

LEARNERS' ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS, AND EFFORTS TOWARDS MANDARIN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the attitudes and perceptions of learners towards learning Mandarin language as a foreign language course at a local public university in Malaysia. In Malaysia, Mandarin language course is offered to foreign language students either as a compulsory elective or free elective course at university level. Nevertheless, majority of the students are still unable to communicate well in the language upon completion of the course. This quantitative field research employs questionnaires and purposive sampling technique as the methods of collecting data. The sampling involves 74 students from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus who enrolled in Level 2 Mandarin course. While the paper discusses learners' attitudes it also highlights their perceptions towards Mandarin language learning environment and their efforts to enhance the mastery of Mandarin during the learning period. The findings revealed that majority of the respondents seemed to show positive attitudes towards Mandarin, such as their willingness to promote the course to their friends and determination to continue to learn the language after graduation. However, majority of the students were also found to have feelings of anxieties while learning Mandarin. Thus, the anxiousness arose during the language class has no apparent effect on their language learning as they claimed. As a whole, this research suggests that language instructors should seek ways to motivate the students to improve their speaking skills especially through group learning strategies.

Keywords: Mandarin language learning, attitudes, perceptions, language learning environment, students' efforts

INTRODUCTION:

Foreign languages are now widely acknowledged and are used to meet the current needs and demands of either public or private organizations. In recent times, society has begun to pay more attention to the importance of foreign language learning at all educational levels; from primary to tertiary level. The ability to speak in a foreign language is an added skill to an individual, not just for personal gain but also for the larger social good as well as for the sake of the country, especially meeting the needs of human resources that require a foreign language as a medium of communication. Among the foreign languages which are frequently introduced and offered as compulsory elective or free elective foreign language courses in Malaysia's Public Higher Educational Institutions are English, Arabic, Mandarin, Japanese, German, Spanish, and Thai languages. In fact, foreign languages such as Arabic, Japanese, French, and German languages were introduced in national secondary schools as part of the 1996 Education Act. The introduction of these languages in the national curriculum proves to be of government's concern as the languages have their own economic, politic and social advantages which will be of benefit to the nation.

In the meantime, there are several policies concerning the medium of instruction in the Malaysian education system. One of them is to use the Malay language, Mandarin language, Tamil language and English language as the medium of instruction in national primary schools, as well as using Malay language and English language as the medium of instruction in national secondary schools. Besides, the Malay language, Mandarin language, Tamil language, English language, and Arabic language are used as the medium of instruction in the private primary schools while only the Malay language, Mandarin language, English language, and Arabic language are used as the medium of instruction in private secondary schools. The Mandarin language is only used as the medium of instruction in Chinese private schools in both primary and secondary schools. Meanwhile, both public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia may opt for Malay language, Mandarin language or Arabic language as the medium of instruction (Alis, 2006).

In Malaysia, the formal or standard language used by the local Chinese ('Chinese' in Malay language known as '*Tionghoa*' or '*Cina*') is called 'Mandarin language', a language which is formally used for formal purposes, such as in formal occasions, formal letters etc. In China, the 'Mandarin language' is known as '*Putonghua*'. According to American Heritage Dictionary (2013), 'Mandarin language' is 'the official national standard spoken language of China, which is based on the principal dialect spoken in and around Beijing. It is also called *Guoyu*'. '*Putonghua*' or '*Guoyu*' can be translated as the 'common language', in which the word '*Putong*' means 'common', while the word '*hua*' means 'saying'.

According to Mok (as cited in Wong and Wong, 2006), the use of Mandarin language as a second language (now known as a third language) in Chinese education system in Malaysians began in the 1990s. It was initiated following the recommendations of the former Education Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak through his announcement in the second reading of the Bill in Parliament Educational Act on December 18, 1995, that the implementation of the teaching and learning of Chinese language would be carried out at national schools with multi-ethnic students. However, his recommendations could only be implemented after the Education Development Plan (2001-2010) which was announced in the Education Development Seminar which was held in Shah Alam, Selangor, on October 8th, 2001. This education plan proposed the introduction of foreign languages subjects like Mandarin and Tamil courses in national schools' curriculum in order to foster unity among students of different races and religions.

Moreover, the government's keenness to promote the Mandarin language to non-Mandarin speakers is very much commendable. The government has given the language due recognition which is manifested through its continuous efforts and encouragements. According to *Utusan Malaysia* (April 21st, 2011), the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin was reported to have said that the government was trying to expand the collaboration between Malaysia and China in the field of education particularly in the language field. One of the efforts was realized in the sponsorship scheme of the Ministry of Education and MARA (Malay for Indigenous People's Trust Council, commonly abbreviated as 'MARA'), where students were sent to pursue their studies in the field of Mandarin

language at Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) since year 2007 as one of the government's initiatives to enhance the teaching and learning of Mandarin language in Malaysian schools and universities.

Although in the outset, the introduction to the Chinese education system encountered numerous conflicts and resistance resulting from the economic and political pressure, the strong impetus to perpetuate the Chinese education system in this country at that time has eventually benefited the current generations. Now, in line with the country's economic development and cooperation relations between Malaysia and China, especially in terms of economy and education, more people from various walks of life, particularly students of the primary to the tertiary level are attracted to mastering the Mandarin language.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM:

Reading, writing, listening and speaking skills are the main skills in learning any language, especially for a foreign language. Yet, these skills are not easily acquired by foreign language learners. On that account, for the past few years many researches on foreign languages have concentrated their research on speaking and listening (audio-oral) skills (Ghazali et al., 2011) as the main purpose of learning a foreign language is to be able to communicate in the language effectively. In the meantime, there were also studies on the learners' perceptions and attitudes such as the learner's anxiousness in learning a foreign language in which it was believed could affect the learners' performance. According to Williams and Burden (as cited in Brown, 2009), learners' perceptions and interpretations towards language learning have been found to have a great influence on their achievement. Therefore, by understanding the learners' attitudes and perceptions towards learning Mandarin as foreign language course, as well as their efforts to enhance the mastery of this language, proper solutions to these learner's problems with the language could be identified and later suggested to improve the teaching and learning of Mandarin in the future.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- (1) What are the students' attitudes towards Mandarin language learning as foreign language course?
- (2) What are the students' perceptions towards Mandarin language learning environment?
- (3) What efforts have the students made to enhance the mastery of Mandarin language?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This quantitative research is to assess the students' attitudes and perceptions towards Mandarin language learning as foreign language course. A set of questionnaire was designed and administered to a total of 74 students who took Level 2 Mandarin as a foreign language course in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus, Kelantan. Using purposive sampling method, a researcher will determine who will be the respondents of the research and what characteristics to be considered in the selection without determining the number of the respondents involved in the research beforehand (Bernard, 2000). In this purposive sampling method, the researcher determined the characteristics that she wanted a respondent to have, for example, the respondent, regardless of the gender must be a student who enrolled in Level 2 Mandarin as a foreign language course. After all of the questionnaires were returned, the data was then processed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

THE ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS MANDARIN LANGUAGE LEARNING:

There are a few studies showing that negative attitudes or feelings towards a foreign language can affect the effectiveness of teaching and learning of the language. Examples are studies on second

language, which had proven that English language learners who were more motivated would more likely to employ English in their conversations or try to learn English longer than those who were less motivated. In other words, it indicates that students with more favourable attitudes towards a target language are said to show explicitly less attrition than those with less favourable attitudes (Gardner et al. as cited in Yu, Chan and Ain Nadzimah, 2013). Hence, this research seeks to identify the negative feelings (anxieties) that exist among the learners as it is believed that it could be one of the constraints influencing the learners' achievement in Mandarin language learning. In this research, the learners' attitudes are referring to their behaviours towards Mandarin language learning either in positive or negative way.

Table 1: The Anxieties of the Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) (Jeli Campus) towards Mandarin Language Learning

Questionnaire Items	Yes		No		Total	
	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)
Do you have any anxiety or uncomfortable feelings while in Mandarin class?						
• Shyness	12	16.7	59	81.9	72	100.0
• Low self-esteem	10	13.9	62	86.1	72	100.0
• Feeling less confident	34	47.2	38	52.8	72	100.0
• Nervousness	22	30.6	50	69.4	72	100.0
• Fear of making mistakes	34	47.2	38	52.8	72	100.0
• Fear of being ridiculed	5	6.9	67	93.1	72	100.0
• No, I don't. I'm very positive.	20	27.8	52	72.2	72	100.0
• Others	2	2.8	70	97.2	72	100.0
*No response					2	-

*Note: The respondents answered "yes" or "no".

Table 1 shows the anxieties of the respondents towards Mandarin language learning. The findings of this research reveal that only 20 students (27.8%) claimed that they held positive attitudes while learning Mandarin; while the rest of the respondents claimed otherwise (72.2%). As can be seen clearly in Table 1, students' feeling of less confident (34 of respondents; 47.2%), fear of making mistakes (34 of respondents; 47.2%), and nervousness (22 respondents; 30.6%) seem to be their major anxieties. It seems that more than half of the total respondents experienced feelings of anxieties while in their Mandarin language classes. According Wan Zarina et al. (2007), communication anxiety (or 'communication apprehension') is a feeling of nervousness/shyness, described as a character of an individual resulting from the excessive worry about being spoken to in a foreign language in front of the public. There are many factors which contribute to foreign language anxieties of an individual. Among those are communication apprehension, test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, etc. (Hana Abdulnabi, 2011; Wan Zarina et al., 2007). Previous researches had proven that every individual showed different types of anxieties towards language learning, where it can be clearly seen from this research findings as well (Table 1).

Table 2 displays the analysis of the attitudes of respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus towards Mandarin language learning with the answer “yes”, “not sure”, or “no”. From the research findings, there were 37 respondents (52.1%) who claimed that the anxieties (such as the feeling of less confident, fear of making mistakes, nervousness, etc.) did not hinder them from learning Mandarin language well, whereas only 12 respondents (16.9%) indicated otherwise. Despite having the mentioned anxieties, over half of the total respondents who were assumed to be more motivated would find ways to cope with the existing anxiety better than few of those who were believed to be less motivated. Although most language teachers and learners undoubtedly felt that anxiety is a major hurdle to be overcome in foreign language learning, most researches on second language learning could not adequately define the language learning anxiety and its specific effect on foreign language learning (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986).

In addition, the findings show that 47 respondents (63.5%) stated that they would advise their friends to take Mandarin language course. From the total of 74 respondents, 57 respondents (77.0%) claimed that they would continually practice or learn Mandarin language after their graduation. Thus, it shows that the learning Mandarin would benefit them in their future.

Table 2: The Attitudes of the Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) (Jeli Campus) towards Mandarin Language Learning

Questionnaire Items	Yes		Not Sure		No		Total	
	Frequency (No. of Respondents)	(%)	Frequency (No. of Respondents)	(%)	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	(%)	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	(%)
Did your anxieties become a barrier for you to learn well the Mandarin language?	12	16.9	22	31.0	37	52.1	71	100.0
*No Response							3	-
Will you advise your friends to take Mandarin language course?	47	63.5	22	29.7	5	6.8	74	100.0
Will you continually practice/learn Mandarin language after graduation?	57	77.0	16	21.6	1	1.4	74	100.0

*Note: The respondents answered “yes”, “not sure” or “no”.

The Analysis of the Respondents' Perceptions towards Mandarin Language Learning Environment:

According to Barr and Gillespie (2003), no matter what the subject is, there are a few fundamental components of any learning environment, such as: physical resources (e.g.: classrooms, libraries, etc.), technological resources (the provision of up-to-date computers), communication, human resources (e.g.: teacher, lecturers, et.), pedagogical strategies (teaching strategies), cultural context (the approach to learning adopted by staff and students), etc.

The data analysis of respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus on their perceptions towards Mandarin language learning environment can be seen clearly on Table 3. When asked about if the origin of a Mandarin language teacher or lecturer (if they are from foreign countries) would affect the students' language learning performance, 22 respondents (30.1%) affirmed so because

of some factors, such as the influence of Chinese dialect and also the 'strong' accent produced by those especially from the Mainland China where it might be a barrier for them in understanding the language used in the Mandarin language class. However, only nine respondents (12.3%) stated otherwise. Moreover, more than half of the respondents (57.5%) answered "not sure", which shows that they could not give the best answers as they have never experienced it.

Besides that, more than half of the respondents (42 respondents; 56.8%) chose Malay language as their preferred medium of instruction while learning Mandarin language, whereas only 29 respondents (39.2%) opted for both Malay and English language as their preferred medium of instruction. When asked about the Mandarin language learning environment, 18 respondents (24.3%) said that the atmosphere of the class was "very enjoyable and interesting", while 40 respondents (54.1%) claimed it was "quite interesting". Majority of the respondents (70.3%) were satisfied with the Mandarin language course schedule and most of them wished to have the class in the morning (41.9%).

A total of 36 respondents (48.6%) claimed to be more comfortable to learn the Mandarin language in a class of less than 20 people, whilst 35 respondents (47.3%) preferred to be in the class of 20 to 30 people. Hence, it shows that majority of the respondents were more comfortable to be in a Mandarin class of not more than 30 people. Besides that, a total of 28 respondents (37.8%) asserted that the teaching aids used by the language teacher or lecturer during the Mandarin language class are not enough, while 23 respondents (31.1%) claimed otherwise. There were a total of 56 respondents (75.7%) who were satisfied with the quantity of Mandarin language syllabuses provided as compared to only six respondents (8.1%) who were not satisfied. A total of 50 respondents (67.6%) claimed that they were satisfied with the time allocated for learning the Mandarin language while only 12 respondents (16.2%) claimed otherwise.

Table 3: Students' Perceptions towards Mandarin Language Learning Environment

Questionnaire Items	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)
If the Mandarin lecturer/language teacher is from a foreign country, does it become difficult for you to learn the language?		
• Yes	22	30.1
• No	9	12.3
• Not sure	42	57.5
Total	73	100.0
*No response	1	-
What is the medium of instruction that you prefer to be used when learning Mandarin language?		
• Malay language	42	56.8
• English language	3	4.1
• Malay language and English language	29	39.2
• Others	0	0
Total	74	100.0
How was the atmosphere in the Mandarin language class?		
• Very enjoyable and interesting	18	24.3
• Quite interesting	40	54.1
• Plain	14	18.9
• Less interesting	1	1.4
• Very boring and not interesting to attract students to learn the language	1	1.4
Total	74	100.0
Did you feel satisfied with your Mandarin language class schedule?		
	52	70.3

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not sure 	<p>7</p> <p>15</p> <p>74</p>	<p>9.5</p> <p>20.3</p> <p>100.0</p>
Total		
In your opinion, when is the best time for you to attend the Mandarin language class?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Morning • Afternoon • Evening • Late evening • I don't mind 	<p>31</p> <p>13</p> <p>8</p> <p>1</p> <p>21</p>	<p>41.9</p> <p>17.6</p> <p>10.8</p> <p>1.4</p> <p>28.4</p>
Total	74	100.0
I am more comfortable with the class capacity of:		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less than 20 people • 20 – 30 people • 31 – 40 people • More than 40 people • I don't mind 	<p>36</p> <p>35</p> <p>1</p> <p>0</p> <p>2</p>	<p>48.6</p> <p>47.3</p> <p>1.4</p> <p>0</p> <p>2.7</p>
Total	74	100.0
Were the teaching aids used by the lecturer/language teacher during the Mandarin language class enough?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not sure 	<p>23</p> <p>28</p> <p>23</p>	<p>31.1</p> <p>37.8</p> <p>31.1</p>
Total	74	100.0
Were you satisfied with the quantity of Mandarin language syllabuses provided?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not sure 	<p>56</p> <p>6</p> <p>12</p>	<p>75.7</p> <p>8.1</p> <p>16.2</p>
Total	74	100.0
Were you satisfied with the time period allocated for learning the Mandarin language?		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes • No • Not sure 	<p>50</p> <p>12</p> <p>12</p>	<p>67.6</p> <p>16.2</p> <p>16.2</p>
Total	74	100.0

The Analysis of the Respondents' Efforts During Mandarin Language Learning:

Table 4 shows the efforts of the respondents on Mandarin language learning. In other words, what are their learning strategies employed to enhance the mastery of Mandarin language. The data analysis shows that more than half of the respondents affirmed that they had sought help from their Mandarin teacher or lecturer when they faced problem during the Mandarin language learning period, while only 20 respondents (27.0%) said they had never done so. Among these respondents, 35 respondents (47.3%) claimed that it was effortless to seek the help of their language teacher or lecturer when they faced problems in understanding the language while other respondents said it was difficult because of either they were too busy (21 respondents; 28.4%) or their lecturers were not free (10 respondents; 13.5%).

Moreover, there were more respondents (33 respondents; 44.6%) who stated that they preferred to learn the Mandarin language in group as compared to 24 respondents (32.4%) who preferred to learn individually while 17 others (23.0%) said that they did not mind either way. All of the respondents

claimed that they had been practicing their speaking skill in Mandarin language each time after the class was over and majority of them (53 respondents; 71.6%) were willing to spend their own money for buying extra reference books other than the text book or handouts provided in class for the purpose of strengthening and improving Mandarin language proficiency.

In addition, with respect to effectively teaching and learning a foreign language, numerous researches had focused on the learning strategies applied by foreign language learners. For instance, the use of metacognitive strategies in foreign language learning had been utilized by most good language learners (GLL), which is obviously a successful one. Examples of the strategies are “maximizing opportunities to use the language”, “pushing oneself into using the language”, “learning intensively”, “learning regularly”, and “having a concrete need/plan for learning”. Besides that, strategies in a specific skill area such as “Listening” (e.g.: “deep listening” and “broad listening”), “Reading” (e.g.: “reading aloud” and “reading a lot”), “Speaking” (e.g.: “memorizing basic sentences by vocalizing many times” and “pattern-practicing them thoroughly”), “Vocabulary” (e.g.: “increasing basic vocabulary”), “Pronunciation” (e.g.: “paying special attention to sounds/prosody), “Writing” (e.g.: “writing regularly/having their writing corrected”) and “Grammar” (e.g.: “learning consciously/attention to forms”) had seems to be the most preferred and regularly used by most GLL. GLL were also found to have shirited their learning strategies according to their learning stages (beginning, intermediate, and advanced stages) (Takeuchi, 2003).

Table 4: The Efforts Made by the Students to Enhance the Mastery of Mandarin Language

Questionnaire Items	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)
Have you ever sought help from your Mandarin lecturer/language teacher when you have problem with the language learning?		
• Very often	0	0
• Often	1	1.4
• Sometimes	32	43.2
• Rarely	21	28.4
• Never	20	27.0
Total	74	100.0
Was it easy to seek the help of lecturer/language teacher when you were faced with problems to understand this language?		
• Easy	35	47.3
• Difficult because the lecturer was always busy	10	13.5
• Difficul because I'm always busy	21	28.4
• Other reason(s)	8	10.8
Total	74	100.0
Does the difficulty to see your lecturer/teacher lead to your having problems in learning the language?		
• Yes	9	12.2
• No, because I can learn by myself	32	43.2
• No, because I can learn from my classmates/friends	33	44.6
• Other reason(s)	0	0
Total	74	100.0
In order to improve the mastery of Mandarin, you prefer to learn the language:		
• Individually	24	32.4
• In group	33	44.6
• I don't mind	17	23.0
Total	74	100.0

Did you try to improve your Hanyu Pinyin pronunciation through speaking practices each time after attending the Mandarin language class?		
• Very often	11	14.9
• Often	30	40.5
• Sometimes	27	36.5
• Rarely	6	8.1
• Never	0	0
Total	74	100.0
Are you willing to spend your money to learn Mandarin language (e.g., for buying extra reference books other than the text book/handouts provided in class)?		
• Yes	53	71.6
• No	5	6.8
• Not sure	16	21.6
Total	74	100.0

CONCLUSION:

This research found that the majority of the Mandarin language learners at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus were undermined by the feelings of anxieties while learning the Mandarin language. Thus, the feelings of anxieties that arose during the language class have no apparent effect on their language learning despite their claims. In general, most of them seem to show positive attitudes towards Mandarin language, such as their willingness to promote the course to their friends and the determination to continue to learn the language after graduation. In addition, as for the preferred medium of instruction for learning Mandarin language, most of the students opted for Malay language. It seems that the students were more comfortable with the national language as compared to the second language (English language) as it is the first language for most of the Malay students. This shows that the medium of instruction used the foreign language class does play an important role in ensuring students' understanding of the lessons taught by the language teacher or lecturer. Most of them show positive perceptions towards the learning environment. However, the analysis of the efforts made by the students on the frequency of seeking their language teacher or lecturer for help was unsatisfactory. Less than half of the total respondents claimed that they had no problem seeing their language teacher or lecturer when they had problems with the course while others claimed to have no free time. Even so, they affirmed that they could solve the problems by self-study or asking their friends' help. More students claimed that they preferred to improve their Mandarin language through group activities. This has been mentioned by Ghazali et al. (2012) and Azani et al. (2012) where group learning strategy can help to improve learners' verbal skills. In addition, the language instructors should not only know how to teach the language but also know how to make the students interested and motivated to improve their speaking skills in the foreign language they learn.

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