

# *The Impact of Parental Education and Family Culture on Children's Second Language Learning Motivation and Outcomes in a Globalized Context*

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**Keywords:** Second Language Acquisition (L2), Parental Influences, Cultural Contexts, Motivation, Educational Background

**Abstract:** In today's globalized world, second language (L2) acquisition is of growing importance, highlighting the critical role of parental and cultural influences on children's language learning. This study explores how parental educational backgrounds and family cultural contexts shape children's L2 learning motivation and outcomes, focusing on high school students from China and the U.S., guided by Coleman's Social Theory of Family Capital and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory. A mixed-methods approach was employed, collecting data from 60 high school students through validated questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The quantitative analysis reveals a strong correlation between parental education and children's motivation and L2 outcomes, particularly in Chinese samples where structured, goal-oriented teaching methods are prevalent. In contrast, U.S. samples show greater variability in motivation and outcomes, reflecting cultural norms emphasizing independence. The interviews further highlight the mediating role of personal traits such as self-motivation in learning success. These findings underscore the interplay of education, culture, and individual traits in L2 learning, offering valuable insights for parents, educators, and policymakers in creating effective and culturally adaptive L2 learning environments.

## **1. Introduction**

As the world advancing into the new era of cultural fusions, learning a second language is considered as a necessary skill of students. In China, children usually started to learn English as a compulsory second language (L2) course in primary school[1]. In particular, the influences of parents are also recognized as crucial factors of children's language developments. For example, the findings of a previous research also added to the recent discussion on parental support in L2 literacy development. Studies conducted among English as L2 learners in Hong Kong China revealed the importance of parental input in developing word reading ability and cognitive-linguistic skills in reading (Tong, C. K., Ho, J. C., Yang, X., McBride, C., Ng, M. C., & Pan, D. J., 2022).[12] However, it remains unclear whether there is a specific connection between parental factors and children's language learning and how those factors affect specific parts of L2 acquisition of children. In this research, we mainly focused on two components: the education status of parents and the

cultural environment of the families, in addition with their impacts on children's motivation of learning a second language and the outcomes of it. In this process, we included over 60 high school students, who are currently studying in either China or the U.S. This allowed us to see a cultural contrast between different families in different countries, which is indispensable for our research. We used a validated questionnaire with semi-structured interviews to examine the demographic information, educational and cultural backgrounds of parents, language grades and proficiency, etc. of our respondents. Previous research has pointed out that parental human capital, especially education related elements, are important factors that affects a home language and literacy environment [2]. Advantaged families have high stocks of financial, human, and social capital [3]. The education status of parents and the cultural influences of families are considered as important factors that largely determine children's motivations and outcomes of L2 learning (Tong, C. K., Ho, J. C., Yang, X., McBride, C., Ng, M. C., & Pan, D. J., 2022)[12]. Nevertheless, we found that research on the influences of family cultural background on L2 acquisitions are lacking and not comprehensive. This is the reason for us to combine both education and culture in the studying of parental effects on children's second language learning. As a result, this research significantly advances our understanding of how parental education and cultural influences shape children's L2 learning. By addressing gaps in prior studies, it is not only deepening theoretical frameworks, but also providing practical tools for educators, policymakers, and families to support effective and culturally adaptive L2 learning environments.[4]

## 2. Literature Review

In this research, we mainly used the foundations of the social theory of family capital [5] and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. In Coleman's theory, family environment includes three different types of capital: physical capital, human capital and social capital. We were focusing on the human capital of the samples of parents, which Coleman stated as the individual's level of educational attainment that is embodied in a person's knowledge, skills and capabilities to act in certain social structures. This means, the highest levels of college degrees or graduation certificates that parents achieved are the most important variables of our research, because their education level may restrict their involvement in language and literacy learning activities with their children at home [5].

While children are trying to learn a new language, the assistance of parents are commonly not rare. However, the quality of assistance that parents can provide is uncertain. Parents of different educational backgrounds have different beliefs, use different teaching strategies in child rearing and interact in different ways with their children [6]. For example, parents who have master's degrees are more likely to be capable to export more professional knowledge to their children. In contrast, parents who only graduated from high school are less possibly to do so. "Advantaged families have high stocks of financial, human, and social capital, which are crucial for shaping students' opportunities, development, and behavior" [7]. We suggested that this phenomenon also exists in parental influences on children's L2 learning motivations and outcomes, as a predictable stretch of the current theories.

Nevertheless, there is a limitation in Coleman's social theory of family capital, which is the cultural influences. Meanwhile, in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, it defines overall development of children as a complex system of relationships affected by multiple levels of the surroundings, which is divided into five systems.[8] In those five systems of outside environment, we are mainly considering the "Macrosystem", as Bronfenbrenner phrased, which included cultural norms and expectations, children's educational rules of parents and so on. As a result, the attitudes of language learning of children highly depend on certain types of standards that

they must follow in daily life, such as hardworking, high expectations of grades, interest developments, etc. Their motivations are affected by the ways of L2 education provided directly or supported indirectly by their parents as well. These influences are then tightly connected with the cultural background of families of our samples.[9]

Thus, from a general perspective, the education status of parents and the cultural influences of families are considered as important factors that largely determined children's motivations and outcomes of second language learning. Though, we have seen independent research examples of the effects of the two factors on L2, attempts of considering if they are interconnected with learning intentions of underaged students are still considerable to be a new research perspective.

Numerous previous studies have indicated that there is an inevitable relation between parental influences and children's study performances in a variety of aspects. Academically, studies have repeatedly shown that parental investment in the form of home learning is associated with children's early linguistic and cognitive development and emergent literacy [10]. Literacy-rich environments where children have access to books and other print materials and parents engage with them in age-appropriate learning opportunities contribute positively to child literacy and language [11].

From the cultural perspective, what kind of culture that the parents exposed to will also play an important role in children's habits of learning. For example, Chi and Rao (2003) have recorded that Chinese and Western societies differ on a variety of cultural and social dimensions.[2] Research conducted in China has found that Confucian values, such as the emphases on academic achievement and effort, characterize Chinese parents' educational beliefs. In contrast, children who have Western family background will often receive a much different way of parental attitude on studying.

How parents can provide the quality and types of education and how that will affect children throughout their studying is also an important aspect for L2 learning. Access to financial resources and services and the human capital accumulated through educational qualifications influence the ways in which parents interact with their children, the type of activities they promote and the attitudes, beliefs and values they express towards learning, as well as their views about child development and the capabilities they wish to develop in their children [12]. It is indicated that the education backgrounds of parents will also have enormous impacts on their ways of educating and their children's academic behaviors.

Nevertheless, there are few research elucidating powerful points on how these different aspects of parental influences act together, especially on children's process of learning a second language. Moreover, we found that they were often regularly studied in a grand point of view, instead of focusing on many possibilities of proving that those family capitals, social-economic backgrounds, cultural influences and all the others have been affecting children's motivation and results, both pedagogically and linguistically.

Our research focused on three research questions:

- Firstly, does the difference in the children education methods used by parents from different cultural backgrounds affect children's motivations and outcomes for L2 learning?
- In addition, do the educational backgrounds of parents affect the effectiveness of L2 education of children?
- And lastly, do the individual differences of children mediate the influences of the previous two parental backgrounds?

Accordingly, we made hypothetical predictions based on the existing theories of the social theory of family capital (Coleman, 1988, 1990, 1991) and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory:

- Regarding the first question, children of parents with stricter family or national cultures of requirements on children's academic performances would show stronger motivations

and outcomes in second language learning.

- Regarding the second question, children with parents who own higher levels of degrees would perform more effectively in language acquisitions.
- Regarding the third question, there would be few examples not following the trends of the previous two hypotheses, tend to be affected by their individual differences, such as self-motivation and abilities to learn.

The significances of this research are widely spread. Existing studies have largely focused on either one of parental education or cultural influences. This research uniquely explores the intersection of both, providing a more comprehensive understanding of how family environments holistically shape L2 acquisition. It also advances knowledge in second language motivation by connecting it to specific family behaviors and cultural dynamics, which are underexplored in previous research.

This research extends Coleman's (1988, 1990, 1991) social theory of family capital by demonstrating how parental education—as a component of human capital—shapes children's motivation and outcomes in second language learning. It builds on previous findings by showing the nuanced influences of cultural and socio-economic factors on language acquisition, moving beyond general educational impacts to focus on specific elements like parental teaching styles, resource allocation, and academic expectations. On the other hand, by incorporating Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, this research highlights how macrosystem-level cultural norms influence parental attitudes and how that eventually affect children's learning motivation. Therefore, it bridges the gap between macro-level cultural expectations and micro-level family practices, providing a multidimensional framework for understanding the interplay between education, culture, and motivation in language acquisitions. In addition to the advancements of the previous two theories, unlike most studies that used single cultural settings, this research contrasts families which sent their children to two completely difference educational environments, in either traditional Chinese high schools or boarding schools in the United States. This offers insights into how cultural norms shape parental practices and learning outcomes differently. This comparison enriches the existing literature by revealing how universal theories apply in diverse cultural contexts.

From more of a practical point of view, the findings provide insights for parents on how their educational background, teaching methods, and cultural attitudes affect their children's language learning. Parents can decide their support strategies accordingly—whether direct teaching, indirect support through resources, or fostering intrinsic motivation—to maximize their child's potential in L2 acquisition. To those who work in the government, the study informs educational policymakers about the importance of family involvement in language learning. Schools can design programs to encourage parental engagement, such as lectures for parents to understand effective teaching strategies and motivation-building techniques. While in the meantime, teachers can also use this research to develop differentiated instruction bind to students' familial and cultural backgrounds.

In summary, this research significantly advances the study of children's L2 learning by offering a comprehensive, multidimensional view of parental and cultural influences on it. It integrates theoretical frameworks, bridges existing gaps, and provides actionable insights for families, educators, and policymakers. By highlighting the intricate connections between education, culture, and motivation, the study paves the way for more inclusive and effective approaches to second language education in diverse cultural settings.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1 Participants

60 current high school students, who are studying in the Chinese Mainland or the United States

were invited to participate in the study. The participants are all volunteers collected from online initiatives. Among the students, half of them(30) study in China, and the other half (30) study in the U.S. Each group has an equal number of males and females, with 15 of each gender. The students all came from different parental education backgrounds and cultural influences. As a default condition, all participants speak Mandarin as their first language and English as their second language.

There are also 2 students chosen from the 60 participants to attend the semi-structured interviews. 1 of them is male and 1 of them is female, whom are both 10th graders (Sample I (Eason), sophomore, 15 years old, Chinese male and Sample II (Wendy), sophomore, 16 years old, Chinese female). Both participants were born and raised in China during their childhood and came to the U.S. for high school.(Table 1 & Table 2)

*Table 1 Grade Level Distributions of Participants*

Grades	Percentage (%)
9	11
10	10
11	68
12	11

*Table 2 Age Distributions of Participants*

Age	U.S. Samples (%)	Chinese Samples (%)
14	3	
15	27	
16	10	33
17	33	67
18	27	

### 3.2 Procedures

In this research, we used a combination of existed questionnaires of learning motivations, language proficiency, parental education status, cultural backgrounds, etc., such as the Language Learning Motivation Questionnaire (Busse, V. & Walter, C. 2013), Language History Questionnaire (LHQ) (Li, P., Zhang, F., Yu, A., & Zhao, X., 2020), Child Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (Marian, Blumenfeld, & Kaushanskaya, Northwestern Bilingualism & Psycholinguistics Research Laboratory, 2007) and Home Language Questionnaire (HLQ) (US State Education Department/ The University of the State of New York).

After getting permissions from the participating students and their parents, respondents were asked to complete the questionnaire, that contained a survey on their English abilities and last year's English final grades. In addition, we also investigated the educational degrees of their parents, the ways their parents educated them in childhood or now, the family rules of academics, the cultural traditions, the time they started learning L2 (English), the methods of learning L2 (English), the abilities of speaking/listening/reading/writing in L2 (determined in standards of CEFR, Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the Council of Europe, 2024), communication skills in L2, reasons to learn L2, etc.. The process was supervised by the researcher himself. All the numeral data of grades and performances of participants in classes were double checked with their English teachers.

All participants completed the questionnaires, the answers were collected back to the researcher. A statistical table was made to analyze the gathered data.

Further on, we randomly invited two participants for interviews on more details of their family backgrounds and purposes of studying a second language. The interviews included several different, open answer questions of parental influences on the language learning of participants. The interviews were intended to acquire more information about the topic and were recorded by videos.

As for data analysis, we used descriptive analysis, in combination with mathematical diagrams to provide a more obvious overview of the results.

## 4. Results

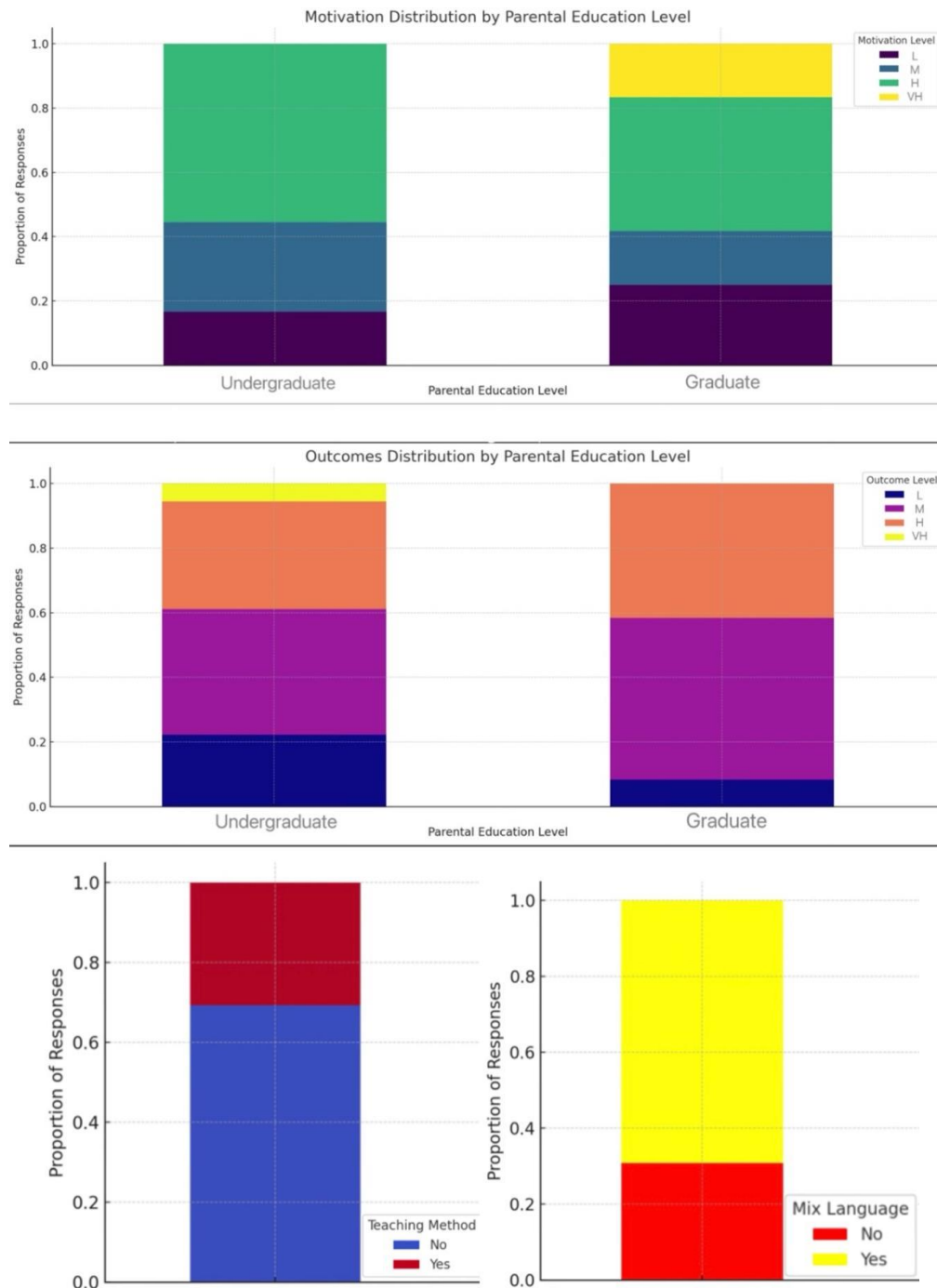


Fig. 1 Summary of U.S. Data

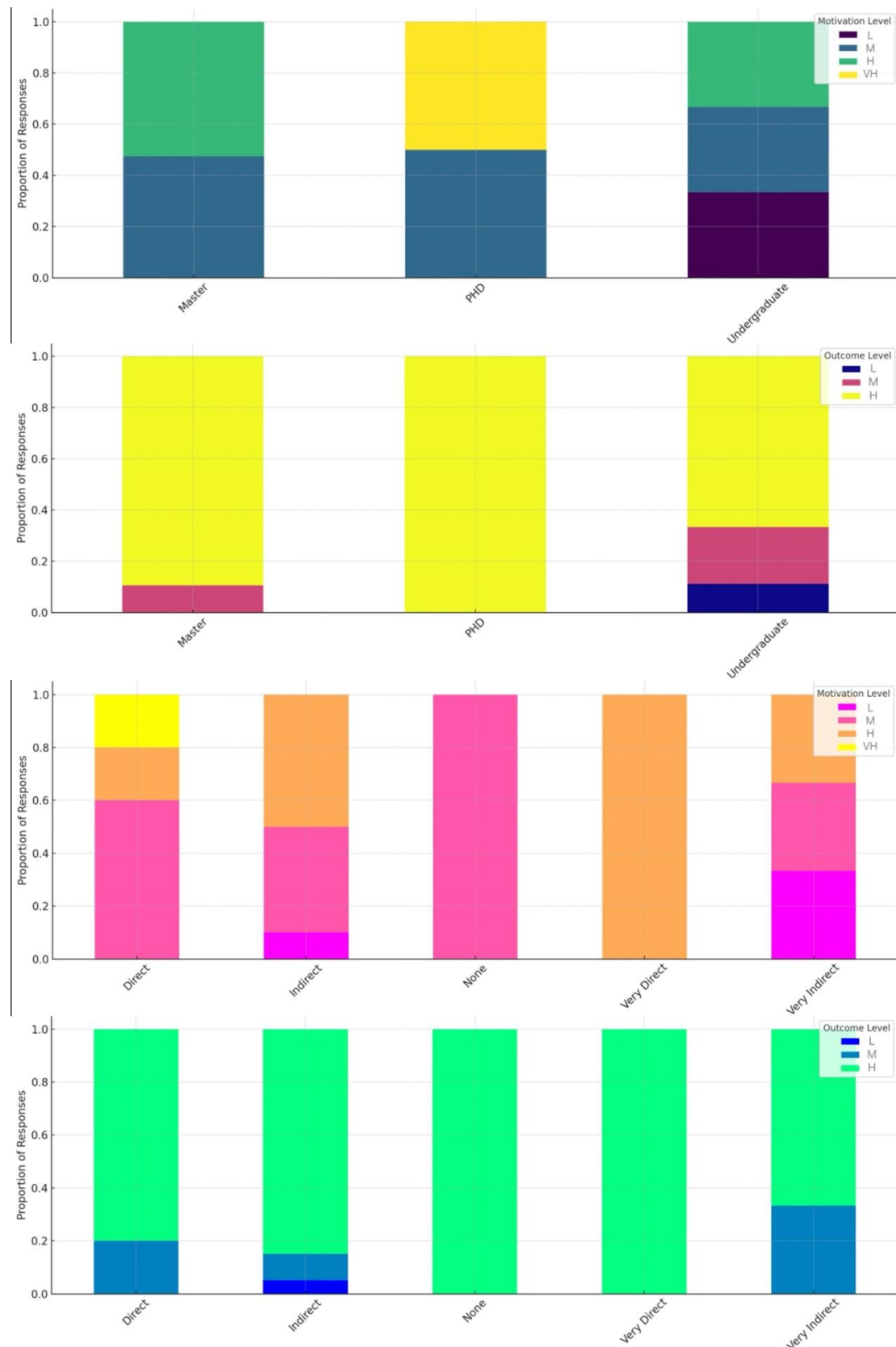


Fig. 2 Summary of Chinese Data

According to the bar charts(Figure 1 & Figure 2), it is obvious that parents of our Chinese



samples predominantly hold higher education degrees (Master's and PhD), while parents of the U.S. samples display more variability, with a mix of high school and bachelor's degrees. We also noticed that children of parents with higher education (Master's or PhD) would mostly exhibit higher motivation levels, especially among Chinese samples. In contrast, U.S. samples show greater variability in motivation, with less direct correlation to parental education levels.

From a cultural perspective, Chinese samples are primarily motivated by parental expectations and academic requirements. On the other hand, U.S. students display diverse motivations, including intrinsic interest and self-driven goals. Families of Chinese samples often use indirect methods such as enrolling children in tutoring programs, reflecting structured and resource-intensive support, in opposite to the U.S. samples' families, who show a wider variety of methods, including encouraging self-study and less structured involvement.

According to the outcomes of the interviews, from the perspective of parental education and support, both students benefited from parents with high educational backgrounds. However, Wendy's father's active teaching aligns with her higher motivation and earlier start in L2 learning (age 3), compared to Eason I, who started at age 7.

**Eason:** "I started learning English since Grade 2 (7 years old)...my dad has a master...and my mom has an undergraduate. They didn't really have any requirements on my English grades, besides signing me up for English tutoring classes in elementary school and middle school's TOEFL training camps."

**Wendy:** "I remember that I had English experiences since I was very young (about 3, confirmed), my dad most likely taught me by himself...both of my parents have graduate degrees, my dad has a PHD, and my mom has a master...they always have high standards on my grades."

## 5. Discussion

The diagrams shown in the result provides clear visual evidence supporting the hypotheses of this research, by proving all three of them with powerful motivations and outcomes on learning their second languages. These results are demonstrated by children whose families live in a more academically focused culture, whose parents have higher levels of college degrees, or who also have tough resilience and self-motivations.

By comparing bar charts of different parental education levels between the U.S. and Chinese samples' families, the results show a significant difference. Parents of Chinese samples generally had higher educational attainment (e.g., master's and PhD degrees), while U.S. samples' parental education levels were more variable, including high school and bachelor's degrees. Through linking these parental education backgrounds with outcomes demonstrated by children, there is a consistent exhibition of higher proficiency and stronger motivation in L2 learning from those whose parents have more advanced degrees. These findings validate the hypothesis that higher parental education correlates with stronger motivation and better outcomes. Advanced education provides parents greater resources and strategies to support their children's L2 learning, particularly in our Chinese samples' families.

Meanwhile, motivation bar charts are also showing distinct trends, that Chinese samples primarily derive motivation from parental expectations and structured educational goals, while U.S. samples show a more diverse range of motivators, including self-motivation and interest-driven learning. Statistics of teaching methods reveal that Chinese samples' families prioritize indirect teaching methods (e.g., enrolling in language courses), whereas U.S. samples' families emphasize independence and self-directed study. These cultural differences affirm the hypothesis that family cultural norms significantly shape teaching methods and, consequently, children's motivation. For example, the Confucian value of discipline and achievement in Chinese families drives structured



learning, while Western ideals of independence foster diverse learning approaches in the U.S.

From more of an individually focused perspective, box plots comparing individual motivation levels show notable variability among U.S. samples, indicating the impact of personal factors like intrinsic interest and self-regulation. In contrast, Chinese samples display more uniform motivation levels aligned with parental influence. Interviews highlight cases where personal factors diverged from parental influence. For example, interview with Wendy, who has strong parental involvement, exhibits higher motivation and outcomes compare to her classmate Eason, whose parents employed less direct teaching. The results confirm that personal traits like self-motivation and individual learning habits can potentially mediate parental and cultural influences. These factors are particularly significant in environments like the U.S., where parental guidance is less structured.

In connection with the questionnaire data of the samples, the interview results consistently showed that parents with higher education levels (Masters or PHD) correlated with stronger motivation and better outcomes for their children. This connection is evident in Sample II's higher family involvement and structured support. In addition, the interview also showed Chinese families often prioritize structured, indirect teaching methods, reflecting cultural values of discipline and academic excellence.

On the other hand, many of the classmates of the two participants displayed more variability in parental education levels in their questionnaires, from high school diplomas to bachelor's degrees. Since many of them were raised in less intense and traditional Chinese families, the less structured and more independent learning methods used by their parents reflect their cultural focus on independence, often lead to more diverse outcomes and motivation levels. Also, their data demonstrated greater variability in teaching methods, from self-study encouragement to tutors. This reflects a cultural emphasis on fostering independence, contrasting with the structured and intensive methods seen in typical Chinese families.

## 6. Conclusion

Generally saying, the questionnaires and interviews clearly illustrate that families of Chinese samples often employ more structured and resource-intensive teaching methods, comparing to U.S. samples. This difference significantly impacts motivation and outcomes, confirming the first research question. At the same time, the data reinforces that higher parental education enhances the effectiveness of language education. This is evident in the superior outcomes among children of highly educated parents, particularly among Chinese samples. Nonetheless, variabilities in motivation and outcomes among U.S. samples also emphasize the role of personal traits, supporting the hypothesis that these factors mediate the effects of parental and cultural influences. This comprehensive analysis validates the theoretical frameworks of Coleman's (1988, 1990, 1991) Social Theory of Family Capital and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, while providing actionable insights for improving L2 education across cultural contexts.

Nevertheless, it is responsible to say that this research does contain certain number of limitations in its studies, that we are unable to cover every detail of the related topics. The study involved a relatively small sample (60 students) from specific geographic and cultural contexts, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. The two cultural groups (China and the U.S.) were not very evenly diverse in terms of socio-economic and regional variations, potentially overlooking intra-group differences. In addition, motivation and learning outcomes were partially based on self-reported measures, which may be subject to biases such as social desirability or recall errors because of the descriptive analysis.

To effectively address the potential cost implications arising from these limitations, we recommend implementing several additional measures. For instance, incorporating larger and more

diverse samples spanning different geographic regions and socio-economic backgrounds would strengthen the generalizability of research outcomes; similarly, expanding the scope to include underrepresented cultural contexts (e.g., European or African family dynamics) could offer valuable insights. Such methodological enhancements would collectively provide a more comprehensive understanding of how cultural norms shape second language acquisition processes.

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