

A Study on International Students' Learning of Classical Chinese Poetry

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Abstract. Classical Chinese poetry is an important carrier of Chinese culture and a key component of Chinese-language teaching at the intermediate and advanced levels. Taking 22 international students from the College of International Cultural Education at Northeast Agricultural University as research participants, this paper uses a questionnaire survey to examine their learning of classical Chinese poetry, including learning cognition (channels of exposure, degree of familiarity), learning attitudes (level of interest, language proficiency), and learning difficulties (linguistic barriers, cultural distance, and differences in values). It also analyzes three categories of factors that influence learning: individual, instructional, and social-environmental factors. The study finds that international students' overall interest in classical poetry is at a moderate level and that they commonly exhibit a fear of difficulty; classroom instruction is the principal avenue of exposure; learning difficulties are concentrated in vocabulary comprehension and insufficient cultural background knowledge. In response, the paper proposes strategies to optimize instruction: select teaching content appropriate to learners' Chinese proficiency, innovate teaching methods, and strengthen foundational training in pronunciation and phonetics, so as to improve instructional effectiveness and promote the dissemination of Chinese culture.

Keywords: classical Chinese poetry, international Chinese language education, learning attitudes, learning difficulties

1. Introduction

With the continuous growth of China's overall national strength and its increasing influence around the world, Chinese culture is spreading to the global stage step by step, and international Chinese language education has become a vital part of the national "going global" development strategy. In such a general situation, classical Chinese poetry stands out as an important carrier of Chinese culture. It holds deep philosophical ideas, unique aesthetic feelings and the great national spirit of China, and it has now become a key part of international Chinese language teaching work. At this moment, international Chinese language education has changed its previous focus on basic language skill training. Instead, it now puts equal stress on learners' linguistic abilities and their cultural literacy cultivation. As a core content in the intermediate and advanced stages of international Chinese language teaching, classical poetry teaching has an irreplaceable role. It can help learners improve their understanding of Chinese culture, develop their intercultural communication abilities and raise their level of humanistic literacy.

But there are a lot of challenges in the actual process of classical poetry teaching. Many international students say that the language used in classical Chinese poetry is hard to understand and quite obscure. What's more, the different cultural backgrounds bring about big barriers for their learning, and their aesthetic experiences are not the same as the connotation of classical poetry either. All these problems make international students have little interest in learning classical Chinese poetry, and they also find it really difficult to understand the poems. A large number of them feel afraid of the difficulties in learning, and some even show resistance to this kind of learning content. These negative learning attitudes will have a direct bad effect on the teaching results of classical poetry, and they also stop Chinese culture from being spread effectively across the world. The research done by previous scholars mainly centers on teaching methods, the compilation of teaching materials and the professional qualifications of Chinese language teachers. Yet they have not paid enough systematic attention to the learners themselves, that is to say, the learning attitudes of international students toward classical Chinese poetry. Learners' attitudes are a key factor that can influence their learning motivation, their degree of engagement in learning and the final learning effects. For this reason, it is of urgent theoretical and practical importance to do research on the real attitudes of international students toward classical Chinese poetry, find out the factors that shape these attitudes and explore the changing rules of such attitudes. This research can help optimize the teaching strategies of classical Chinese poetry, improve the effectiveness of teaching work and push forward the deeper and better dissemination of Chinese culture all over the world.

2. Literature review

2.1. What content should be selected for teaching classical poetry to international students

Concerning the question of *what content should be selected for teaching classical poetry to international students*, Xiaonan Zhang [1] points out that international students mainly aim to build a basic awareness and grasp general knowledge when they learn classical Chinese poetry. Because of this, the teaching work should focus on developing students' ability to appreciate literary works, and it needs to pick out easy-to-understand and excellent poems created by famous and important poets as teaching materials. Huimin Gao [2], Yanli Feng [3], Yimo Zhao [4] and Wenwen Wei [5] hold similar opinions on this issue. They all think that at the initial stage of learning, the selected classical poems should have simple and clear content, be short and brief in their form, and be easy for students to recite and remember. For instance, when choosing the poems written by Bai Li for teaching, Yanli Feng [3] advises to select the relatively simple ones that are widely known and praised by people. Huimin Gao [2] also adds that the selected classical poetry content should follow a progressive learning order and have a well-organized systematic structure. Wenwen Wei [5] lays stress on another point too: it is necessary to choose poems that have strong storytelling elements, vivid images and the ability to arouse students' emotional resonance when they learn. Yimo Zhao [4] puts forward that the selected works should be typical, have clear teaching targets and practical learning value. These poems should be able to show the features of the times they were written in, the popular thoughts of that period, as well as people's life styles and social customs back then. When students learn these selected poems, they can not only get rich cultural information from them, but also make progress in Chinese pronunciation, expand their vocabulary and improve their grammatical accuracy. In this way, they can learn more about Chinese culture and master the basic concepts of classical poetry learning. Shengli Long [6] gives an extra suggestion on teaching content and methods: classical poetry teaching can be carried out together with the musical versions adapted from these classic poems.

2.2. International students' attitudes toward classical poetry

When it comes to the attitudes of international students after they take classical poetry classes, Xiaonan Zhang [1] points out that international students usually find it hard to understand the delicate and subtle parts of Chinese classical poetry. This is because they have limited Chinese language skills, come from different cultural backgrounds, and do not have enough experience of being surrounded by Chinese cultural heritage. Besides, they do not have a natural feel for the Chinese language and cannot easily recognize the beauty in it. Because of these reasons, they often have trouble understanding the poems and feel distant from classical poetry learning. To be more specific, the hardest part for students to understand is the creative attitude of the poets who wrote the poems. Next to that, they find it difficult to grasp the imagery, metaphors and allusions used in the poems. Then grammar becomes a difficult point for them, and the last one is the explanation methods used by teachers. For this reason, teachers need to use simple and easy-to-understand language when they explain classical poetry to students. Ruqi Qian [7] holds the same opinion on this matter. He points out that many students lose their interest in classical poetry just because they have difficulty in understanding the meanings of words in the poems and the teaching methods are often too dull and unvaried.

Wenhui Tu [8] and Lixuan Luo [9] both did research on the features of how international students learn and use the Chinese language. Based on this research, Wenhui Tu [8] suggests that even though international students do not have a natural sense of Chinese and cannot tell the beauty of the language at the beginning, they will have a better understanding of Chinese literature and history and become more interested in them after a long period of learning in class. Lixuan Luo [9] finds that after learning classical poetry, students can basically understand the main content and the implied meanings of the poems. However, they still make mistakes when they try to use what they have learned about classical poetry in real situations.

Ruqi Qian [7] and Yilin Li [10] both point out that when learning classical poetry, students encounter difficulties in pronunciation, semantics, grasp of emotions, understanding of the creative background, and appreciation of artistic conception, thus their motivation to learn requires improvement.

Since the HSK (Chinese Proficiency Test) rarely involves classical poetry, many international students prioritize the study of basic language knowledge instead. Hehong Gong [11] and Yilin Li [10] agree on this point and further note that because classical poetry is disconnected from modern society and lacks practicality, students tend to undervalue its teaching.

3. Research design

3.1. Research participants

This study takes international students from the College of International Cultural Education at Northeast Agricultural University as its participants, covering groups with different levels of Chinese proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced), various nationalities, and different lengths of study. Using a random sampling method, questionnaires were distributed, and 22 valid responses were collected, yielding a 100% valid response rate. The basic characteristics of the sample are as follows: in terms of Chinese proficiency, beginners accounted for 9.1%, intermediate learners 81.82%, and advanced learners 9.09%. Regarding study duration, 18.18% had studied for less than one year, 13.64% for one to two years, and 68.18% for more than two years. The sample included students from Asia, Europe, and Africa, ensuring both diversity and representativeness.

3.2. Research instruments

The study employed a self-designed questionnaire titled *Survey on International Students' Learning of Classical Chinese Poetry*. The questionnaire was developed based on key issues identified in the research background and literature review, and it primarily included the following dimensions:

- International students' learning attitudes toward classical Chinese poetry (e.g., level of interest, willingness to learn).
- Difficulties encountered in learning classical Chinese poetry (e.g., language comprehension, cultural background, aesthetic experience).
- Key factors influencing international students' learning attitudes toward classical Chinese poetry (e.g., teaching methods, teacher explanations, personal experiences).

3.3. Research methods

The study mainly adopted a questionnaire survey method. Electronic questionnaires were distributed through the *Wenjuanxing* (Questionnaire Star) platform to collect relevant data on international students' learning of classical poetry. After data collection, SPSS 26.0 statistical software was used to conduct descriptive statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation), difference analysis (e.g., t-test, ANOVA), and correlation analysis, in order to investigate the current situation, attitudes, and influencing factors of international students' learning of classical Chinese poetry.

4. Analysis of international students' learning of classical Chinese poetry

4.1. Cognitive dimension

4.1.1. Channels of exposure

The vast majority of international students (85.71%) were first exposed to classical Chinese poetry through Chinese language courses at school. Others encountered it through the internet (14.29%) and extracurricular reading (21.43%). This indicates that classroom teaching remains the dominant channel for the dissemination of poetry, while the potential of modern online media is yet to be fully utilized.

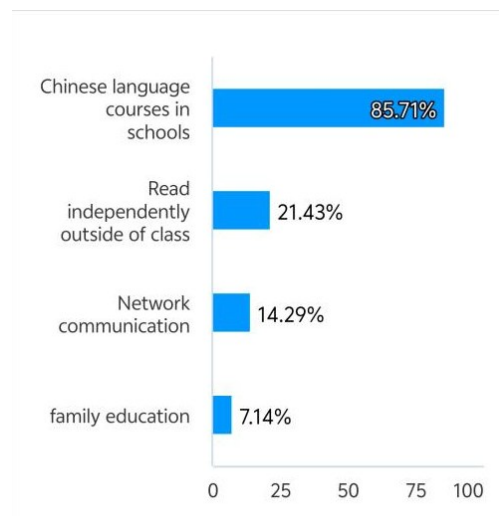


Figure 1. Bar charts show international students are first exposed to relevant content related to Chinese poetry (mainly showing the proportions of different exposure channels like school Chinese courses, reading independently, network communication, and family education.)

4.1.2. Familiarity

The survey shows that only 9.09% of students reported being “very familiar” with certain classical poems, reflecting an overall low level of familiarity. Among the poets known, Bai Li was mentioned most frequently, which is closely related to the widespread circulation of his works and their frequent inclusion in textbooks. In contrast, familiarity with other poets such as Wei Wang and Haoran Meng was relatively low.

4.2. Learning attitudes

4.2.1. Level of interest

Among students who had not yet taken a classical poetry course, all expressed an interest in it. Among those who had taken relevant courses, about 57.14% indicated a certain degree of interest in learning classical poetry.

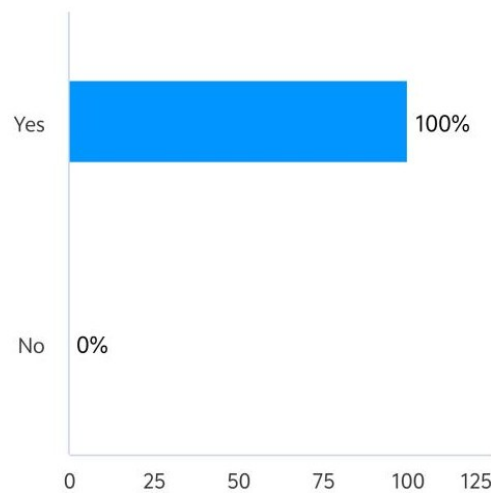


Figure 2. Bar charts show the proportion of responses for “Yes” and “No”

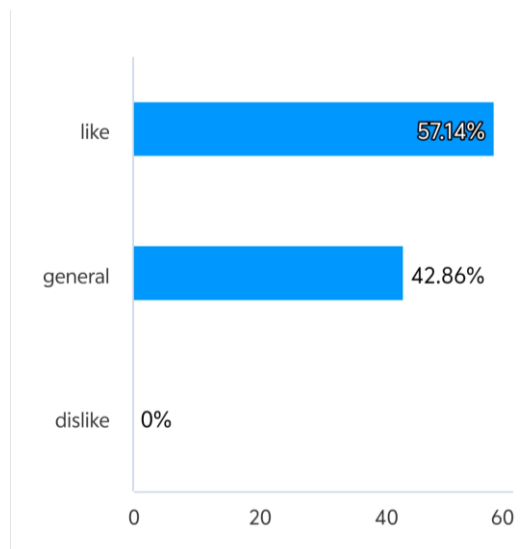


Figure 3. Bar charts show the proportion of attitudes towards being interested in learning Chinese poetry for “like”, “general” and “dislike”

4.2.2. Language proficiency

Within the sample, 81.82% (18 students) had Chinese proficiency at HSK Level 3–4 (intermediate to upper-intermediate), and 68.18% (15 students) had studied in China for more than two years, giving them a basic foundation of cultural exposure.

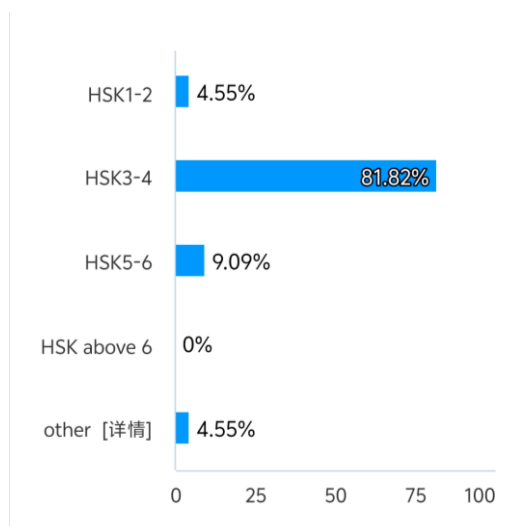


Figure 4. Bar charts show the proportion of international students' HSK levels

4.3. Learning difficulties

4.3.1. Language barriers

More than 57.14% of students identified vocabulary comprehension as the main obstacle. The large number of rare characters, words with different meanings in ancient and modern Chinese, and polysemy in classical poetry pose significant challenges. For example, the word *kelian* (可怜) often meant “lovely” in ancient poetry, which is very different from its modern meaning of “pitiful.”

4.3.2. Cultural barriers

Over 14.29% of students felt that a lack of understanding of China’s ancient historical and cultural background was a major obstacle in learning poetry. Without knowledge of ancient political systems, social customs, or religious beliefs, it is difficult to grasp the full meaning of poems. For instance, without understanding the imperial examination system, one cannot fully appreciate the exuberant joy expressed in Haoran Meng’s *After Passing the Imperial Examination*: “With the spring breeze in high spirits, the horse’s hooves fly; in a single day, I see all the flowers of Chang’an.”

4.3.3. Differences in values

Students’ native values differ from traditional Chinese values. Classical poetry emphasizes subtlety and the beauty of imagery, while some cultural contexts prefer directness and bold expression. This cultural aesthetic gap led about 7.14% of students to admit difficulty in appreciating the aesthetic connotations and values embedded in Chinese poetry.

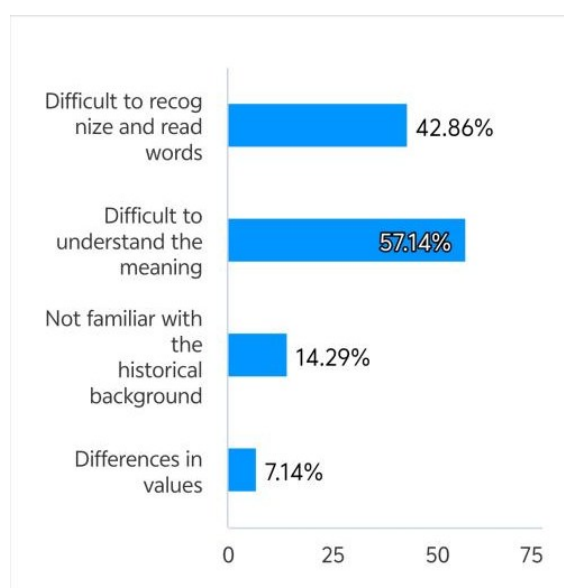


Figure 5. Bar charts show difficulties international students encounter in learning Chinese poetry.(mainly showing the proportions of difficulties like difficult to recognize and read words,difficult to understand the meaning,not familiar with the historical background,and differences in values.)

4.4. Factors influencing learning

4.4.1. Personal factors

4.4.1.1. Chinese proficiency

Chinese proficiency is positively correlated with the learning of classical poetry. Learners with higher proficiency levels show clear advantages in vocabulary comprehension and grammatical analysis, resulting in greater understanding and acceptance. Approximately 81.82% of intermediate and advanced learners reported relatively easy comprehension.

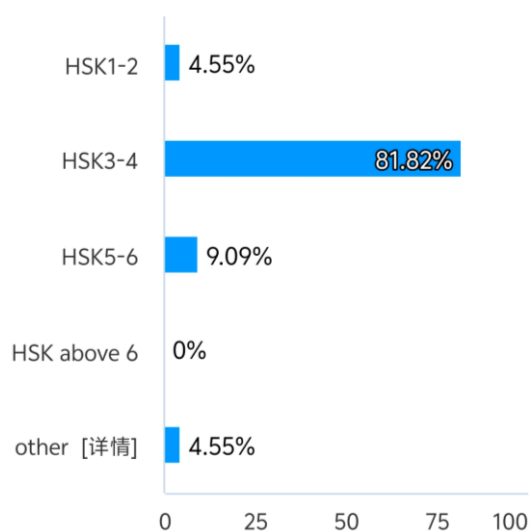


Figure 6. Bar charts show the proportion of international students' HSK levels

4.4.1.2. Level of interest

57.14% of students explicitly stated that they “like” classical poetry, while 42.86% expressed a neutral attitude. The higher the level of interest, the stronger the students’ learning motivation.

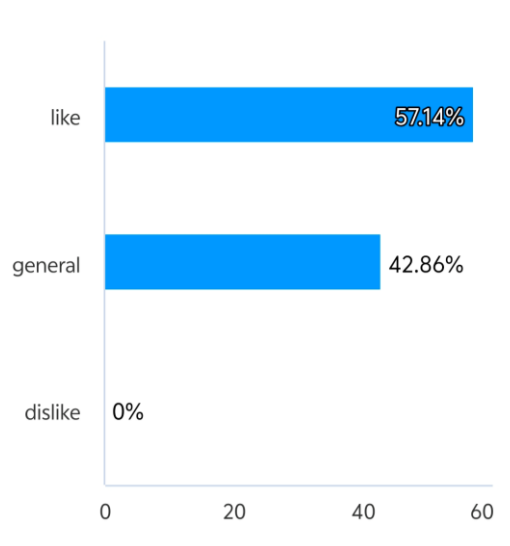


Figure 7. Bar charts show the proportion of attitudes towards being interested in learning Chinese poetry for “like”, “general” and “dislike”

4.4.2. Instructional factors

4.4.2.1. Teaching methods

Most students felt that current teaching methods were monotonous, relying mainly on teacher lecturing with insufficient interaction and engagement. The traditional didactic approach neglects learners’ agency and practical needs, resulting in low motivation. The most preferred teaching forms identified by students were: music (57.14%), videos (42.86%), pictures (35.71%), stories (35.71%), and direct explanation (7.14%).

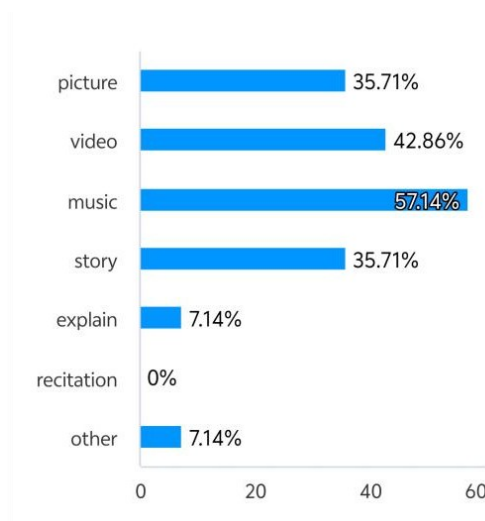


Figure 8. Bar charts show international students’ preferences for Chinese poetry teaching methods (mainly showing the proportions of teaching methods like picture, video, music, story, explain, recitation, and other.)

4.4.2.2. Textbook content

Some students reported that the difficulty level of selected poems in textbooks was not well balanced: some were too simple to meet their learning needs, while others were too difficult, exceeding their comprehension capacity. In addition, the cultural background of the poems was not explained in sufficient detail, hindering deeper learning.

4.4.2.3. Curriculum design

On the one hand, class hours were insufficient: 14.29% of students attended at least two classes per week, 71.43% only one class per week, and 14.29% had no relevant courses. On the other hand, the learning cycle was relatively long: 50% of students required at least one week to master a single poem, reflecting room for improvement in teaching efficiency.

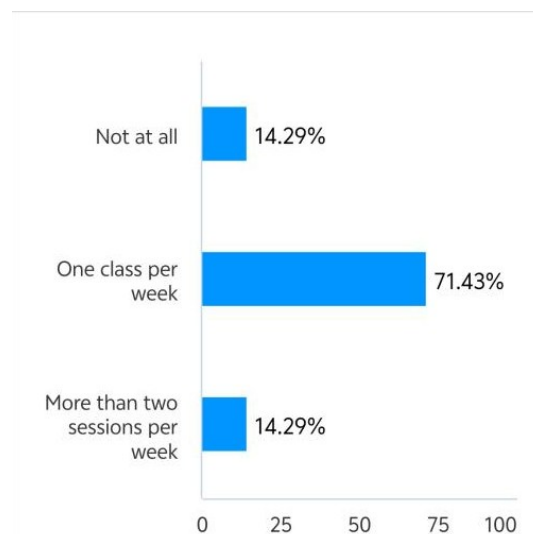


Figure 9. Bar charts show the frequency of Chinese poetry related courses for international students.(mainly showing the proportions of frequencies like not at all,one class per week,and more than two sessions per week.)

4.4.3. Social and environmental factors

4.4.3.1. Cultural atmosphere

The extent to which Chinese culture is promoted in students' environments significantly affects their exposure to and interest in classical poetry. In regions where Chinese culture is actively promoted, students had more opportunities to encounter poetry and showed greater enthusiasm for learning. Conversely, in environments with a weaker cultural atmosphere, students lacked external motivation to study poetry.

4.4.3.2. Exam orientation

Mainstream Chinese language proficiency exams such as the HSK place relatively little emphasis on classical poetry. As a result, many students perceived limited relevance of poetry study to exam performance, leading them to pay less attention to it.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Analysis of current learning attitudes

The results of the survey show that international students hold a moderate overall attitude towards Chinese classical poetry, and they have a certain level of interest in it. The data collected from the questionnaires shows that 57.14% of the students who have learned classical poetry clearly said that they “like” it. It is worth noting that among the students with HSK Level 5 to 6, this proportion went up to 75%, and this figure is based on two students in the advanced-level survey sample. This result proves the statement made by Wenhui Tu [8] that “the improvement of language ability promotes cultural identity”. Yet international students generally feel that learning classical poetry is a difficult thing: 78.57% of them said that they could only “partially understand” the classical poems they learned, and 42.86% of the students thought that the difficulty in learning comes from “lexical comprehension”. This finding is in line with the conclusions drawn by Xiaonan Zhang [1], Wenhui Tu [8] and other researchers. From this, we can draw the inference that international students with better Chinese language skills and longer learning experience tend to have a more positive attitude towards classical poetry. It also means that as their language abilities get better and their understanding of Chinese culture becomes deeper, they are more willing to accept and learn Chinese classical poetry. Even so, some students start to resist learning classical poetry because they meet a lot of difficulties in the learning process, and this kind of resistance directly has a bad influence on their own learning results, and also affects the overall effect of Chinese cultural dissemination to a wider range of people.

5.2. Causes of learning difficulties

Factors that influence international students’ desire to learn classical Chinese poetry are mainly in three aspects: language, culture and teaching. First of all, the language aspect lies in students’ insufficient Chinese language skills. Different from modern Chinese, the special features of classical Chinese form an objective difficulty for international students. Some words have different meanings in ancient Chinese and modern Chinese, like *kelian* (可怜), and there are also a great many historical allusions in the poem *Nian Nu Jiao: Chibi Huaigu*. All these things bring big difficulties for students when they try to understand classical Chinese poetry. The data from existing questionnaires show that as students’ Chinese skills get better, their willingness to learn classical Chinese poetry will rise in the same way. Second, the culture aspect has obvious cultural barriers for students. International students come from different cultural backgrounds, so they can hardly have emotional resonance with the cultural meanings behind classical poetry. When compared with students from the Asian cultural areas, students from Europe and the United States find it much harder to understand classical Chinese poetry. To solve this problem, it is suggested that basic courses of classical Chinese poetry use simple and easy-to-understand works, which can reduce students’ sense of difficulty and raise their interest in learning. For instance, poems with the theme of missing one’s hometown, such as the line “I lift my head to gaze at the bright moon, and lower it to think of home,” can arouse students’ emotional resonance and help them understand the poetry better. Third, the teaching aspect is about the traditional teaching methods adopted by some teachers. Some teachers still use the way of lecturing to give lessons in class, and they do not fully take the learning characteristics and learning needs of international students into consideration. So it is necessary to carry out reforms on both the teaching content and the teaching methods for such teaching situations. These three factors act on each other, and this makes international students have a limited and not satisfying learning experience when they learn classical Chinese poetry.

5.3. Implications for teaching content selection

International students' preferences for the teaching content of classical Chinese poetry give clear and practical guidance to real teaching practice. The teaching of classical poetry should follow the basic principle of progressing from simple to complex content, and the choice of teaching materials must fit closely with students' actual Chinese proficiency. For beginner learners with HSK Level 3 to 4, teachers should prioritize selecting short, concise classical poems that are easy to understand and rich in vivid images, such as *Quiet Night Thoughts* and *Spring Morning*. In the teaching process, teachers can also use various multimedia resources like animation videos and poetic songs to support classroom teaching and make it more engaging. For advanced learners at HSK Level 5 to 6, longer narrative classical poems can be included in the teaching content, for example *Song of the Pipa Player*. At the same time, teachers can use documentaries as supplementary materials to help students reconstruct the historical and cultural backgrounds linked to the poems. What's more, the cross-cultural comparison method can also be applied in teaching. For instance, teachers can compare Li Bai's *Drinking Alone Under the Moon* with the poems about solitude by Persian poet Rumi. This kind of comparison can help students develop their intercultural understanding ability and bridge the gaps between different cultural values. Besides these methods, integrating poetic songs into classical poetry teaching—such as the song adapted from *May We All Be Blessed with Longevity*—can effectively arouse students' learning interest and also help them memorize the key images in poems, like the image of the “bright moon” in many classical works. However, teachers need to be cautious when choosing such poetic songs: the selected songs should be of moderate difficulty and meet students' actual learning needs. They should avoid choosing songs adapted from poems with too many obscure and hard-to-understand words, such as *Li Sao*. All these teaching suggestions and viewpoints are consistent with the research findings of Shengli Long [6] and Wenwen Wei [5].

5.4. Practical significance of influencing factors

The factors that influence students' attitudes towards learning lay a good base for making teaching strategies better and more suitable. On the one hand, it is very important to strengthen students' language training in daily learning. As for the 57.14% of all the surveyed students who said they have trouble understanding the meanings of classical Chinese words, it is suggested to do special practice on those high-frequency words that have different meanings in classical and modern Chinese. For a specific example, the word *kelian* (可怜) in Classical Chinese usually meant “lovely” in the ancient time, and the word *qizi* (妻子) stood for “wife and children” instead of just the single meaning of “wife” in modern Chinese. On the other hand, it is also of great importance to make teaching methods more creative by using different kinds of visual and audio resources in class. Teachers should use pictures, videos and music together to build proper cultural backgrounds for learning and increase interactive activities between teachers and students. For instance, playing the musical versions of the poem *Spring Morning* can arouse students' learning interest a lot, and showing animated ink-painting videos of *River Snow* can make students understand the images in the poem much better, like the scene of “the lone boat and the old man wearing a bamboo hat and a straw cape”. Besides, teachers can encourage students to take part in various cultural activities, which can improve the communication between different cultures and change students' attitudes towards classical Chinese poetry in a more positive way. Take the Mid-Autumn Festival as an example, students can join in mooncake-making activities and at the same time recite Su Shi's *Prelude to Water Melody: When Will the Moon Be Clear and Bright*. In this way, students can not only have a richer cultural experience but also build a closer emotional connection with classical Chinese poetry.

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