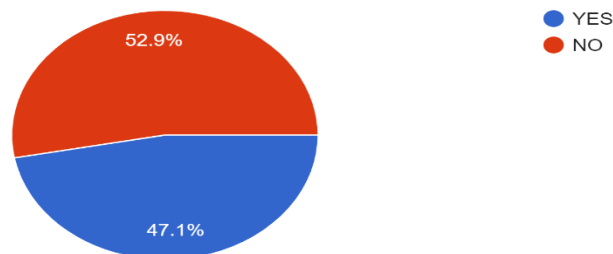


Figure 8: Previous interactions with Chinese people before joining USIU

3.4.2 Knowledge of Chinese culture

The students were also asked if they knew about Chinese culture before joining the campus. The responses were equally divided, with those saying yes and no tying at 50%. The summary of the findings is as shown on figure 9 below.

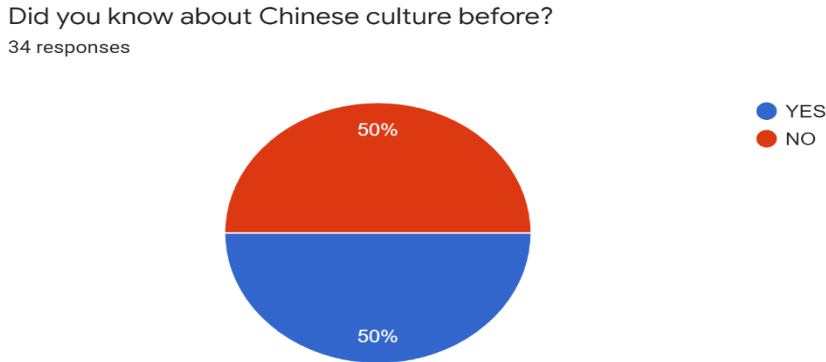


Figure 9: Knowledge of Chinese culture before

3.4.3 Knowledge about Chinese People

The students were asked whether they know any information on the Chinese culture and the people. There were several themes emerging from the student responses, where top themes were; industrialism, hardworking, family-oriented, traditional culture, and operation of non-interference in political affairs of other countries.

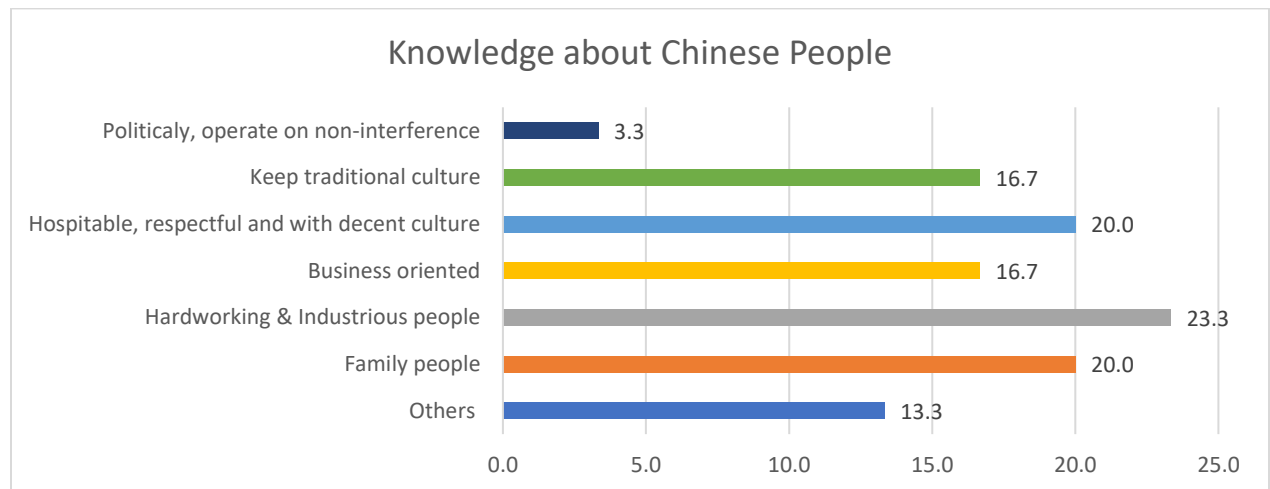


Figure 10: Some known facts about Chinese people

From the findings, it was observed that most of the respondents at 23.3% identified Chinese people as hardworking and industrious, they are family people (20.0%), and are hospitable, respectful and with a decent culture (20.0%). Further, about 3.3% of the respondents indicated that the Chinese politically operated on non-interference.

Some of the quotes on different themes were as follows;

Chinese people are hardworking and industrialists as shown from the following quotes;

They are industrialist. we import too many goods from them. **Pharmacy Female student, year four**

They are very intellectual and brilliant in everything they do. **A female Nigerian student, year one**

On the cultural aspect, some of the quotes were as follows;

They are very humble, disciplined and well-mannered people in general. They give great value to their culture and never fail to follow their traditions despite the strong western influence in today's world. **Male Kenyan IBA Student, Year three**

They are amongst the few people that strongly practice their culture. **Female Kenyan Pharmacy student, Year four**

Smart and mostly business oriented. **Female Kenyan IBA student, Year four**

On the aspect of political non-interference, one of the respondents indicated,

They operate on principle of political non-interference. **Male Kenyan, Governance student, year one**

3.5 Use of Chinese language after learning

Students were asked on what they plan to do with the newly acquired Chinese language after school. Several themes came out, including communication, building friendship with Chinese citizens, for employment as a translator, for furthering education in China, and for business among other responses. The summary of the responses is as shown on the figure 11;

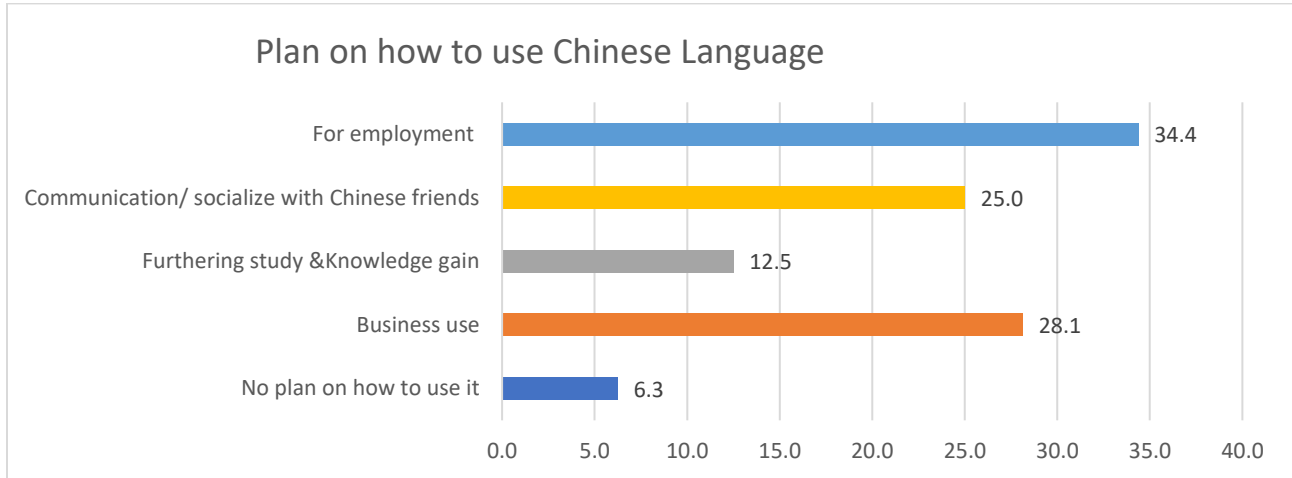


Figure 11: Plan on how to use Chinese Language

From the analysis, it was established that 34.4% of the student wanted to use gained skills in Chinese language for employment purposes. This included working as interpreters, working for international bodies in communication, hostesses, and other opportunities. Further, another 25.0% of the students sought to understand Chinese language for communication and socializing aspect with friends speaking Chinese. It was also established that a good number of students at 28.1% sought to know Chinese for the purposes of business, and another 6.3% of the students had no plan on how to use the gained language skills.

3.6 Working for Chinese and Visiting China

The section presents findings on whether the students would want to visit China and whether they would want to work for Chinese based companies while in Kenya. The responses are shown in the following two subsections.

3.6.1 Interest in visiting China

Respondents were also asked whether they would have liked visiting China. Surprisingly, all of them (100%) indicated that they wanted to visit China as shown on figure 12.

Would you like to visit China?

34 responses

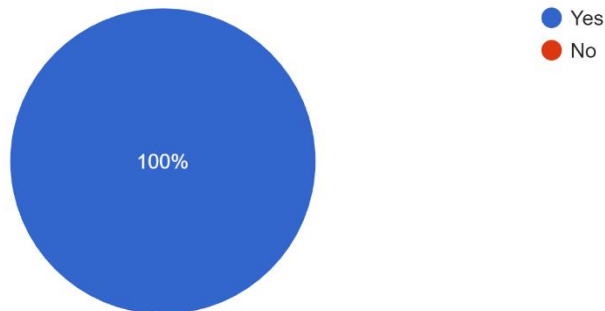


Figure 12: Interests in visiting China

3.6.2 Working in a Chinese company in Kenya

Students were also asked whether they aspired to work in Chinese companies based in Kenya. A clear majority at 85.3% indicated that they were willing to work for any Chinese company in Kenya while a paltry 14.7% were not. The information is summarized in figure 13 as shown.

Would you like to work in a Chinese company in Kenya?

34 responses

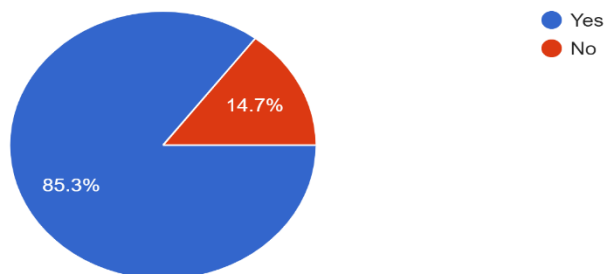


Figure 13: Working in a Chinese company in Kenya

The data compares well with findings on motivation for learning French in Kenyan universities (Kazadi 2006). According to his findings 41.3% of students learning French in Kenya dream of using the language to secure a well-paying job. Meanwhile, 14.3% of the respondents were keen on the French culture. Similar trends were noted by Levy (1992) among students learning French in Israel.

3.7 Challenges in Learning Chinese

The section presents the information on whether it is hard learning Chinese and some of the challenged experienced when learning Chinese.

3.7.1 Whether it is hard learning Chinese

Students were asked whether or not it was hard to learn Chinese. Interestingly and encouragingly, about 67.6% of the respondents indicated that it was not hard, while the remaining 32.4% indicated it was hard to learn Chinese. The summary of the findings is shown on figure 14 below.

Is it hard to learn Chinese?
34 responses

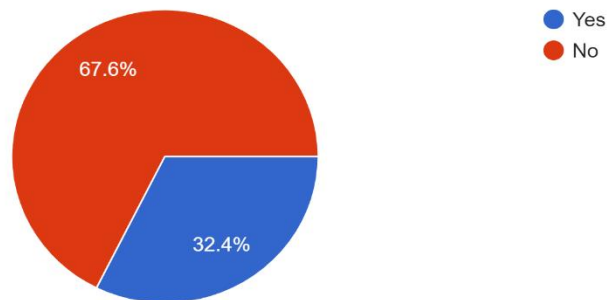


Figure 14: whether it is hard to learn Chinese

3.7.2 Challenges encountered when learning Chinese

The respondents were asked to explain some of the challenges experienced in learning Chinese. Several themes emerged, including class interactions, reading written language, writing Hanzi and pronouncing the characters among other challenges. Figure 15 below summarizes the responses;

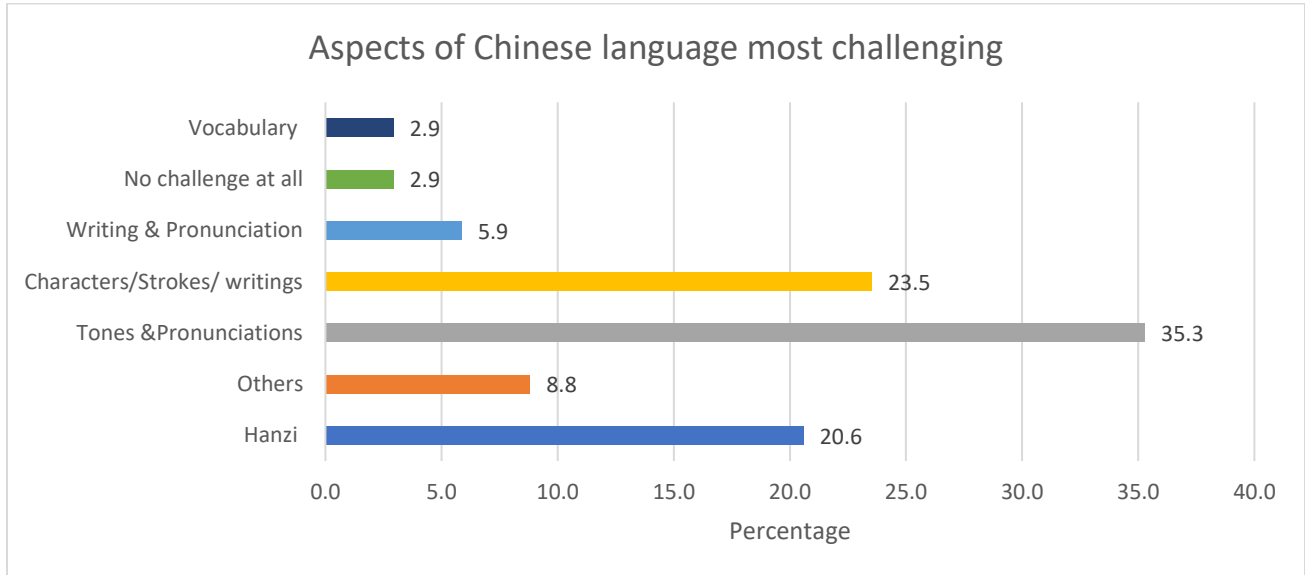


Figure 15: Aspects of Chinese language most challenging

From the summary of the challenges, it was established that the most common challenge was that of tones and pronunciations, cited by 35.3% of the respondents. This surprises little when we consider the English language. Indeed, Barnett (1970) notes:

The most excruciating difficulties encountered by the serious foreign student who wishes to learn to write English, as well as speak it, involve neither grammar nor syntax but rather the chaotic lack of correlation between its spelling and pronunciation. P. 34. (our italics).

The other top challenges were understanding the characters, strokes and writings, and understanding Hanzi as mentioned by 23.5% and 20.6% of the respondents respectfully. Some of the students mentioned challenges including difficulties in class interactions when speaking Chinese, not understanding well when one is speaking fluent Chinese, and not understanding some of the professions that one can take in Chinese. It was also established that one respondent (representing 2.9% of the sampled size), had no challenge at all in learning Chinese language.

Making sense of the data

The data above point to a number of observations about the Chinese language as perceived by the respondents. Evidently, the learners state that the language is challenging to learn due to some of its intrinsic features such as strokes, characters and tones, etc. This, notwithstanding, the Chinese language seems to appeal to the learners for reasons varying from an affective appreciation of

Chinese Culture and the Chinese people to the instrumental role that the language can play in business or future employment of the students. Additionally, the absolute desire to visit China underscores the learners' affective connection with China and her peoples. *In fine*, the data, though limited in scope, point to the importance of the Chinese language in Kenya.

4. Conclusion

In understanding the demographic characteristics of students taking foreign languages at USIU, most of them were young learners below age 25 years, and most of the learners were Kenyan. Students pursuing particular courses like IBA (international business administration), Applied computer science and software engineering and international relations were most likely to pursue Chinese as a second language at USIU. Most of the students cited personal interests as a reason for furthering in Chinese. Similarly, interesting Chinese language, Chinese booming economy and love for the Asian culture were the three major reasons given for choosing the foreign language. Most cited challenges for learning Chinese were tones and pronunciations, characters/ strokes/ writings, and Hanzi in that order.

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