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## Chinese Language Teaching and Learning in Kenya in the Prospects of China's Reform and Opening-up

METHODY FLORIAN OWAKI, MERCY MWENI KATHINA, CHRISTOPHER KHAYEKA-WANDABWA, FRANCIS MAINA GICHURU, and EUNICE AMIMO

### Abstract

Teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language and its culture is complex for Kenyan learners. It requires them to consider contrasting intellectual, policy and economic dimensions that instead of aiding its propagation among Kenyan learners, could even facilitate a hindrance to its progression. Potential measures that could be embraced are examined in this study based on the current context in lieu of proper guidelines or policy for foreign language learning, and in the midst of China's reform and opening-up. The study adopts Stern's second language learning theoretical approach, documentary and discourse analysis as complementary to a preliminary exploratory survey. Chinese and Kenyan partnering institutions in higher education and its intersections through Chinese language development and cultural exchange are well-attuned towards attaining a competitive cadre of bilingually educated Kenyans who are appreciative of the cultural diversity between the two nations. This affords Chinese and Kenyan nationals the opportunity to engage with each other in efficient bidirectional exchanges for common intellectual and economic prosperity founded on various exchange agreements. In the quest for greater Chinese language and culture propagation, increased bidirectional participation of stakeholders in curriculum-related policymaking and implementation processes are sought. The mobilization of strategic resources through exchanges between China and Kenya hold the promise to a more certain cooperative future for all. Avenues on resource mobilization with a focus on efficient human resource management, together with an opportunities linkage framework, would benefit both countries, and thereby reinforce a common intellectual and economic prosperity.

**Keywords:** Kenya, Chinese language, education, policy, curriculum.



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## Introduction

Over the past few years, the global propagation of the Chinese language and its culture has gained momentum. Scholars (both national in Kenya and international) with expertise or interest in the area have diverted their focus to explain the new trends in this emerging field of study (Chún & Thunø, 2014; Jing-Schmidt & Peng, 2018; King, 2010). Kenya has hinted on the official introduction of Chinese language teaching and learning into its school curricula. The African continent hosts many countries which historically were colonized by countries such as Great Britain, France, Portugal, Italy, Germany, and Spain, among others, who left the continent divided along numerous foreign linguistic grounds. Kenya is one African country that uses the English language (inherited from the British colonial period), and also Kiswahili, which is a Bantu language spoken by close to fifty million people across the continent (Heine & Nurse, 2000). The journey that the two languages have taken, through Kenya's Ministry of Education (MoE) and the Kenyan education system back to precolonial days. English was first adopted into the Kenyan school curriculum in 1953-1955 after various Education Department Reports advocated for its inclusion, including the Becheer's Report (1949), Binn's Report (1952), and the Drogheda Report (1952) (as cited in Nabea, 2009).

Major language policy changes through commission reports during the colonial period continued even after Kenyan independence (Mbaabu, 1996). Following Kenya's declaration of independence in 1963, English was declared an official language of the country, to be used in all governmental sectors including education (Nabea, 2009). The Kenya Education Commission Report of 1964 recommended English as the medium of instruction at all levels in the Kenyan education system (Ominde, 1964). Recommendation #48 of the report stated that, "English should become the universal medium of instruction, starting as early as from Standard 1, but Kiswahili should become a compulsory subject from Standard 1 wherever possible" (Mbaabu, 1996). This was further emphasized by the Gachathi Commission of 1976, which also recommended Kiswahili as an important language to be taught in all schools, but also as an optional subject (Nabea, 2009; Ogechi, 2003). The report also recommended that Kiswahili be an examination subject at the end of primary education, and both compulsory and examinable at in secondary education; although these recommendations were not put into force until 1985 and 1986, respectively. Today, English is the official language of Kenya and is also the medium of instruction from Class 4 onwards, while Kiswahili is the national language taught and examined as a compulsory subject from Classes 1-8 in primary schools, and Forms 1-4 in secondary schools, and also taught as a subject area in Kenyan Institutions of higher learning (Nabea, 2009).

Going by the dynamics, all the educational commissions mentioned presented reports that emphasized on the "trilingual" language pattern that recognized English, Kiswahili and the various mother-tongues that exist within Kenya. The 2010 Constitution of Kenya further recognized Kiswahili as the national language, giving the status of "official languages" to both Kiswahili and English, and emphasizing the promotion and protection of language diversity of the people of Kenya. In addition, the Constitution promotes the development and use of indigenous languages, of Kenyan Sign language, Braille and other communication models accessible to those with disabilities (Constitution of Kenya, 2010).

One question that comes to mind is where do other languages not mentioned in the Constitution fit in, even though they are taught within the Kenyan education system? Languages such as French, Arabic, German and, more recently, Chinese, have been taught in

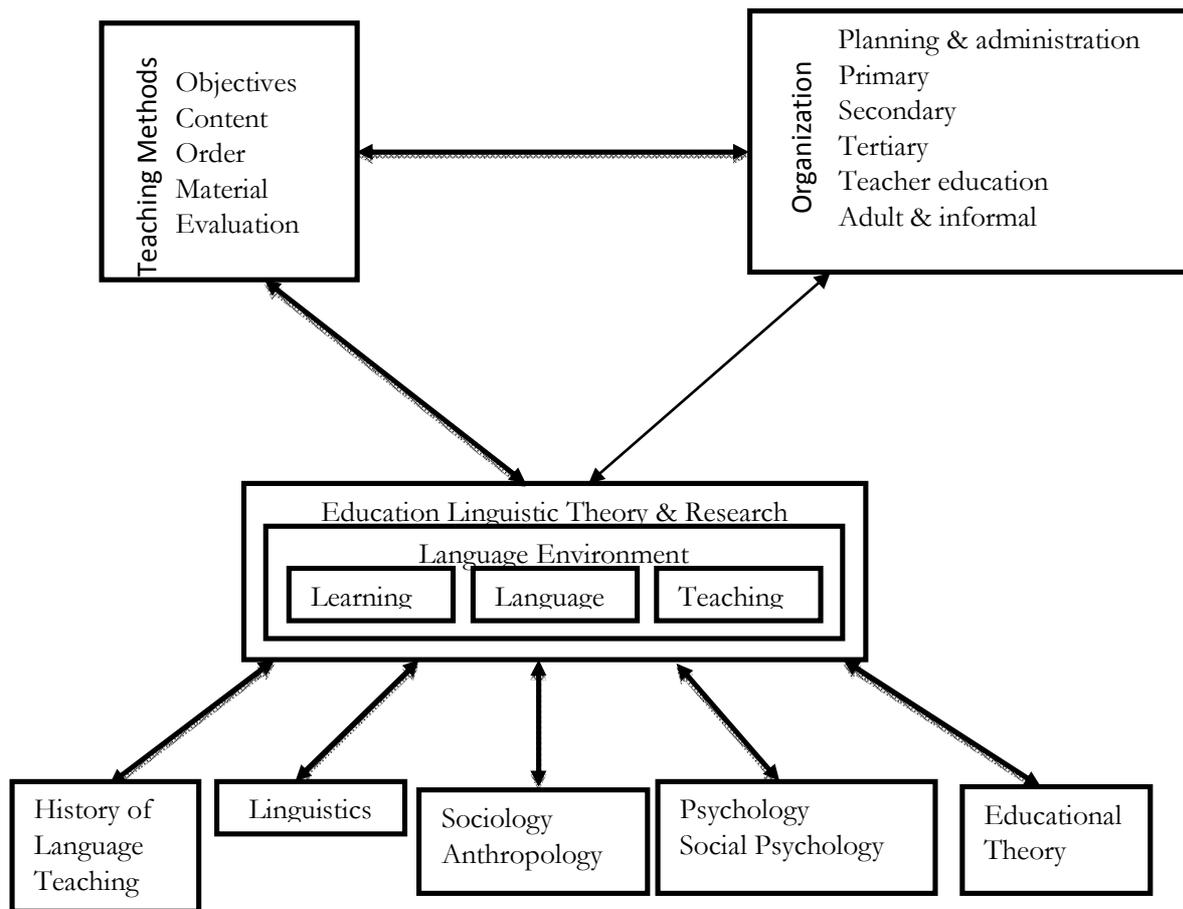
some schools in Kenya, but are all classified as foreign languages. Only in Wamalwa's Report (1972) that the question of foreign language teaching was mentioned, where it recommended the need for foreign language training in Kenya, and specifically quoting French and German languages.

Nairobi has fast become a major world conference center, and has therefore created a need for language interpreters and translators (Mbaabu, 1996). However, currently there is no streamlined foreign language policy within Kenyan education curricula (Okonda, 2016), and the teaching of these languages by willing institutions therefore fell outside of the scope of Wamalwa's Report and its recommendations. The teaching and learning of Chinese as a foreign language, and its culture, while attempting to intertwine certain intellectual, policy and economic dimensions, has led to its propagation among Kenyan learners being hindered. The current study examines the current context in lieu of any proper guidelines or policy for foreign language acquisition, and in the midst of China's reform and opening-up as well as its increasing influence across the African continent and in Kenya in particular.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methodology**

### *Theoretical underpinning*

As far as the teaching and learning of the Chinese language and culture is concerned in Kenya, this article draws its framework from American Benard Spolsky's Education Linguistics theory and from Stern's Second Language Learning Theory (Xing, 2006). Spolsky asserted that Second language learning is as a result of three basic ideas; language description (spoken or written account of a particular language), language learning theory, and language application theory. He further argued that language learning theory is derived from language theory, with language description ability relying heavily on language theory. To be able to understand language learning, Spolsky suggested that it is important to first understand "language" and "learning" concepts as two entities drawn from other factors which he introduced as general linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics (Mitchell & Myles, 2013; Xing, 2006). According to Spolsky, language learning goes beyond an individual's linguistic understanding and includes the social environment of the language's application. This better explains the Kenyan situation, in which Kenyan learners, drawn from their various linguistic backgrounds, sit together at various academic levels with the common aim to add an extra language such as Chinese as their target language (TL). The TL acquisition process itself is what Spolsky refers to as Education Linguistics. Stern's Second Language Learning Theory, on the other hand, though his reasoning is identical to that of Spolsky, and places his idea on a three-class scale making it clear and systematic. He argued that the second class, which comprises of learning, language, and the teaching and language environment, corresponds to Spolsky's Education Linguistics Theory, and is a communication bridge between the basic theories (first class) and the educational practices (third class) (see Figure 1) (Mitchell & Myles, 2013; Xing, 2006).



**Figure 1.** Model of Stern’s Second Language Learning Theory

Based on the theory, Kenya’s language development context in resonance with Kenya’s language environment is complex, which has been argued that it actually helps with the mastery of non-native language acquisition. For every child that is born in Kenya, apart from acquiring their mother-tongue, which some writers also called the native language or first language for this case the L1 (Castello, 2015; Saffran, Senghas, & Trueswell, 2001), are also supposed to learn Kiswahili and English as compulsory languages under the Kenyan schooling system. This happens within an organized environment under supervision from various stakeholders. The teaching objectives, material, content, and evaluation processes, alongside other needs, are all predetermined and aimed at fostering excellent communication skills in as far as the learning process is concerned. Viewed together, the learning process involved here is actually second language acquisition (SLA), as guided acquisition based on the previously mentioned theoretical framework (Ellis & Ellis, 1994; Klein, 1986). As much as English is an official Kenyan language and also the language of instruction within the Kenyan education system, the use of Kiswahili in official scenarios tends to lead Kenya towards a state of bilingualism in as far as the official languages are concerned. This impacts further on the education sector as it faces the challenge of code-mixing. Foreign language teaching and learning, specifically Chinese, and forms the center of discussion in this article, and is therefore likely to face challenges from Kenya’s environment complexity, bearing in mind that there is no structured organization for its teaching and learning.

The question of whether Chinese language teaching and learning should be contextualized as a foreign language or as a second language, based on Kenya's language evolvment and related educational sector language policy, still exists as an unconcluded debate, but with a certain sense of direction (Liddicoat & Curnow, 2014; Trudell & Piper, 2014). In reference to previous findings, it is argued that "Second Language Acquisition" and "Foreign Language Acquisition" are different concepts placing their difference on the acquisition environment. VanPattern, however, clearly explained their difference by using the idea of "Foreign Language Context" and "Second Language Context." VanPattern argued that the difference is witnessed from two perspectives, one being whether or not the country where the acquisition takes place uses the TL as a communication tool; the second being whether or not there is a classroom experience attached to the acquisition. He further asserts that the former refers to a situation where apart from the classroom situation, the TL is not used as a communication tool, as in the case of studying Chinese while based in Kenya; while the latter refers to a situation where the TL is also the communication tool in the environment of study, like a Kenyan studying Chinese language while based in China (Ellis, 1989; Wang jian, 2009). Kenyans learning the Chinese language, are therefore learning it as a second or consecutive language for as long as it remains not one of Kenya's formal languages of communication.

It can therefore be said that Chinese is taught and learned as a foreign language in the Kenyan context, and therefore this article is based on that understanding. The teaching and learning of the Chinese language and culture as a foreign language, as well as its complex intellectual and economic dimensions among Kenyan learners, hinders its propagation. The current study examines possible measures that could be embraced in the context of historical account, theoretical and empirical discussion, documentary analysis, as well as discourse analysis (Oguonu & Ezeibe, 2014; Zhao, 2018). This approach is based on the current context in Kenya, in the absence of proper guidelines or foreign languages policy, and in the midst of China's reform and opening-up, and its increasing influence across Africa and in Kenya in particular.

#### *Exploratory survey on Chinese Language Teaching and Learning in Kenya*

In order to gain further insight into Chinese language teaching and learning in Kenya, the researchers conducted an exploratory survey among Kenyan learners of the Chinese language as complementary findings to within the aforementioned theoretical framework and scope of the current study. The online survey was conducted between early November and the end of December 2018, and captured data on demographics such as gender, education, socioeconomic engagements, and the participants' age which is considered critical to SLA.

The respondents' population was drawn purposively from two major Kenyan institutions of higher learning; the University of Nairobi and Kenyatta University. These were among the earliest established centers for Chinese language learning in Kenya. Additionally, these two institutions have established social media platforms for both student-student and student-tutor engagement, platforms upon which the stable link for the online digital questionnaire was shared for the potential eligible participants to provide their consent to participate, and also to complete the questionnaire. The eligible participants were learners pursuing various study programs at the institutions, or as part of an exchange program with partnering institutions in China, as well as alumni having already completed their education and had

learned or were currently learning Chinese. Also eligible were alumni who were engaged in gainful employment with experience of learning the Chinese language in either the Kenyan and/or Chinese contexts. Participants below HSK 3 were excluded, as this was considered the minimum Chinese proficiency qualification level. The collected quantitative data were synchronized within a centralized database and descriptive analyses then conducted using STATA in order to describe the basic contextual attributes among Kenyan learners of the Chinese language.

## Results and Discussion

### *Chinese Language and Confucianism in Kenya vis-a-vis China's reform and opening-up*

The learning of the Chinese language is not a new phenomenon in Kenya. Chinese language teaching in Kenya in the context of China's opening up and reform dates back to the late 1990s, courtesy of Chinese emigrants into the Republic of Kenya (Beech, 2001; Onjala, 2008). Furthermore, in 1998, China's Nanjing Agricultural University sent a number of students to study at Kenya's Egerton University as part of an exchange program. These students, apart from learning from the receiving university, also started a small, informal Chinese language teaching program that saw a number of Kenyan students enroll (Haugen, 2013; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Wheeler, 2014).

The global rapid development and spread of Chinese language teaching and learning has been achieved through the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs) and Confucius classrooms. This has not been confined just to Kenya, but worldwide as part of the ambitious international diplomacy, opening up and reform strategy driven through coherent continental platforms like the Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-Africa partnership (Akhtaruzzaman, Berg, & Lien, 2017; Lo & Pan, 2016). These institutions were established in 2004 as non-profit public institutions that adopted flexible teaching approaches to suit local conditions in promoting Chinese language learning and teaching about the Chinese culture in countries outside of China. According to Ma Jianfei, the Deputy Chief Executive of the CI Headquarters and Vice Chair of the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching, the number of these Institutions since their establishment has grown beyond doubt. He says "After 15 years of efforts, 531 Confucius Institutes and 1,130 Confucius Classrooms have been set up in 150 countries around the world with over 9 million students." In 2017, over 12.7 million people participated in cultural events organized by Confucius Institutes worldwide. This expansion continues, with the institute planning to employ 2,536 Chinese language teachers in 2018, according to its official website. China aims to deepen the reform of Confucius Institutes by improving the quality of education and its administrative systems, and thereby offering more innovative programs. Confucius Institutes have successfully encouraged 67 countries to incorporate the Chinese language into their national education systems (Hartig, 2012), with Kenya as one such country.

Just 1 year after the establishment of CIs, Kenya received its own CI on December 5, 2005, which was the first CI to be opened on African soil (Wheeler, 2014). The Institute was established at the University of Nairobi (UoN) through collaboration between the UoN and China's Tianjin Normal University (TNU) and was named as the Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi (CIUON) (Wheeler, 2014). Its founding was followed by other launches in Kenya and across the African continent. In 2009, Kenyatta University, in Collaboration with Shandong Normal University in China, started a CI at Kenyatta University (CIKU), followed by a CI at Egerton University with the collaboration of Nanjing Agricultural University in 2012,

and finally a CI at Moi University through a collaboration between Moi University and China's Donghua University in Shanghai. In total, four CIs were established and officially recognized by the Confucius Institute Headquarters in Beijing (Hanban).

Today, over fifty institutions including private primary schools, both private and public secondary schools, as well as colleges and universities in Kenya teach the Chinese language (King, 2010; Wheeler, 2014). Some of these institutions such as Alliance Girls, Alliance Boys, Loreto Girls, Mary Hill School, and the University of Kabianga, among others, collaborate with CIUON in offering tuition in the Chinese language the language. Additionally, Brookside International Schools collaborate with CIKU, with others like ACK School of Languages, Discovery Chinese, United States International University (USIU), and Ruiru Fairview Primary, among others, operating as independent institutions. The Chinese community school, Kenya-China School, opened in March 2016, and is yet more proof that teaching of the Chinese language and culture is ongoing in Kenya, even prior to its integration into the school curricula.

Greater efforts are being made in order to ensure appropriate propagation of the language in Kenya (Kathina et al., 2018). The Chinese government, through various collaborations with the Kenyan Government, the Kenyan Ministry of Higher Education, and the Chinese Embassy in Nairobi and Hanban are developing more programs like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), in extending their support for Kenyan local populations in ensuring that they are educated about the Chinese language and culture in their pursuit of various other fields of study (King, 2010). The Confucius Institute adopted recent reforms put forward by the Leading Group for Deepening Overall Reform at the 19<sup>th</sup> Communist Party of China's (CPC) Central Committee in 2018, presided over by President Xi Jinping. It is self-evident that China aims to reform the Confucius Institute system in order to turn it into a significant force for cultural and educational exchange so as to better serve Chinese diplomacy overseas (Fourie, 2013; King, 2010; Onjala, 2008; Wheeler, 2014). On the same note, local Kenyans who have acquired Chinese language skills are also working together to ensure the establishment of a strong organization to spearhead and strengthen local activities concerning the learning of Chinese in the Kenyan context; however, this will require significant effort in realizing these goals (King, 2010).

According to the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development's (KICD) director, Dr. Julius Jwan, "*Chinese is among the languages to be taught in primary education in Kenya,*" a factor that closely collaborates with people-to-people bilateral agreements recently signed between China and Africa, with Kenya included, as well as Kenya school education curriculum review dynamics (Bunyi, 2013). Mandarin (the name given to the most common Chinese dialect) was chosen to be taught along with other foreign languages at the primary education level in the newly-launched Competence-based Curriculum (2-6-3-3-3) that was officially rolled-out in January 2019. The declaration has been viewed as a positive influence with bidirectional economic gains between China and Kenya within China's reform and agenda for its opening-up (King, 2010). Nonetheless, the teaching and learning of Chinese among various Kenyan learners has been driven by a number of reasons, and as such, their levels of competence differ from one learner to another (Haugen, 2013; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2016; Wheeler, 2014). In addition, a number of other challenges affect the Chinese language's propagation in the local context of Kenya, a domain that this study will highlight further, but was preceded with exploratory survey findings on the insights of Chinese Language Teaching and Learning in Kenya.

*Determinants of Chinese Language Learning versus China's reform and opening-up*

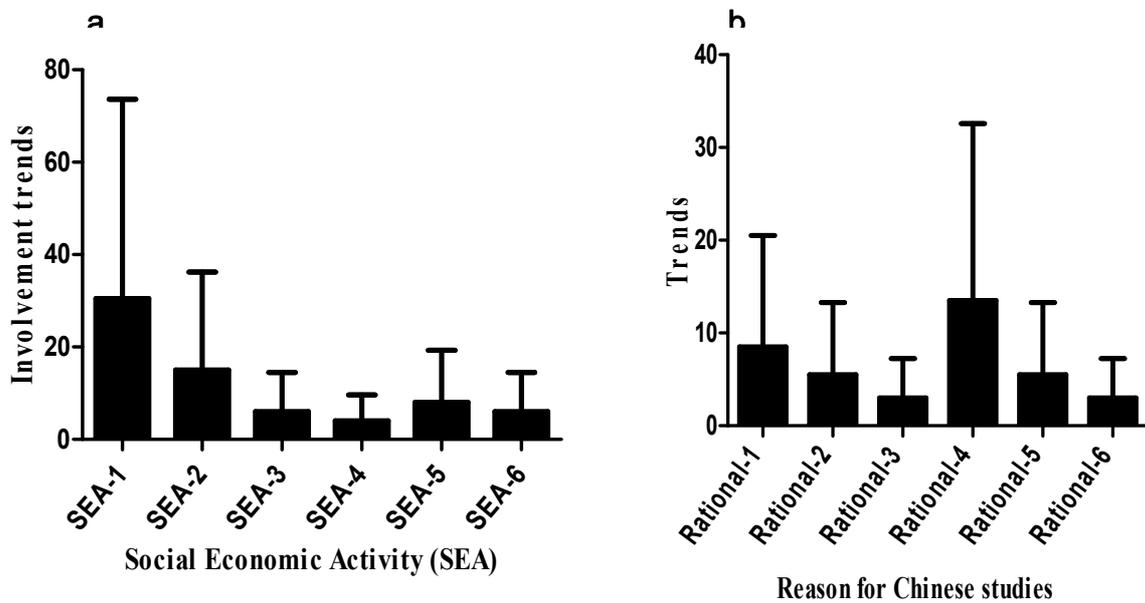
The Kenyan Chinese language learners, as participants to the current study, held sociodemographic characteristics as shown in Table 1. Based on the trends seen in the data, the majority of the learners were male ( $n = 44$ , 56.4%), and most students, regardless of their gender, were aged 25 years or above. A high proportion of the students had studied the Chinese language for between 1 and 3 years ( $n = 28$ , 35.8%), followed closely by those who had studied for between 3 and 5 years ( $n = 25$ , 32%), while the least proportion of students had spent more than 5 years ( $n = 12$ , 15.3%) studying Chinese, which was also comparable to those that had spent less than 1 year studying the language ( $n = 13$ , 16.6%). Most of the students held a Bachelor's or a Master's degree, ( $n = 36$ , 46.1%) and ( $n = 28$ , 35.8%), respectively. Four major institutions provided training in Kenya to the respondents at some level of their Chinese language learning; and these were, the Confucius Institutes at University of Nairobi accounting for 25 (32%) of the students, Kenyatta University for 17 (21.7%) students, University of Kabianga for 12 (15.3%) students, and Egerton University for 7 (8.9%) students, while a sizeable proportion of other institutions together accounted for 17 (21.7%) of the students. Only 37 (47.4%) of the respondents had a Chinese-related major, while 60 (76.9%) of the students had attained a minimum of the HSK3 qualification, and equally the training linked to pursuing Chinese-related socioeconomic undertakings.

**Table 1.** Chinese language Kenyan learners' sociodemographic characteristics

Gender	<i>n</i>	Proportion (%)
Male	44	56.4
Female	34	43.6
Age (in years)		
13-19	3	3.8
20-24	22	28.2
25 or above	53	67.9
Education Level		
Doctorate	5	6.4
Master's	28	35.8
Bachelor's	36	46.1
Other (Diploma/Certificate)	9	11.6
Majors in Chinese or Education-related		
Other Majors (e.g., Engineering, Communication & Public Relations, Sociology, Hospitality & Tourism Management, Business Management, Economics & Statistics, Law, International Studies, and Horticulture)	37	47.4
	41	52.5
HSK Level Attained		
HSK 3 (Min. Qualification among Teachers)	60	76.9
HSK 5 (Min. set Qualification for Local Teachers)	41	52.5

The drivers for studying Chinese were mostly found to be socioeconomic activities, and the rational for studying the language ranged from internal/self-driven interest to the Chinese language being learned as a means of applying for Chinese-related jobs and scholarships in order to advance in their academic studies and/or their career (see Figure 1).

While most learners were engaged in Chinese language-related SEA, the core rational for Chinese language learning was to retain or work towards Chinese-related jobs, which was closely followed by internal interest or a passion to learn the Chinese language, possibly alluding to the global impact of China on African soil (Hanauer & Morris, 2014a, 2014b). The SLA of Chinese for communication value, and as an avenue to attaining Chinese academic scholarships, was comparable.



**Figure 1.** Socioeconomic characteristics and Chinese language development attributes among Kenyan Chinese language learners

(a) Social economic activities (SEA) ranged from SEA-1 to SEA-6; Chinese language-related (SEA-1), Students (SEA-2), Fulltime translators/interpreters (SEA-3), Fulltime local teachers of Chinese language and culture or other subjects (SEA-4), Chinese company-related jobs (SEA-5), and Others (not specified) (SEA-6). (b) Reasons for Chinese language studies varied; Internal/personal interest (Rational-1), Communication value (Rational-2), External push (Friends/Teachers/Parents) (Rational-3), Chinese-related job desire driven (Rational-4), Academic Scholarship in China (Rational-5), and Others (Rational-6).

Chinese as a language has a variety of dialects; however, the current study is concerned only with the teaching and learning of modern Chinese (Mandarin dialect), which is drawn from the Northern dialects of China. In Mandarin, the standard pronunciation employs what are known as Beijing speech sounds, and uses modern vernacular literature as its grammatical model (Li & Cheng, 2009). Chinese (Mandarin) is a language that has been perceived to be one of the most difficult languages to learn, especially among English speaking communities (Ye, 2011).

In view of previously reported findings, “interest” is one of the reasons reported as to why Kenyans elect to study the Chinese language. However, interest is not just shown towards the Chinese language, but also in other foreign languages too. This interest is driven by a sense of prestige, and a desire to add another language of communication (Haugen, 2013; Wang & Curdt-Christiansen, 2016). Today, Chinese is also considered one of the UN languages of communication, and as such, the Chinese language, as a subject, has become

one of the majors for a Master of Arts degree in Interpretation (MAI) at the UoN Center for Translation and Interpretation (CTI) (Fourie, 2013; King, 2010; Wheeler, 2014). Some learners are motivated through extrinsic drivers such as their parents, friends or teachers who may already be aware of the opportunities available, and/or from their own observations on the current trend of China's placement in the world (Fourie, 2013; King, 2010; Wheeler, 2014).

China's economic growth and prospects for intergovernmental cooperation has seen a major push that has impacted not just Kenyans, but also more African students overall looking to learn and understand the Chinese language (Fourie, 2013; King, 2010). As became evident from content analysis, even with today's economic challenges facing Kenya, China remains Kenya's biggest growing business and economic partner, and thus the Chinese language has become valued as one of the promising foreign languages of in Kenya today (Fourie, 2013; Gadzala, 2009; Kamoche & Siebers, 2015). The Chinese language has become a driving force in Kenya to meaningful economic gains, and therefore academic qualifications are sought by those interested in pursuing the learning of Chinese (Fourie, 2013; King, 2010), a factor noted in the exploratory survey findings (see Figure 1) on reasons put forward for learning Chinese. Thus, the Chinese influence in Kenya is well recognized and established in the newly introduced education curriculum of Kenya as a way of increasing opportunities (Fourie, 2013; King, 2010; Wheeler, 2014) among Kenyan learners. It is further argued that China's rapid economic growth has coincided with its expanding influence in international business, which when viewed from the African eye, is applied through China's demand for raw materials which has in turn has seen an upsurge in commodity prices, and thus generating more revenue for many African economies, including that of Kenya (Manji, & Marks, 2007; Ye, 2011).

Based on complementary exploratory findings (see Table 1 and Figure 1), Kenyan learners of the Chinese language engage with the language through various aspects, either directly or indirectly. Various job opportunities exist for those having learned the language, including working as Chinese language teachers, translation and interpretation, tourism, and in the marketing of manufactured goods or services, to name but a few. Business prospects include the importation of glassware, clothing, automobile spares, and electronic goods, as well as both heavy and light machinery from China presenting another area of opportunity. Numerous Chinese restaurants and health clinics have been established to serve the increased number of Chinese tourists visiting Kenya, as well as immigrants and visitors from other countries. These are among the factors that exemplify economic prosperity through knowledge of the Chinese language and culture, according to the findings of the current study as well as reported in earlier studies (Gadzala, 2009; Kamoche & Siebers, 2015). In summary, the varying levels of Chinese language knowledge that exist today among different categories of Kenyan learners has enabled smooth bidirectional economic and intellectual cooperation between Kenya and China (Haugen, 2013; King, 2010; Wheeler, 2014).

Today's Kenyans enjoy various categories of academic scholarships to study in China (King, 2010), among them being the famous Chinese Government Scholarship offered by the China Scholarship Council (CSC), and Confucius Institute Scholarships (CIS) which targets language students who pass a certain level of Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK-written exam and HSKK-spoken exam). There are also the more recent Belt and Road Scholarship, and the Confucius China Studies Program (CCSP) which is sponsored by Hanban and targets prospective PhD students. Additionally, various Chinese cities' offer scholarships programs

and Chinese universities offer special scholarship programs. Since a good proportion of these scholarships require a certain level of proficiency in the Chinese language and knowledge of the culture, it became evident in the survey findings (see Table 1) that for some Kenyans, Chinese language learning was seen as a stepping stone in seeking academic opportunity. For others, learning is not just an opportunity to meet their academic aspirations, but one to experience the Chinese culture directly from within the country and also for the prospect of gaining international experience. Such an opportunity can diversify students' global views of today's world. As such, Chinese cultural and educational exchanges have helped China to advance on a diplomatic level through well-articulated Chinese language teaching and learning, as exemplified by the drive of the Confucius Institutes having accelerated towards achieving win-win cooperation in the context of China's reform and opening-up.

These dimensions highlight a perspective behind some of the reasons as to why Kenyan learners are choosing to learn Chinese, which could also be seen as part fulfillment of President Hu Jintao's pledge to African countries in November 2006, in which a vow was made to train African professionals; to set up various agricultural, education and health facilities; and to increase the number of Chinese government scholarships, among others (Kaplinsky, McCormick, & Morris, 2007; Zafar, 2007). As far as SLA is concerned, many other reasons exist than those listed here (Fourie, 2013; Wheeler, 2014). However, one must also remain cognizant of the challenges presented by Chinese language teaching and learning in Kenya.

#### *Challenges Facing the Teaching and Learning of Chinese Language in Kenya*

SLA presents certain challenges, a fact that is largely unavoidable. Learner age is one factor that limits the competence levels of Mandarin in Kenya. Educational research has shown that age affects language learning and acquisition. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) states that there exists a biologically determined period when language is increasingly difficult to acquire (Okonda, 2016). Drawing from this theory, some scholars have argued that successful language acquisition happens by the age of 4 years, and can only be guaranteed for up to 6 year's old, after which language acquisition becomes compromised and is rarely successful in adults, making it particularly difficult to attain native-like competence. Kenyan Chinese language learners may therefore not be able to attain this level of competence no matter how hard they try to master the language. Most of today's learners across almost all institutions are adult learners, aged above 15 years based on the Chinese language learning entry and qualifications observed in the current study's survey demographics (see Table 1), as opposed to children within the CPH. Nevertheless, with the Kenyan government's plans to include the Chinese language in the newly rolled-out competence based curriculum, school-age students will have the opportunity to learn the language much earlier. Such advancements underpin the efforts and influence of China's reforms and opening-up seen in the past four decades or so, and the commitments made by the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) (Chun, 2013; Wheeler, 2014).

Focusing on language as a component of Stern's Second Language Learning Theory, the complexity of the Chinese language itself presents a significant challenge. Chinese orthography, portrayed by characters and tones, are among the most difficult to learn. Kenyan learners are familiar with the 26 letters of the English (Latin) Alphabet and, irrespective of their native language, are used to it in both the Kiswahili and English languages for speech and writing. However, learners of the Chinese language need to be

introduced to a totally different system of language, which differs for both speech and writing. As a language, Chinese consists of four distinct tones, and has many homonymic characters which have a direct influence to its morphology (Ke, 2006). However, character writing presents non-Chinese learners, and especially those used to the Latin Alphabet, with considerable challenges (Hu, 2010); partly due to the complex nature of the characters, but also as to when and how to introduce them to learners. Some scholars have argued that their introduction be delayed, and to only use the pinyin system in order to teach and learn Chinese language; an idea supported by Dew, who asserted that learners must develop oral and aural skills prior to literacy instruction (Ye, 2011). However, others state that it should be introduced at the onset of the first lecture, arguing that language teaching should address all four skills from the word go (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). It becomes difficult to determine which of the two apply to the Kenyan context due to lack of a unified system, divided priorities among the learners, and the presence of differing levels of character mastery even among educators themselves.

In the same vein, understanding the Chinese culture is also considered to be part of understanding the language itself (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martinez, 2000). An awareness and understanding of the subjective culture is vital to language learning because language cannot be separated from thought, and thought is based on assumptions, values and beliefs (Durocher, 2007). Considering the Kenyan context, teachers are often unsure as to what culture should be taught, and when it should be taught in tandem with delivering language content (Chen, 2008; Crookes, 1997).

Second language learning involves teaching and learning processes as observed from both Spolsky and Stern's theories. For an efficient learning process, it also requires significant organization and planning. This means that all stakeholders involved in the educational process must be involved. It also requires appropriate policies, organized structure, well-stated objectives, adequate resources (both human and material), as well as appropriate methods of instruction. As already observed, Kenya is still a considerable way from attaining these, and there is still a lack of sufficient and competent human resource available to run such a program based on recent observations (Bunyi, 2013).

## **Conclusion**

It was evident that the pursuit of gainful employment by virtue of being bilingual in the Chinese and English languages, and business prospects afforded to strong bilateral economic collaboration between China and Kenya, the quest for academic and professional advancement through scholarships and communication interlinked to prestige and peer pressure are all seen as reasons behind the center stage role of Chinese language education in Kenya. The impact of the Confucius Institutes alongside partnering institutions of higher education in Kenya, and their intersection with language planning and cultural exchange diplomacy has become well-attuned towards attaining a competent cadre of educated and trained Kenyans in the Mandarin language. These skills provide a platform for Kenyans to ably engage with China and Chinese businesses as part of an efficient bidirectional people-to-people exchange supporting joint intellectual and economic prosperity. Viewed together, the presented findings show that Chinese language teaching and learning in Kenya, in considering the prospects of China's reform and opening-up, is already a quest in progress. Increased participation of stakeholders in curriculum-related policymaking and implementation processes alongside strategic resource mobilization through bidirectional

Chinese and Kenyan exchanges hold promise for a better future. Resource mobilization with a focus on the efficient management of human capital, and the opportunities presented through such linkage will benefit both countries, and language graduates in particular. Therefore, language development is seen as a significant driving force in underpinning future bilateral Chinese-Kenyan relations and economic and cultural prosperity (Kathina et al., 2018).

## Notes

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