

Analysis of Factors Influencing the Mandarin Proficiency of Ethnic Minority College Students

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on determining the factors that influence Mandarin proficiency of ethnic minority college students of Hulunbuir University in border minority areas of China. We used questionnaire to collect multi-dimensional data including gender, living environment, family language environment, parents' Mandarin proficiency, parents' academic qualifications, regional differences and parents' occupations. Descriptive statistics, cross-contingency and chi-square tests were used to analyze the data and reveal the key factors affecting Mandarin proficiency. The results show that girls' Mandarin proficiency is generally better than that of boys ($\chi^2 = 25, p < 0.01$), and students from cities and flag counties perform better in Mandarin, compared to students from rural and pastoral areas ($\chi^2 = 27, p < 0.05$). Family language environment ($\chi^2 = 38, p < 0.01$), Mandarin proficiency ($\chi^2 = 37, p < 0.05$), occupation and academic qualifications of parents and regional background all significantly affect students' Mandarin proficiency ($\chi^2 = 40.8, p < 0.01$). Based on these findings, this study recommends the following measures to improve Mandarin education: increase investment in Mandarin education in minority areas, optimize the language learning environment, encourage parents to improve their Mandarin proficiency, and carry out more Mandarin training and practice activities in schools, while develop personalized teaching strategies for students from different backgrounds.

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the Chinese national language, the popularity and quality of Mandarin are directly related to the development of the national language and writing industry. It plays an important role in enhancing the cultural identity of ethnic regions and promoting

regional development (Chen, 2021, p.164). It is also an important foundation for achieving national unity, social harmony and economic development. In recent years, driven by the national language policy, Mandarin education in ethnic minority areas has received unprecedented attention. According to the China's official website, the national Mandarin popularization rate is expected to reach 85% by 2025, which shows the importance of Mandarin promotion at the national level.

With the implementation of the National Standard Spoken and Written Language Law, efforts to promote and popularize Mandarin as the national standard language in ethnic minority areas have been increasing. Popularizing the national standard language helps to rationally allocate educational resources and is an important way to achieve educational equity (Chen et al., 2020, p.79). Studies have shown that Mandarin education is of great significance in improving the communication skills of residents in ethnic minority areas, promoting social interaction, and maintaining national unity and ethnic unity (Official website of the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China). In ethnic minority areas, improving Mandarin proficiency has become a focus of educational work, and accurately analyzing the factors affecting Mandarin proficiency is an important basis for promoting and popularizing the national standard language. Studies have found that family language management, parents' Mandarin proficiency, and academic qualifications are also considered to be important factors affecting children's Mandarin proficiency (Chang, 2021, p.4). In the process of promoting and popularizing Putonghua in ethnic minority areas, the language environment constitutes a major constraint (Wang, 2019, p.3). Guo Didi et al. pointed out in the study on the current situation of language use and countermeasures of the Kyrgyz in Xinjiang that the language use of the Kyrgyz presents different states in terms of occasions, age, and education level, and that the differences between the multiple corpuscular modes are more complicated (Guo Didi et al., 2019, p. 2).

Previous studies have focused more on the practicality and instrumentality of Mandarin promotion, and have not explored in depth the impact that Mandarin education may have on the language and culture of ethnic minorities. At the same time, the research methods are mostly based on qualitative analysis, lacking large-scale empirical data support, and there are large differences in research samples and research objects, especially lacking in-depth analysis based on empirical data from border ethnic minority areas. However, due to the influence of historical, geographical, cultural and other factors, there is still much room for improvement in the Mandarin level of college students in ethnic minority areas. Therefore, conducting targeted research in specific areas and accurately analyzing the differences in Mandarin

proficiency of students in ethnic minority areas can provide basic data and firm reference for the improvement of the promotion and popularization of Mandarin teaching in ethnic minority areas. Based on this, this paper selects Hulunbuir University, a university in China's border ethnic minority area, as the research object, and explores the main factors affecting the Mandarin proficiency of ethnic minority college students from different dimensions such as gender, living environment, family language environment, parents' Mandarin proficiency, parents' academic qualifications, regional differences, and parents' occupations, so as to provide effective solutions and methods for the promotion and popularization of the learning and teaching of the national language in ethnic minority areas.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study takes all the ethnic minority college students on campus as the target population. According to the sampling experience rule, a sample size of 20% is drawn from the population. A total of 300 questionnaires are distributed. After eliminating invalid data, 294 valid samples are collected, and the effective recovery rate is 98%. This is a survey with high recovery rate and efficiency, and has high credibility collecting and analyzing quantitative data on the Mandarin level of minority college students, including Mandarin level, Chinese college entrance examination scores, gender, living environment, family language management, parents' Mandarin proficiency, parents' academic qualifications, regional differences, personal learning attitudes and other dimensions.

We performed descriptive statistical analysis, cross-column analysis and chi-square test to analyze our data to verify the research hypothesis and reveal the relationship between different factors and Mandarin level. For data analysis, we mainly used IBM SPSS Statistics26.0 and Excel2019 statistical analysis software.

For the grade standard of mandarin proficiency test, Mandarin Proficiency Test grades are divided into three classes and six levels, i.e., Classes I, II and III, and each class is further divided into two levels, A and B, as follows (Table 1):

Table 1. Evaluation Criteria for Mandarin Proficiency Grade. (Putonghua and Character Application Training and Testing Center of the State Language Commission (SLC), 2021)

Mandarin class level	Evaluation criteria	Exam scores
First Class A	When reading aloud and having free conversation, the pronunciation is clear, the words and grammar are accurate, the intonation is natural, and the expression is fluent.	97-100
First Class B	When reading aloud and having free conversation, the pronunciation is clear, the words and grammar are accurate, the intonation is natural,	92-96.99

	and the expression is fluent with occasional mistakes in pronunciation and intonation.	
Second Class A	When reading aloud and having free conversation, the pronunciation and rhythms is basically clear, the intonation is natural, the expression is fluent, a few difficult sounds are sometimes incorrect, and there are very few errors in words and grammar.	87-91.99
Second Class B	When reading aloud and having free conversation, individual tonal values are inaccurate, pronunciation and rhymes is not clear, there are more mistakes in difficult sounds, dialectal intonation is not obvious, and there are cases of using dialectal words and grammar.	80-86.99
Third Class A	When reading aloud and having free conversation, there are many errors in the pronunciation and rhythms, difficult sounds are out of the common range, most of the tonal values of tones are inaccurate, dialectal intonation is more obvious, and there are lapses in the use of words and dialectal grammar.	70-79.99
Third Class B	When reading aloud and having free conversation, there are more errors in the pronunciation and tones, dialectal features are prominent, dialectal intonation is obvious, there are more errors in words and grammar, and it is hard for outsiders to understand him/her.	60-69.99

According to the grade standard of the Mandarin proficiency test, this study takes the Second-Class A level as the reference benchmark and analyzes it in depth from multiple dimensions.

Theoretical hypothesis:

- (1) The Mandarin proficiency of ethnic minority female students is significantly higher than the Mandarin proficiency of ethnic minority male students in the university.
- (2) Family language management has a significant impact on students' Mandarin proficiency.
- (3) The Chinese language scores in college entrance examination have little impact on college students' Mandarin proficiency, while Mandarin training during college has a greater impact on students' Mandarin proficiency.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In language learning, people habitually assume that female students perform better than males, just as males are believed to perform better than females in science (Lan, 2012, p. 141). Moreover, it is also generally believed that students from cities have more opportunities to learn Mandarin or that their Mandarin level is undoubtedly better than that of students from rural and pastoral areas. Family language management, parents' Mandarin proficiency and academic qualifications are also considered to be important factors affecting children's Mandarin level (Chang, 2021, p. 2).

Cross analysis of key results of research data

Gender difference analysis: From the analysis results in Table 2, it can be seen that 20.29% of the male students in the test sample and 52.44% of the female students have second-level Mandarin proficiency. There are significant differences in the Mandarin proficiency of students of different genders ($\chi^2 = 25, p < 0.01$).

Table 2. Differences in Mandarin Proficiency Among Students of Different Genders

		Gender		Total	χ^2	<i>p</i>
		Male	Female			
Mandarin level	Second Class B	51(73.913%)	101(44.889%)	152	25	***
	Second Class A	14(20.29%)	118(52.444%)	132		
	Not certified	2(2.899%)	2(0.889%)	4		
	Third Class A	2(2.899%)	2(0.889%)	4		
	First Class B	0(0.0%)	1(0.444%)	1		
	First Class A	0(0.0%)	1(0.444%)	1		
Total		69	225	294		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Middle school is an important period for the formation of students' language ability (Chen, 2022, p. 32). Chinese learning results usually reflect students' language expression, text comprehension, literary appreciation and other abilities. These abilities, to a certain extent, lay the foundation for students' future Mandarin learning. To this end, we tested students' Chinese language scores in college entrance examination and Mandarin levels and obtained the following results (Table 3):

Table 3. Differences Between Chinese Language Scores in College Entrance Examination and Mandarin Proficiency

		Chinese Language Score in College Entrance Examination						Total	χ^2	<i>p</i>
		120-129	100-109	130 points or more	Below 90 points	90-99	110-119			
Mandarin level	Second Class B	24 (40.68%)	44 (63.77%)	12 (30.0%)	12 (66.67%)	20 (60.61%)	40 (53.33%)	152	32	NS
	Second Class A	32 (54.24%)	23 (33.33%)	26 (65.0%)	6 (33.33%)	13 (39.40%)	32 (42.67%)	132		
	Not certified	2 (3.39%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.33%)	4		
	Third Class A	1 (1.70%)	1 (1.45%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2 (2.67%)	4		
	First Class B	0 (0.0%)	1 (1.45%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1		
	First Class A	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (2.5%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1		
Total			69	40	18	33	75	294		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$, NS = non-significant

From the analysis results in Table 3, it can be seen that there is no significant difference between the Chinese language scores of the college entrance examination and the students' Mandarin level ($\chi^2 = 32, p = 0.17$). The Chinese language test of the College Entrance Examination mainly measures students' writing (test-based) ability, while the Mandarin level should not only measure the students' Chinese writing (test-based) ability, but also pay more attention to their oral expression ability. Therefore, it can be considered that the writing (test-based) ability of the College Entrance Examination is more important than the Mandarin level and has no significant effect on students' Mandarin proficiency.

The educational environment at the middle school level, especially the quality of Chinese teaching, will also affect students' Mandarin proficiency. High-quality Chinese education can provide students with a better language learning environment. However, some studies have shown that although there is a certain correlation between middle school Chinese language learning performance and Mandarin proficiency, this correlation is not absolute. Mandarin proficiency is also affected by family language environment, regional dialects, personal language talent and other factors. In addition, improving Mandarin proficiency requires continuous practice and training, including training in listening comprehension, oral expression and other aspects.

To sum up, there is a correlation between middle school Chinese language learning performance and college students' Mandarin proficiency, but it is not the only influencing factor. Improving Mandarin proficiency requires comprehensive consideration of multiple factors and the adoption of effective learning and training strategies.

Living (growth) environment analysis: Figure 1 shows Cross-analysis results of students by different living environment groups. The survey results show that the passing rates of Mandarin Level 2A from high to low are 64.29% in cities, 58.82% in banner or counties, and 47.44 in rural areas, and 32.22% in pastoral areas. There are significant differences between different living environments and the obtained Mandarin level ($\chi^2 = 27, p = 0.025$). That is to say, the Mandarin level of students who grew up in pastoral areas is significantly lower than that of students who grew up in cities, banners or counties and rural areas. Therefore, it can be considered that different living environments are key factors that affect their Mandarin proficiency.

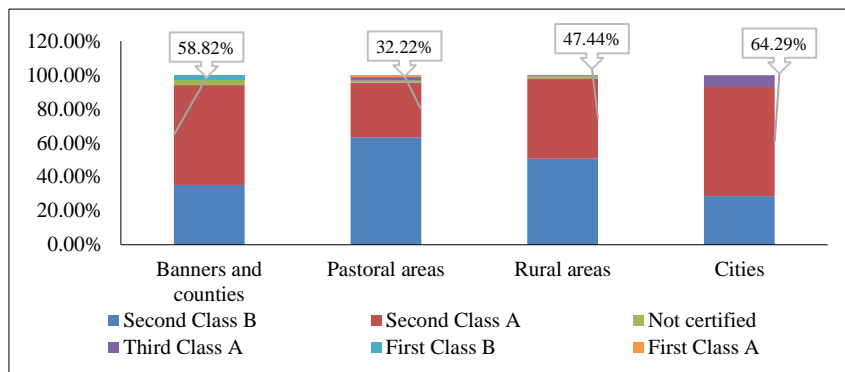


Figure 1. Analysis of differences in living environments and Mandarin Proficiency

Analysis of family language environment: The results of the analysis of differences in home language management on students' Mandarin proficiency can be seen in Table 4. Although there is no significant difference overall ($\chi^2 = 25, p = 0.188$), the proportion of Second-Class A proficiency judging from the results, the family language environment that supports bilingual communication has the highest passing rate (58.18%), followed by families without language management (49.52%), and families that support the use of the national spoken and written language ranks third (44.83%). Relatively speaking, Students from families that support the use of ethnic languages have the lowest passing rate for Second Class B (33.65%).

Table 4. Analysis of Differences Between Family Language Management and Mandarin Proficiency

		What is your parents' attitude towards the language of communication used at home?					Total	χ^2	p
		No specific requirements, just let it be	Support the use of minority languages	Advocate bilingual communication	Support Mandarin	Other			
Mandarin level	Second Class B	50(47.62%)	67(64.42%)	21(38.18%)	13(44.83%)	1(100.0%)	152	25	0.188
	Second Class A	52(49.52%)	35(33.65%)	32(58.18%)	13(44.83%)	0(0.0%)	132		
	Not certified	1(0.95%)	0(0.0%)	1(1.82%)	2(6.90%)	0(0.0%)	4		
	Third Class A	1(0.95%)	1(0.96%)	1(1.82%)	1(3.45%)	0(0.0%)	4		
	First Class B	1(0.95%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1		
	First Class A	0(0.0%)	1(0.96%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1		
Total			104	55	29	1	294		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The difference between parents' Mandarin proficiency and students' Mandarin proficiency: From the analysis results in Table 5, we can see that parents' Mandarin proficiency has a significant impact on students' Mandarin proficiency ($\chi^2=37$, $p = 0.011$). Among them, those whose parents are relatively fluent in Mandarin have the highest passing rate of Second-Class A (51.32%). On the contrary, when their parents are basically fluent in Mandarin, the passing rate of Second-Class A in Mandarin is only 20%. It shows that parents' Mandarin proficiency is an important indicator that affects their children's Mandarin proficiency.

Table 5. Analysis of Differences Between Parents' Mandarin Proficiency and Students' Mandarin Proficiency

		Parents' Mandarin proficiency					Total	χ^2	p
		More fluent	General	Very fluent	Not very fluent	Can't speak Mandarin			
Mandarin level	Second Class B	35(46.05%)	53(50.0%)	11(42.31%)	42(59.16%)	11(73.33%)	152	37	**
	Second Class A	39(51.32%)	52(49.06%)	11(42.31%)	27(38.03%)	3(20.0%)	132		
	Not certified	1(1.32%)	1(0.94%)	2(7.69%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	4		
	Third Class A	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1(3.85%)	2(2.82%)	1(6.67%)	4		
	First Class B	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1(3.85%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1		
	First Class A	1(1.32%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1		
Total			106	26	71	15	294		

*** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, * $p<0.1$

The difference between parents' academic qualifications and students' Mandarin proficiency: From the analysis results in Table 6, we can see that there is a significant difference between parents' academic qualifications and students' Mandarin level ($\chi^2 = 117$, $p = 0.001$). Among them, students whose parents have a primary school diploma have the highest passing rate of Second-Class A (50.60%). Students whose parents have a college degree or above have a passing rate of Second-Class A reaching 47.83%. Students from families with junior high school and high school education have the highest passing rate (50.60%). The passing rates for Second Class A are basically similar, both at around 40%. It shows that parents' academic qualifications are an important indicator that affects their children's Mandarin proficiency.

Table 6. Analysis of Differences Between Parents' Academic Qualifications and Students' Mandarin Proficiency

		Parents' academic qualifications					Total	χ^2	<i>p</i>
		University	Junior high school	Primary school	High school	Graduate school and above			
Mandarin level	Second Class B	10(43.48%)	82(54.67%)	39(46.99%)	20(57.14%)	1(33.33%)	152	117	***
	Second Class A	11(47.83%)	64(42.67%)	42(50.60%)	14(40.0%)	1(33.33%)	132		
	Not certified	0(0.0%)	3(2.0%)	0(0.0%)	1(2.86%)	0(0.0%)	4		
	Third Class A	1(4.35%)	1(0.67%)	2(2.41%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	4		
	First Class B	1(4.35%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1		
	First Class A	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1(33.33%)	1		
Total			150	83	35	3	294		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$ ***The difference between parents' occupation and students' Mandarin proficiency:***

From the results in Table 7, we can see that parents' occupation has a significant impact on students' Mandarin level ($\chi^2 = 40.868$, $p = 0.004$). Among them, students from dual-income families have the highest passing rate in Mandarin Level Second Class A (57.14%), while students from pastoral families have a passing rate of Second Class A in Mandarin only 33.59%, which is significantly lower than other groups. It shows that parents' occupation status is an important reference indicator that affects students' Mandarin proficiency.

Table 7. Analysis of Differences Between Parents' Occupations and Students' Mandarin Proficiency

Profession	Mandarin level						χ^2	<i>p</i>
	Second Class B	Second Class A	Not certified	Third Class A	First Class B	First Class A		
Farmers	88 (49.72%)	85 (48.02%)	2 (1.13%)	2 (1.13%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	40.868	***
Pastoralists	82 (62.60%)	44 (33.59%)	1 (0.76%)	3 (2.29%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.76%)		
Dual-income couple	5 (35.71%)	8 (57.14%)	0 (0%)	1 (7.14%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)		
Single Worker	6 (35.30%)	8 (47.06%)	1 (5.88%)	1 (5.88%)	1 (5.88%)	0 (0%)		
Other	0 (0%)	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

Analysis of the difference between family language environment and students' Mandarin proficiency: From the above analysis results, Table 8, it can be seen that students who believe that the family language environment has a beneficial impact on their Mandarin proficiency have the highest passing rate in Mandarin Second Class A. The very adverse impact group had the lowest passing rate in Second Class A (25%). Overall, the family language environment has a significant differential impact on students' Mandarin proficiency ($\chi^2 = 38, p = 0.008$).

Table 8. The Impact of Family Language Environment on Students' Mandarin Proficiency

		How do you think your family language environment affects your Mandarin proficiency?					Total	χ^2	p
		Somewhat favorable	Moderate	Very favorable	Not so favorable	Very unfavorable			
Mandarin level	Second Class B	45(48.39%)	74(57.36%)	25(42.37%)	6(66.67%)	2(50.0%)	152	38	***
	Second Class A	48(51.61%)	52(40.31%)	28(47.46%)	3(33.33%)	1(25.0%)	132		
	Not certified	0(0.0%)	1(0.78%)	3(5.09%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	4		
	Third Class A	0(0.0%)	2(1.55%)	1(1.70%)	0(0.0%)	1(25.0%)	4		
	First Class B	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1(1.70%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1		
	First Class A	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1(1.70%)	0(0.0%)	0(0.0%)	1		
Total		93	129	59	9	4	294		

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

The difference between receiving Mandarin training and education during college and students' Mandarin level: From the analysis results in Table 9, it can be seen that receiving Mandarin training and education organized by the school during college has a significant impact on students' Mandarin level ($\chi^2 = 10, p = 0.068$). Among them, the passing rate for the Second-Class A students who received Mandarin training activities organized by the school was 45.64%, while the passing rate for students who did not receive Mandarin training activities was 41.51%. It shows that Mandarin training during school has a certain impact on students' Mandarin level.

Table 9. The Impact of Mandarin Training Education During College on Students' Mandarin Proficiency

		Have you received any Mandarin training or activities organized by the school during your college years?		Total	χ^2	p
		Yes	No			
Mandarin level	Second Class B	124(51.45%)	28(52.83%)	152	10	0.068*
	Second Class A	110(45.64%)	22(41.51%)	132		

Not certified	1(0.42%)	3(5.66%)	4	
Third Class A	4(1.66%)	0(0.0%)	4	
First Class B	1(0.42%)	0(0.0%)	1	
First Class A	1(0.42%)	0(0.0%)	1	
Total	241	53	294	

*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

When discussing the factors that influence the level of Mandarin, regional differences are an important factor that cannot be ignored. As the national language, Mandarin has obvious differences in popularity in different regions. This difference is not only reflected in the language environment and frequency of use, but is also closely related to the local culture, economy, and education level. Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, as a multi-ethnic region, has a Mandarin popularity rate that is roughly equivalent to the national average, but there are certain differences between non-leaning cities (Liu, 2017, p. 57).

From the figure 2, it can be seen that the passing rates of Mandarin Second Class A for students from different league cities in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, from high to low, are Tongliao City 51.55%, Xing'an League 50.65%, Chifeng City 48.57%, Hohhot Baotou Ordos Western District 33.33%, 32% in Xilingol League, and 21.43% in Hulunbuir City, ($\chi^2 = 53$, $p = 0.001$). That is, there are significant differences in the Mandarin proficiency of students from different league cities.

by a variety of factors. First, economic conditions are one of the important factors affecting Mandarin proficiency. Regions with better economic conditions often have richer educational resources and more language learning opportunities. Secondly, educational policies and implementation efforts will also affect the popularity of Mandarin. For example, some regions may pay more attention to promoting Mandarin education, thereby improving the Mandarin proficiency of local residents. In addition, cultural factors and language environment cannot be ignored. Some regions may have stronger cultural confidence and language inheritance awareness, which will also affect the learning and use of Mandarin.

In the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, there are significant differences in the popularity of Mandarin in different league cities. This difference may be related to local economic conditions, education policies, cultural traditions and language environment. For example, Tongliao City and Xing'an League have relatively high passing rates for Mandarin Second Class A, while Hulunbuir City has relatively low passing rates. This may be related to the economic development level, educational resource allocation, and educational policy implementation strength of each region.

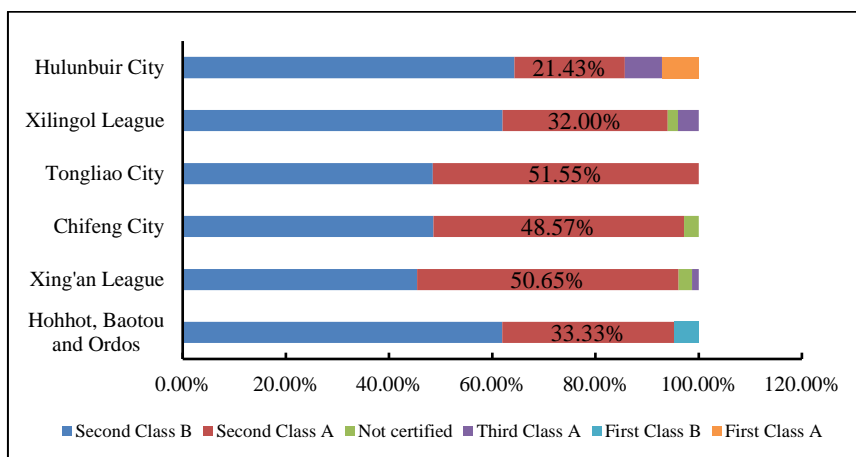


Figure 2. Differences in Putonghua Proficiency Among Students in Different Regions of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region

Conclusion: This study found through empirical analysis that the Mandarin proficiency of ethnic minority college students is affected by a variety of factors, among which gender, living environment, family language environment, parents' Mandarin proficiency, parents' academic qualifications, regional differences, and parents' occupation have particularly significant impacts on Mandarin proficiency. The results of the study show that female students' Mandarin proficiency is generally higher than that of male students. Urban and banner county students' Mandarin proficiency is higher than that of rural and pastoral students. Family language management, parents' Mandarin proficiency and academic qualifications, regional differences, and parents' occupation are all related to students' Mandarin proficiency.

Suggestions: Based on the above analysis, this study proposes the following improvement strategies: First, investment in Mandarin education in minority areas should be increased, especially in pastoral and rural areas, to improve students' Mandarin proficiency by providing more educational resources and training opportunities. Secondly, families and schools should work together to create a good language learning environment and encourage students to use Mandarin in daily life. In addition, parents should improve their own Mandarin proficiency and set a good example for their children. At the same time, schools should organize more Mandarin training and practical activities to improve students' oral expression. Finally, differentiated teaching strategies should be developed for students from different regions and family backgrounds to meet the needs of different students. Through the implementation of these strategies, it is expected to effectively improve the Mandarin

proficiency of ethnic minority college students, promote the balanced development of language and writing, and contribute to the realization of the country's long-term development goals.

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