

○ UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF PERFORMANCE: THE INFLUENCE OF LEARNER BACKGROUND ON SCHOOL-AGE LEARNER ACHIEVEMENT IN CHINESE

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While Chinese language learning in Australian schools is characterised by predominantly second language programs for learners who have had no prior exposure to the target language, there is increasing participation by Australian-born children who speak Putonghua (Mandarin) or another dialect at home. Curriculum and assessment frameworks and syllabuses at senior secondary level have responded to the diversity in learner background through the provision of separate curricula and assessment schemes for different learner groups based on country of birth, prior educational experience and languages used at home. However the impact of learner background on learning and achievement as learners progress through Chinese language programs both in primary and secondary school remains under-researched. In particular, evidence of how the performance of second language learners differs from that of learners who a) speak the language at home and b) may have substantial community schooling experience beyond the school classroom, or c) were born and initially educated in Chinese, is very limited.

This paper reports on the results of the Student Achievement in Asian Languages Education (SAALE) Project (Scarino et al., 2011; Scarino, this issue and Elder, Kim & Knoch, this issue) with regard to student achievement in Chinese. It focuses on the writing performance of Year 10 learners of Chinese and considers specifically the impact of language background by comparing performances between Australian-born students who do and do not speak Chinese at home. Scores assigned to students' writing gathered on common test procedures confirms the expectation that background language learners perform at significantly higher levels and suggests that the two groups also differ in the nature of that performance. The implications of this data for the teaching, learning and assessment of Chinese in schools, and for the appropriate provision of programs for these different groups of learners is discussed.

KEY WORDS: Chinese language learning, school age learners, learner background, learner achievement, second language learners, home language learners

BACKGROUND

At present, in many primary and secondary school Chinese language programs in Australia beginner learners are learning Chinese as a second or foreign language alongside Australian-born children who speak Putonghua (Mandarin) or another dialect at home, and children who were born and raised in 'greater China' (Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong) or in

Chinese communities in South-East Asia, many of whom have received initial school-based education in Chinese. Many of those with a home background or prior schooling in Chinese also maintain or continue to develop their Chinese skills through regular attendance at community language schools. These language programs are often resourced by a single set of textbooks designed for the assumed second language beginner-learner, who in many settings may actually be in the minority in the classroom. In this context the learning needs and communicative potential of students with diverse background and experience with the language may not be adequately recognised and addressed. The increasing diversity of students in different learning contexts has led to calls for a better understanding and adequate recognition of the needs of learners participating in Chinese language education in schools. As interest in Chinese language education increases there is an additional need for a better understanding of the distinctive challenges of learning Chinese language and the implications of these for Chinese teaching and learning in school-based contexts as well.

RESEARCH INTO DIVERSITY AND ACHIEVEMENT IN CHINESE LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

Literature relevant to issues of learner background and responding to learner diversity in school-based Chinese language education in Australia has been limited, with attention tending to focus on a range of issues including: teacher education, the challenges that native-speaker teachers face in teaching Chinese as a second language (Orton, 2011; Scrimgeour, 2010a); curriculum issues, the importance of incorporating local contextual factors in curriculum design and resource development (Scrimgeour, 2011b; Scrimgeour & Wilson, 2009); and approaches to literacy learning in Chinese, developing appropriate content and processes to support non-background students in understanding how to learn to read and write in Chinese (Scrimgeour, 2011a). Clyne, Fernandez and Grey (2004), however, did focus in the growing numbers of Chinese background learners in the community, proposing ways of supporting language learners with a home background to develop and maintain their home language, and Scrimgeour (2010b) highlights the need for appropriate responses to learner diversity in the Chinese classroom. Consideration of student assessment and in particular student achievement is notably absent in the literature on classroom learning of Chinese.

An investigation was recently undertaken to examine the current state of Chinese language education in Australian schools. The report *Chinese Language Education in Australian Schools* (Orton, 2008, p. 4) identified a number of key issues in Chinese language education in Australia, including the difficulties in maintaining second language student enrolments to Year 12, in particular in the context where the teaching of Chinese is ‘overwhelmingly a matter of Chinese teaching Chinese to Chinese’. The recommendations in the report include recognising and responding to the needs of different levels of Chinese learner. The report argues for students who speak Chinese at home to be ‘taught and assessed separately from

students who learn the language in the classroom' (Orton, 2008, p. 5), and for a separate curriculum for students entering at primary, and those who only begin the study of Chinese at secondary level.

Research into learner achievement in school-based Chinese language education has been undertaken under the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) Strategy (operating 1994–2002), and the National Asian Languages and Studies in Schools Program (NALSSP) (operating 2008–12) initiatives. Research focussed on assessing and reporting student learning in Asian languages in Australian schools included the report: *The development of language-specific proficiency descriptors: Chinese, Indonesian, and Korean* (Scarino, Scrimgeour, Elder & Brown, 1998) which described student proficiency outcomes for Year 12 level in Chinese. The descriptions developed in that study were based on performance data from second language learners, despite the increasing presence of a significant number of 'background speakers' in Chinese classrooms at that time. A second report: *A Report on Assessing Student Outcomes in Asian languages (Japanese and Indonesian)* (Hill, Iwashita, McNamara, Scarino & Scrimgeour, 2004) analysed curriculum frameworks in use in all states and territories and described key performance measures for second language student assessment in Asian languages at different phases of schooling.

Research into the effect of language background on school achievement has been addressed in a number of Australian studies. Elder (1997) identifies a range of factors potentially influencing learners' level of achievement including the variety and status of the language to which a learner has been exposed (i.e. how closely it conforms to the taught language of schooling), the frequency and domains of exposure, and the extent of prior schooling or literacy development. Individual experiences vary considerably, as do attitude, motivation, and learners' sense of identity in relation to the target language and its communities of speakers (of regional dialects in the case of Chinese). In a number of studies of the achievements of background and non-background learners of Chinese (and other languages), based on common assessments in examinations, background learners were shown to perform better than non-background learners on school examinations, particularly for Chinese. Differences in performance were found between the first/background and second language learners, in particular, those who were recent arrivals who had experienced substantial amounts of schooling in their first language (Elder, 1996, 2000a, 2000b).

In the context of increasing Chinese migration to Australia, an increasing prevalence of Chinese language use in the wider community, increasing opportunities for Chinese community schooling, and the participation of an increasing number of Chinese international students in school education in Australia, exploring the achievements of the diversity of learners in Chinese classrooms is particularly important. Recognising the distinctive achievements of both background language learners and second language learners of Chinese

and considering ways to promote and support the continued learning of the language by learners from both groups is equally important in this context.

RESEARCH INTO CHINESE BACKGROUND LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Studies related to home language or ‘heritage’ learners, including characteristics of their language knowledge and use, their learning needs and achievements relative to second language learners have received considerable attention internationally (He & Xiao, 2008; Kondo-Brown, 2006; Kondo-Brown & Brown, 2008; Lo Bianco & Liu, 2007, Tsung & Cruikshank, 2011). The term ‘heritage learner’ as used in literature from the USA tends to refer to a wide range of learners and background experiences in language learning and use. Kondo-Brown & Brown (2008, p. 3) describe heritage learners as any learners who have acquired their linguistic and cultural proficiency in a non-dominant language primarily through contact at home with foreign-born parents and or other family members. It is further acknowledged that heritage learners are to some degree bilingual in English and the heritage language (Valdes, 2001, 2005), but the heritage language is seldom completely acquired because of the switch to another dominant language (Polinsky, 2008). Two social variables that are significant in relation to heritage language development include speaker generation and birth order, with second generation learners generally displaying higher proficiency than third generation speakers, and the first born in a generation generally displaying higher proficiency than later born siblings (Lynch, 2003).

Studies examining the profile of heritage learners describe a range of linguistic, cultural and other background variables relevant to understanding their prior knowledge of the target language, the nature of their achievement and consequent learning needs are generally undertaken with reference to learners in college or university rather than school education contexts. In a study exploring the diversity of prior experiences and particular needs of Chinese heritage learners in relation to ‘Chinese true beginner’ learners, Wu (2008) identifies a number of grammatical forms that heritage speakers tend to have mastered before entering college programs which are considered challenging to second language learners due to language distance and their apparent distinctiveness from related grammar rules in English. Wu (2008) describes differences in motivation, distribution of language skills (stronger oral language skills than print literacy skills), comfort with language unknowns, approaches to learning grammar, and heightened cultural awareness as additional characteristics of the heritage learner. Pronunciation is an additional issue for background learners who speak a dialect other than standard Putonghua, and literacy development in Chinese characters is a challenge for the majority of Chinese heritage learners.

Despite the apparent strengths that heritage learners display in contrast to second language learners, in terms of oral proficiency and control of sentence structures, Xiao (2009, 2010) argues heritage learners tend to display much reduced fluency when required to deal with

more abstract concepts, reinforcing the view that heritage learners generally display well developed oral skills in everyday language use domains, but have limited capabilities when dealing with more abstract concepts or formal genres of use, particularly in writing. This difference between heritage learners and first language learner performance is reinforced in a study (Jin & Bayley, 2008, as cited in Xiao, 2010) that found that China-born children significantly outperform American-born children (of Chinese heritage) in Chinese language tests, with extended exposure to English being a significant factor in lower performance. Xiao (2009) argues that language input for heritage learners both at home and in community school settings is insufficient to maintain a native-like proficiency, due particularly to the restricted print literacy inputs available through home and community school education.

Xiao (2010) describes heritage learners as neither entirely first or second language learners, but displaying characteristics of performance more similar to second language learners than first language speakers. In her analysis of differences in the development of discourse features in writing between (overseas educated) native speakers and other language learners – both heritage and second language learners alike, she characterises the writing of both non-native speaker groups as displaying fewer Chinese-specific features of written discourse that are in direct contrast to English (e.g. ‘zero pronouns’). The writing of both second language and heritage learners remains characterised by repetitive simple sentence patterns, excessive use of overt nouns as subjects, and insufficient topic chains. Xiao (2010) concludes that heritage learners display no meaningful advantage over second language learners when creating written discourse in Chinese, displaying the same difficulties (or lack of awareness) of Chinese specific features of written discourse, due largely to the fact their oral skills are limited in terms of general proficiency and domains of use and do not contribute meaningfully to their production of accurate written discourse, particularly in more formal or academic genres. Their obvious advantage in vocabulary and colloquial grammar rules does however still provide them significant advantage over second language learners in everyday communication tasks.

Overall the literature supports the proposition that the characteristics of language use displayed by heritage (or background language learner) students has more in common with second language learners than with overseas born and educated native (first language) speakers. The overseas born native speakers (or first language learners) are likely to have age-appropriate literacy skills in Chinese far beyond what would be expected of the background language learner who simply speaks the language at home, or has studied for a limited amount of time in second language classes in a country where the language is not the official medium. The background language learners, on the other hand, bring a level of competence in oral language use and an inherent awareness of the basic structures and features of the grammatical system that could not be expected of a second language learner. However, their ability to transfer these oral skills to their written production may be limited

by their ability to employ the written language (Chinese characters) in meaningful ways. Some background language learners also display variability in their degree of oral literacy in Putonghua (Mandarin) and print literacy (in either simplified or traditional/ full-form characters), such that their advantage over second language learners cannot be assumed, but can be expected solely on the basis of their ongoing, sustained exposure to the target language at home.

At present little is known in Australia about the similarities and differences between Australian-born students who use Chinese at home and students with no prior knowledge or experience of learning Chinese beyond the classroom. Understanding this is particularly important in a context where the study of Chinese in schools is undergoing a significant transformation, from a predominantly second language learning context to one in which there is significant variation in the background and prior learning experiences of learners of Chinese. The current study seeks to better understand this reality, specifically in relation to student achievements in writing to provide a basis for determining how the prior knowledge of background learners can be adequately recognised and a curriculum offered that extends their learning and provides an engaging and relevant learning experience for all. It is also important to recognise the nature of second language learner achievement, to identify the particular characteristics, both strengths and weaknesses evident in their writing, so that their needs can also be better understood and addressed, in this period when numbers of second language learners remain low despite significant initiatives to promote the study of Chinese as a second language in particular.

Given the evident gap in prior experience and oral language performance between those who speak the language at home and those who learn the language only in the classroom, this study concentrates on writing performance, since for both groups of learners these skills are mainly developed through classroom-based learning and therefore provide a better basis for comparison between groups, particularly in terms of what is acquired in the classroom context.

The data examined here, drawn from the larger SAALE study (Scarino et al., 2011; and see Scarino, this issue and Elder et al., this issue), is designed to profile the learner groups and compare the performance of both second language and background language learners on common writing tasks administered to learners in Year 10, midway through their secondary schooling, by which stage they should all be expected to have acquired basic literacy skills in Chinese. It addresses the following questions:

Do Australian learners with a home background in Chinese perform differently in writing from second language learners with no such background? If so, what is the nature of these differences in writing performance?

METHODOLOGY

PARTICIPANTS

The participants in the current study were drawn from the larger sample used for the SAALE study mentioned above. The two groups of interest to this study were identified on the basis of a language background questionnaire (see Elder et al., this issue) from a total of 123 Year 10 participants. These two groups were background language learners (N=40) and second language learners (N=70). As indicated in Elder et al. (this issue) a background language learner is defined in this study as being born in or a long-term resident in Australia and having spoken Chinese at home before starting school. A second language learner is defined as having little or no prior learning of the target language and has little or no prior cultural or linguistic association with the target language. Learners may however speak or be exposed to another language at home, or be studying an additional language at school. The learners were drawn from a range of secondary schools across three Australian states. In most sites a range of both second and background language learners were present and were taught together in the same class. The 70 second language learners participating included a significant number of students born elsewhere in Asia (but claiming no home use of Chinese). Of the 40 background language learners identified, the majority (28) speak mainly Mandarin at home. Some of these (14) speak Cantonese as well, and an additional 10 speak Cantonese exclusively at home.

INSTRUMENTATION AND DATA COLLECTION

The Writing test: the writing tasks used for the current study were part of a more extensive set of assessment tasks used in the SAALE study. There were two writing tasks, a self-introduction as part of a scholarship application, and a response to a blog posted by a Chinese student intending a visit to Australia. The writing tests were administered by the designated language teacher in each school. Teachers were asked to supervise their own class groups over two lesson periods and to observe 'test' conditions. They were asked not to allow access to dictionaries or other resources for reference.

For the writing tasks, five criteria were used to judge students' writing performance: use of script (i.e. character writing), vocabulary, content, forms/structures, and discourse.

ANALYSIS

Within the SAALE study the scores on each of the writing test tasks were analysed using statistical comparison of mean scores across each of the groups identified from the student background questionnaire data. For qualitative analysis a selection of scripts from within each group was identified to highlight features of performance that characterised each group, at both average and high levels. These are presented as descriptions of achievement with additional exemplar scripts with commentaries in the SAALE Report (Scarino et al., 2011).

For the present analysis a selection of eight writing samples drawn from the exemplars in the SAALE study were used to exemplify and compare typical learner background and achievements of both second language and background language learner students. Two samples were selected at both average and high levels of performance for both learner groups, based on the scores allocated as part of the initial marking process in the larger SAALE study. The comparative analysis of written language performance was undertaken by reviewing both the scores allocated in the marking process of the SAALE study, and using the same five criteria to describe relevant features of performance evident in these samples. These actual samples of student writing and their associated commentaries from the SAALE study are included in the Appendix.

RESULTS

The achievement data for background language and second language learners who participated in the Year 10 writing tasks of the larger SAALE study is analysed to identify the general characteristics of the achievement of these two groups. Results are presented in Table 1 below. The maximum possible score of 50 represents the combined totals of the two writing tasks (described earlier), each marked out of 25 using 5 criteria on a 5-point scale. Background language learners clearly outperformed second language learners in overall mean scores. The difference between the mean score of each group is statistically significant ($t_{(108)}=6.10$, $p < .01$, although the standard deviations reflect a wide variability in achievement within each group.

Table 1. Overall mean writing scores by language background

Group	N	Max. Possible	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Background language learners	40	50	35.45	13.08	7	50
Second language learners	70		19.56	13.18	0	50

In Table 2 below, mean writing scores for each criterion for Task 1: Self introduction are provided, as this task will form the basis for the subsequent qualitative comparison. The results show that the mean scores for each criterion range from 4.0 to 3.68 across the five criteria for background learners, and between 2.9 and 2.5 for second language learners. A t-test analysis showed that these differences are statistically significant in all cases, *use of script* ($t_{(104.7)}=5.23$, $p < .01$), *vocabulary* ($t_{(108)}=4.26$, $p < .01$), *forms and structures* ($t_{(108)}=6.38$, $p < .01$), *discourse* ($t_{(66.3)}=6.08$, $p < .01$), and *content* ($t_{(67.2)}=6.15$, $p < .01$).

Between background language learner and second language learner groups a number of distinctive features are evident. The highest mean score for both groups was for the *use of script* criterion (which for Chinese relates to the accuracy and range of characters used in

their writing). Given the general view that character writing represents one of the key challenges in learning Chinese, this finding may seem surprising, but as this assessment was undertaken at year 10 level, participants are likely to be students who have committed to the study of Chinese beyond the compulsory years, and, as such, have displayed a commitment to and success in the study of Chinese characters. More significantly overall performance on the criterion *forms and structures* shows a marked difference between the two groups. Mean scores for this criterion were ranked second highest (at 3.9) for background language learners and lowest of the five criteria (at 2.5) for second language learners. Mean scores for *forms and structures* also show the greatest disparity between the two groups (a gap of 1.4 points on average). Mean scores differences for other criteria, *vocabulary*, *discourse*, and *content*, while statistically significant, are slightly smaller. Interestingly, the lowest mean score achieved by background learners was for *content*, possibly due to raters' expectations that more could have been achieved, given background learners' evident skills with *forms and structures*. It is also worth noting that the minimum score for second language learners on all criteria was zero, as some written responses were very limited. This was not the case for any background language learners.

Table 2. Task One-Self introduction: Mean writing scores for each criterion by language background

Criteria	Years of studying Chinese	N	Max. possible	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Use of scripts	Background language learners	40	5	4.00	.88	2	5
	Second language learners	70		2.91	1.29	0	5
Vocabulary	Background language learners	40	5	3.83	1.26	1	5
	Second language learners	70		2.64	1.47	0	5
Forms and Structures	Background language learners	40	5	3.90	.98	2	5
	Second language learners	70		2.51	1.39	0	5
Discourse	Background language learners	40	5	3.83	1.06	1	5
	Second language learners	70		2.59	1.42	0	5
Content	Background language learners	40	5	3.68	1.33	1	5
	Second language learners	70		2.53	1.50	0	5

Based on the findings above, features relevant to understanding the achievements of each group are analysed in eight sample scripts from the SAALE study (see Appendix), with a focus primarily on features highlighted in the quantitative analysis above namely, the *use of scripts*, and *forms and structures*. While these scripts are naturally idiosyncratic, representing single instances of achievement, they were selected to reflect the range of achievements and provide some detailed exemplification at both average and high levels of achievement. The characteristics of the scripts are sketched below.

At second language learner - high level, character writing is generally neat, legible and written with evident attention to stroke number and sequence, with few stroke errors or omissions, but lacking the accuracy and proportionality expected of a more proficient writer. At second language learners-average level, characters are legible and written with a degree of familiarity, but with minor errors common in strokes, in confusing similar forms or omitting parts (e.g. 第第 for 弟弟, 他 for 也).

At background language learner - high level, character writing is neat, fluent and accurate in strokes and proportion of components. If one character cannot be recalled it is replaced with pinyin (e.g. 陪 is replaced with pei. At background language learner - average level, character writing is legible (in the first sample), written with a high degree of familiarity but lacking neatness and balance. In the second sample, characters are poorly constructed and are often replaced with pinyin, which is often misspelt or reflects Cantonese pronunciation.

In relation to the criterion *forms and structures*, at second language learner - high level, writing extends beyond the descriptive to include some reasons for opinions, impressions or preferences. Grammatical structures used to elaborate ideas include the adverb structure 又..又.. (both ...and ...) to link adjectives, prepositions e.g. 对 (to) 给 (for) 跟 (with) when expressing interest in or identifying participants in an activity. They use common conjunctions e.g. 所以 (...so...) to express causal relationships, 因为 (because ...) to give reasons, qualifying statements using 但是 (but) and using the adverb 比 (to compare...) e.g. schools in China and Australia. Language structures are generally simple but accurate, with errors in expression, largely reflecting English word order e.g. the absence of a preposition in the phrase 我喜欢说话他们.

At second language learner - average level, ideas are expressed using a range of simple structures including the use of measure words for counting, the possessive particle 的, the conjunction 和 (and) to link nouns, the adverb 也 (also) to link actions, specifying frequency using 每 (every..), and the adverb 一起 (together), stating location using 在 (at, in, on) and sequencing events in time using 以后 (after). Some attempts are made to use more complex forms in familiar contexts, e.g. the verb complement 住在 to describe a place of residence, and the verb complement of degree structure e.g. 考得好, 学得好 (perform well, study well). Both students display a willingness to express their ideas in Chinese, though errors

occur regularly, including the overuse of the verb ‘to be’ (the adverb intensifier 很 is absent, the verb 是 (to be) is used inappropriately instead), underuse of the possessive 的, and absence of the subordinating conjunction 因为 (because) when providing reasons. Errors in information sequencing are common, including the placement of location phrases, and the absence of directional complements 山 (上).

At background language learner - high level, a variety of grammatical structures including adverbs of frequency, aspect markers (e.g. 平常是老师等着我们去上课 often the teacher is waiting for us...) and modal verbs, comparing and contrasting information using the comparative 就像 (as if), and contrastive 不如 (not as good as) or using the demonstrative (不是...) 那样 (isn't .. like that.) are used effectively. Information is sequenced using the adverb 就 (then) and 一...就... (as soon as...), and ideas linked using 还有 (as well), and 比如 (for example) used to make suggestions. Language is detailed and well structured, including complex attributive clauses, indefinite pronouns 没什么 (nothing) and inclusive constructions 什么...都... (everything).

At background language learner - average level, activities are described using prepositional phrases and attributive clauses to specify sporting and other interests. Time is expressed using adverbial clauses e.g. (很早 early), events are related using the time phrase 的时候 (while), and the particle 了 is used to express change of state. Verb phrases include complements of degree and direction. Comparisons are made, though the structures are confused, using 比 (compare to) rather than 跟 (with) with (不) 一样 (not the same). Reasons are provided using the conjunction 因为 (because). 比如 (for example) is used to list examples and the causative co-verb 让 (to cause) to express opinions.

COMPARING THE TWO GROUPS

Second language learner high level achievement displays an ability to use a limited range of forms and structures to express facts and opinions about everyday events. Character writing is consistently good with few orthographic errors. At average level, achievement displays a reliance on a more restricted range of sentence structures and a regular reliance on English word order, or lack of awareness or recall of *Chinese specific* ways of conveying certain ideas (e.g. positioning prepositions before the verb, restricted use of the verb copula, *to be*). Character writing, while legible, contains numerous orthographic errors.

Background language learner high level achievement in writing tasks is characterised by fluent and natural patterns of expression, with language employed effectively to express ideas and opinions in a colloquial style derived from everyday speech with a high degree of accuracy in syntax and good overall cohesion in responses of between 240 and 300 characters, almost twice the length of those produced by second language learners. Grammatical structures for stating time, frequency or tense, for making comparison and for outlining sequences of events are used effectively. At background language learner average

level, learners with limited literacy education struggle to map their evident knowledge of oral language onto the appropriate character forms, impeding the overall clarity of their message. Their language displays a natural style of everyday speech, often reflecting English sentence patterns as much as Chinese, but displaying a wider range of structures than is the case for second language writers, with more effective control of complex constructions (e.g. comparisons and conjunctions).

DISCUSSION

The analysis of score data confirmed that the achievements of the background language learner group are significantly higher than those of the second language learner group with respect to both overall performance and to performance on particular task criteria, with the greatest contrast apparent in knowledge of forms and structures.

The qualitative analysis of scripts revealed that background language learners, defined as learners who speak Chinese at home before starting school, are able to draw on a wide range of structures learned and used in oral interactions in everyday social domains of use to express their ideas in writing. Second language learners, however, can draw on only a limited range of structures introduced in classroom contexts to express their ideas, though those with high level performance who are exposed to or use another language at home may also be drawing on metalinguistic knowledge or other capabilities derived from their experience with additional languages.

Background language learner performance, deriving from significant oral language use in the home, is enhanced by some formal classroom learning of the Chinese language, in particular its writing system (simplified characters in the Australian classroom). However, this learning often takes place in a composite classroom situation that does not differentiate between learners of different background or experience. As a result, grammar and vocabulary and print-literacy learning experiences are typically the same for both background and non-background second language learners and therefore not necessarily address their particular needs. Significantly, an achievement at background language learner average level displays particular weaknesses, the most obvious being the difficulties in mapping oral language capabilities onto the correct written forms. Sample 2 of the background language learner-average level achievement in writing (see Appendix) reflects the achievement of a Cantonese speaker who struggles to express known vocabulary in characters, and also has difficulty rendering Cantonese words in Putonghua pronunciation and its pinyin romanisation, despite three years attendance at community school.

Background language learner performance in writing is evidently stronger than that of second language learners in terms of accuracy, variety and appropriateness of forms and structures, which supports the view (Wu 2008, Xiao 2010) that these learners' knowledge and use of

language structures and features in a rather simple written task of self introduction extends well beyond that typically expected in the second language classroom at this level. Background language learner achievement at average level appears simple in style and limited in degree of abstraction and application of Chinese specific features of discourse. Second language learner achievement at average level, on the other hand, highlights the limitations in knowledge and ability to use a wide range of sentence structures. The most evident feature in their writing is their natural reliance on English language sentence patterns, which in many cases is effective given that basic Chinese S-V-O word order is consistent with English, but which regularly results in confusion when students attempt any form of elaboration in their writing, such as the use of relative clauses, verb complements, and prepositional phrases.

The analysis of performance of individual students in writing tasks drawn from the SAALE study, while limited in scope, identifies how differences in language background and experience are reflected in achievement. For background language learners in particular, there is clearly a need to focus more attention on ways to enhance their oral language development, and to build opportunities for rapid literacy development, given the oral base available to build on. For second language learners, Chinese language learning and performance is restricted by the challenges of learning to write in characters and limited opportunities to use Chinese to communicate meaningfully outside the classroom. For these students there is clearly a need to provide greater opportunity to engage with Chinese learning and use in a more intensive and sustained manner, and to recognise that the nature of the task in learning to read and write in Chinese requires a particular set of understandings and skills that are quite distinctive and which need further exploration.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study has been to contribute some systematic and empirical evidence about learner achievement in Chinese second language classrooms, with a particular emphasis on the differences in achievement for two groups of learners. The data suggest that Australian learners with a home background in Chinese do perform differently in writing from second language learners with no such background. The nature of these differences in writing performance is most evident in their knowledge of and ability to use a range of grammatical structures, particularly those structures that are Chinese specific in terms of order in the sentence. These differences are less evident at average levels of achievement where oral language proficiency of background language learners is less well developed and English word order, common to non-background learners, is more evident in their writing. In terms of character knowledge, the achievements of both background language and second language learners at high levels of achievement are consistently good, within the limits of their known oral vocabulary, but at average levels both background language and second language

learners display problems in accurately representing their ideas in characters, though these problems appear to be different in nature.

Orton (2008) and others have recognised the need to improve our understanding of the nature of Chinese language learning in schools in order to offer a more appropriate and distinctive curriculum for both learners with home background in Chinese, and for second language learners with no prior knowledge of the language. This study, and the SAALE study from which the data were drawn, highlight features of achievement at two levels in writing in Chinese for second language and background language learners. The information obtained from the study is of particular relevance at present in Australia where the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is currently developing curriculum for Chinese in three learner pathways, developed to cater specifically for second language learners across Years F-10, background language learners across Years F-10 and first language learners in Years 7-10. The data highlights the particular characteristics of achievement for both second and background language learners, and the distinctiveness of that achievement for each group. The information also provides teachers with useful data, documenting in a systematic way what they experience in their own classrooms, and offering therefore an opportunity for reflection on and changes in their teaching practice, to better cater for these groups of learners in their own teaching context (see also Scarino, this issue).

The study itself also represents an initial stage in research among school-aged learners of Chinese to better understand the nature and development of their achievements. Background language learners and the nature of their achievements will require ongoing investigation as school programs begin to respond more directly to their prior knowledge and particular learning needs. One possible avenue for investigation includes comparative studies into the nature of achievements by background language learners of Chinese who do or do not attend out-of-hours community school as well as studying Chinese in mainstream classroom contexts. Such a study could contribute significantly to developing a more complementary role for these two providers in maximising the potential achievements of Chinese learners who speak the language at home.

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APPENDIX 1: SAMPLES OF ACHIEVEMENT YEAR 10 WRITING

SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER - HIGH

你	好	我	叫	[NAME]	我	十	五	岁	我	的	生	日	是	-	月
二	十	五	日	我	家	有	四	个	人	我	爸	爸	妈	妈	第
一	弟	弟	和	我	我	我	对	音	乐	有	兴	趣	我	喜	欢
摇	滚	乐	我	是	影	迷	我	喜	欢	恐	怖	片	了	又	紧
张	又	刺	激	我	不	喜	欢	爱	情	片	我	是	电	视	迷
我	喜	欢	动	画	片	连	续	剧	和	喜	我	不	喜	欢	剧
我	最	不	喜	欢	体	育									

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born in Australia and speaks English and some German at home. The student has studied Chinese since Year 7 (4 years). The Chinese program has three 60-minute lessons per week (approximately 120 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

Information is provided on a range of topics: personal information, family members and interests, with considerable detail on film, music, and TV interests, including film types, and TV programs; her impressions of horror movies and reasons for these views, using the adverb 又...又...to link adjectives. She uses the preposition 对 when expressing interest in, for example, music. Vocabulary includes a range of specific terms including 刺激 (exciting) and 连续剧 (TV series). Few reasons are given for opinions or preferences. Characters are generally neat and written with attention to stroke sequence. Information is presented in a single paragraph without indents or punctuation spacing. Length 100 characters.

YEAR 10 SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER - HIGH

我	很	高	兴	下	周	可	以	见	到	你	澳	大	利	亚	的
十	月	天	气	很	热	所	以	带	很	多	件	汗	衫		
让	我	介	绍	一	下	我	的	学	校	。	我	的	学	校	很
小	但	有	美	丽	的	花	园	。	你	的	学	校	比	我	大
我	想	你	喜	欢	我	的	课	尤	其	中	文	因	为	我	的
老	师	很	好	。	我	最	喜	欢	的	课	也	是	中	文	因
为	我	有	很	多	朋	友	在	澳	大	利	亚	和	中	国	。
我	喜	欢	说	话	他	们	所	以	我	喜	欢	学	中	文	。
在	下	课	和	周	末	我	去	弹	钢	琴	课	游	泳	和	网
球	。	我	和	我	的	朋	友	也	去	海	滩	。	你	来	澳
大	利	亚	我	可	以	带	你	看	悉	尼	大	桥	和	悉	尼
歌	剧	。	我	们	也	可	以	去	海	滩	。				

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born in Australia, of parents born in Korea and Malaysia, and speaks mainly English at home. The student has studied Chinese since Year 7 (4 years) and does not attend community school. The Chinese program has four 50-minute lessons per week (approximately 130 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

Information is provided on a range of topics: weather and appropriate clothing, linked by the subordinating conjunction 所以. She describes her school using the conjunction 但是 (but) to express positive and negative aspects of the school environment and the adverb 比 to compare schools in China and Australia. She describes her interests in school subjects giving reasons with the conjunction 因为, and causal relationships using 所以. She lists her leisure activities and things she does with friends, using prepositions to describe participants and the linking adverb 也 between verbs. She provides a list of suggested activities using the modal verb 可以. Vocabulary includes some specialised terms (e.g. 弹钢琴 and 去海滩), and

grammatical items, for example, 尤其 (especially). There are few errors in expression, apart from the absence of a preposition in the phrase 我喜欢说话他们. Information is presented in two paragraphs with occasional punctuation spacing but no indents. Length 180 characters.

YEAR 10 SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER - AVERAGE

你	好		我	叫	[NAME]		我	十	五	岁	我	上	十	年
级	的	家	有	四	个	人	的	生	日	是	十	二	月	
六	号	我	有	很	多	朋	友	每	周	末	我	跟	朋	友
一	起	去	看	电	影	在	学	校	我	考	得	好	在	我
的	家	我	学	得	好	下	课	以	后	我	做	作	业	我
有	很	多	爱	好	我	喜	欢	骑	自	行	车	每	周	末
我	跟	爸	爸	一	起	去	山	在	山	我	们	骑	自	行
我	也	喜	欢	音	乐	我	也	喜	欢	看	书	我	喜	
	听		听											
欢	Rock	音	乐	也	喜	欢	看	Action	Adventure	书	和	小		
说														

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born overseas, was raised in Australia, and speaks English at home. The student has studied Chinese since Year 6 (5 years). The Chinese program has five 40-minute lessons per week (approximately 130 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

The student covers a range of topics: personal information (name, age, year level, and birth date), activities with friends, personal interests, and school life, using a range of high-frequency vocabulary. The student describes his activities with friends, specifying frequency using 每, and the collective action using a preposition and the adverb 一起. He repeats this structure to describe his activities with his father. He describes his successes at school using verb complements 靠得好 and 学得好 and sequences events in time using 以后. He lists a range of interests using the adverb 也 for each new activity. The student uses some additional grammatical structures, including numerical expressions for age and date and locational

phrases using 在. Errors occur in information sequencing, for example, the placement of location phrases, and the absence of directional complements 山(上). Characters are neat and strokes are generally accurate. The text is presented in one paragraph without punctuation spacing or indents. Length 140 characters.

YEAR 10 SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNER- AVERAGE

你	好	我	叫	[NAME]	我	是	十	五	岁	我	住	在	[PLACE]
我	喜	欢	音	乐	和	足	球	我	也	喜	欢	看	电
最	喜	欢	侦	探	和	记	录	片	我	有	一	个	算
叫		他	是	十	二	岁	我	的	爸	爸	和	我	的
妈		妈											
是	老	师	我	的	爸	爸	叫	[NAME]	我	的	妈	妈	叫
[NAME]													
我	的	学	校	是	[SCHOOL]	我	的	喜	欢	科	学	数	学
学	和	历	史	科	学	有	意	思	我	不	喜	欢	英
很	难	我	的	第	一	个	不	喜	欢	英	语	美	术
是	马	虎	虎	我	有	一	个	go	他	叫	[NAME]	和	是
是	一	个	很	好	朋	友	我	他	有	五	个	朋	友
十	岁	他	叫	[NAME]									

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born in Australia and speaks English at home. The student has studied Chinese since Year 7 (4 years). The Chinese program has three 60-minute lessons per week (approximately 120 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

The student covers a range of topics: personal information (name, age, and residence), family members including parents' occupations, personal interests, school life including subjects and reasons for subject preferences, and types and numbers of pets. Vocabulary includes some low-frequency items (e.g. detective 侦探 and documentary 纪录片). Sentence structures include the use of measure words for counting, the possessive 的, conjunctions 和 to link

nouns, the adverb 也 to link actions, and the verb complement 住在 to describe a place of residence. Adjectives include 难 difficult, and the colloquial 马马虎虎 ‘so so’ to describe subjects, though the adverb intensifier 很 is absent, the verb 是 ‘to be’ is used inappropriately instead. Errors also include overuse of the verb ‘to be’, underuse of possessive 的, and absence of the subordinating conjunction 因为 when providing reasons. Characters are written quickly with a degree of familiarity, but minor errors are common, (e.g. 第第 for 弟弟. 他 for 也). The text is presented in a single paragraph without indents or punctuation spacing. Length 160 characters.

YEAR 10 BACKGROUND LANGUAGE LEARNER - HIGH

澳	大	利	亚	的	十	月	天	气	很	好	。	有	时	候	会
冷	，	有	时	候	很	暖	和	。	澳	大	利	亚	有	四	个
季	节	。	十	月	是	春	天	。	你	应	该	带	很	多	连
衣	着	因	为	天	气	很	好	。	澳	洲	的	学	校	很	好
。	高	中	学	生	，	每	天	有	六	节	课	，	从	早	上
八	点	二	十	三	分	到	下	午	三	点	。	我	们	每	一
个	课	都	有	不	同	的	教	室	。	平	常	是	老	师	等
着	我	们	去	上	课	。	我	的	学	校	的	老	师	和	同
学	很	好	。	我	的	学	校	又	大	又	漂	亮	。	我	最
喜	欢	的	课	是	数	学	课	和	汉	语	课	。	我	们	下
课	的	时	候	有	时	候	会	去	教	室	聊	天	，	有	时
候	会	去	逛	街	。	平	常	我	们	都	回	家	的	。	周
末	的	时	候	，	我	喜	欢	跟	我	的	哥	哥	去	公	园
打	篮	球	。	我	也	喜	欢	跟	朋	友	去	看	电	影	。
澳	洲	有	很	多	好	玩	的	地	方	。	比	如	，	悉	尼
塔	。	悉	尼	塔	很	有	名	。	可	以	吃	好	吃	的	，
也	有	很	多	好	玩	的	。	来	澳	洲	，	不	如	去	我
们	的	中	国	城	看	看	。	我	们	的	中	国	城	很	有
趣	。	每	个	星	期	六	都	会	有	很	多	小	店	在	街
上	卖	东	西	。	有	很	多	好	吃	的	也	可	以	买	很
多	漂	亮	的	衣	服	。	在	那	里	，	可	以	买	很	多
好	玩	的	玩	具	。	中	国	城	的	东	西	都	很	特	别
。	来	澳	洲	一	定	要	去	大	金	港	。	大	金	港	也
可	以	叫	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂	挂

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born in Australia of parents born in Singapore and Malaysia, and speaks mainly English at home. The student has studied Chinese since Year 8 (3 years) and does not attend community school. The Chinese program has four 50-minute lessons per week (approximately 130 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

Information is provided on a range of topics: the weather and clothing required, school life, weekend activities, and tourist sites. In describing school life in Australia the student describes the timetable and explains where lessons are held using adverbs of frequency, and aspect markers (e.g. 平常是老师等着我们去上课). She describes her leisure time with friends using a range of time phrases to express frequency or sequence of events and prepositional phrases to identify participants in events. She uses 比如 to suggest tourist sites and 不如 to emphasise sites best visited. Vocabulary choices are varied and effective, (e.g. 漂亮, 聊天 and 逛街). The language is natural, colloquial and effective. Information is presented in a single paragraph without indents or spacing. Length more than 300 characters.

YEAR 10 BACKGROUND LANGUAGE LEARNER - HIGH

		高雅，	你好。	我们	很	高兴	你	可以	来
澳	大	利	亚	过	两	个	月	澳	式
的	十	月	天	气	不	冷	不	热	，
就	象	上	海	的	天	气	只	是	热
的	衣	服	就	行	了。				
		澳	洲	的	学	校	不	是	像
那	样	我	们	从	早	上	八	点	半
下	午	三	点	半	就	下	学	了。	还
就	是	我	一	天	上	六	节	课。	我
欢	但	是	一	最	喜	欢	的	六	节
中	文	课	，	数	学	课	，	英	语
		我	下	课	和	周	末	最	喜
毛	球	，	我	一	有	时	间	就	打
		在	我	这	个	城	市	里	啊
什	么	好	玩	的	地	方	，	在	澳
悉	尼	最	好	玩	了。	有	时	间	我
玩。									

带你上海

和

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born in Australia of Chinese-born parents and speaks Cantonese and Mandarin at home. The student has studied Chinese since Year 5 (6 years) and attended 2 years of community school. The Chinese program has four 50-minute lessons per week (approximately 130 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

The student provides information on a range of topics. In describing the weather, the student contrasts the weather in Australia and Shanghai using the comparative 就像, qualified by the clause 只是热一点. In talking about school life, the student contrasts school life using the demonstrative (不是...) 那样, and sequences his description of events using the adverb 就 (then) and 一...就... (as soon as...), and links his ideas using 还有 (as well). He uses a wide

range of high-frequency vocabulary, and employs a range of sentence structures, including complex attributive clauses, indefinite pronouns 没什么 and inclusive constructions 什么...都... Information is expressed in a natural manner in a colloquial style (...就行了). Length 240 characters.

YEAR 10 BACKGROUND LANGUAGE LEARNER - AVERAGE

(a)	我	们	十	月	的	天	气	开	始	热	了	,	十	一	一	
	十	二	和	一	月	是	夏	天	。	我	们	衣	服	衣		
(b)	澳	大	利	亚	的	学	校	比	中	国	的	不	一	样	。	
	我	们	很	早	开	始	。	学	校	的	课	八	点	二	十	五
	分	开	始	的	。	我	最	喜	欢	学	英	文	和	历	史	。
	下	课	的	时	候	,	我	和	我	的	好	朋	友	一	起	出
	去	吃	东	西	。	周	末	的	时	候	,	去	参	加	运	动
	和	妈	妈	去	买	东	西	。								
	澳	大	利	亚	有	很	多	好	的	地	方	去	玩	儿	。	
	Queensland	有	Great	Barrier	Reef	,	是	很	美	丽	的	海	。	有	的	
	看	鱼	。	Northern	Territory	有	一	个	大	白	头	叫	Agul	Rock	。	

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born in Australia of Chinese-born parents, and speaks Cantonese at home. The student has studied Chinese since Year 7 (4 years) and attends Year 9 at community school. The Chinese program has five 40-minute lessons per week (approximately 130 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

Information is presented on a range of topics. Weather is described using the particle 了 to express change of state. School life in China and Australia are compared using comparisons, though the structures are confused, using 比 rather than 跟 with (不) 一样. Adverbial clauses

(很早) are used to refer to the school timetable, and events are related using the time phrase 的时候. Information is presented in complex constructions, incorporating time phrases, prepositions supported by adverbs of scope, and verb complements to describe direction of the action (e.g. 下课的时候, 我和我的好朋友一起出去吃东西). Recommendations for tourist activities involve listing, with some descriptive phrases to justify choices. Ellipsis and attributive and relative clauses are used regularly. Characters are written with a high degree of familiarity but lack neatness and balance. Information is presented in three distinct paragraphs with no indents but with punctuation spacing. Length 160 characters.

YEAR 10 BACKGROUND LANGUAGE LEARNER - AVERAGE

我	的	名	字	是	[NAME]																
我	今	年	十	六	岁	我	上	十	0	年	级										
我	的	爱	好	是	上	网	he	hua	bing.												
我	喜	欢	he	我	的	好	朋	友	去	出	去	wan									
我	喜	欢	的	运	动	是	tiao	wu	he	hua	bing.										
hai	ben	是	我	jia	喜	欢	去	的	di	fung	yin	wai	会	很	kua						
乐																					
我	喜	欢	hung	国	音	乐	bi	ru	2	NE	1	he	2	pm							
yin	wai	jai	sie	音	乐	会	rung	人	开	心											
我	家	li	有	五	口	人	我	的	爸	爸	妈	妈							我	的	
可	爱	的	go	he	我	我	们	一	家	很	开	心							一	住	ting
音	乐		一	qi	运	动															

COMMENTARY

Learner Background and Program Context

The student was born of Chinese-born parents and speaks Cantonese and Mandarin at home. The student has been studying Chinese since Year 9 (2 years) and has attended community school for 3 years. The Chinese program has one 120-minute lesson per week (approximately 80 hours per year).

Features of Achievement in this Example

The student provides some personal information. She then describes activities with friends using prepositions and complements of direction, and attributive clauses to specify sporting and other interests, including going to the beach. Reasons are provided using the conjunction 因为. She describes and explains her interest in music using 比如 to list examples and using the causative 让 (to let, make) to show the impact of such music on her and others. She describes her family and pets, expressing an opinion on why her family is so happy. The student uses a range of vocabulary (e.g. 上网, 开心, 比如). Characters are poorly constructed and are often replaced with pinyin, which is often misspelt or reflects Cantonese pronunciation. Information is presented as a sequence of sentences without formatting. Length 120 characters.