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Research Processes Exploring Children's Learning of Chinese as a Foreign Language in a School in South Africa

Norma R.A. Romm

University of South Africa (UNISA)

Abstract: In this article I offer my post-facto reflections on a study initiated in 2018 and finalized in 2019 with children from Grade 6 (ages between 11 and 12) at a school in Pretoria. The school provides Chinese as a Second Additional Language to non-Chinese speaking students (over and above teaching a First Additional Language as a core subject). I was part of a team of researchers (including Linpu Wang, Pan Lu, Norma Nel, Oupa Lebeloane and Susan Krog). We contributed in different ways to the project. Detail on historical background to the initiation of the project and a write up of some aspects of the results (pertaining to factors influencing learner acquisition) can be found in Nel and Krog (2021). In this article I provide further background explaining the gaps in the literature which this study sought to address, and how the specific methodology was geared to exploring with the participant children and their teacher their ways of learning, while also aiming to provide feedback that could be beneficial for them. I explain the significance of the study in view of the fact that very few studies have been conducted on experiences of learning of Chinese as a Foreign Language in the context of Africa. Furthermore, most studies of teaching and learning of Chinese have been with adults and with adults whose language with which they are most familiar is English. In the school in question although English was the language of instruction, learners did not necessarily speak English at home – various African languages (sometimes more than one) were mentioned by learners as being spoken, sometimes together with English.

Key words: Chinese Language in Africa, Learning Chinese at School Level, Relationality, Cultural Resonance.

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1. Introduction

A number of authors have pointed to the promotion by various governments in Africa of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) to be learned at school level (optional or compulsory) due to the widespread influence of China in the global economy. Xu (2023a, p. 2) indicates in this regard that "the national spread of Chinese throughout

Africa has continued unabated in recent years". She refers, for instance, to

> Uganda's move to make Chinese a compulsory subject of its high school curriculum in 2018 [which] signals how integral the Chinese language is becoming to its society – as does the recent decision of Kenya and South Africa to introduce Chinese as an optional language course in public schools" (Eke, 2021). (Xu, 2023a, p. 2)

Xu's statement is supported by Julius Jwan, CEO of the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), who expressed in an interview (2019) that: "The place of China in the world economy has also grown to be so strong that Kenya stands to benefit if its citizens can understand Mandarin" (see Adeoye & Mukhtar, 2019). In the South African context, at school level Mandarin was introduced in schools as a Second Additional language (SAL) in 2015 over and above choices of First Additional Languages, starting from Grade 4 upwards (DBE, 2015).

A presentation in 2020 on u-tube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qS6ce0VplXw) offers more detail on how African governments are increasingly encouraging the learning of Mandarin at school level. The presenter refers to the introduction of Mandarin in schools, and also refers to China being a favored destination for students who wish to further their studies beyond the school level. Xu (2023b) offers an account of these latter students' motivation as not being purely instrumental (that is, good for business). She indicates, based on her interviews with a sample of students, that many of them were also motivated to become "global citizens serving a common good in the process". As she puts it:

> Their narratives highlight the previously neglected relevance of international higher education and Chinese language learning to the process of global citizenship education. The participants in this study displayed positive dispositions of global citizenship such as an in-depth understanding of the world, promoting hargramony [sic] and contributing to the common good. (2023b, p. 1)

While various initiatives have been taking place across Africa (and beyond) to encourage the learning of Chinese as a foreign language at primary school, high school or university level, Chan, Woore, Molway and Mutton indicate in their scoping review (2022) that there has been little attention in the research literature to *school-level* CFL across the globe. Often the studies of CFL are directed to understanding how *university-level* students or other adults approach their learning. As they state:

> Over the past 30 years, 14,479 CFL learners took part in the reviewed research all told, spread across multiple countries and educational levels. However, because of the predominance of studies investigating adults or university students, only a small proportion of these participants were at school level: in total, 2519 secondary and primary students took part, or just 17% of the total. (Chan et al., 2022, p. 13)

Chan et al.'s scoping review also spotlighted that:

> Of the 289 articles included in our review, the USA has produced the highest number (36%). China comes second (16%) and the UK third (8%). Other CFL research-active jurisdictions include Taiwan (7%), Australia (5%) and Hong Kong (5%). Adding together the USA, the UK, Australia, Ireland, Canada and New Zealand, the English-speaking world has contributed to half the total outputs. (n = 144 or 50%). (p. 11)

They note that of the 11 "multiple countries" studies in their review, only a fraction included Africa (with Egypt as a country being included).

As it happens, Chan et al.'s scoping review did not feature Wang and Lemmer's study undertaken in South Africa (2015). Wang and Lemmer undertook an investigation of CFL teaching of university-level students at four South African universities. They indicate by way of introduction that:

> China's global position has led to a growing demand for Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) worldwide. This development is observable in South Africa where four universities offer CFL courses. However, due to the absence of a substantial Chinese-speaking community and related linguistic resources, South African students study CFL in an isolated language environment with limited communicative opportunities. (2015, p. 76)

Wang and Lemmer argue that the limitation of communication opportunities for these university-level students affected their language acquisition.

Chan et al.'s s scoping review also did not pick up the multiple-country study reported upon by Nel, Zhou, Krog and Lebeloane (2019), which compared teaching of Chinese at a selected primary school in China with a selected school in South Africa. However, the examples offered by Wang and Lemmer (2015) and by Nel et al. (2019) as undertaken in South Africa do not alter Chan et al.'s point that very few studies appear to have been undertaken in Africa and also that a large majority of participants in the reviewed studies were adults.

An(other) exception to the studies focusing on *adult* CFL learning is the study by Xu and Stahl who examined a school in Australia (where Xu was a teacher-researcher) with a focus furthermore on non-technical aspects of language acquisition. They indicate that part of the discourse around learning Chinese in Australia as elsewhere, is that it is technically very difficult – as is claimed by authors such as McDonald (2013), Orton (2016), Hao & Li (2024). They contend that

> the notion of Chinese as a difficult subject to learn is deeply entrenched in Australian society … . Furthermore, as Cruickshank and Tsung (2011) note, the learning activities developed in the teaching of Chinese, such as repetitive tracing Chinese characters, neither attend to the particular emotional needs of young, school-based students, nor guarantee classroom cooperation or compliance. (2023, p. 3)

In order to undercut this discourse – which goes hand in hand with a way of teaching the language by concentrating on technical difficulties – Xu and Stahl argue that the *supportive relations with peers and educators* can make a difference to how the language learning is experienced by young students (and indeed by others). Xu and Stahl suggest that it is important to pay attention to the *relations* that enable the learning to be experienced as an interesting and enjoyable process rather than being seen as problematic. They indicate that their paper is intended to "serve as a counter-discourse to more technical and linguistic driven conceptions … that dominate language education and research" (p. 3). Their contention regarding the dominant focus on technical challenges of learners and on research exploring these aspects of CFL is consistent with the literature review organized by Yao, Zhang, & Shen (2022), who point out that:

> During the preceding two decades, most studies involving CSL/CFL education have focused on language pedagogy … , Chinese character, phonetic, lexical, and grammatical learning … , language testing … , and teacher development … , while affective factors such as attitudes, motivation, beliefs, and anxiety have not received adequate attention (Yu, 2010). (Yao, Zhang, & Shen, 2022, p. 2)

Echoing this concern, Jacobs and McCafferty (2006, p. 25) argue that enhancement of motivation and supportive anxiety-reducing activities can occur in practice in the relations that become developed with peers and with the teacher, thus enhancing prospects of students' learning.

Notably, the article mentioned above by Nel and Krog (2021) regarding the research at the primary school in South Africa (which reported upon the same study on which I now offer my further reflections), did not focus *only* on technical aspects of the learning processes being implemented at the school. Nevertheless, Nel and Krog's article is entitled "Factors Influencing the Acquisition of Mandarin Chinese as a Second Additional Language Focusing on Phonetics". This indicates their primary attention to the phonetics in their write-up of the project. I focus in this article more strongly on *how the methodology which our team employed was able to draw out aspects other than how the students indicated that they were getting to grips with the language on a technical level*. My article highlights furthermore how as a team we offered feedback to the learners and to the teacher regarding the importance of supportive relations with peers and with the teacher (as indeed was being encouraged by the teacher so as to make the learners feel at ease and so as to enjoy the learning experience). We did however, at our feedback session for learners and the teacher, offer some technical input which sprang from the quantitative aspects of the study. In the section below I outline the methodology.

2. Methodology and Research Approach

The study involved a mix of methods, with a sequential design: To start with, a VARK questionnaire (http://vark-learn.com) was administered to a sample of 19 Grade 6 non-Chinese speaking learners (out of 34 such learners overall in Grade 6); followed by interviews of about 20 minutes each with the 19 learners and a more in-depth interview with the teacher; in turn followed (several months later) by a reading check (where the same 19

learners were asked to read a short Chinese text to us in the form of a story); the display of a Pinyin table (which the learners which asked to read out); and memory of a song (where the learners were asked to sing a specific song which was played to them). (The latter three exercises were done in one session and took about 15 minutes altogether with each learner.)

For our access to the learners, we followed the protocol of seeking consent from parents and assent from learners for participating in the various phases of the study – one parent did not wish her child to participate and hence from an initial sample of 20 learners we had 19 learners who participated. And for the teacher, we also explained orally and in written form what her participation would involve, namely an in-depth interview with her of about an hour and a half.

As part of the VARK administration with the learners, we made it clear to them (in a session in the school hall) that there were of course no right and wrong answers and that we were simply seeking considerations from them about their learning style (we also had added an additional question not normally asked in VARK questionnaires – regarding their self-reported understanding of their musical propensities, which we had thought may be relevant to the study). Furthermore, as far as the interviews went, when we engaged directly with the learners during the interviews, we chose our words carefully at the beginning of the interview and throughout so as to again emphasize that there were no right or wrong answers. We wanted them to feel at ease in answering our questions so that we could learn from them about how they were experiencing their learning of CFL, while they were invited to reflect on the questions that we were asking.

At all stages of the project (including in the three mini-exercises towards the end of the project), we explained to the learners (and kept re-iterating) that we were grateful to them for sharing their experiences with us and that we hoped they would enjoy participating in the project and also might learn from our feedback. We considered that this was part of our ethical engagement with them. Interestingly, a question that was asked by a learner during the feedback session at the end of the project was: “What was the purpose of the VARK questionnaire?”. This gave us the opportunity to explain in more detail what it was meant to achieve and also to clarify that our data too showed up there is no particular learning style that contributes to a better learning experience in getting to grips with CFL. (See Section 3 for more detail.)

It is worth mentioning here already that when offering our feedback to learners (and to their teacher as well as to the head teacher) we did highlight as part of our presentation what the quantitative components of the study showed up as being experienced as particularly challenging. For instance, we pointed to the specific tone that the majority of learners were finding most confusing. (Chinese is a tonal language with four tones). The study of the Pinyin table and reading exercise indicated that amongst all the learners taken as a whole, tone 3 tended to be mistakenly pronounced as tone 1 (i.e., 73.6 % of the time, tone 3 was pronounced wrongly as tone 1). During our feedback session, we suggested that more attention to this could be cultivated as a skill. We felt that our feedback on this could benefit learners, teacher and head teacher who could bear this in mind (and therefore

become more conscious of where the main errors were occurring).

What I wish to highlight in this article is the importance of organizing for feedback as part of an ethical commitment to "give back" to research participants so that they would not feel that we were there simply to extract data from them (as in the extractive practices described, for example, by Spyrou, 2023). This (ethical) aspect of *relations between researchers and participants* does not feature as a rule in articles on CFS (as noted by Chan et al., 2022; Xu & Stahl, 2023). The articles do not generally highlight ethical commitments of researchers to nurture reciprocal relations with research participants, which is a feature of the research process foregrounded as important by many Indigenous scholars and adherents from various parts of the globe (e.g., Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Dube, Ndwandwe & Ngulube, 2013; Chilisa, 2020; Chilisa & Phatshwane, 2022; Omodan, 2025). Readers can consult Romm (2018, 2020) for a critique of the practice of simply following the USA-commissioned Belmont report's (1979) ethical guidelines, without committing to practising a relational stance from which all parties can benefit through and during the research process. Hwang and Roth, (2005) and Roth (2018) also point to this ethical requirement.

In the case of our research conducted at the South African school, we were "outsider" researchers (not part of the school); but at the same time as a team we were committed to making a positive input to the participants "on the spot" via our research – and to showing that we cared that the research could be experienced as beneficial to the immediate beneficiaries (in this case the teacher, head teacher and learners. (All Grade 6 non-Chinese speaking learners attended our feedback session – and not only the sampled learners). Our ethical stance, that is, our position as a whole from which the research sprung, was linked to our commitment to try to be helpful – we had all discussed this commitment prior to embarking on the research.

We also wanted the participant learners to find their involvement in the project to be a worthwhile experience for them as they engaged with our questions. This was expressed by the primary facilitator of the interviews (Norma Nel) and myself in various ways during the interview process. For example, the primary facilitator (F) stated in the beginning of each interview, words that tried to make the participant feel at ease in reflecting upon and sharing their understandings with us. Below I offer four examples of the beginning and endings of the interviews:

a) **Example 1** (with a male student who indicated in an answer to one of our questions that he spoke Xhosa and English at home – but mainly English):

The primary facilitator below is marked by the letter F, and the learner by the letter L. I am marked as NR (standing for Norma Romm). The interview began as follows:
Addressing the student by his first name (here with the letter L), the facilitator stated:
F: I want you to relax. Will you be able to do that?
L: Yes.

F: Yes and just enjoy it okay. There are no right and wrong answers. We are definitely not going to judge what you say, and if you feel that you had enough of us, tell us, and if you feel uncomfortable, you can tell us that you want to go'.

Having asked all our questions (mainly via the primary facilitator, F), I asked:

NR [me]: Excellent. Is there anything you think we should have asked you that we didn't think about asking?

L: Mm, no.

And finally, after some conversation where the learner volunteered to tell us about a Chinese festival that he had attended the week before and had enjoyed, I asked:

NR: Okay, and how did you experience the interaction with us today?

L: It was fine.

NR: Fine or fun.

L: It was fun.

F: Fun

L: Because the questions are showing you like trying to understand.

F: Thanks so much [addressing him by his name].

NR: Thank you very much.

F: We learned from you.

b) **Example 2**: This example of extracts of conversation comes from a female learner who indicated during the course of the interview that she spoke English at home. The interview proceeded thus:

F: We have explained everything to you, so you are quite comfortable?

L: Ja.

F: And you need only to be relaxed. There are no right and wrong answers. If you feel like pulling out because you are feeling uncomfortable, you must tell us.

L: I am fine.

This interview ended with the sequence:

F: [Mentioning first name of learner], it was great speaking to you.

NR: Tell me something, is there something else you think we might have asked you that we didn't think to ask, something you want to share with us?

L: No, you covered everything.

F: You mean there is nothing else I can ask you.

L: Everything I thought of you guys asked me.

F: That is great, thanks very much.

NR: How did you experience this interaction with us?

L: I thought it was very, I thought it was like actually very nice because it is not often when I get to tell people like how you do things in Chinese and it is very special to tell people who don't know. I don't normally tell people, so

I think that is wonderful.

NR: Great.

c) **Example 3** (with a female learner who indicated in the course of the interview that she spoke Zulu, Sotho and English at home):

F: You know what it is all about, we have explained it to you, do you remember in the hall?

L: Yes.

F: That it is research, and that there are no right, there are no wrong answers. We want you just to be relaxed and if you feel that you are feeling uncomfortable, you wouldn't like to continue with interview, you are welcome to withdraw. So, tell me how do I pronounce your name?

L: [Indicates first name].

F: Oh [repeating the name?]

L: Yes.

F: And then your second name is?

L: [Mentions second name]

F: [Speaking the name], am I pronouncing it correctly?

L: You are trying, that is fine.

The interview ended with:

F: Okay. Thank you so much [First name of learner]

NR: Oh no, wait a second, is there anything you think that we could've asked you that we didn't think of, that is important for us to know about your experience of learning Chinese?

L: Well, not really because actually I was quite nervous to come here to the office.

F: Really.

NR: Okay.

L: To answer the questions, but this was actually great.

NR: It was great. Oh that is good. Why did you find it great? You just enjoyed talking to us?

L: Yes.

NR: Right, we enjoyed talking to you. Thanks very much.

F: Thanks [Name of learner], but there are some other activities we are going to do you which is even more enjoyable, you will see. We would like you to read to us, just a short little piece and a singing activity, I am sure you can sing.

NR: And even if you can't it doesn't matter.

F: Because I can't sing. Thanks so much [Name of learner].

d) **Example 4** (with a male learner who spoke Xhosa at home).

F: Remember what we mentioned in the hall with all the learners participating in this research: there are no right answers, there are no wrong answers. And also if ever you feel like that you are uncomfortable or something and

if don't want to continue, you are welcome to just tell us. Okay.

L: Yes ma'am.

NR: And if there is anything we ask you and you think you should have asked something more, you will let us know that. If there is something important that we need to know.

L: Yes ma'am.

And towards the end of the interview:

NR: Is there anything you want to add to what we have been asking you?

L: No, I think that is all.

F: Do you enjoy learning Mandarin?

L: Yes, I do enjoy learning Mandarin.

F: Okay. Thanks so much.

The above samples offer a glimpse of how we interacted with the learners during the interview and how we started off trying to make them feel at ease, but also telling them if they wished to leave, they were not obligated to stay. (None of them wanted to leave!) And at the end of each interview, we asked if they felt that we had omitted to ask something important and we also asked (time permitting) how they had experienced the interview.

For the teacher (who indicated during the course of the interview that she hailed from Taiwan, but had studied for a post graduate qualification in education at a South African university), we began the interview with:

NR: You must have been teaching them well because the kids are enthusiastic. You know when we say what do you enjoy most, they say, we like it when the teacher does this, we like it that she does that. So they are enjoying your teaching.

Teacher: Thank you so much.

F: Listen [First name of teacher] and the questions we ask you, there are no right answers, there is nothing wrong.

Teacher: Okay.

F: You just answer how you feel.

Teacher: Okay.

NR: And these questions come from a combination of Pan Lu in China.

Teacher: Ah.

NR: He sent us some rough questions. And we added a few and also [the head teacher] added some. So it is a combination of things we are asking you. You might not even find them all relevant, but ….

F: I might even skip some of them.

NR: We will think. We might still go through it and see which ones, but at the end you can also tell us if you think if there is something we should have asked, which we didn't.

Teacher: Okay.

NR: Because we may be missing something that you think is important.

Teacher: I understand.

NR: Good.

… .

And the interview ended with the following sequence:

Teacher: … . And the other way is also like, so we must apply these learning options.

F: Because each one of us learn differently.

NR: So you are catering for different learning styles. I think you mean a bit individual, that is it is not that you treat everybody the same. You know that different people may learn differently; so you are giving lots of options.

Teacher: That's right. Facilitate their learning.

NR: Yes, you facilitate their learning.

F: Thanks so much. I am sorry we took so much time.

NR: It has taken an hour and a half. We learned a lot from you. Do you think you learned something?

Teacher: Yes.

NR: What did you learn?

Teacher: I have learned a lot. You know what they respond and then you find out, in their learning process.

F: What we are going to do next year, we are going to come and give a presentation here at the school. We are going to come and give you feedback, what we found and also not only to the children but also to the teachers. So they can see.

Teacher: So that would be the most helpful to us.

F: And then the teachers and the children together.

NR: It will be together.

F: Yes. So we are going to do that next year, we are going to make a presentation about that, We have sent all that [quantitative] data to Dr Pan Lu and he will do the analysis and so on and come back here and together we will sit and bring the findings and show you what we have done.

Teacher: Thank you so much.

In summary, the teacher indicated to us during the interview that she was responsive to the learners' different learning styles and encouraged them to develop their own styles, while she also encouraged co-operative/group learning so that they could learn in conjunction with their peers. Many students during the interviews gave very positive statements regarding her relations with them and how she made them feel at ease and did not chide them when they made mistakes. They also indicated that they did at times try to speak Chinese outside the classroom with their (non-Chinese speaking) peers, in order to learn from each other.

In the next section, I report on the power point presentation which we constructed for the benefit of all the Grade 6 learners (not only the sampled ones) and their teacher, with the head teacher also present.

3. The Feedback Session

For the purposes of offering our feedback – which had been arranged to take about two hours – a power point presentation was prepared by Norma Nel and myself, based partly on the quantitative analyses that had been

created by Pan Lu. During the power point presentation, different members of our team reminded the participants how we had designed the project to investigate with the learners and their teacher their experiences of the learning (and teaching) of CFL. We indicated that VARK is a common tool used not only in the context of CFL, but in many spheres of learning. We also indicated that along with the standard questions used in VARK questionnaires, we added the ones on musical ability as Pan Lu had considered that possibly self-reported musical ability may be related to phonetic performance. (As it happened, the data as analyzed did not show up any correlations between learners *learning style* and their performances; however, the added questions in our VARK questionnaire relating to self-reported musical propensity, indicated that students who perceived themselves as musical performed slightly better than others in reading the Pinyin table.)

We pointed out that as far as our beginning the study with the VARK questionnaire was concerned, this was in order to signal via the questionnaire (albeit not referring to this explicitly) that different learning style preferences have been located in the educational field: We mentioned that these are:

V: Visual preference

A: Aural preference

R: Read/write preference

K: Kinesthetic

We remarked that we had hoped that this questionnaire could help prepare them for answering freely our questions during the interview phase of the project about how they felt they were best learning. We reminded them that during the interviews we were asking them to think (more) consciously about this – that is, what worked for them as learning aids. For example, a person (who was kinetically inclined) shared with us how she made movements to help her to remember the different Chinese characters: she enjoyed doing the movements; so her learning became enjoyable. We expressed that many students shared with us that the teacher enabled them to experiment creatively with learning approaches. They also were grateful that the teacher did not chide them when they made mistakes, but encouraged them to try again! By making points such as these during the presentation we were reminding the teacher (and head teacher) that making the learners feel at ease was experienced as helpful for their learning. (This is also expressed by various authors in the literature, for example, in the article by Xu and Stahl, 2023, which offers a relational theoretical lens, highlighting the importance of supportive human relations between peers and between learners and their teacher(s).)

We showed that as far as quantitative analysis went, Pan Lu had found no correlation from examining the VARK *learning style preferences* (as self-reported by each student) compared with their *level of accuracy* in their reading the story text, or the Pinyin table, or their memorizing correctly the song that we had played to them. This supports the notion that there is no one “best” learning approach to pursue.

When we invited questions from the audience, one learner wanted to know more about VARK as a tool in general. We stated that it was not a test in any way, but just helps a person to become more aware of their specific preferences – even though a person may not necessarily exhibit only one way of learning and can try out different

modes. The score is a score indicating a *preference,* but other modes of learning can also be employed if a learner feels that that also enhances their learning.

Another learner wanted to know what our interest in the research was. We indicated that by engaging with them and asking our specific questions, we were coming to know more about CFL from them and we also may have been helping them to reflect more consciously on how they are learning. In addition, their teacher was also prompted during our interview to reflect on her relations with the learners. Also, we hoped that our feedback (as presented in the session) could be useful for them. Finally, we indicated that we planned to write up articles where we would share some insights gleaned from the study for wider audiences (such as other teachers).

Further to the power point event, I continued liaising with the teacher on facebook, thanking her again for her time and mentioning to her (again) that her friendly and approachable relations with the students were appreciated by them and that this was important as part of their learning. She thanked me for this further input.

I now share with readers of this article as part of my articulating a relational theoretical lens as applied to this study, some deliberations of Mertens and Chilisa (2024). They point to the similarities between the relational orientation written into ancient East Asian cultural scripts as well as African cultural adages, such as the Ubuntu adage (translated into English): "I am because we are". This adage expresses that we can be considered as being "selves-in-relation". Mertens and Chilisa refer, for example, to, Nisbett (2003), whom they state:

> differentiates between Anglo Western thought that organizes the world in categories, [and] values individualism, … from the Eastern world, especially East Asia, where the world is organized in relationships and there is a tendency to strive towards societal harmony. (2004, p. 2)

They suggest that:

> Eastern thought is to some extent similar to African thought and world view. The African world view is dominated by an I/We relationship. African thought comes from the African adage: I am because we are. This thought process views relations … as the pillar of human existence. (2024, p. 2)

This would mean that the manifestation of an emotionally supportive learning context that I have inferred from my interpretations of some of the learners' statements, and from the orientation of the teacher in relation to her learners, as well as the stance that we as researchers adopted in our relations with the research participants, can be regarded as *culturally resonant* with the research participants. This is not to say that a sense of being-in-relation cannot also be nurtured in other contexts in other parts of the world. Indeed, as I indicated above, Xu and Stahl (2023) have experimented with nurturing this orientation in the context of Australia. And others to have pointed to the value of relational connections in different contexts (e.g., Jacobs & McCafferty, 2006).

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the results of the VARK questionnaire compared with the other quantitative data indicated that no matter what learning style learners seemed to prefer was not linked to their phonetic propensities (as

determined through the analysis of their reading of a text, a Pinyin table, and a musical exercise). This reinforced the idea (for learners and teacher) that whatever style of learning learners were more comfortable with, should be accommodated in the class, so that the teacher would be responsive to the needs. The teacher had mentioned in our interview with her that this was important to her, as she had studied this when doing a post graduate certificate course in teaching at a South African university: That is, she had learned about learner-centred teaching, which was part of the curriculum. She indicated to us towards the end of our interview with her that she had now further understood (via her reflections during the interview in relation to our questions) more about how she was being responsive to the various learners, taking into account their styles of learning. And she learned from us (via our mentioning this to her during our interview with her) that her nurturing of "good relations" with the learners and being approachable to them, as well as her encouraging co-operative learning, were all a crucial part of the learners' learning experience. Meanwhile from the learners' point of view, they were reminded via our feedback that they could confidently pursue their own preferred learning styles which they had shared with us via the VARK questionnaire and the interviews, but that this did not preclude trying out new approaches to learning too, and also learning in conjunction with their peers.

From a theoretical point of view, I have invoked what can be called a relational theoretic lens as a way of explaining how we went about the research process as an ethical endeavor; and also how I used this lens to interpret some of the expressions of the learners and of the teacher too regarding their ways of interacting with each other and with the teacher. This is a lens used by many authors advocating an Indigenous research paradigm as well as by others who consider it important to conduct the research process to develop reciprocal relationships with the participants who contribute to the study, and to encourage such relationships all round.

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Corresponding Author: Norma R.A. Romm, University of South Africa (UNISA).

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