Beliefs About Difficulties in Learning Chinese as a Foreign Language in a Public Sector University

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Abstract

Chinese language teaching in universities was introduced as part of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor initiative (CPEC) for economic, entrepreneurial, and social reasons. Over a decade of introducing Chinese foreign language learning, undergraduate learners in Pakistan have invested in Chinese language for scholarships, higher education, jobs, and business purposes. However, many CFL learners were unable to acquire Chinese language and had low proficiency in the language. Therefore, the present study investigates the beliefs about difficulties that Pakistani foreign language learners face about learning Chinese as a foreign language in a public sector university. For this purpose, quantitative research using BALLI questionnaire was conducted within a public sector university. The BALLI questionnaire inquired about the general and specific language learning difficulties that students face while learning CFL. Data was collected using stratified sampling from two hundred undergraduate students who have completed CFL-I and CFL-II mandatory language course at the university. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics through SPSS. The results of the study reported that learners considered Chinese as a difficult language to learn as compared to other foreign languages. Also, few of the participants believed that they would be fluent Chinese language speakers in future and get a successful job with CFL. Similarly, learners reported about the four language skills in Chinese and considered listening as easier than speaking. Additionally, the learners reported that reading and writing are equally difficult in acquiring Chinese.

Keywords: BALLI, CFL, CPEC, Difficulties, language skills

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Introduction

In the present times, Chinese has globally emerged as one of the most effective languages (Fan, 2018). China and Pakistan signed a flagship multibillionaire investment project China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which opened gates for better economic conditions, investment, business opportunities and improved social relations (Javaid & Jahangir, 2015 & Khan et al, 2022). Higher education has a pivotal role in the CPEC project as it offers prospects for scholarship, exchange programs and higher education in China (Bacha, 2018). As most of the learners are investing in Chinese language for a better job and entrepreneurial opportunities (Aftab et al 2021 & Jalil, 2008).

Therefore, the Government of Pakistan and higher education institutes in Pakistan introduced and started teaching CFL in private and public sector universities as a mandatory foreign language at undergraduate level. Similarly, Hanif (2023) while exploring the present situation of of CFL teaching at Confucius Institute in Pakistan reported that Chinese language learning was popular till 2019. Post-2019, the number of CFL learners declined gradually. The main reasons for this decline were insufficient teaching staff, teaching material, methodology and native Chinese teachers. Rana (2023) also narrated that even our diplomatic staff was not taking any interest in understanding Chinese culture and acquiring the four skills of Chinese language.

Most of the young undergraduate students in public and private universities are not familiar with Chinese language. As a result, undergraduate students face difficulties in learning Chinese language. Previous studies have focused on the beliefs of learners about CFL (Aftab, 2019), foreign language investment (Aftab et al., 2020) and language policy about CFL instruction in a public sector university (Khan et al 2023). Therefore, the present study focused on the difficulties that learners face while learning Chinese language and difficulties in acquiring the Chinese language skills.

Research Objective & Question

- To investigate the beliefs about difficulties in learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in an educational institute?

Therefore, the research question of the study is:

- What are the beliefs about difficulties in learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in an educational institute?

Theoretical Model

Horwitz (1985) developed the tool of language learning inventory for beliefs to evaluate views of learners based on issues relative to language learning using the tools of interviews and group discussions with both teachers and learners of foreign language. Beliefs) developed a tool about Beliefs about Language Leaning Inventory (BALLI) questionnaire to investigate the beliefs of

foreign language learners. This study showed that beliefs were detrimental for language learning. However, there are several difficulties in learning a foreign language as well. The results of the study showed that most of the students of foreign languages had no desire to study the foreign culture nor did they believe that their foreign language proficiency would help them to get a better job in future.

The present study utilizes BALLI questionnaire which has many dimensions like foreign language aptitude, motivation, nature of language learning, difficulties, and communication strategies. As the present study focused on difficulties of language learners therefore, it utilizes the difficulty of language learning dimension from the beliefs inventory. Howritz (1985) defines difficulty in language learning as a dimension which pertains to the general difficulty faced by the foreign language learners while learning a foreign language and the specific difficulty which deals with the components of target language. Therefore, the present study adopted Howritz model of System of belief about language learning as theoretical framework (Horwitz, 1988). The BALLI questionnaire has been utilized to study the beliefs of foreign language learners in foreign countries as well where Chinese was taught (Cui, 2014; Le, 2004; Sun, 2011; Yang: 2015). This framework provides a way for understanding the difficulties that learners face while learning a foreign language. Hence, it would enable the learners and teachers to overcome these difficulties and improve CFL teaching in future.

Figure 1
Theoretical Model of the Study
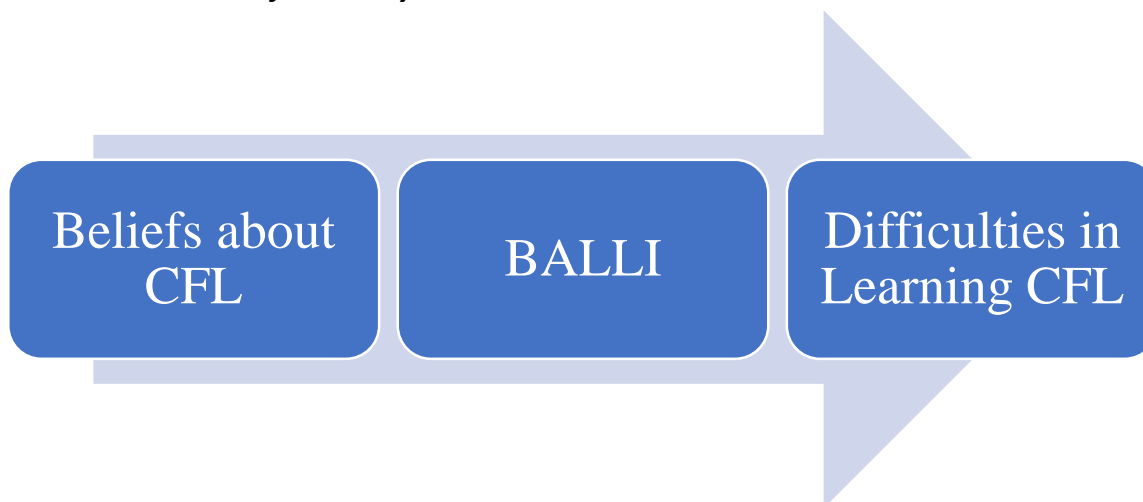
Literature Review

Aftab et al (2022) conducted a study to know about the foreign language aptitude of undergraduate learners in a public sector university. The study was conducted using BALLI questionnaire by focusing on the aptitude dimension and data was collected from undergraduate students who were learning Chinese as a mandatory foreign language. The findings showed that students had mixed responses about their ability and capability to learn the foreign language.

50% reported that it was easy to learn Chinese at a young age as compared to old age. Similarly, gender has an equal role in language learning. 38% believed that women are comparatively better CFL learners as compared to male. While 50% of the participants narrated that they had confidence and in-born ability to learn foreign languages. In the same manner, 60% said that they can easily acquire CFL. More than 50% agreed that learning Chinese language would enhance their multilingual identity and intelligence after acquiring CFL. Overall, the study focused on the age, gender, identity, intelligence, capability, confidence, and intelligence of participants for learning CFL. However, these are some of the factors that create a barrier in Chinese as a foreign language learning. Beside these, there are other difficulties as well that learners face while learning a foreign language. Hence, the present study aims to explore the beliefs of learners about difficulties in learning CFL with a specific focus on language skills. Similarly, Iftikhar et al (2024) conducted a mixed method study on the perceptions of Chines learners in the Confucius institutes in the provinces of Sindh and Punjab. The result reported the increase in learning and promotion of Chinese due to the impact of CPEC in form of jib opportunities. The study further compared the data of two provinces which signified the extensive support for Chinese language among the learners of Punjab as compared to learners from Sindh province. The Chinese learners in Sindh resisted Chinese learning because of the local culture and mother tongue.

 In the same way, Khan et al (2023) focused on the Chinese language policy and interpretations of policy makers and learners while learning Chinese as a compulsory language at a public sector university. Data was collected using face-to-face individual interviews from policy makers and focus group interviews from learners enrolled in CFL course and document analysis of language in education policy and notifications. The findings showed that the policy makers' aims and objectives differ from the perceptions of CFL learners. The difficulties that learners reported were mainly related to the medium of instruction, classroom size, interest and motivation of learners and levels of learning. While narrating about the future of CMFL, the policy makers said that Chinese language would evolve over the time, and it would time some time while another policy maker acknowledged the importance of Chinese language learning skills which would be a key for social integration and propagation of Chinese culture. Therefore, the present study focuses on investigating the difficulties learners face while acquiring the four skills of Chinese language.

In the same way, Ali and David (2023) also explored the challenges of Chinese language learning in a multilingual country with English as the official language. The study inquired about the perceptions of students and teachers towards Chinese language policy using survey approach. The findings of the study reported that Chinese language classroom was struggling to replace English language classrooms and face resistance from minority language speakers who are already resisting the majority languages in different settings.

Similarly, Cui (2014) focused on North American students and explored the Chinese as a foreign language learning belief. The data was collected from two hundred and eight respondents who were learning CFL. The findings showed that learners considered acquiring Chinese culture and

language an uphill task. However, most of them believed that Chinese has a greater influence in the coming years as a foreign language. The global world will be dominated by Chinese language-oriented job and business opportunities due to Belt Road Initiative (BRI). While Sun (2011) identified the CFL learners motivation beliefs in Canada. The findings showed that learners considered Chinese as a difficult language to learn. Yet most of the respondents were motivation due to interaction and awareness of Chinese culture, travelling and future job opportunities. Similarly, Le (2004) using BALLI questionnaire explored foreign language learning experiences of learners in China. Data was collected from three different groups of learners. Although most of the groups were confident about learning Chinese language, yet one of the groups reported Chinese as a very difficult language. Yang (2015) also utilized the BALLI questionnaire to inquire about the experiences of young learners while acquiring Chinese language. The results showed that most of the young learners were enthusiast to learn the Chinese language yet considered it to be a difficult language to learn. He also reported that both teachers and students considered Chinese as a difficult language to learn and require more time to gain proficiency in the Chinese language that merely studying two compulsory courses of Chinese in a year.

Methodology

The present study focused on investigating the beliefs about difficulties faced by learners in learning CFL in a public sector university. Therefore, a quantitative survey approach was selected to know the difficulties faced by learners (Creswell, 2015). Survey research design was selected because the present study focused on investigating the difficulties faced by CFL learners enrolled in a public sector university. Therefore, data collected through survey has been statistically analyzed to denote the different difficulties faced by undergraduates as CFL learners.

The population of this study includes undergraduate students who have studied CFL-I and CFL-II mandatory foreign language course at the public sector university. The target population included undergraduate students from twenty-nine different departments of the public sector university. Data was collected using systematic sampling. Creswell (2015) defines systematic sampling as choosing every nth student from the target population until it reaches the total sample size. The sampling interval tells us "how to select elements from a sampling frame by skipping elements in the frame before selecting one for the sample" (Neuman, 2015, p. 258). Out of the 2,000 undergraduate students who have studied CFL-I and CFL-II;data was collected from 200 students as a representative sample which is 10% of the total target population.

The data was collected using BALLI questionnaire adopted from Horwitz (1988). BALLI questionnaire was adopted in many studies to know the beliefs of learners about the language learning process and difficulties. The BALLI questionnaire was developed by Horwitz, (1985 & 1988) to assess learner's opinions on a variety of issues surrounding language learning beliefs.

The analysis of the BALLI questionnaire was done statistically using Statistical packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics were performed to summarize the data provided by 200

students in terms of frequencies, mode, median, mean, skewness and standard deviation of the questionnaire. The goal of analyzing this statistical data was to present the beliefs of undergraduates about difficulties in learning CFL.

Findings

The BALLI questionnaire inquired about the general difficulty faced by the learners in learning a foreign language as well as the specific difficulties which the learners usually deal with while learning their target foreign language (Horwitz, 1988). Descriptive analysis of learners' responses through presenting means, standard deviation and percentages for each category is reported below in Table 1.

Table 1

General beliefs about difficulty in learning CFL

Area	N	Mean	SD	Skewness
Difficulty of language learning	200	2.6025	1.2332	-0.026

Table 1 above shows the general beliefs of undergraduates about difficulty in learning CFL. The lower mean of 2.6 showed that the undergraduates had weak beliefs in difficulty of learning Chinese. However, the higher SD value indicates the variance in the responses of the participants which shows that the undergraduates hold different beliefs in each category relative to dimension of difficulty. Moreover, the skewness score is in between the range of +1 to -1 which reflects that the data is moderately skewed. An in-depth analysis of each item included in Horwitz' dimension of difficulty is discussed in detail through, median, mode, skewness, frequencies, and percentages below.

Difficulty in learning Chinese Language

Median of 2 as shown in table 2 below signifies that the responses of the undergraduate students about this item are not symmetrical. Moreover, the skewness score is in between the range of +1 to -1 which reflects that the data is moderately skewed. The mode value of 1 represents that most of the responses from the undergraduate students disagree with the statement. Additionally, the distribution of the responses is presented through the histogram in figure 2 below.
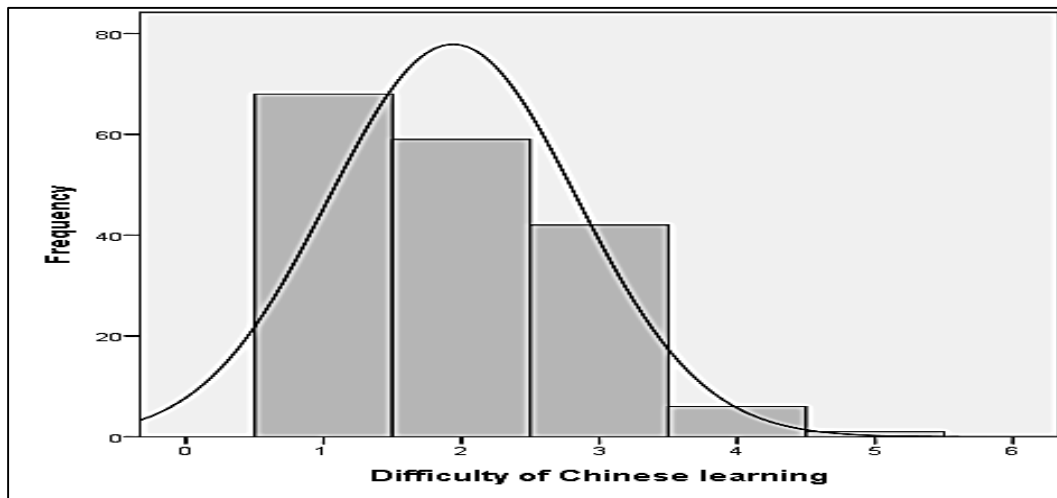
Table 2

Descriptive statistics for responses on difficulty in learning Chinese language

Statement	Median	Mode	Skewness	SD
The language I am trying to learn is	2	1	0.597	0.902

Figure 2

 Histogram for responses on difficulty in learning Chinese

Similarly, Table 3 represents the frequency table for difficulty in learning Chinese language. In total 68 participants considered Chinese as a very difficult language, 59 as a difficult language while 42 reported it as a language of medium difficulty. While 7 reported Chinese to be an easy language to be learnt.
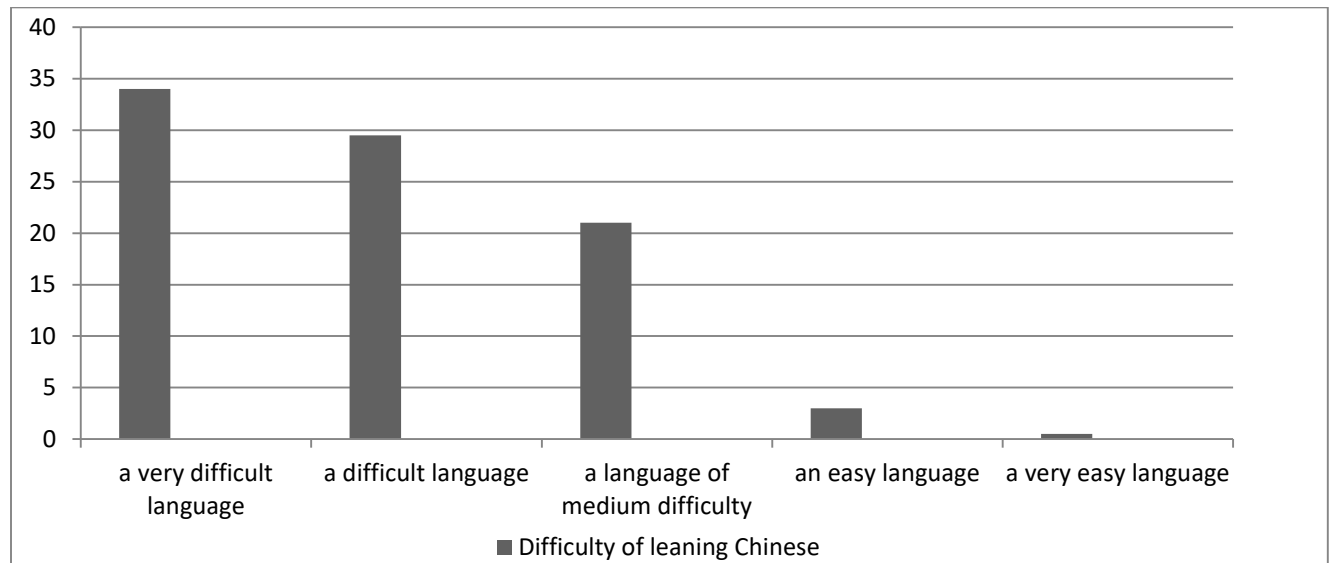
Table 3

Frequency table for difficulty in learning Chinese

Statement	A very difficult language	A difficult language	Language of medium difficulty	An easy language	A very easy language
The language I am trying to learn is	68	59	42	6	1

Item 1 probes the belief of undergraduates about the level of difficulty they face while learning Chinese. As shown in the figure 2 below, collectively more than 50% of the respondents considered Chinese a difficult language whereas 21% of them considered Chinese as a language of medium difficulty. Only 3% of the respondents took Chinese as an easy language to learn and 0.5% took it as an easy language. These frequencies show that most of the undergraduates' rate Chinese as a difficult language to learn.

Figure 3 Percentage distribution for difficulty in learning Chinese

Future expectations about Speaking Chinese

The next item analyzed in the BALLI questionnaire inquired about future expectations of learners as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Descriptive Statistics for future expectations about Speaking Chinese

Statement	Median	Mode	Skewness	SD
I will ultimately learn to speak	3	4	-0.157	1.29

Median value of 3 as shown in the table 4 above signifies that the responses of the undergraduate students about this item are symmetrical. Moreover, the skewness score is in between the range of +1 to -1 which reflects that the data is moderately skewed. The mode value of 4 represents that majority of the responses from the undergraduate students agree for the statement. The normal distribution of the responses is presented through the histogram in figure 4 below.

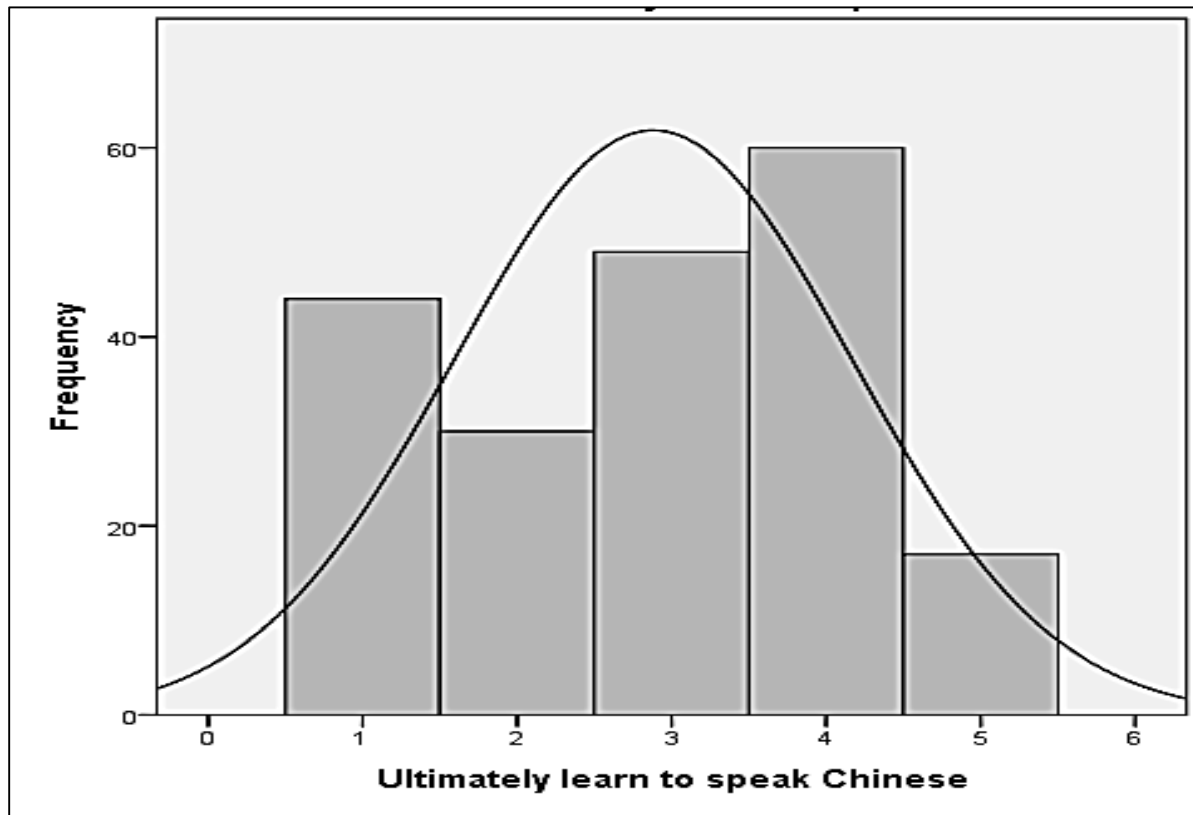*Figure 4 Histogram for responses about future expectations about Speaking Chinese*

Table 5 reported the responses of participants regarding future expectation about Chinese speaking skills.
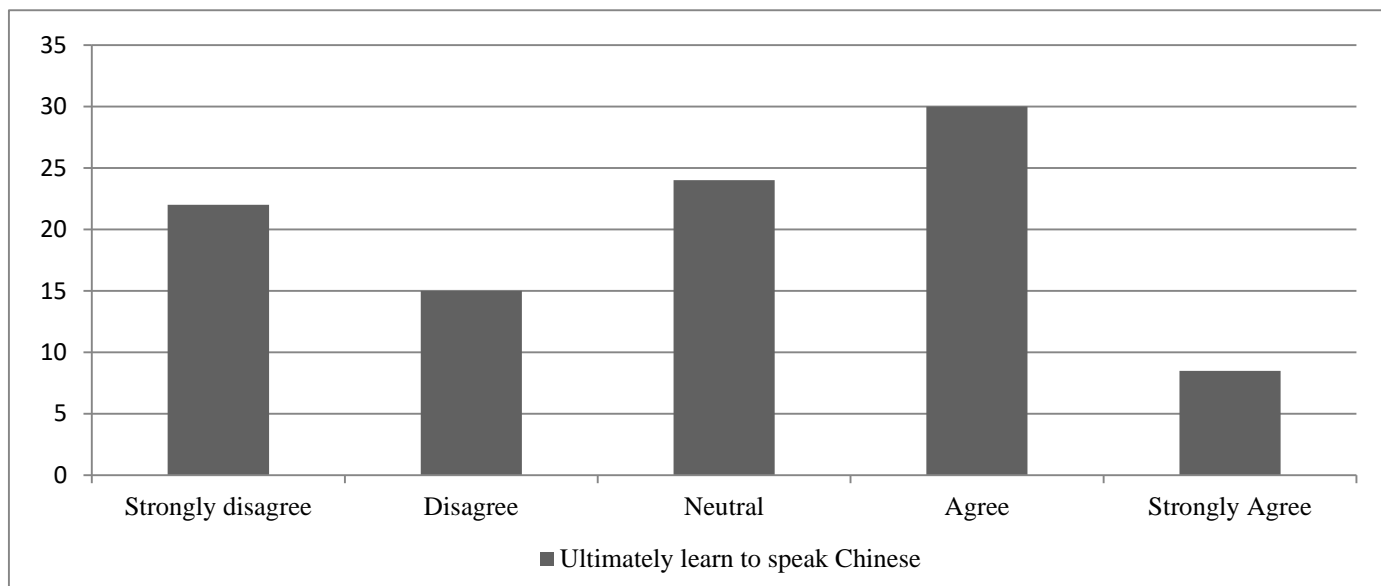
Table 5
Frequency table for future expectations about Chinese Speaking Skills

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
I will ultimately learn to speak	44	30	49	60	17

Item 2 investigated the belief of the undergraduates about their expectations for success in learning Chinese as a foreign language. According to the responses shown in figure 5, respondents had diverse beliefs relative to their expectation of success. 30% of the respondents agreed that they would be able to speak Chinese in future. On the other hand, 24.5% of them were unable to predict their future in learning to speak Chinese. Interestingly, 22% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 15% of the respondents disagreed as well about their future

speaking potential in Chinese. The proportion of agreed and disagreed responses was almost equal for this BALLI item.

Figure 5 Percentage distribution of future expectations about speaking Chinese

Difficulty in learning Chinese language skills

The questionnaire also inquired about the level of difficulty that the learners faced while acquiring the four skills of Chinese language as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Descriptive statistics for difficulty in learning language skills

Statement	Median	Mode	Skewness	SD
Easier to understand than speak Chinese	3	4	-0.197	1.41
Easier to read and write than speak Chinese	2.00	1	0.348	1.333

The median value of 3 as shown in table 6 above signifies that the responses of the undergraduate students about the first statement are symmetrical. Whereas the median value of 2 as shown in table 7 above signifies that the responses of the undergraduate students about the first statement are not symmetrical. Moreover, the skewness scores for both the statements are in between the range of +1 to -1 which reflects that the data is moderately skewed. The mode values of 4 for the first statement represents that majority of the responses from the undergraduate students agree for the statement. Whereas the mode value of 1for the second

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statement represents that many of the responses from the undergraduate students disagree. The distribution of the responses is presented through the histogram in figures 6 and 7 below.

Figure 6 Histogram on responses about learning speaking and listening skills
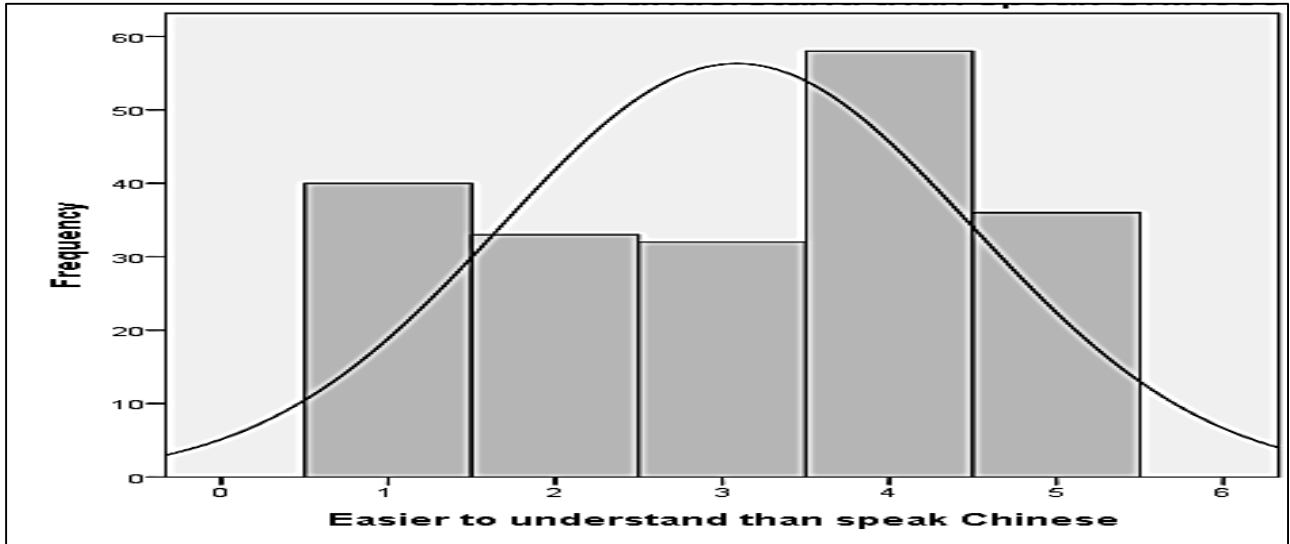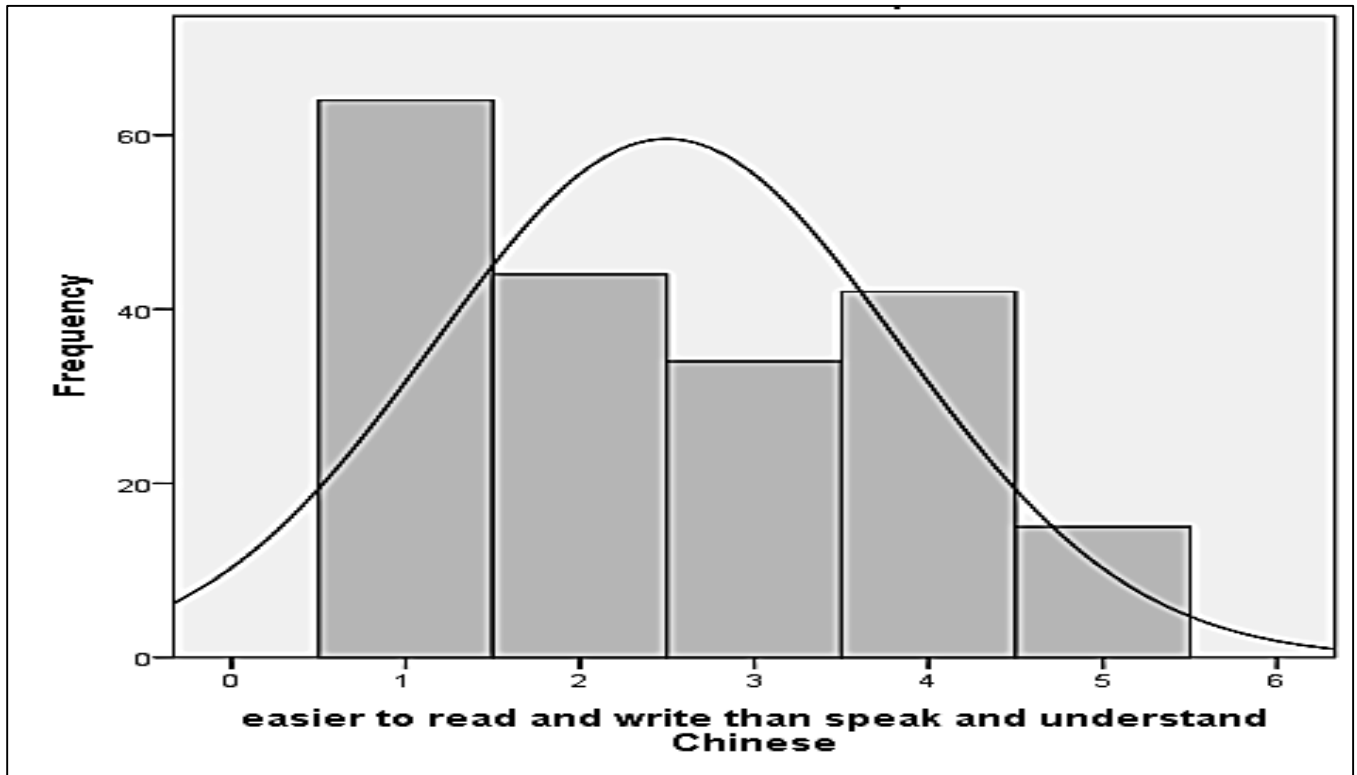

Figure 7 Histogram on responses about learning reading and writing skills

In the same manner, Table 7 reported the number of participants that agreed and disagreed with the difficulty of acquiring the different skills of Chinese language.

Table 7

Frequency table for difficulty in learning language skills

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA
Easier to understand than speak Chinese	40	33	32	58	36
Easier to read and write than speak Chinese	64	44	34	42	15

Items 16 and 17 of the questionnaires inquired about the relative difficulty faced by the learners in acquiring the four skills of Chinese. As shown in figure 8 below, 29% of the respondents agreed and 18% of the respondents strongly agreed on rating listening as an easier skill to learn than speaking. In contrast, 20% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 16.5% of them disagreed with the statement whereas 16% of the respondents were neutral.

Figure 8 Percentage distribution of participants' response to difficulty in learning skills
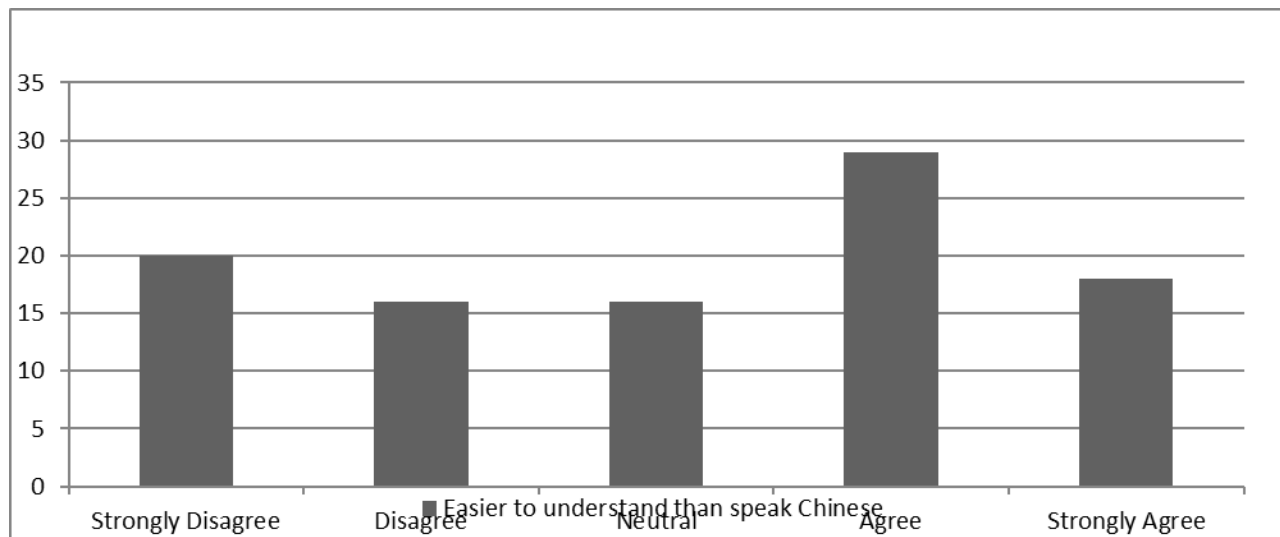
In comparison to listening and speaking, 32% of the respondents strongly disagreed and 22% of them disagreed with the statement which indicated that reading and writing were difficult to

learn. On the other hand, 21% of the respondents agreed and only 7.5% of them strongly agreed with the statement. The figure 9 below shows the maximum disagreement by the respondents on rating reading and writing easier than listening and speaking Chinese.

Figure 9 Percentage distribution of participants' response to difficulty in learning skills
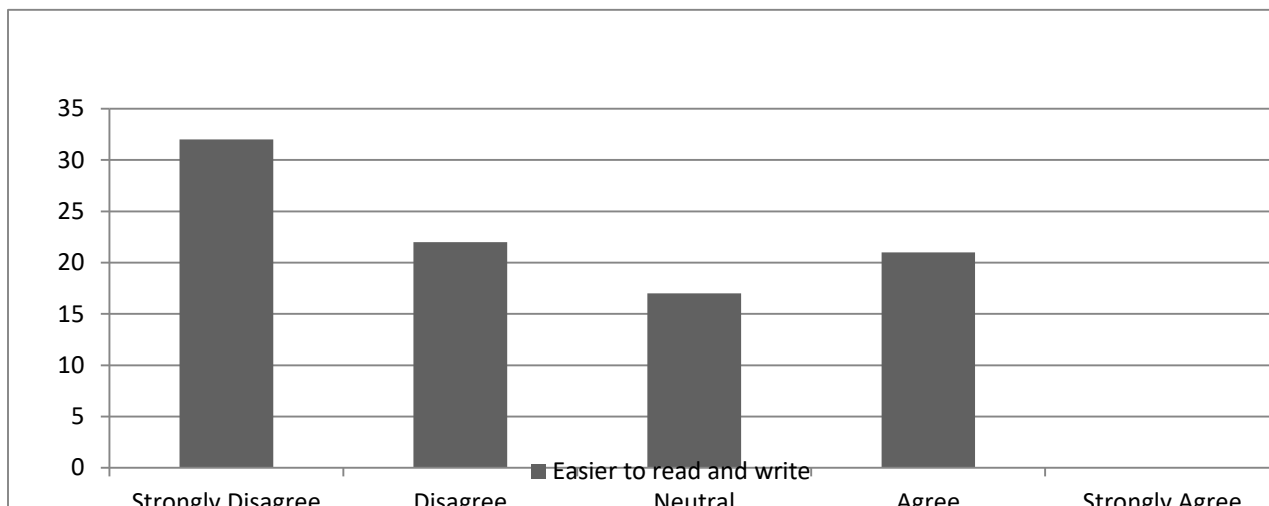
Discussion

Learning a language is relatively easy when it has similar features acquired from other famous global languages (Fan, 2018). The present study focused on the beliefs about difficulties that learners face while acquiring CFL while Aftab et al (2022) focused on the aptitude of learners and Khan et al (2022) focused on the language policy and motivation of learners while learning CFL. Similarly, Iftikhar et al (2024) focused on the attitudes, problems and motivation of CL in Sindh and Punjab.

The findings of the study showed that learners considered Chinese as a difficult language as it has no connective roots with other famous global languages. Majority of the undergraduate students rated Chinese as a difficult language to learn. These findings corroborate to the other studies who presented the similar result relative to Chinese. The students who studied Chinese as a foreign language in different states of UK at school level rated Chinese as a difficult language (Yang, 2015). Similarly, the post school North American foreign language learners of Chinese were of the similar opinion on rating Chinese as a difficult foreign language (Cui, 2014). Also, the foreign learners of Chinese in America ranked the language as a difficult one for learning (Le, 2004). Although foreign learners who were learning Chinese in Canadian university were of the same opinion on the difficulty level as the other studies concluded, the learners took it more as challenging than difficult (Sun, 2011). These findings also relate with (Yang, 2015) who also concluded that students and teachers consider Chinese as a difficult language. Yang, (2015) who concluded the combined beliefs of both teachers and leaners and narrated the learners be given 3 to 5 years to

learn Chinese. In conclusion, the findings about the difficulty level of learning CFL can be sum up on the inference that Chinese is a difficult language to learn for undergraduates as evident in other studies (Cui, 2014; Le, 2004; Sun, 2011; Yang, 2015).

Conclusion

This study explored that beliefs of learners about difficulties that they face while learning Chinese language. The findings of the study showed that 50% of the learners considered Chinese as a difficult language to learn in general. 21% respondents reported Chinese as a medium language while only 3% of respondents considered it to be easy language. Similarly, the respondents had diverse beliefs about the future expectation from Chinese language. 30% of the CFL learners reported that ultimately, they would be able to speak Chinese language in future while 37% disagreed that they would be able to use Chinese language.

The study also focused on inquiring about difficulty in acquiring Chinese language skills. 37% of the respondents agreed that listening to Chinese language as easier than speaking Chinese while 36.5% disagreed with them. In the same manner, 54% of the respondents narrated that reading and writing is difficult than speaking in Chinese while 28.5% agreed that reading and writing is comparatively easier than speaking in Chinses.

Overall, the present study concluded that Chinese is a difficult language to acquire especially the four skills of the language. While narrating about the future of CFL learning only 30% agreed that they would be able to prosper and speak Chinese language.

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