

# From Linguistic Barrier to Bridge: Translanguaging as a Pathway to Chinese Proficiency in Mali's Confucius Institute

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Received: February 26, 2026  
doi:10.65343/jlsp.v2i1.82

Accepted: March 23, 2026

Published: March 30, 2026

URL: <https://doi.org/10.65343/jlsp.v2i1.82>

## Abstract

This article delves into how integrating Bamanankan and French into Chinese language instruction at Mali's Confucius Institute affects learners' engagement, comprehension, and cultural understanding. Using survey data from 56 students and qualitative feedback, the study reveals that translanguaging practices, rather than impeding Chinese learning, serve as cognitive and emotional aids, reducing anxiety, increasing motivation, and strengthening intercultural connections. Findings indicate that over 70% of students are highly aware of translanguaging, with 78.6% reporting that it significantly boosts their interest in Chinese. Students deliberately use French to clarify complex grammar and Bamanankan to explain cultural elements, especially idioms and social norms. The study also points to resource shortages in teaching and recommends a pedagogical approach that views students' linguistic resources as strengths rather than obstacles. These findings contribute to the growing research on translanguaging in the Global South and propose practical strategies for teaching Chinese in multilingual African contexts.

**Keywords:** translanguaging, Chinese as a foreign language in Mali, multilingual pedagogy, motivation, intercultural competence

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the economic ties between China and Mali have strengthened alongside the expansion of Chinese-language education. Current teaching methods mainly rely on monolingual immersion, which does not accurately represent the complex multilingual environment of Malian students. Many Malian students speak French, Bamanankan, and various local languages. This creates a significant challenge. Observations at the Confucius Institute in Mali show that teachers and students often use translanguaging strategies to improve understanding and support effective learning.

This issue is especially evident in Africa, where Confucius Institutes operate within highly multilingual societies. In these environments, speakers frequently switch between multiple local languages and colonial languages like French or English during conversations. Mali clearly illustrates this complexity. In a single classroom at Bamako's Confucius Institute, students might speak Bamanankan at home, learn in French, encounter Arabic through religious lessons, and approach Chinese as a third or fourth language, creating a rich multilingual background. Traditional 20th-century teaching methods often suppress this linguistic diversity, seeing learners' existing languages as barriers rather than assets.

Drawing on surveys from 56 students at Mali's Confucius Institute, the research delves into how translanguaging practices affect learning Chinese and what these patterns reveal about effective teaching in a multilingual African context.

These findings are relevant beyond Mali, especially as Chinese language programs grow across Africa's multilingual landscapes; more than 40 countries now host Confucius Institutes. Recognizing how students actually use their language skills, rather than how monolingual ideas suggest they should, is crucial for developing fair and effective teaching methods. Additionally, this research contributes to broader debates about translanguaging in the Global South, where colonial language hierarchies intersect with indigenous multilingual practices, in sharp contrast to the immigrant multilingualism often studied in Europe and North America.

Since its emergence in Welsh bilingual education in the 1990s, the concept of translanguaging has evolved significantly. Williams (1994) first described it as a teaching practice where students switch between English and Welsh for input and output, such as reading in one language and writing in another. This required more cognitive effort than sticking to a single language, as students had to transfer information between languages.

Translanguaging has shifted from being a teaching method to a broader theory of how bilinguals process language. García (2009) described it as the natural practice of bilinguals who use a single, integrated linguistic repertoire instead of switching between separate mental languages. This suggests that bilinguals operate with a single unified system rather than two distinct languages. As a result, teaching methods that treat languages separately are seen as impractical and unnatural psychologically (García & Li, 2014). Li (2011) extends this idea by introducing the concept of “*translanguaging space*,” a social and cognitive environment in which multilingual individuals merge linguistic, cultural, and personal elements to develop new practices and identities. In this space, they are not confined to specific languages but can creatively combine features to accomplish goals that are impossible in a single language. Li (2018) emphasizes that translanguaging is more than a communication tool; it is a transformative practice for shaping and performing identities.

Understanding the difference between translanguaging and code-switching is crucial. Code-switching involves moving between separate languages, with research emphasizing grammatical rules and social implications (Myers-Scotton, 1993; Poplack, 1980). It assumes languages are separate entities. Conversely, translanguaging sees the speaker's language skills as a unified whole (Otheguy, García, & Reid, 2015). The key difference lies in their perspectives on how bilinguals use language.

Empirical research reveals translanguaging in various educational settings. Canagarajah (2011) shows that multilingual US students used their entire linguistic repertoires for academic texts, which aided with idea generation and audience awareness. Creese and Blackledge (2010) observe UK heritage schools in which students and teachers naturally switch languages to achieve pedagogical goals that no single language could fulfill. These studies demonstrate that translanguaging is a normal part of multilingual communication.

The use of translanguaging theory in teaching has sparked extensive research on how teachers can purposely design lessons that leverage students' full linguistic abilities. García, Johnson, and Seltzer (2017) introduce a framework for translanguaging pedagogy consisting of three elements: stance, design, and shifts. Stance refers to teachers' beliefs about students' multilingualism: whether it is an advantage or a drawback. Design involves creating activities that promote translanguaging, while shifts are the immediate adjustments teachers make based on students' language use during lessons.

Research on teacher implementation highlights both potential and challenges. Vaish (2019) explores Singaporean teachers' use of translanguaging in English classrooms, noting that they valued students' home languages but struggled to integrate multilingual resources. Allard's (2017) research shows that US teachers with bilingual students often held monolingual views that limited translanguaging. The connection between translanguaging and scaffolding is crucial in second language contexts. Translanguaging provides “instructional scaffolding,” helping learners extend their skills. When students use stronger languages to understand weaker ones, they engage in meaningful learning that would not be possible otherwise. These supports can be gradually phased out as proficiency improves, but translanguaging remains useful for specific purposes, such as cultural comparison or identity.

Critics of translanguaging pedagogy raise concerns about developing the target language. Relying too much on familiar languages might slow fluency and automaticity. Cummins (2007), responding to García (2009), emphasizes the need for balance, allowing translanguaging while still engaging with the target language. This study looks at how Malian learners manage support and challenges when learning Chinese.

Learning Chinese poses unique challenges for speakers of non-tonal languages, setting it apart from learning European languages. These challenges occur at various linguistic levels, making mastering Chinese difficult for learners from different backgrounds. At the phonological level, Mandarin uses four tones to differentiate meaning. For example, rising and falling tones change the meaning of a syllable, a feature not present in languages like French and Bamanankan. Wang, Spence, Jongman, and Sereno (1999) note that native English speakers require extensive training to identify tones, and even then, their brain processing differs from that of native speakers. Malian learners face additional difficulties, as neither French nor Bamanankan uses lexical tones, although Bamanankan does use tonal distinctions for grammar, providing some transferable experience.

Chinese uses a logographic writing system where characters represent morphemes rather than sounds, unlike alphabetic systems like French and Bamanankan's Latin-based orthography. Learning to read Chinese involves developing visual memory skills and understanding the structure of characters, including radicals and phonetic components (Wang & Koda, 2007). Shen (2005) estimates learners need to recognize about 2,500-3,000 characters for literacy, each requiring repeated exposures. Chinese mainly forms words through compounding, with many two-character compounds whose meanings may not be predictable, unlike French's derivational morphology and Bamanankan's agglutinative structure, requiring new vocabulary strategies (Jiang et al., 2020).

Research on Chinese as a second language increasingly focuses on learners' multilingual backgrounds. Studies by Wang (2019) and Li and Tsung (2024) show that learners who use their full linguistic repertoires retain

vocabulary better and understand more sophisticated grammar than those constrained by monolingual norms. However, much research concentrates on learners in English-speaking regions in Europe, North America, and East Asia, with little attention to African learners of Chinese, whose linguistic and educational experiences differ.

In the context of African Multilingualism and Language-in-Education, the linguistic landscape differs notably from European and North American settings, where most translanguaging research has been conducted. Heugh (2015) characterizes African multilingualism as involving horizontal rather than vertical relationships among languages. In this environment, languages form complex ecological networks instead of being arranged hierarchically under a single national language. Essentially, multilingualism is the norm, with monolingual speakers the exception rather than the rule.

Mali's linguistic landscape includes around 70 languages, with Bamanankan serving as a common language among them (Eberhard, Simons, & Fennig, 2024). French, inherited from colonial rule, serves as the official language of government, education, and writing, and is mostly spoken by educated urban populations. Skattum (2010) highlights Malian multilingualism: Bamanankan for family interactions, French for school and government affairs, Arabic for religious purposes, and, increasingly, Chinese due to economic development. This language versatility influences how Chinese is learned. Malians often switch languages depending on the situation, reflecting translanguaging theory. However, educational policies have historically marginalized African languages, favoring French-only policies rooted in colonial legacies (Ouane & Glanz, 2010).

Recent policy changes show gradual shifts. Mali's 1996 education reforms began experimental bilingual programs using national languages and French, but implementation remains inconsistent due to limited resources (Ouattara et al., 2025). Research indicates that teachers believe Bamanankan speeds up learning and increases engagement, especially among young students and those with limited French skills. However, they encounter institutional resistance and a shortage of materials for bilingual instruction. The Confucius Institute functions in a complex environment, inheriting monolingual assumptions from Chinese and Malian French education, while serving students who juggle multiple languages daily. Understanding this situation requires examining institutional limitations and learners' ability to use their full linguistic repertoire.

In terms of motivation and emotional connection, including identity in second language acquisition, emotional factors play a crucial role in achieving success. Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis explains that anxiety, lack of motivation, and low confidence act as mental barriers that hinder understanding. When learners feel safe and self-assured, these barriers diminish, facilitating easier language acquisition. Despite some criticism of its comprehensive scope, this idea is supported by evidence showing that emotional states affect learning outcomes. Dörnyei's (2005) L2 Motivational Self System, which encompasses the ideal L2 self, the ought-to L2 self, and the L2 learning experience, provides a research-backed framework for understanding motivation, with studies confirming its effectiveness in predicting learner success (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021).

Translanguaging can influence motivational states through various channels. Allowing learners to use familiar languages lowers anxiety when expressing complex ideas with limited linguistic tools (Guo & Lin, 2020). It also shows institutional respect for learners' linguistic identities, fostering a sense of belonging that Norton (2013) describes as crucial for investment in language learning. Norton's (2013) concept of investment, rooted in Bourdieu's (1991) social theory, emphasizes that learners invest in language learning when they anticipate gaining symbolic and material resources that enhance their identity and social status. When classrooms affirm learners' existing identities and resources, investment increases; when they compel learners to abandon their identities, investment decreases.

Recent research emphasizes the connection between translanguaging and motivation. Zhang, Wang, and Li (2025) find that positive attitudes toward translanguaging significantly predict L2 motivation, which, in turn, influences actual translanguaging experiences. This reveals a reciprocal relationship: positive views boost motivation, leading to greater engagement, which in turn further improves attitudes.

The connection between translanguaging and identity is especially important for Malian learners of Chinese. Learning Chinese in Mali involves not just gaining language skills but also positioning oneself in relation to China's increasing economic and cultural influence in West Africa. Learners who can use Bamanankan and French alongside Chinese may experience less identity conflict than those who are forced to suppress familiar languages and cultural frameworks. They can incorporate Chinese into their existing language repertoires rather than replacing what they already have.

Multimodal learning and technology are vital in language acquisition, involving multiple modalities and tech tools beyond traditional methods. Mayer's (2005) cognitive theory explains how combining visual and verbal info boosts understanding and memory. It suggests that learners use visual and auditory channels, each with limited capacity. Effective multimedia helps create mental images by merging both channels, lowering cognitive load, and fostering deeper learning.

For learning Chinese, visual supports are especially crucial because of the logographic writing system. Research by Tanaka (2011) shows that clear visual aids, such as stroke-order animations and radical decomposition diagrams, greatly helped beginners learn characters. Similarly, Wang and Koda (2007) demonstrate that systematic teaching of radicals and phonetic components improved learners' ability to recognize and remember characters, suggesting that visual supports should be integrated with linguistic instruction rather than kept separate.

Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) is rapidly expanding. Stockwell (2010) highlights the advantages of mobile devices for vocabulary growth, such as portability and accessibility. Kukulska-Hulme (2009) notes that mobile learning enables personalization, allowing learners to choose resources. In regions like Mali, where materials are scarce, mobile tech offers a vital way to improve education. The merging of technology and translanguaging is growing, with learners using translation apps, videos, and online communities. Thorne (2003) warns that technology needs pedagogical support; without guidance, it might distract rather than aid learning.

This review identifies gaps the study addresses: (1) While translanguaging research has expanded, few studies explore its functioning in African contexts, where multilingualism differs from Europe and North America. In Mali, Bamanankan supports community functions, and French is used in formal education, creating different translanguaging conditions than those in the Global North. (2) Research on Chinese as a second language mostly focuses on learners in English-speaking countries, with little on francophone African learners' challenges and opportunities. (3) The connection between translanguaging and multimodal resource use in Chinese learning needs more empirical study, especially how learners combine multilingual practices and technology, informing pedagogy and resources.

This paper aims to address these gaps by examining translanguaging practices among Malian learners of Chinese. The research investigates both the cognitive and emotional aspects of these practices and their relationship to learners' use of multimodal resources. It focuses on three questions: How aware are students of translanguaging as a teaching method, and what factors influence this awareness? How does using familiar languages affect their motivation, understanding, and cultural appreciation? And what role do multimodal and digital tools play in supporting this integrated approach to language learning?

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1 Research Setting and Participants*

The research took place at the Confucius Institute at Yambo OUOLOGUEM University in Bamako, Mali. Founded in 2018, it serves as Mali's main center for Chinese language instruction at the university, offering courses from beginner to intermediate levels (HSK 1-3). The environment is linguistically diverse, with students speaking Bamanankan, French, and local languages such as Fulfulde, Soninke, and Dogon.

The study included 56 students in Chinese courses, 20 Chinese teachers, 18 native Chinese speakers, and 2 local Malian teachers. Student participants belonged to 15 ethnic groups, primarily Bamanan (35.7%), Peulh (10.7%), and Sonrhai (10.7%), highlighting Mali's multilingual society and providing a basis for studying multilingual interactions. Students ranged in age from 17 to 35, with 75% male and 25% female, reflecting the gender imbalance in education in Mali.

### *2.2 Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis*

A convergent parallel mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) captures both broad patterns and detailed aspects of multilingual interactions in Chinese language learning. It combines quantitative data on language practices and perceptions with qualitative insights into underlying processes and meanings. This approach seeks to measure the frequency of translanguaging and investigate the experiences that inform the data.

The quantitative section included student questionnaires that gathered data on language backgrounds, usage, challenges, benefits, proficiency, and demographics. These were conducted in French with Bamanankan support. The qualitative part involved 30-45-minute teacher interviews on multilingual dynamics, benefits, challenges, strategies, and institutional factors, conducted in French, Chinese, or Bamanankan, at the teacher's preference. Three classroom sessions were observed to record interactions, language choices, and translanguaging practices. Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 26.0 with descriptive statistics. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in NVivo 12, including familiarization, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and reporting. Integration used a side-by-side comparison approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

## **3. Results**

### *3.1 Awareness and Perceived Helpfulness of Translanguaging*

The initial research question explored students' awareness of translanguaging and their perceptions of its role in learning. Data on students' familiarity with translanguaging as both a concept and a practice show that most

students are aware of it, with important implications for education. Among the 56 participants (Figure 1), 42.8% (n=24) reported understanding it “fairly well,” and 28.6% (n=16) said they know it “very well.”

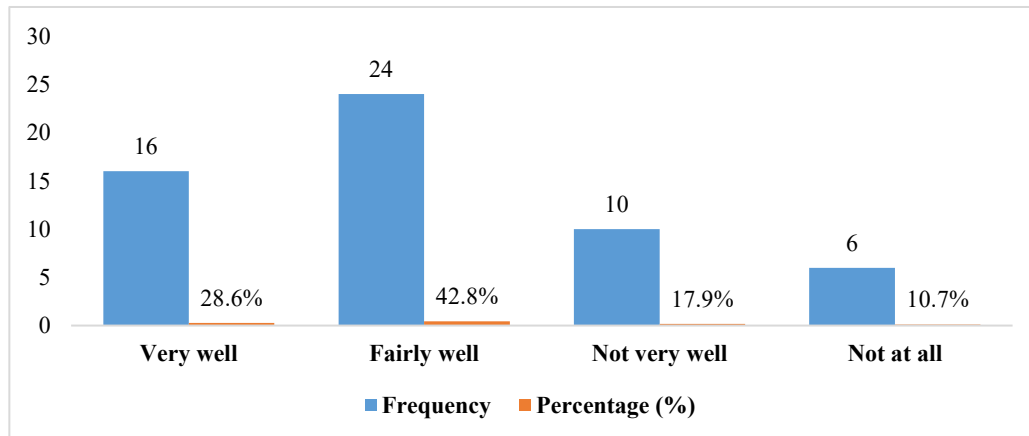


Figure 1. Students' Knowledge of Translinguaging (N = 56)

Together (Figure 1), over 70% of students have a functional understanding of translinguaging, indicating that it is not just an academic idea but also a part of their everyday language use. These learners can recognize patterns in their own practices that match translinguaging theory.

A significant minority still lacks understanding of the concept. Specifically, 17.9% (n=10) report limited understanding (“not very well”), and 10.7% (n=6) say they have no understanding at all (“not at all”). This (Figure 1) shows that, although translinguaging is widely practiced, it is not universally recognized as a valid teaching method. Some learners might practice translinguaging without labeling it as such, while others may have internalized monolingual norms, making their practices invisible to themselves or perceived as illegitimate.

Most students have a solid understanding of these concepts, which lays a good foundation for translinguaging-informed teaching. As Canagarajah (2011) argues, openly recognizing and discussing translinguaging practices in classrooms respects students' natural linguistic diversity and encourages the use of their full linguistic abilities. For the small group of learners with limited awareness of translinguaging, clear instruction on the topic can help build understanding and foster more strategic language use.

Besides awareness, the paper examined how helpful learners found translinguaging for learning Chinese. Figure 2 below shows that 50.0% (n=28) find it “very helpful,” while 28.6% (n=16) consider it “somewhat helpful.” Nearly 80% see translinguaging as beneficial, supporting research on its advantages in cross-language education (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; García & Li, 2014).

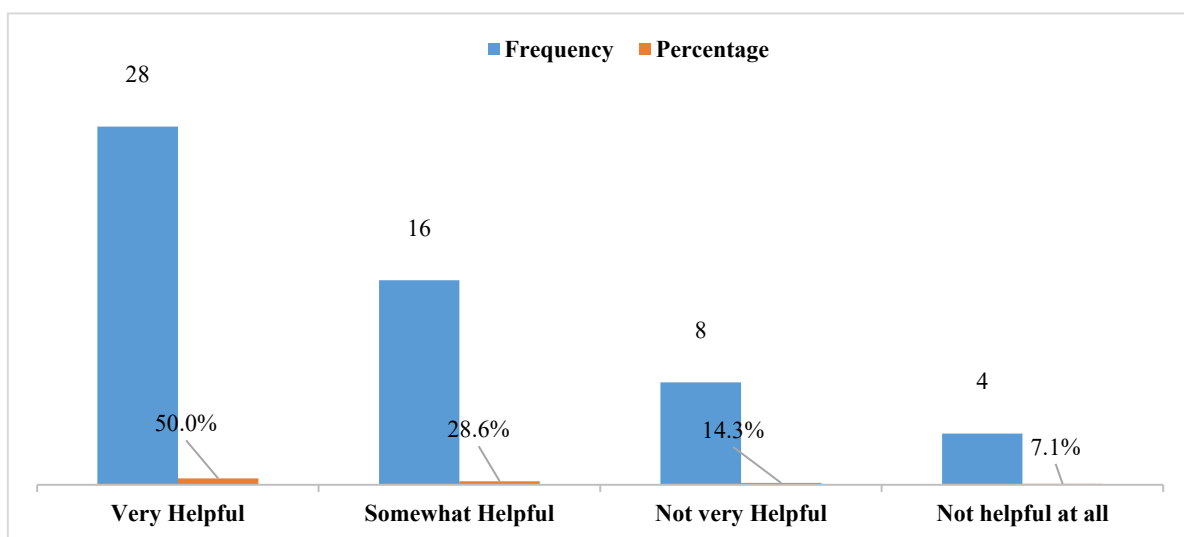


Figure 2. Students' Perceived Helpfulness of Translinguaging (N = 56)

Qualitative responses show how learners perceive this helpfulness in practice. One participant explained:

*“Chinese grammar is very different from French grammar. When the teacher explains a grammar point only in Chinese, I often find it difficult to understand. But if she first explains it in French and then shows how it works in Chinese, I understand it completely. French provides the map; Chinese reveals the territory.”*

Another participant emphasized the importance of Bamanankan for gaining a deeper understanding.

*“For everyday classroom language, French works well. However, when it comes to truly understanding concepts, particularly cultural ones, Bamanankan is more effective. There are ideas in Bamanankan that express concepts more closely to Chinese than to French. French is somewhere between Chinese and us, but Bamanankan can be more direct at times.”*

These responses show how learners use their languages differently. French primarily serves to explain grammar and to provide conceptual frameworks for understanding Chinese structures. Bamanankan, on the other hand, has deeper cultural and conceptual roles, connecting to lived experience and allowing for comparisons based on meaning rather than just form. This difference shows that learners are not merely relying on familiar languages as crutches but are using them strategically, leveraging each language's specific strengths.

The minority who saw translanguaging as “not very helpful” or “not helpful at all” deserves attention. These learners might prefer immersion methods that provide maximum exposure to the target language. One participant explained:

*“When we use too much French in class, I feel like I'm not practicing my Chinese enough. The goal is to think in Chinese, right? If I'm always translating through French, I never reach that point.”*

These viewpoints highlight concerns about target language development and align with Cummins's (2007) warning to balance support with challenge. Learners who prefer extensive exposure to Chinese should receive assistance, just as those who benefit from multilingual aid should. The main challenge is finding the right balance in translanguaging practices that improve learning while keeping students engaged with Chinese.

### 3.2 Motivational and Cognitive Impact of Translanguaging

The second research question centered on how the use of familiar languages affects students' motivation and understanding. Perhaps the most significant finding relates to the emotional aspects of translanguaging.

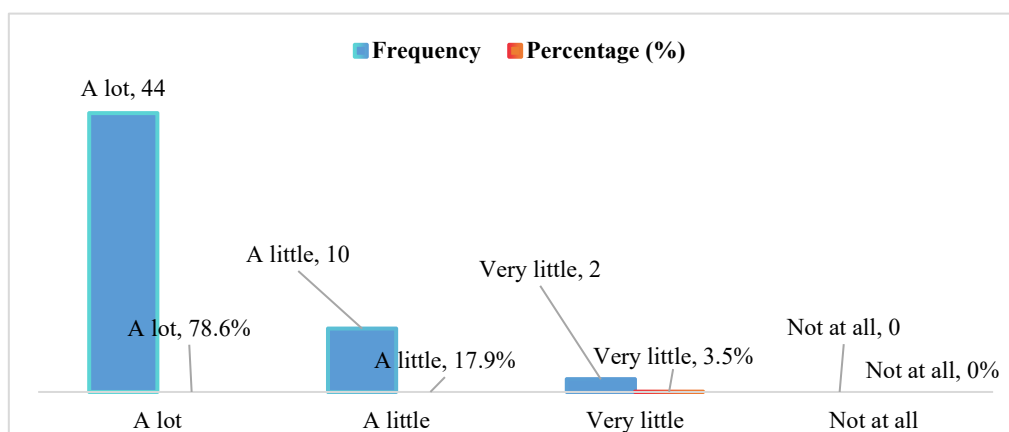


Figure 3. Influence of Translanguaging on Students' Interest in Learning Chinese (N = 56)

Among respondents (Figure 3), 78.6% (n=44) reported that translanguaging “increases my interest a lot,” with another 17.9% (n=10) expressing moderate satisfaction. Only 3.6% (n=2) indicated minimal motivational benefit. This strongly positive response (Figure 3) suggests that translanguaging serves not only as cognitive support but also as a powerful emotional resource that maintains engagement with difficult material.

Learners' qualitative responses reveal the mechanisms driving this motivational effect. One participant explained:

*“Chinese is very challenging because of the tones and characters. Sometimes I want to give up. But when the teacher lets us use French or Bamanankan to understand, I feel like I can do it. The difficulty doesn't go away, but I know I have the tools to handle it. That feeling keeps me motivated. I want to keep learning because I believe I can succeed.”*

This response shows how translanguaging changes learners' relationship with difficulty. The language stays challenging but becomes easier to handle. Learners who can express confusion and confirm understanding in familiar languages usually feel less anxious and stay engaged longer than those who cannot.

Another participant emphasized social and identity factors:

*“When we use our native languages in class, it feels like Chinese becomes part of us instead of something foreign we have to accept. We can discuss Chinese topics in Bamanankan ways. That makes it ours, not just theirs.”*

This insight illustrates how translanguaging helps build a sense of ownership over the new language. Chinese shifts from being an external obstacle imposed by outsiders to something learners can claim, modify, and integrate into their existing communicative repertoires. The affective filter drops not because the difficulty decreases, but because learners' relationship with the challenge changes.

A third participant linked translanguaging to confidence and willingness to take risks.

*“Using Bamanankan to confirm my understanding motivates me to try speaking Chinese, since I know I can correct mistakes in Bamanankan. Without this safety net, I would stay quiet. I would just listen and never speak.”*

This observation closely aligns with Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis. Translanguaging serves as a safety net that promotes the risk-taking necessary for language learning. Learners who feel secure are more inclined to attempt complex language, receive more feedback, and ultimately progress faster than those who stay silent to avoid errors.

Cognitively, students said that translanguaging enhances their understanding of Chinese structures. As mentioned earlier, French provides explanatory frameworks for grammar, while Bamanankan offers conceptual links for cultural content. One student shared this cognitive benefit:

*“When I learn a new grammar pattern, I need to understand not just the rule but the logic behind it. Explaining that logic in French helps me see how Chinese organizes ideas differently. Then I can apply the pattern myself instead of just memorizing examples.”*

These findings deepen the theoretical understanding of translanguaging by emphasizing its motivational and emotional dimensions alongside its cognitive functions. The sense of control students experience, knowing they can access familiar resources when needed, appears to sustain curiosity and keep engagement alive through challenges that might otherwise cause discouragement.

### 3.3 Cultural Mediation via Translanguaging

Beyond its cognitive and motivational functions, translanguaging plays an essential role in mediating learners' engagement with Chinese culture. Table 1 displays data on how learners use translanguaging to grasp cultural content.

Table 1. Role of Translanguaging in Understanding Chinese Culture (N = 56)

Theme/Response Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Facilitates comparison between Malian and Chinese culture	18	32.1%
Provides clear explanations of cultural concepts in familiar languages	15	26.8%
Helps in interpreting idioms, proverbs, and traditional expressions	10	17.9%
Encourages deeper classroom discussions on cultural practices	8	14.3%
Builds confidence to engage with cultural topics	5	8.9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1 indicates that 32.1% of learners (n=18) cited translanguaging as helping to "facilitate comparison between Malian and Chinese culture." These students valued linking new cultural knowledge to familiar frameworks, which helped them connect with unfamiliar content. An additional 26.8% (n=15) appreciated "clear explanations of cultural concepts in familiar languages." For these learners, the challenge was not recognizing cultural differences but understanding their content and implications.

Explanations in French or Bamanankan provided a deeper understanding than those in Chinese alone, demonstrating the role of translanguaging in shifting from theoretical to experiential learning. Learners not only understood dictionary definitions but also connected to the social and emotional reality through familiar cultural contexts.

Another 17.9% (n=10) valued assistance with interpreting idioms, proverbs, and traditional expressions, which are culturally rich and often resist literal translation.

Additionally, 14.3% (n=8) said translanguaging helped classroom discussions about cultural practices, while 8.9% (n=5) mentioned it boosted their confidence in talking about culture. These patterns show translanguaging as a tool for genuine intercultural dialogue, not just cultural transmission. Learners actively interpret Chinese culture, filtering it through existing frameworks, comparing it, questioning it, and blending it with their own perspectives.

This finding supports Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competence, viewing language learning as a conversation that promotes shared understanding across different worldviews. Translanguaging enhances this exchange by keeping both cultural frameworks active and accessible. Learners do not dismiss Malian perspectives when exploring Chinese ones. Instead, they maintain a dialogue between both, using each to shed light on the other.

### 3.4 The Role of Multimodal and Digital Tools

The third research question analyzed the role of multimodal and digital tools in supporting students' integrated approach to language learning. Figure 4 presents data on how learners use visual aids and their perceptions of their usefulness. Most students view visual aids positively: 42.9% (n=24) describe them as "very helpful," while 25.0% (n=14) consider them "helpful." Overall, 67.9% (n=38) see visual aids as beneficial for learning. This strong support aligns with cognitive theories suggesting that combining visual and verbal information promotes deeper semantic understanding and reduces cognitive load (Mayer, 2005).

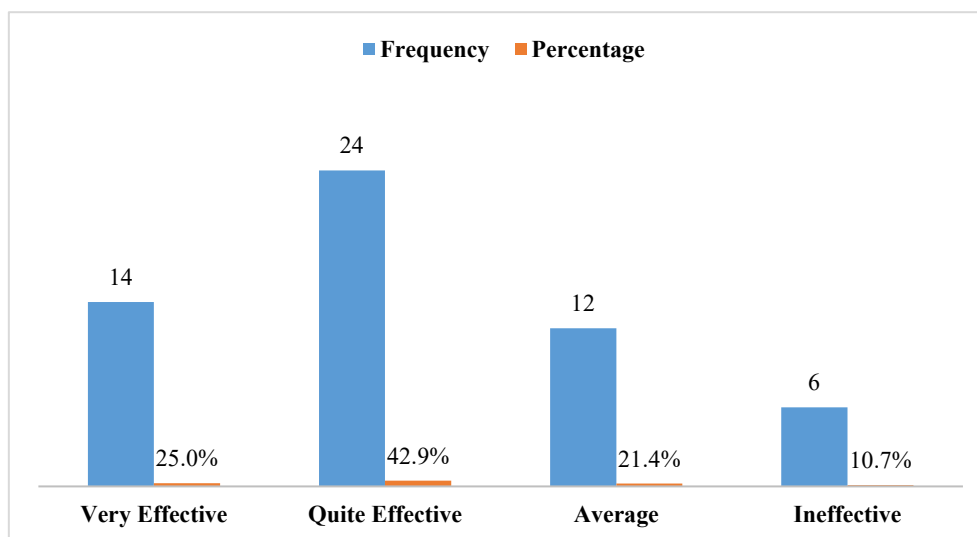


Figure 4. Students' Perceptions of Visual Aids in Chinese Learning (N = 56)

Based on the qualitative data, learners described specific ways visual aids supported their Chinese learning. A participant explained:

*"Characters can be difficult, but watching animated stroke orders helps me remember them. Without visual aids, characters feel like random sketches, but with them, they turn into understandable systems, making learning easier and more fun."*

This response emphasizes the difference between rote memorization and systematic understanding. It shows how visual aids help with this. When learners see character parts and how they connect, they create mental models

that improve retention and recognition.

Another participant noted:

*“Diagrams showing grammar patterns help me understand sentence structure. Chinese word order is different from French. Seeing it visually, with subject, time, place, and verb, helps me recognize the pattern. Words alone can be confusing.”*

The perceived role of visual aids varied among learners: 21.4% (n=12) rated them as “average,” indicating that, while helpful, visual aids alone are insufficient. Additionally, 10.7% (n=6) considered visual aids “not helpful,” preferring more interactive methods or finding static images disconnected from dynamic language use. These differences emphasize the importance of offering multiple learning modalities to accommodate diverse learner preferences.

In addition to classroom visual aids, learners actively use a variety of digital tools to enhance their learning outside formal lessons. Figure 5 presents data on the tools students use.

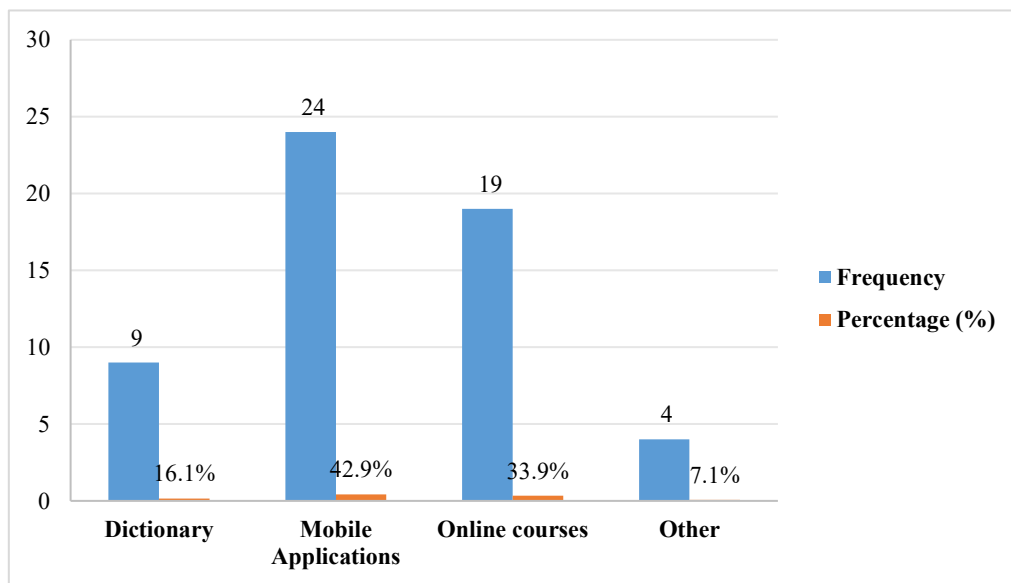


Figure 5. Tools Used by Students to Support Chinese Learning (N = 56)

The data in Figure 5 shows that mobile applications are the main tools students use for supplementary Chinese learning, with 42.9% (n=24) reporting this. Online courses follow at 33.9% (n=19), traditional tools like dictionaries at 16.1% (n=9), and other unspecified tools at 7.1% (n=4). This pattern indicates that learners prefer digital tools that offer interactivity, accessibility, and flexibility, qualities that support autonomous, personalized learning outside the classroom.

A participant explained the appeal of mobile apps:

*“I have a Chinese learning app on my phone. Whenever I get a few minutes, like while waiting for a bus or between classes, I practice. Ten minutes here, ten minutes there. It really adds up. I couldn't do that with a textbook.”*

This observation shows how mobile technologies extend learning beyond scheduled class time. It promotes distributed practice, which is vital for skill development. The portability and immediate access to mobile resources create learning opportunities that traditional materials cannot offer (Stockwell, 2010; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009).

Another participant described using multiple tools strategically:

*“I use an app for vocabulary, online videos for listening practice, and a dictionary app when I need to look things up. Each tool does something different. Together, they help me learn in ways the classroom alone can't.”*

This strategic combination of tools reflects the increasingly common blended learning model among language learners, who create personal learning ecosystems from available resources (Thorne, 2003). For teachers, this pattern highlights the importance of guiding learners in using tools effectively rather than assuming that technology alone is enough.

This article also looked at how learners interact with authentic Chinese media. Data shown in Figure 6 below indicates that 35.7% (n=20) of learners “often” use Chinese films or TV series for language learning, while another 32.1% (n=18) do so “sometimes.”

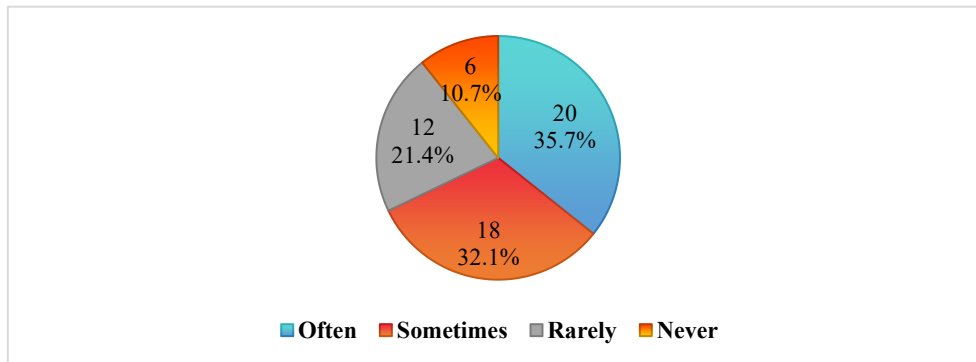


Figure 6. Students' Use of Chinese Films or TV Series for Language Learning (N = 56)

Approximately two-thirds of learners regularly engage with authentic audiovisual materials. This high level of participation highlights the value learners place on exposure to naturalistic language.

A participant described what drew them to it:

*“Movies reveal how Chinese people actually speak, not just textbook Chinese but real conversation filled with emotion, gestures, and context. They show tone, body language, and the difference between formal and casual language that cannot be learned from a book.”*

This observation supports research on how authentic input helps develop *listening skills, pronunciation, pragmatic awareness, and intercultural understanding* (Vanderplank, 2010). Films and television offer rich, multimodal input that links linguistic forms to culturally specific contexts, which are hard to replicate in classrooms (Herron et al., 1995).

However, a significant minority of learners report minimal use of these resources: 21.4% (n=12) “rarely” use them, and 10.7% (n=6) “never” use them. Barriers may include limited access to streaming platforms, insufficient proficiency to follow authentic content, or a lack of guidance on how to learn from media effectively. Providing scaffolded viewing guides and curated content recommendations could help more students engage in audiovisual learning.

### 3.5 Barriers and Gaps in the Learning Environment

Although learners often use tools, they recognize significant gaps in the instructional materials provided. Figure 7 clearly illustrates these perceptions. The data show a consensus that more teaching resources are necessary for effective Chinese language learning in Mali's multilingual environment.

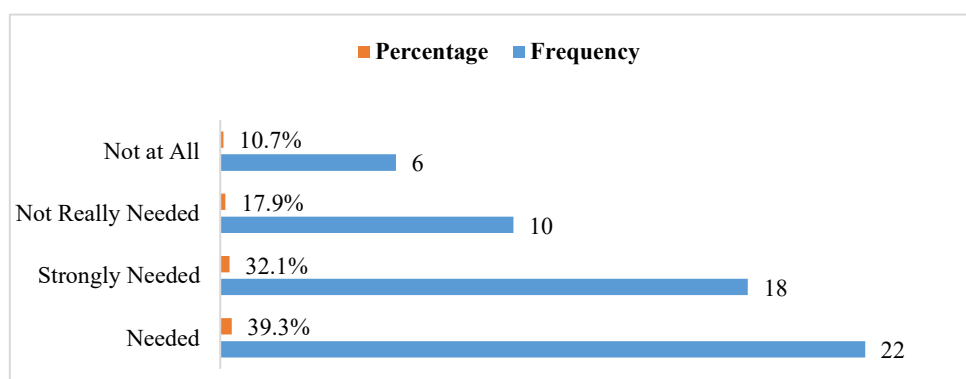


Figure 7. Students' Opinions on the Need for More Teaching Materials (N = 56)

Most students agree that more resources are necessary, with 71.4% responding affirmatively. Among these, 39.3% (n=22) consider materials “*needed*,” while 32.1% (n=18) believe they are “*strongly needed*.” This shows (Figure 7) a common understanding among learners that current instructional resources do not adequately address their diverse language backgrounds and learning needs.

Qualitative responses clarified what is missing.

*“All our textbooks are available in both English and Chinese. However, I don't speak English, so I have to rely on English translations of Chinese explanations, a language I don't understand, to learn Chinese. This approach is impractical. We need textbooks with explanations in French.”*

This participant highlights a fundamental mismatch between the materials created for English-speaking learners and the actual language profiles of Malian students, who speak French. The common belief in global Chinese-language publishing that international students can be taught in English overlooks the realities faced by learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Another participant noted:

*“Bilingual dictionaries for Chinese and Bamanankan would be very helpful. When I look up a word, I immediately understand the Bamanankan meaning. With French, I have to think about it. Bamanankan is straightforward.”*

This preference for Bamanankan reflects its role as the most immediate and emotionally connecting medium for many learners. While French has important functions, Bamanankan provides direct access to meaning without translation.

A third participant emphasized the significance of cultural relevance:

*“Our textbooks focus on Beijing and Shanghai, and on what Chinese students do. We need to learn about China and Mali, including our families, food, and traditions. I can discuss the Great Wall but not the Niger River.”*

This comment emphasizes that learners need to both understand Chinese culture and share their own experiences in Chinese. Materials that overlook learners' personal lives restrict their capacity to use Chinese for genuine self-expression.

The minority who found materials “*not really*” (17.9%, n=10) or “*not at all*” (10.7%, n=6) helpful may be learners with autonomous learning strategies or preferences for other methods. Still, the strong consensus underscores the need to diversify resources in multilingual classrooms (Tomlinson, 2012). Effective materials should be multilingual-friendly, incorporating translanguaging, culturally responsive content, and scaffolding (Escobar & Borsato, 2017).

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Translanguaging as Integrated Practice

The findings support understanding translanguaging as the natural, integrated practice of multilingual learners rather than a deviation from monolingual standards. Malian learners of Chinese do not separate Bamanankan, French, and Chinese into distinct mental categories; instead, they draw on their unified linguistic resources according to the task, social context, and communication goal. This practice appears in the functional differences described by learners. French plays metalinguistic roles, explaining grammar and providing frameworks for understanding Chinese structures. Bamanankan functions more in cultural and conceptual ways, connecting to lived experience and enabling comparisons of meaning. Chinese increasingly supports communication in the target language, backed by other languages when needed.

This pattern expands translanguaging theory by showing how multilingual speakers assign different roles to languages in their repertoires based on each language's opportunities and personal background. For Malian learners, French offers access to formal education and grammatical metalanguage; Bamanankan provides access to cultural meaning and emotional bonds. Both are important; neither alone is enough.

The theoretical implication is that translanguaging is not merely about mixing languages but about strategically deploying them according to their specific strengths. Effective translanguaging pedagogy would recognize and leverage these functional differentiations rather than treating all languages as equivalent resources.

### 4.2 Cognitive and Affective Interplay

The findings demonstrate a strong connection between the cognitive and emotional aspects of translanguaging. Cognitively, it supports understanding by enabling learners to draw on familiar ideas. For example, learners grasp Chinese grammar through French explanations and acquire Chinese cultural concepts via Bamanankan comparisons. This cognitive support aligns with Cummins's (2005) interdependence hypothesis, which suggests

that skills acquired in one language transfer to facilitate learning in another. Practically, translanguaging influences how learners perceive the difficulty of Chinese.

The highly positive motivational response, with 78.6% reporting significantly increased interest, shows that translanguaging influences both learners' abilities and their emotional attitude. Those who can use familiar languages experience less anxiety, more confidence, and greater persistence. As a result, they try more complex language tasks, take bigger risks, and participate more actively. This emotional shift may be especially important for learning Chinese, whose inherent difficulty could otherwise discourage learners. The affective filter lowers not because Chinese becomes easier, but because learners' ability to handle difficulty improves. They know they have resources, French for grammar, Bamanankan for meaning, and peers for collaborative understanding, which keeps difficulty from becoming overwhelming.

The implication for teaching is that translanguaging should be seen and used as both mental support and emotional encouragement. Methods that only emphasize understanding overlook translanguaging's equally vital role in creating the motivation needed for ongoing learning.

#### *4.3 Cultural Mediation and Intercultural Competence*

The research shows learners value translanguaging for cultural comparison (32.1%), challenging deficit views of multilingualism. They use familiar languages not due to a lack of Chinese proficiency but because they bring cultural insight to learning. The Bamanankan speaker's comparison of Chinese face concepts to local social dynamics is not deficient but rather demonstrates sophistication.

This exemplifies what Byram (1997) calls intercultural communicative competence, the ability to navigate between cultural frameworks rather than just adopt target culture norms. Translanguaging facilitates this navigation by keeping both cultural perspectives active and accessible. Learners do not abandon Malian viewpoints when they encounter Chinese ones; instead, they engage in dialogue with both, using each to deepen their understanding.

For Confucius Institutes aiming to enhance mutual understanding, this discovery has important strategic consequences. Suppressing students' pre-existing cultural backgrounds hampers the intercultural dialogue that these institutions aim to promote. On the other hand, recognizing and utilizing these backgrounds can deepen such dialogue. The objective should not be to substitute Malian views with Chinese perspectives, but to cultivate learners who can navigate both thoughtfully.

#### *4.4 The Resource Gap and Decolonizing Pedagogy*

The consensus that more tailored materials are needed (71.4%) highlights a resource gap. Most current tools primarily serve English speakers and do not address the specific linguistic needs of Malian learners. Existing textbooks often assume familiarity with concepts that might not translate well. They also need to organize glossaries in French or Bamanankan instead of English, and they are culturally aimed at Western audiences. This reflects broader issues in global language publishing, where African contexts are often marginalized. Many resources assume that learners worldwide can learn English, often neglecting French-speaking African countries. This overlooks local or indigenous languages, viewing them as irrelevant to Chinese learning.

To bridge this gap, it is crucial to go beyond simple translation and move toward transcreation, developing materials specifically designed for Malian learners. These resources should include grammatical explanations in French, Bamanankan glossaries, cultural comparisons, West African examples, and support for expressing local realities in Chinese. This is not about creating separate and unequal materials, but about providing resources that acknowledge the actual needs and strengths of multilingual learners. In an equitable global language education system, materials need to be adapted to different contexts rather than assuming a one-size-fits-all approach.

#### *4.5 Limitations and Future Research*

Several limitations influence these findings. Firstly, the study relied on self-report data, which might not fully capture actual practices. Incorporating observational research could provide direct documentation of learners' behaviors. Future investigations should include classroom observations and interaction analyses. Secondly, the participant pool consisted only of intermediate learners from a single institution, so the findings may not be applicable to beginners or advanced students, who differ in language dependence and automaticity. Comparing different proficiency levels could reveal how translanguaging develops over time. Thirdly, the study primarily examined learners' perspectives without systematically investigating teachers' practices or beliefs. Exploring how Malian Chinese teachers understand, implement, or resist translanguaging would offer valuable insights. Lastly, the research did not directly measure learning outcomes; therefore, conclusions about effectiveness are based on perceptions rather than objective indicators. Future studies should explore how translanguaging impacts actual Chinese language proficiency growth.

Finally, this study focused on one African context; the findings might not apply directly to other countries with

different language policies, educational systems, and relationships with China. Conducting comparative research across African contexts would highlight both common patterns and specific differences.

Despite these limitations, the study makes significant contributions by documenting translanguaging practices among a previously understudied population and revealing patterns that enhance theoretical understanding of translanguaging's cognitive, affective, and cultural aspects.

### 5. Conclusion: Toward an Integrated Pedagogical Framework

This paper argues that Malian learners' knowledge of French and Bamanankan acts as a bridge, not a barrier, to learning Chinese. Evidence shows that learners who view translanguaging as legitimate, strategically use familiar languages, and make cultural comparisons exhibit higher motivation, engagement, and intercultural understanding. This has pedagogical implications for Confucius Institutes and Chinese language programs in multilingual African contexts. First, validate current practices; many learners are already aware of translanguaging. Making this visible reduces guilt and enhances awareness through primers on translanguaging, classroom discussions, and teacher modeling. Learners should see that using their full linguistic repertoire is a strategic, effective practice.

Second, differentiate language functions pedagogically: French may be optimal for grammar, Bamanankan for culture, and Chinese for complex use. Pedagogy should strategically mobilize each language's strengths by designing activities that leverage different languages for specific purposes, rather than enforcing artificial separation or allowing unrestricted multilingual practice. Third, address resource gaps by developing materials for francophone African learners, including multilingual glossaries, culturally relevant examples, and content for expressing their realities in Chinese, with support from Confucius Institutes, publishers, and edtech developers.

Fourth, train teachers in translanguaging pedagogies; teachers must understand these approaches through professional development on their theoretical basis, practical strategies, and on balancing multilingual support with target-language goals. Fifth, conduct localized research to understand context-specific patterns. Similar studies in other African countries will enrich the knowledge base for multilingual Chinese pedagogy, taking into account each country's unique linguistic landscape.

The core of these recommendations is decolonizing language teaching, which values learners' full linguistic selves, validates local knowledge alongside target culture, and aims to add new languages without abandoning existing ones. In a connected world, this approach is both fair and effective. The best communicators can fluidly navigate multiple languages while staying rooted in their own. Translanguaging pedagogies, respecting both movement and stability, develop this skill.

For Malian learners of Chinese, the path to proficiency does not require abandoning Bamanankan and French. Instead, it involves incorporating them as resources, bridges, and foundations for building new language structures. The aim is not to replace but to add, not to erase but to integrate. When teaching methods acknowledge this, learning Chinese becomes not a threat to existing linguistic identities but an enhancement of them. Learners transform from mere imperfect imitators of native speakers to skilled multilinguals, adding another language to already rich communicative repertoires.

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