

## A Survey on Chinese Mongolian College Students' English study — A Case Study of Northwest Minzu University

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**Abstract:** China is a multinational country, with 56 nationalities in all. Mongolian nationality, as one of the major minorities in China, has recently attracted many researchers' attention. Mongolian college students' English study has attracted many researchers' attention. The paper, making use of questionnaire and the theory of third language acquisition, analyzes the current situations of Mongolian College Students' English study in China, analyzing the existing problems and putting forward some solutions of the problems of Mongolian College Students' English study in China, which has practical meanings for the improvement of Mongolians' English teaching methods.

### 1. Introduction

China is a country with 56 nationalities. Mongolian nationality is one of the major minorities with the population of approximate 6,000,000 according to the Sixth Population Census of The People Republic of China in 2010, occupying 4.49 percent of the population of China.

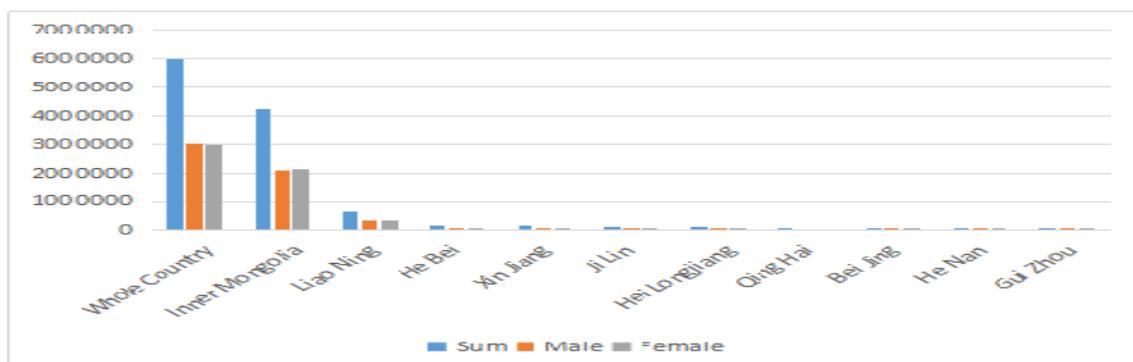


Figure 1. Top 10 provinces of Mongolian residents in China

For the reasons of history and migration, Mongolians live in almost every province. According to Fig.1, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is the area inhabited by most Mongolians. Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region is located in the north of China, with Liao Ning, Ji Lin, Hei Longjiang on the east, He Bei, Shan Xi, Shan Xi, Gan Su, Ning Xia, on the south and west. The total area of Inner Mongolia is 1,183,000 square kilometers, occupying 12.3 percent of the total area of China.

With the development of society and the improvement of people's educational awareness, more and more Mongolians accept higher education. According to the Census in 2010, 420682 Mongolians have accepted junior college education, and 335274 Mongolians have accepted college education. In comparison, there are not many Mongolians accepting postgraduate education, fewer than 30,000, as is shown in figure 2.

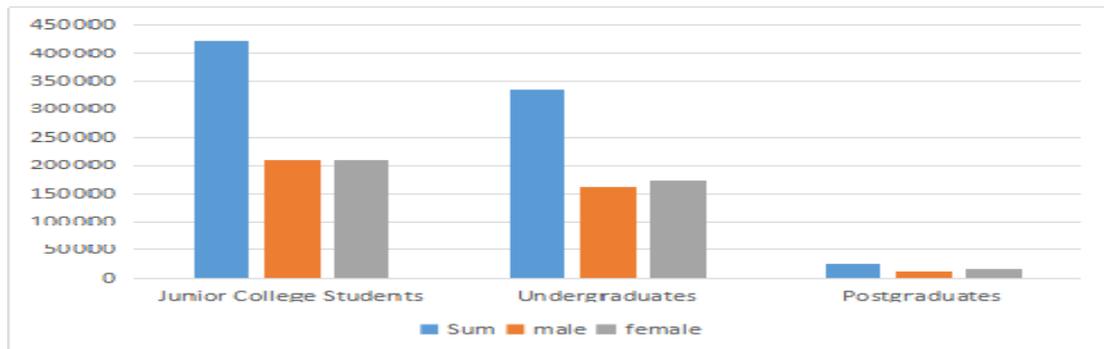


Figure 2. The situations of Mongolians accepting higher education

As we all know, with the advent of globalization, English, as an international language, is becoming more and more important. Chinese government attaches importance to the study of English. English is one of the major subjects in schools and universities not only in cities but also in the countryside. In Inner Mongolia, Mongolian is the most commonly used language. In Inner Mongolia, there are three kinds of primary schools: Mongolian schools, Han and Mongolian schools, Han Schools, in all of which English is taught. From primary school to high school to university, Mongolians study English for many years, but the English level is not satisfactory.

In order to find out the problems and solutions, a survey questionnaire with 10 open questions is designed and 120 questionnaires are distributed to the Mongolian college students in Northwest Minzu University. Finally, 103 valid questionnaires are taken back, 65 females students and 38 male students. Let's analyze the current situations of Mongolian College Students' English study according to the survey.

## 2. Discussion:

### 2.1 The Current Situations of Chinese Mongolian College Students' English study

#### 2.1.1 Uneven English levels

According to the survey, the starting time of learning English is different in different places. In most places, Mongolians begin to study English in the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade in primary school. But in some places, for example in Delinghai city of Qing Hai province, some Mongolians start to learn English in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade. So college students' English levels are uneven.

#### 2.1.2 The lack of interest

According to the survey, 76.2 percent of Mongolian college students (80 Ss) find English boring; only 11.7 percent of them (12 Ss) find English interesting; the others just write "just so so". The results are similar to Liu Bin's research. According to his research, 85 percent of Mongolian college students don't think it is necessary to study English and almost all of them think it is completely unnecessary to learn the culture of English-speaking countries. 47.2% Mongolian college students have little interest in studying English. 28.4% are totally uninterested in studying English. 46.2 percent agree that they are absent-minded in English classes. (Bin, L, 2010)

Many Mongolian students think studying English is difficult for them. After all, English is their third Language. Third Language (L3) is commonly defined as a language learned after the acquisition of the first (L1) and the second language (L2). Most Mongolian college students can speak Chinese (their second language) fluently, because of the environment of their being brought up: Mongolians and Han people live together even in Inner Mongolia. The good language environment helps them to study Chinese well and easily. Most of Mongolian college students are able to master the two languages well. But English is difficult for them. The answers to the 5<sup>th</sup> question on the questionnaires, 89.3 percent (92 Ss) of the students consider that grammar is the hardest part in English study; 9.7 percent (10 Ss) of them think that it is very hard to remember so many words. The difficulty of English is considered as one of the major reasons for their losing interest in English.

### *2.1.3 The lack of motivation*

Q 3 and Q6 are designed to know the students' motivation of studying English. 60.2 percent (62 Ss) don't know why they should study English. Only 11.7 percent of the students (12 Ss) think English is important and they should study English well. According to the Mongolians' employment status in Northwest Minzu University, very few find jobs related to English more or less. So most of them don't think English is necessary to study English. Obviously, most of them don't have enough motivation to study English.

### *2.1.4 Using Chinese as their interlanguage.*

According to Q8, 82 Ss (79.6 percent) think it is better if their English teachers are Mongolians, because when having English classes taught by Chinese-speaking teachers, most of them have to transfer Chinese to Mongolian and then to English (according to answers to Q7), which is a barrier for the Mongolians. But the fact is that most English classes are taught by Chinese-speaking teachers, and some Mongolians' Chinese is not good enough to understand all the contents.

### *2.1.5 Low level of English becomes their barrier to further their study.*

According to Fig.2, it is apparent that very few Mongolians (only about 0.45 percent of the total Mongolian population) further their study with master's degree. The percentage is greatly lower than that of Han people. To some extent, the answers to Q10 explain the reason. 54.4 percent (56 Ss) just want to find jobs without any plans to further their study. 12 Ss (11.7 percent) expect to go on studying for master's degree. The remaining students (34 percent) think that their English is so bad that they can't get the admission score in English, so they have to give up.

## **2.2 The Solutions of the Problems**

### *2.2.1 Organize some activities to arouse the Mongolian students' interest*

We often say "interest is the best teacher for a student", from which we can know the significance of interest. It is important that teachers should organize some activities to arouse the Mongolian students' interest in studying English. According to the answers to question 9, 32 Ss think their English classes are so boring that they are sleepy in the classes, so they want their English teachers to organize some English games to stimulate their interest in English. For example, English words cross puzzle, word chain... English teachers can also organize stage-based English teaching activities to make them interested in studying and speaking English.

### *2.2.2 Help to build motivation for the Mongolian college students.*

Motivation has long been reckoned as the major factor influencing English language learning. Learning and motivation are both important to acquire some knowledge. Learning means one's ability helping a learner to get skills and knowledge, while motivation means a motive power to push and encourage a learner to overcome the difficulties in the process and get knowledge at last. (Wimolmas, 2013) The students with high motivation can learn more and more quickly than less motivated students. Mongolian college students, unlike Han people, can still find jobs even though their English is very bad. Therefore, they lack motivation. Therefore, both intrinsic and integration types of extrinsic motivation should be desirable in English teaching.

### *2.2.3 Strengthen the fluency of Chinese.*

Hakan Ringbom, as one of the most influential researcher of the effects of language transfer in third language acquisition, said "It is obvious that the less the learner knows about the target language (here he refers to L3), the more he is forced to draw upon any other knowledge he possesses. This other knowledge also includes other foreign languages (LN) previously learned, and such LN influence, like L1 influence, will be much more in evidence at the early stages of learning" (Ringbom, 1986: 155-156)

According to the survey (answers to Q7), about 61.2 percent of Mongolian college students(63 Ss) use Mongolian to think first and then transfer it to Chinese and then to English, while 30.1 percent of Mongolian college students (31Ss) use Chinese to think and then transfer it to English. Chinese plays a role as an interlanguage, just like what Ringbom said "... the higher the learner's standard of LN proficiency and the more vivid the LN is in his mind, the more there is of other LN influence on L3 (Ringbom, 1986:160) Fluency in Chinese is helpful for the Mongolians to

understand English better.

### 3. Conclusions

According to the survey, Mongolian college students have some problems in studying English: uneven English levels, the lack of interest, the lack of motivation...Some solutions are put forward. But there are still some problems unsolved. For example, what factors make it hard for them to study English, psychologically, methodologically or environmentally? The survey can help English teachers know the specialties of Mongolian college students, and better organize their English classes.

### 4. Problems of the survey

1. All the college students are the students in Northwest Minzu University. Their English studying situations can't represent all the situations in China.
2. Only 103 valid questionnaires are taken back. In comparison with the Mongolian population, the answers on the questionnaires can only explain some people's ideas.

### Acknowledgement

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### Appendices

Questionnaire for students. Please answer the following questions

Grade \_\_\_\_\_ Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Your major \_\_\_\_\_ The Place you are from \_\_\_\_\_

1. When did you start to learn English?
2. Do you find it interesting to study English?
3. Do you think it is necessary to study English to find a good job?
4. Do you think it is necessary to know about the culture of English-speaking countries?
5. Which part in English do you think is the hardest part, words, pronunciation or grammar?
6. Why do you think you should study English?
7. When having English classes, which language do you use to transfer the content to English, Mongolian or Chinese?
8. What language do you want your English teacher to speak when he/she is teaching English? English, Chinese or Mongolian?
9. What suggestions would you like to give to your English teachers?
10. Do you want to continue your study as a postgraduate after graduation? If no, why?

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