

# Myanmar Language Learning Experiences at China's Frontier

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## Abstract

In the context of China's implementation of Belt and Road Initiative, the development of LOTE (languages other than English) in China comes into a revitalization era. LOTE play important role acting as a bridge linking China to the other countries. Since 2009, Yunnan has been discursively constructed as a bridgehead for China to cooperate with Southeast Asian country and the education of LOTE with a particular focus on the Southeast Asian languages has experienced an unprecedented expansion size. This study explores the learning experiences of Chinese postgraduates majoring in Myanmar language in a Chinese border university in Yunnan. Findings reveal how Chinese students perceive the values of learning Myanmar language, what learning challenges they encounter and how they exert their agency to overcome their learning difficulties. The study reveals that Chinese students' investment in learning Myanmar has been shaped by their access to various resources mediated in multiple social forces across time and space. The study can shed some lights on providing pedagogical implications for enhancing the learning outcomes of LOTE in China.

**Keywords:** LOTE; Myanmar language learning; agency; empowerment

## 1. Introduction

Since the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed in 2013, China has actively promoted political, economic, cultural exchanges with other countries. By February 6th, 2022, China had signed more than 200 cooperation documents on the belt and road cooperation with 148 countries and 32 international organizations (Liu, 2022). The Belt and Road Initiative has not only created great opportunities for China's economic development, but also provides opportunities for the revival of LOTE (languages other than English) in China. Recent decades, China's LOTE education has seen an unprecedented development. According to Jiang Jingkui, the director of the Foreign Languages Department of the Ministry of Education, now, more than 580 LOTE teaching points have been distributed nationwide, involving 197 universities with tens of thousands of students (Tian, 2021). At present, 32 universities, which are mainly in North China and southwest China, have offered majors in south Asian and southeast Asian language, and among them, Yunnan has the largest number of universities offering south Asian and southeast Asian language (Li & Li, 2021). Yunnan is located in the southwest China, the China's frontier, bordering Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, this frontier actually plays an important role in the belt and road initiative, which provide a platform for China and southeast countries to strengthen political and cultural exchanges. In addition, it has various languages resources of neighboring countries and in light of favorable geographical advantages it has become a bridgehead connecting South and Southeast Asia. Myanmar is an important neighbor for China, China and Myanmar are linked by the same mountains and river, friendly relations has continued to this day. Therefore, the study of Myanmar Language Learning Experiences at China's Frontier, especially Yunnan, has practical significance in the context of China's the Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, because the "going out" of national strategy need the LOTE personnel, Myanmar language talents are considered as one of the key parts of the Belt and Road Initiative, thus, the study of Myanmar Language Learning experiences at China's Frontier has practical significance. What's more, the early studies of foreign languages mainly focus on English, less attentions are paid to LOTE, therefore, the study of Myanmar language learning experiences at China's frontier can provide new case study and new perspective with foreign language study. In this context, we explored specifically LOTE students' language agency and their empowerment. This article focuses on the Myanmar language learning experience of postgraduates in Yunnan university. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, audio-recording and online interactions, we pay attention to those postgraduates' perceptions, challenges and agentive strategies overcoming difficulties in Myanmar learning,

explored how they exercise their agency in learning Myanmar and how they are empowered by Myanmar learning.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Previous Studies on Learning Foreign Languages

The previous studies on learning foreign languages learning tend to focus on English as ideological inquiry, such as the study He & Chang (2012) explore the factors affecting the English learning of master degree pursuers. Li & Liu (2013) have a contrastive study of differences among college students in the context of web-based autonomous learning of English. They have conducted their research in attempts to explore the complex factors that influence students' English learning. However, the effectiveness of learning foreign language is not up to individual, it is actually affected by various factors. Various factors come into play in affecting English learning, including various social factors, such as the national language policy, school, family and ethnic background. English as a global language has an important impact on educational policy. Nunan (2003) showed the investigation of English language educational policies across the different countries, which have identified some of the impacts of English as a global language on policies and practices in a number of countries in the Asia-Pacific region, including the inequitable access to English, unqualified English teacher and ineffective language education, which can have effect on learners' English learning. School also plays an important role in language learning. Lamb explored the impact of school on EFL learning motivation and find that class teachers can influence enthusiasm of English learners. In school, some English learners with positive attitudes appeared to sustain their efforts to learn and developed an ability to regulate their motivation in the face of threats and challenges (Lamb, 2007). In addition, the influence of family factors on English learning cannot be ignored. English learning is also related with family. If family attach importance to English, it can effectively weaken the deficiency of school education, and the communication between parents and children can also inspire children's English learning confidence (Chang, Liu & Guan, 2019). According to Nunan (2003), the only children who stood a chance of learning English were those whose parents could afford to send them to private, after-school language classes. In summary, various factors affect English learning. In considering the relevance of various factors for foreign language learning, it is important to recognize that the effectiveness of learning foreign language is not simply something that related to an individual, but affected by various factors. However, foreign language learning includes not only English learning, but also LOTE learning.

### 2.2 Previous Studies on LOTE in China

Despite its nascent stage, an increasing number of Chinese scholars have conducted their studies on LOTE in China and these previous studies tend to highlight the cultivation mode of LOTE, challenges confronting LOTE education and motivation of LOTE learners. Studies on cultivation of personnel in LOTE tend to focus on the enrollment system, teacher and curriculum. In terms of enrollment system, there is a lack of unified enrollment system for LOTE in China, the proficiency of teachers in LOTE vary from each other, teachers' knowledge structure needs to improve, and the curriculum model is outdated, the orientation of curriculum system is unclear (Yang & Tong, 2008). The challenges confronting in LOTE education are lacking of planning for language opening, such as insufficient establishment of national shortage languages, however blind construction of some languages, and the problem of insufficiency of "top talent" (Zhang, 2007). In addition, previous studies on LOTE also tend to focus on the motivation of LOTE learners. Lu & Shen (2021) study LOTE from the perspective of linguistic market, paying more attention to LOTE learners' perceptions and choice of LOTE and English learning. LOTE learners regard English as a requisite, English learning seems to be a default choice, while LOTE are perceived as a plus, an extra choice, which highlight the dominance of English in LOTE education (Lu & Shen, 2021).

Previous studies, however, seem to pay much attention to the LOTE education at macro level. Our knowledge of LOTE students' learning experiences at micro-level remains poorly understood. Despite a couple of studies on LOTE students' learning experiences, these studies tend to follow the cognitive approach by focusing on the topics like "motivation". For example, Zheng explores the multilingual motivation of Chinese university students who voluntarily choose to learn one of six languages other than English (LOTE) as a second or third language with a focus on the motivational variations across different target languages (Zheng, 2021). How LOTE learners' lived experiences are associated to the wider process of China's global development is rarely investigated. To bridge these gaps, this study aims to explore Chinese postgraduates' Myanmar learning experiences at a Chinese border university in Yunnan. It addresses the following research questions:

- 1) How do Chinese students transfer Myanmar language to capitals in the process of learning Myanmar language?

2) How are Chinese students empowered from Myanmar language learning?

### 3. Theoretical Framework

#### 3.1 Language Agency in Learning Foreign Languages

In this study, we draw on agency as theoretical framework to examine learning experience of postgraduates majoring in Myanmar language. Agency is defined as individuals' intentional acts to make things happen in social cognitive theory, as a sociocultural mediated capacity in Sociocultural theory, as a temporal and situated achievement in an ecological perspective and as a discursive practice in the post-structuralist view (Gao, 2021). However, one of the most widely accepted definitions of "agency" was developed by Giddens (1984), who conceived as an individual's capability of doing things to make a difference by deploying powers, which involve 'reflexive monitoring of action' and 'rationalization of action' (Lu & Shen, 2021). Agency is often understood as individuals' socio-culturally mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2001). According to Lantolf & Pavlenko (2001), In sociocultural theory, learners are considered active agents and co-constructors of meaning, not passive recipients of knowledge (Tae, 2016). Myanmar major postgraduates as active micro level agents in language practice, they exercise their agency in Myanmar learning by transferring Myanmar language resources into capitals. First, they can transfer Language capital to educational capital. For example, they learn Myanmar language for academic excellence. When they get "good return" in academic through learning Myanmar, the academic excellence is a kind of educational capital. Second, the language capital can be transferred to cultural capital. When the students are recognized by Myanmar people by speaking good Myanmar and when they are attracted by Myanmar culture, they will learn Myanmar with more confidence, which is a kind of cultural capital. This, in essence, is how they exercise their agency in learning Myanmar.

### 4. Methodology

#### 4.1 Research Site

##### 4.1.1 Yunnan as China's Bridgehead for China to Cooperate with Neighboring Countries

Yunnan province is located in Southwest China, the China's frontier, bordering Myanmar, Vietnam and Laos, the geographical advantages provide a platform for China and southeast countries to strengthen political and cultural exchanges, specially Myanmar (see Figure 1). The 2200-km long border line between China and Myanmar is a ribbon of friendship and trade, closely linking the two neighbors. For years, China and Myanmar have continued to deepen comprehensive cooperation in political, economic, military and cultural fields (Li, 2016). Yunnan as a China's bridgehead connected with Southeast Asia and South Asia, has the strategy positioning in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. Bordering on Myanmar, Yunnan is at the forefront in communications with the neighbor. Over the past decades, Yunnan has promoted its corporations with Myanmar. According to the data, from 2019 to 2020, the bilateral trade volume reached 12 billion dollars (Economic and Commercial Office of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of the Union of Myanmar, 2020). Now, China has become the largest trade partner of Myanmar. Therefore, it is necessary to study the learning experience of Myanmar language personnel in order to keep with the practice of the Belt and Road Initiative.



Figure 1. "Map showing the location of Yunnan Province" from Wikipedia

#### 4.1.2 Yunnan University as an Important Cradle to Cultivate Myanmar Language Personnel

Yunnan university as Chinese border university, also has the strategy positioning in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. As the only Double First-Class university in Yunnan province, it is an important cradle to cultivate Myanmar language personnel. At present, Yunnan university have designed various language majors for students in total, including Myanmar, Thai, Vietnamese, Hindi, Malay, Bengali and etc. Among them, Myanmar language majors began to enroll students in 2014 after the reconstruction of Myanmar language major. Students in Myanmar majors can attain various learning resources in Yunnan university, including well equipment, proficiency professors and Myanmar books etc. In addition, Yunnan university also has the Myanmar research institute, the only Myanmar research institute for China, which is a good resource, so that students can learn more Myanmar related research. Moreover, Yunnan university provide students in Myanmar majors with opportunity to study in Mandalay foreign university in Myanmar for one year, from which students can acquire a lot and contact with Myanmar native speakers. Because of above mentioned reasons, Yunnan university is selected to be research site.

#### 4.2 Participants

Participants who were chosen in the study of Myanmar Language learning experience are postgraduates of Yunnan university. They all have oversea study experience in Myanmar when they were undergraduates. There are five participants in total and they have different information. The detailed information about participants is exhibited in Table1. Postgraduates students have more feelings and experiences in learning Myanmar language comparing with undergraduates. Thus, selecting postgraduates of Myanmar majors aims to comprehensively explore how Chinese students perceive the values of learning Myanmar language, what learning challenges they encounter and how they mobilize their resources to overcome their learning difficulties. These five participants are multilingual in Chinese, Myanmar, English as well as their hometown dialects, especially participant D, who can speak Dai and understand Jingpo dialects. Her language background is presented in Table 2.

Table 1. 5 Participants' profile

Participants	Age	Gender	Nationality	Hometown	Education background (Graduate institutions of bachelor degree)	Myanmar proficiency	English proficiency
A	23	Female	Han	Yunnan	Yunnan University	Level-4, 8	CET6
B	24	Female	Han	Sichuan	Guangxi University for Nationalities	Level-4, 8	CET6
C	23	Female	Han	Chongqing	Yunnan University	Level-4, 8	CET6
D	24	Female	Han	Yunnan	Yunnan Normal University	Level-4, 8	CET6
E	24	Male	Han	Jiangxi	Yunnan Normal University	Level-4, 8	TEM 8

Table 2. Language background of participant D

Chinese proficiency	Myanmar proficiency	English proficiency	Baoshan Fanyan proficiency	Dai Fanyan proficiency	Jingpo Fanyan proficiency
Level II	Level-4, 8	CET6	Can listen, speak read and write	Can speak and understand, but cannot write	Can understand

#### 4.3 Data Collection and Data Analysis

To explore learning experience of Myanmar language, five postgraduates majoring in Myanmar language in a Chinese border university in Yunnan are selected. Yunnan university is a Chinese border university and is renowned for Myanmar language education and studies, therefore, it is representative and suitable as the research site. The five selected participants can provide complementary perspective of Myanmar learning experience. The

data are mainly collected through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, informal conversations, audio-recording, on-line interactions and other relevant documents and materials. Through participant observation and informal conversations, it can be seen more details of participants' Myanmar language learning experience. The semi-structured face-to face interviews on average lasted about half an hour and all were audio recorded with the permission of five participants. The main interview questions are as follows:

- 1) Did you choose Myanmar Major by yourself when you were undergraduate, or assigned by the university? Why did you choose the major?
- 2) What do you think of Myanmar language learning?
- 3) What are your perceptions of Myanmar language learning?
- 4) What are your attitudes toward Myanmar language? Have you ever changed your attitudes? Why?
- 6) What challenges are you confronting?
- 7) What strategies do you use to overcome difficulties?

The data analysis is based on themes that emerged from the interview data. In the first phrase of data analysis, we read all documents and materials as well as the interview data repeatedly and categorizes the data according to the themes. The data can be categorized into three parts, perceptions of learning Myanmar, challenges confronting of Myanmar postgraduates and the agentive strategies. In the second phrase of data analysis, the author pays attention to the interconnections of these three parts.

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Perceptions of Learning Myanmar Language

#### 5.1.1 First, Low Expectations on Learning Myanmar Language Before Their Exposure

Before enrollment, the participants hold the perceptions that learning Myanmar language means lack of profitable future, and they even lack of expectation or interest in learning Myanmar language because they regard Myanmar as a poor country. Before learning Myanmar language, they thought that Myanmar language is a little-known language and learning Myanmar language is strange and not fashionable like learning English. From this, it can be seen that the value of learning Myanmar language is correlated with the economic strength. Some of them learn Myanmar language as negotiation to transfer to another favorite major. The interviews with our participants shown below reveal that they hold negative belief when they were enrolled in Myanmar language major.

I was assigned by the university to learn Myanmar language, I remember that i wanted to transfer to other major when I got my admission notice, because at that time i thought that learning Myanmar means lack of profitable future. Myanmar is a poor country, I had no expectations on Myanmar. (Interview with A, 03/1/2022)

I choose Myanmar major by myself out of curiosity. Because I had never learned it before and didn't know much about Myanmar, the only thing I knew is that Myanmar is a poor southeast Asian country. (Interview with B, 14/1/2022)

I was assigned to Myanmar major, at the beginning, I was reluctant to learn Myanmar language, because it is not fashionable like learning English, the pronunciation and writing are strange. (Interview with C, 05/1/2022)

#### 5.1.2 Second, High Expectations on Learning Myanmar Language After Their Exposure

After learning Myanmar language, their perceptions of learning Myanmar language have been changed. From the micro level, they learn Myanmar language for aesthetic value. For example, participant A likes the tone of Myanmar language that sounds gently. Besides, they learn Myanmar language as a shared repertoire, because it is similar to local languages, like Dai and Jingpo dialects. Participant D grown up with friends who speak Dai and Jingpo, so that D can also speak Dai and can understand Jingpo, which help D learn Myanmar language easier with more confidence. When they are recognized by Myanmar people by speaking good Myanmar, they have more confidence to learn Myanmar language. What's more, they learn Myanmar language to overcome stereotypes. After learning Myanmar language in depth, they are attracted by different Myanmar culture, instead of considering Myanmar as a poor and backward country. Moreover, they learn Myanmar language for academic excellence, Myanmar language as added value for learning other subjects, because Myanmar can be a medium for getting the first data to do interdisciplinary research. Learning Myanmar as self-management. They believe that high proficiency in Myanmar language means "bright future" and being "top talent".

From the macro level, however, value of learning Myanmar is dependent on the power of China rather than Myanmar itself. With the rapid development, China’s comprehensive national strength is stronger, learning Myanmar language has become a future potential. They learn Myanmar language for profitable prospect, they also believe that Learning Myanmar can serving China’s interest, which show their patriotism.

5.2 Challenges of Learning Myanmar Language

From the micro level, the first learning challenge they have encountered is inadequate Myanmar proficiency, including problem of pronunciation and oracy. For instance, participant B who comes from Sichuan has difficulty in pronouncing “n” and “l” clearly, like “know” and “low”, the same problem can be found in Myanmar pronunciation, the word “miss” in Myanmar is pronounced “luan” in Chinese, however she often pronounces the word “nuan”. As for the oracy, she says her expressiveness is unidiomatic.

From the meso level, they are challenged by limited resources to learn Myanmar. For example, Myanmar learning materials are less comparing with English, Japanese. They acquire related materials through internet. However, there are limited access to materials and information about Myanmar and Myanmar related lectures are still inadequate.

From the macro level, participants majoring in Myanmar language are firstly challenged by the ideology that English is regarded as “the most useful language” in China and in Myanmar. In the context where English as a lingual franca, people often regard English as norm or referencing point, superior while other languages (like Myanmar language) as “weird” and inferior. They also attached “exotic” value to Myanmar language before their exposure. Secondly, they are also challenged by family expectation, for example, on where to settle. Moreover, they are confronting with the challenge of asymmetries of job market. More specifically, Myanmar majors have been confronted with a series of constraints from job market. For instance, Myanmar majors’ students are challenge by gender in employment. Female are difficult to get a good job, because the requirement of the good job give priority to man (see Figure 2). In addition, the job position is imbalance in terms of region, for example, the province in South China, like Yunnan, Guangxi, have more positions (see Figure 3).



Figure 2. the requirement of the job give priority to man



Figure 3. The province in South China, like Yunnan, Guangxi, have more positions

### *5.3 Agentive Strategies to Overcome Myanmar Learning Difficulties*

Postgraduates majoring in Myanmar language exercise their agency in Myanmar learning process when they are confronting with the challenges mentioned above. Agentive strategies range from practicing pronunciation, oracy to access to Myanmar culture. They mobilize their resources and invest much time and made efforts to overcome their learning difficulties in the Myanmar learning process. Agentive strategies they had adopted are as follows.

The first strategy for coping with the challenge of inadequate proficiency in Myanmar language is to spent huge amount of time to practice Myanmar in order to meet the requirement. They often get up early to practice the pronunciation, read loudly and imitate the pronunciation at the beginning of learning Myanmar. Besides, they learn to use Myanmar language by singing Myanmar songs. Participant A prefers to use Myanmar language by singing Myanmar songs, because the lyrics of the songs are authentic expression and it is easier to remember the expression by singing. In addition, they also enhance their Myanmar oracy by participating in language and cultural contests and practicing Myanmar language with Myanmar international students or friends. Moreover, they enhance Myanmar vocabulary by referring to Chinese language features.

The second strategy they had adopted for the challenge of limited resources is to search information through internet and learn the culture by watching Myanmar movies, TV and reading newspaper. These participants all have the habits of watch the Myanmar movies, sometime they share with their international friends their what they have known.

The third strategy is to communicate with Myanmar native speaker and experience the culture of Myanmar. They all have study experience in Myanmar for a year. After experience the life in Myanmar, they were attracted by Myanmar culture and overcome the stereotype of Myanmar. Now, they have more confidence in learning Myanmar.

Apart from individuals' strategies, the external resources including the teachers and the university also help them a lot in Myanmar learning. They have invested in Myanmar language learning by their access to various resources. Thus, it can be seen that Chinese students' investment in learning Myanmar has been shaped by their access to various resources mediated in multiple social forces across time and space.

### *5.4 Dynamic Process of Learning Myanmar Language at Chinese Border University*

From the data, it can be found Dynamics in Learning Myanmar Language at a Chinese Border University. "dynamic", more specifically, means that the perceptions of Participants majoring in Myanmar language are changeable. Values of learning Myanmar language are dynamic, after learning Myanmar, their perceptions have changed from the perception that learning Myanmar means lack of profitable future and lack of expectation to the perception of learning Myanmar for profitable prospect and serving China's interest. In accordance with "dynamic", the "process" actually emphasizes that the change of ideology and practice in Learning Myanmar. Their perceptions of Myanmar Language learning have been changed, moreover, it can be seen that difference between the publicity value of learning Myanmar and the value in learners' mind. Some learners still hold the belief that English is more useful than Myanmar. Actually, Chinese students' investment in learning Myanmar has been shaped by their access to various resources mediated in multiple social forces across time and space.

## **6. Discussion**

The study explores learning experience of postgraduates majoring in Myanmar language in Yunnan university. Through deeply interview, it can be seen that how they perceive the values of learning Myanmar language, what learning challenges they encounter and how they mobilize their resources to overcome their learning difficulties. Their perceptions of learning Myanmar language have changed after their exposure and they also adopted various agentive strategies to overcome challenges they are confronting with. Thus, the findings of this study reveal that there exists a dynamic process of Learning Myanmar language. The perceptions of learning Myanmar is dynamic. They had low expectations on learning Myanmar language before their exposure, while high expectations on learning Myanmar language after their exposure. The language ideology conducted in China via official documents is that Learning Myanmar language can be "top talent" and international personnel and have a "bright future". However, the value of learning Myanmar from the Myanmar postgraduates' perspective, Learning Myanmar is not just for profitable future, they also learn for the aesthetic value, the added value for learning other subjects and serving China's interest. In the process of learning Myanmar language, it can be seen that postgraduates majoring in Myanmar language transfer Myanmar language resources into capitals. First, they transfer Language capital to educational capital. For example, they learn Myanmar language for academic excellence. When they get "good return" in academic through learning Myanmar, the academic excellence is a kind of educational capital. Second, they transfer language to cultural capital. More specifically, when they are

recognized by Myanmar people by speaking good Myanmar and when they are attracted by Myanmar culture, they learn Myanmar with more confidence, which is a kind of cultural capital.

Form the dynamic process of learning Myanmar, it can be found that these students are empowered from Myanmar learning in under-resourced context (comparing with English, there are less resources to learn Myanmar, though Yunnan has the largest resources compared with other province). They are empowered from Myanmar language learning by adopting various strategies and mobilizing their resources to overcome Myanmar learning difficulties, majors to facilitate their language learning. Various learning resources and chance to study in Myanmar are provided by YNU for enhancing their Myanmar proficiency and equipping them with global vision (Lin, 2019). Lu & Shen (2021) study the LOTE learning and English learning, and highlight that LOTE learners see English as a default choice and LOTE as an extra choice, which ignore the empowerment of learners in LOTE learning. Students at Chinese border university learn Myanmar language with more confidence, they are empowered by various resources.

## 7. Conclusion

This paper focuses on learning experience of postgraduates majoring in Myanmar language in Chinese border university, Yunnan university. Based on the findings mentioned above, it is generally acknowledged that their perceptions of learning Myanmar have changed after learning Myanmar. For example, they have low expectations on learning Myanmar language before their exposure, however, they have high expectations on learning Myanmar language after their exposure though there are gaps between the value of learning Myanmar in China via official document and the value in their mind. When they are confronted with various challenges in learning process, such as problem of pronunciation and oracy, limited resources to learn Myanmar, “English is the most useful language” ideology, family expectation and asymmetries of job market, as micro agents in Myanmar language learning, they adopt various agentive strategies and mobilize their resources to overcome challenges and transfer language capital to educational capital and cultural capital. Thus, this study reveals that Chinese students’ investment in learning Myanmar has been shaped by their access to various resources mediated in multiple social forces across time and space. In addition, the study demonstrates that Myanmar language learners are empowered from various resources in the English under-resourced context. It can be seen dynamics in learning Myanmar language. In the dynamic process of their Myanmar learning, they are more confident in learning Myanmar language and even exercise their agency in learning Myanmar language when they are confronted with difficulties, which has provided new case study and new perspective with foreign language study, specially LOTE learning study in China’s frontier. The findings also suggested that more attention to Myanmar language learning and prepare students for learning Myanmar language and encourage them to think about how to deal with difficulties in the process of language learning. This study can also shed some lights on providing pedagogical implications for enhancing the learning outcomes of LOTE in China.

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