

# Self-practices and ethical values in learning German

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## Abstract

This paper explores the practices Hong Kong Chinese undergraduate students engage in to learn German and the values they attach to these practices for their ‘selves’. The findings discussed in this paper are part of an empirical study investigating the motivation to learn German amongst Hong Kong Chinese university students who studied German as a major programme. The study employs a Foucauldian ethical perspective which regards learning as contributing to the process of self-formation to broaden the view on language learners’ motivation. The data were collected through interviews and diary entries over a period of two academic terms and analysed following a discourse-oriented approach based on the four axes of self-formation as defined by Foucault. This paper focuses on a selection of five research participants examining the deeper dimensions of their engagement with the language outside class. The findings indicate that the activities students engaged in to learn and apply German assisted them in living their lives differently and creating for themselves a world in which they could strive towards their ethical ideals.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper draws on an empirical study that explored the motivation of Hong Kong Chinese university students majoring in German at a university in Hong Kong. Their motivation was examined through the lens of Foucault’s theories on ethics, in particular ‘the care of the self’ (Foucault, 1984a) and ‘the use of pleasure’ (Foucault, 1985). This ethical framework was selected to explore learners’ motivation to learn a new language beyond the social psychological (Gardner, 1979, 1985; Gardner and Lambert, 1972) or cognitive-situated perspective (Dörnyei, 1990, 2001a, 2001b, 2005) that commonly serve as the theoretical basis in language learning motivation research. Studies adhering to these paradigms usually describe motivation in dichotomies as either integrative/instrumental or intrinsic/extrinsic and apply quantitative research methods.

In the early stages of the study, an approach was considered that drew from Norton’s concept of investment in language learning as it places the learners’ identity in the centre of investigation (Norton, 1995, 2000). However, since ‘investment’ is a term commonly associated with economics implying utilitarian, instrumental motives of becoming engaged in market trade, it did not seem to do justice to the students’ inner emotions, the feelings, disappointments,

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hopes and dreams they experienced when learning German. Furthermore, the concept of ‘investment’ was developed in the context of immigrant learners who struggled for acceptance by mother-tongue speakers of English. The power-relationship between the learners and the members of the target language community was not equal, therefore the ‘investment’ framework was based on assumptions that did not match the way the Hong Kong Chinese students experienced their learning German in Hong Kong.

Furthermore, irrespective of the paradigms they adhere to, most of the research studies investigating the motivation of language learners have been conducted in an ESL or EFL context where learning English constituted a necessary skill for learners either in order to comply with their study programme, or to survive in an English-speaking community. In addition, research in second language acquisition is often said to focus more on ‘the process of acquisition than to the flesh-and-blood individuals who are doing the learning’ (Kramersch, 2009, p. 2). The findings of this study thus support concerns regarding the extent to which theoretical frameworks developed in ESL contexts are useful when exploring language learners’ motivation in learning other modern languages (Busse, 2009).

Learning German in Hong Kong is usually not a skill considered necessary amongst Hong Kong’s population, not a matter of survival, and seldom a matter of academic compliance, but a matter of choice. This led to the assumption that Hong Kong students choosing German as part of their university studies do so for specific purposes that might lie beyond pragmatic or instrumental reasons. The aspect of choice is a decisive element in Foucault’s theories on ethics (Foucault, 1984c, 1991). Within the framework of ethics, individuals choose certain practices and engage in certain activities to further develop and transform the self which are based on their ethical convictions and beliefs. Applying a Foucauldian ethical perspective to Hong Kong Chinese students’ choice to learn German might thus shed more light on the values they attach to their learning the language and the underlying reasons for their choice to learn German rather than Japanese or Korean which are usually regarded more practical in Hong Kong.

The ethical framework allows us further to take into account the learners’ considerations of where they come from and who they are, how they position themselves within their social community, how they feel about learning a specific skill, how they want to live their lives and what kind of person they want to become. Foucault’s concern with how one can give one’s life a different direction through the concepts of ethics, style and aesthetics with the aim ‘to become oneself and not someone else’ (Nehamas, 1998, p. 187), yet remain integrated in the community, was reflected in the learners’ commitment to learning German.

Knowing more about the perceptions learners hold about themselves, their ethical values and beliefs and how they relate these values to their language learning can provide further insights into why languages are learnt. Foucault’s ethical analysis shifts the focus from what the learners want to be able to do with their language skills to ‘how they want to be’ as a result of learning the language (Paras, 2006, p. 128).

Foucault’s works on ethics have increasingly been employed in educational studies to shed more light on the significance of the process of learning for the development of learners’ self and identity (Clarke, 2009; Fendler, 2003; Zembylas, 2003). Since learners’ selves and identities are contextually shaped, the discussions presented in this paper must be seen within the context in which the study had been conducted. It is hoped that the findings will provide a different perspective on language learners’ motivation and thus contribute to the ongoing debate on the interconnectedness of language learners’ motivation, self and identity.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Foucault sees the process of ethical self-formation emanating from our freedom to venture beyond what is commonly taken for granted and to design our lives in a way we see as meaningful and purposeful. Foucault’s model of self-formation indicates possibilities of how we can shape and form our own lives according to ‘our own principles of living’ (O’Leary, 2002, p. 171), not by ignoring the world around us but by taking into account what ‘happens around us’ (May, 2006, p. 124). Self-formation is thus embedded in social interaction and discourses and a process that is socially and historically constructed.

An investigation of learners’ motivation from a Foucauldian ethical perspective suggests therefore a post-structuralist approach that defines individuals’ identities as de-centralised and ever-changing. Although Foucault did not see himself as a poststructuralist, his analysis of discourses is located in the poststructuralist tradition as it examines the constant interplay between identity, language, culture and society (May, 2006).

In Foucault’s view, ethics represents all the effort undertaken by individuals to transgress given power-structures that shape their understanding of who they are, with the aim to become something else and different from what they

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