MANDARIN AS THE CHOSEN FOREIGN LANGUAGE COURSE AMONG LEARNERS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Mandarin language course is offered to foreign language students either as a compulsory elective or free elective course at university level. However, students' performance in this course still leaves a lot to be desired as most of them are still unable to communicate well in the language upon completion of the course. Thus, this study intends to identify the perceptions of students enrolling in the course in order to better understand the matter. This quantitative field research employs questionaires and purposive sampling technique as the methods of collecting data. The sampling involves 74 students from UMK who have enrolled in level 2 Mandarin course. The findings show there are important factors attribute to students preference for Mandarin course. The findings demonstrate that the number of students who obtained A Grade in the test at Level 1 was higher than those who obtained lower grades and they found that the test's level of difficulty was rather moderate. Moreover, the majority of the respondents found that learning the Chinese characters was difficult as compared to learning pronunciation in Hanyu Pinyin. Therefore, this study suggests that teachers should opt for a variety of teaching aids in order to draw students' interest in the course.

Keywords: Mandarin language course, perceptions of students, purposive sampling, factors attributable to students preference, test's level of difficulty.

INTRODUCTION:

In Malaysia, a language which is learned and used besides Malay language is considered as a foreign language (Wan Zarina et al., 2007). In this country, a foreign language such as English is also recognized as a second language to the first language, while other foreign languages which are learned besides Malay language and English language are usually known as the third languages. Some of the foreign languages which are commonly 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 the national secondary schools as part of the 1996 Education Act. This proves the governments' effort in introducing foreign languages as the languages have their own advantages in the economy, politics, and social culture. There are several policies of the medium of instruction in the Malaysian education system. One of them is to use 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. Furthermore, 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 Malay language, Mandarin language, English language, and Arabic language are used as the medium of instruction in private secondary schools. Mandarin language is only used as the medium of instruction in Chinese private schools in both primary and secondary schools. In the meantime, both public and private higher education institutions in Malaysia may opt to use Malay language, Mandarin language or Arabic language as the medium of instruction (Alis, 2006).

However, sometimes foreign languages and the second language are differentiated from each other more specifically because the role of the second language is bigger in a community as compared to a foreign language which is usually learnt in a foreign language course. For example, English language is commonly learned as the second language in most countries because of its more extensive usage in the international level, but it is only learnt as a foreign language in countries like Japan and France (Ellis, 1995) (Labrie dan Quell, 1997). According to a survey by Eurobarometer in 1994, knowledge of foreign languages among the European societies has increased since 40 years ago. Consequently, the communication between the European societies has grown extensively as German language, English language, and French language are the most frequently taught and used language in the Europe continent. This shows that foreign languages have different roles and benefits in different places and situations.

In this research, the focus is on the Mandarin language because its usage is very wide and it is well known to the public especially among the multiracial Malaysian communities. First of all, what are the roles and benefits of Mandarin language as a foreign language in this globalization era? According to Sung (2009), serious attention has been paid on Mandarin language recently due to the impact of China's international political influence and their prosperous economy. In addition, more attention has been paid on Mandarin language since China's participation in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and also since Mandarin language becomes one of the six official languages of the Organization of the United Nations (UN) (Wong & Wong, 2006).

Despite that, some students cannot communicate well in Mandarin especially by the means of speaking using the language. The existence of this problem is the reason this research was conducted. In this research, a society's perception of learning a foreign language is a question that should be figured out. This is because a society's perception and views are related to their motivation in mastering a language (Pogadaev, 2007). Therefore, the researcher tries to identify the factors which influence the students to choose Mandarin language course as the foreign language course they are taking, their achievement in the Mandarin language course, the factors affecting their achievement, and the students' perception of the level of difficulty of the course.

STATEMENT OF RESEARCH PROBLEM:

Until today, there are foreign language learners who are not able to perform well in a foreign language course they take. Reading, writing, listening and speaking skills which are the main skills in learning a foreign language are not easily acquired by foreign language learners, especially speaking and listening (audio-oral) skills as many research on foreign languages focus on these two skills (Ghazali et al., 2011). More attention should be paid on the audio-oral skills because the main reason an individual learns a foreign language is to communicate in the language especially orally. Hopefully, by understanding the factors which influence their choice of foreign language to be learned as well as their perception on the course, solutions for the mentioned problems can be found.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

There are four research questions, which are;
  (1) What are the factors which influence the students to choose Mandarin language course?
  (2) How is the foreign language students' achievement in the Level 1 Mandarin test they took in the previous semester?
  (3) What are the students' perception on the level of difficulty of the reading, writing, speaking, and listening test?
  (4) Which part do the students consider easy or difficult to learn while taking the Mandarin language course?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This research is a quantitative research. This research used a set of questionnaire which is divided into two parts; Part 1 and Part 2. Part 1 includes items to gather the respondents' demographic data while Part 2 consists of items required to adhere to the research objectives. The respondents of this research were students who took Level 2 Mandarin as a foreign language course in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus, Kelantan. The sample of this research consists of 74 respondents.

Before the actual research was conducted, a pilot study had been conducted on 41 out of 60 students who took Level 2 Mandarin course for Semester 1 2011/12 Session in UMK to ensure the validity of the questionnaire. After the analysis of the pilot study had been done, the researcher found that there were some confusing responses from the respondents. Even though the number of the respondents who gave confusing responses was small, the researcher made some modifications on the items in the questionnaire to ensure that the respondents of the actual research will understand what the researcher is trying to convey through the items better.

Furthermore, the researcher used purposive sampling method for the actual research. In purposive sampling method, a researcher will determine who will be the respondents of the research and what are the characteristics of respondents that will make them be considered to be the respondents without determining the number of the respondents involved in the research beforehand (Bernard, 2000). In this purposive sampling method, the researcher determined the characteristics she wanted a respondent to have, for example, the respondent, regardless of the gender must be a student who are enrolling in Level 2 Mandarin as a foreign language course.

After all of the questionnaires were returned, the researcher first counted the number of completed questionnaires to determine the number of respondents involved in this research. After the number of questionnaires to be analyzed was determined, the quantitative data that was acquired was then processed using Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:
RESPONDENTS' DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE ANALYSIS:

The findings of this research show that most students enrolling Mandarin as a foreign language course in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) are Malay students (74.3%) while a smaller number of students enrolling in the same course consists of Indian students (20.3%) (Table 1). This finding is similar to the finding in a research by Lau, Ng & Lee (2011) which shows that most of the students who enroll in Mandarin language course are Malay students and followed by Indian students and other Bumiputera students. In term of gender, as can be seen in Table 1, there are more female students (70.3%) taking this course than male students (29.7%).

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Item		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Race	Malays	55	74.3
	Chinese	1	1.4
	Indian	15	20.3
	Others	3	4.1
	Total	**74**	**100.0**
Gender	Male	22	29.7
	Female	52	70.3
	Total	**74**	**100.0**

It was also found that in term of linguistic background, all Malay students speak using Malay language. In addition, all Indian students speaks using Tamil language except one of them who speaks using Telugu language. Students of other races like Chinese students speak using Hokkien or English language, while Bumiputera

students from Sabah and Sarawak tend to speak in their own dialect such as Iban language. Besides Malay language that Malaysians generally use, the speakers of other languages like Tamil, Iban, Hokkien and others mostly only have the oral skills of their language but not reading and writing skills because of some factors such as the nonexistence of the lessons for those languages in schools.

However, the researcher does not think that linguistic background factor is a major influence on the achievement level in Mandarin language especially in the aspect of memorizing and identifying the Chinese orthographic system. Previously, a research was done by Ke (1998) and it was found that linguistic background does not cause significant effects on the respondents' performance or achievement in a test to identify and write Chinese characters. In his research, the respondents consist of heritage learners; which means they have been exposed to the Chinese language or dialect through listening and speaking at home, and non-heritage learners who have never been exposed to the language or dialect at home. Based on the findings of his research, Ke (1998) concluded that non-heritage learners are highly motivated to perform well but heritage learners do not perform well, therefore his research on the effect of linguistic background on the respondents' performance in identifying and writing Chinese characters (Hanzi) could not achieve its objective. Even though the research found that heritage learners have more potential to identify and write more Chinese characters than non-heritage learners, the findings do not show any significant difference. Nevertheless, in this study, from the respondents' linguistic background, the researcher was only trying to find out the races composition and the first language that is used at home because most of the speakers who have just started learning Mandarin language are influenced by their dialect or first language, and it causes problems especially the problem to produce the correct pronunciation of Mandarin language, which is tone in Hanyu Pinyin. In the researcher's opinion, the students who have background knowledge of a language that is similar to the language that they want to learn have the higher ability to identify and memorize meaning, such as knowing Hokkien dialect which is quite similar to Mandarin.

THE ANALYSIS OF THE PREFERRED FOREIGN LANGUAGE RANKED BY THE RESPONDENTS:

Before identifying the factors which influence the respondents to choose Mandarin language to be learned as a foreign language, the researcher gathered the data about the preferred foreign languages which are ranked by the respondents. It is important to know whether Mandarin language is the language they prefer to learn the most. The following table shows the analyzed rank of the preferred foreign language chosen by the respondents who enrolled in the Level 1 Mandarin language course in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus:

Table 2: The Rank of Foreign Languages Preferred by the Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) (Jeli Campus)

	Mandarin	**Arabic**	**Japanese**	**German**	**Spanish**	**French**	**Thai**	**Tamil**	**Russian**
Median	1.00	2.00	3.00	4.00	6.00	6.00	8.00	8.00	7.00
N (Valid)	74	74	74	74	74	74	74	74	74
Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*N refers to the number of respondents involved. Missing refers to the number of respondents who did not answer the questions or items in the questionnaire.

This rank is determined by the median value gathered through the data processing using the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS Version 16.0 for Windows). The result of the analyis shows that Mandarin language is the most preferred foreign language for the respondents who are taking Mandarin language classes in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus, followed by Arabic language, Japanese language and German language (Table 2). Besides Mandarin, Arabic language is the second choice for foreign language chosen by the majority of the students from the Mandarin language class, which is then followed by Japanese language. The factor of the popularity of Arabic language among students especially Malays who are also Muslims is because Arabic language is used in Islamic teachings and Al-Quran. Therefore, the learning of Arabic language among Malay students is easier and faster with the strong base. In addition, Japanese language is also one of the most preferred language because of factors like Japan's advanced technology in this era of globalization which attracts the younger generation nowadays.

ANALYSIS OF THE FACTORS INFLUENCING THE PREFERENCE OF A FOREIGN LANGUAGE:

The selection of a foreign language among the students is very much influenced by the characteristics of the language. Therefore, it is very important to understand the factors which motivate the students to enroll in

Mandarin language course in order to know their target and goals in learning a language. Generally, the findings of this research show that the majority of the respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) have their own specific reasons on choosing Mandarin language for their foreign language course.

Table 3: The Perception of the Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) (Jeli Campus) about Mandarin Language Learning

Questionnaire Items	Yes		No		Total	
	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)	Frequency (Number of Respondents)	Percentage (%)
Why did you choose Mandarin instead of other foreign languages as a foreign language course? (You can choose MORE THAN ONE answer.)						
• As an added value to get a job	58	78.4	16	21.6	74	100.0
• Due to its commercial value and extensive use	54	73.0	20	27.0	74	100.0
• To be able to communicate easier with Chinese people	38	51.4	36	48.6	74	100.0
• To learn more about Chinese unique custom and culture	20	27.0	54	73.0	74	100.0
• To enrich the knowledge about languages	54	73.0	20	27.0	74	100.0
•Follow friends' choice without realizing the benefit of learning the language	2	2.7	72	97.3	74	100.0
• Simply to fulfill the credits requirement	3	4.1	71	95.9	74	100.0
• Other reason(s)	2	2.7	72	97.3	74	100.0
Did you feel regret after taking the Mandarin language course?	1	1.4	73	98.6	74	100.0

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

As shown in Table 3, the analysis shows that among the main factors that motivate the respondents to choose Mandarin language as foreign language course are; as an added value to get a job, to enrich the knowledge about languages, and due to its commercial value and extensive use. Choosing Mandarin language can be considered as a good decision for the respondents because almost all or 98.6% of the 74 repondents from UMK do not regret it after learning Mandarin language.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONDENTS' ACHIEVEMENT AND EVALUATION OF MANDARIN LANGUAGE COURSE:

Table 4 displays the achievement in term of the grade the respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) (Jeli Campus) acquired in Mandarin Language Course for the previous semester:

Table 4: Achievement of the Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) (Jeli Campus) In Mandarin Language Course for the Previous Semester

Result		Frequency (number of respondents)	Percentage (%)
Grade	**Scale**		
A	4.00	53	73.6
A-	3.67	11	15.3
B+	3.33	3	4.2
B	3.00	5	6.9
B-	2.67	0	0
C+	2.33	0	0
C	2.00	0	0
	Total	**72**	**100.0**

*Two respondents did not give any response for their achievement.

From the research findings, it was found that a bigger number of respondent acquired Grade A (4.00) in the Mandarin language course than the number of respondents who acquired lower grades. This finding shows that the students are committed in learning Mandarin language in order to achieve good grades in the course. Even though only a small number of respondents acquired low grades, this matter should be paid attention to since they have to complete the Mandarin language course until Level 2 and Level 3. If they are unable to master the basic of Mandarin language well, they will probably face difficulty to learn Mandarin on a higher level well. Besides that, the researcher also gathered data on the respondents' perception of the difficulty level of Mandarin language course (Level 1) test. The data was analyzed based on the five-level Likert Scale (Table 5).

Table 5: The Interpretation of Mean Score of the Likert Scale

Likert Scale (Five Levels)	Score	Likert Scale (Three Levels)	Mean Scores	Mean Score Interpretation
Very Easy	1	Easy	1.00 – 2.33	Low
Easy	2			
Fair	3	Fair	2.34 – 3.66	Moderate
Difficult	4	Difficult	3.67 – 5.00	High
Very Difficult	5			

The result of the analysis done on the respondents' perception of the difficulty level of Mandarin language test (Level 1) is presented in the following table:

Table 6: The Perception of the Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) (Jeli Campus) about the Level of Difficulty of Mandarin Language Tests in the Previous Semester

Four Skills Tests	Likert Scale	Frequency (number of respondents)	Percentage (%)	Mean	Mean Score Interpretation
Listening	Very Easy	4	5.4	2.78	Moderate

Test	Easy	23	31.1		
	Fair	34	45.9		
	Difficult	11	14.9		
	Very Difficult	2	2.7		
	Total	74	100.0		
Speaking Test	Very Easy	2	2.7	2.84	Moderate
	Easy	20	27.0		
	Fair	43	58.1		
	Difficult	6	8.1		
	Very Difficult	3	4.1		
	Total	74	100.0		
Reading Test	Very Easy	8	10.8	2.64	Moderate
	Easy	21	28.4		
	Fair	37	50.0		
	Difficult	6	8.1		
	Very Difficult	2	2.7		
	Total	74	100.0		
Writing Test	Very Easy	5	6.8	2.78	Moderate
	Easy	23	31.1		
	Fair	32	43.2		
	Difficult	11	14.9		
	Very Difficult	3	4.1		
	Total	74	100.0		

Table 6 shows the perception of the respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK) Jeli Campus of the difficulty level of the Level 1 Mandarin language tests that were taken during the previous semester. The analysis of the mean interpretation of the data shows that the respondents' evaluation or perception of the tests for all four skills is on moderate level; the mean value was between 2.34 – 3.66. This analysis shows that the tests designed by the university are not too difficult nor too easy. In the meantime, by comparing the mean values, it was found that the respondents from UMK Jeli Campus perceive speaking test as more difficult than all the other tests.

Besides that, the items which gather information on the respondents' perception of the difficulty level of the syllabus are also presented in the questionnaire. The analysis of the data gathered through these items is presented in the following table:

Table 7: The Perception of the Respondents from Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK)
(Jeli Campus) about the Syllabus of the Mandarin Language Course.

Questionnaire Item	Frequency (number of respondents)	Percentage (%)
What was **the easiest** part in learning Mandarin language?		
• Hanyu Pinyin Pronunciation	54	75.0
• Sentence Construction	10	13.9
• Chinese Characters (Chinese Letters)	3	4.2
• Others	5	6.9
Total	72	100.0
*No Response	2	-
What was **the most difficult** part in learning Mandarin language?	9	12.2
• Hanyu Pinyin Pronunciation	17	23.0
• Sentence Construction	45	60.8
• Chinese Characters (Chinese Letters)	3	4.1
• Others	74	100.0
Jumlah		

As presented in Table 7, the majority of the respondents (75%) think that learning Hanyu Pinyin pronunciation is the easiest part, while learning the Chinese characters is the hardest part in learning Mandarin language. However, even though they consider learning Hanyu Pinyin pronunciation as easy, it is only easy in term of identifying the pronunciation but not in term of uttering the pronunciation. Therefore, it can also be said that they assume that speaking test is hard. Therefore, to be able to pronounce well, the students need to pay more attention and do more practice. Besides that, foreign language learners' speaking proficiency can be improved by getting involved in activities like acting (Azani et al., 2012). Moreover, the audio and oral skills in foreign languages can also be enhanced through effective activities like studying in a group (Ghazali et al., 2012). These kind of activities can increase the instances in which students are required to speak using Mandarin language, and the language instructors also play a big role in emphasizing on effective learning among students besides the formal teaching in the classroom. In the meantime, learning Chinese characters is considered as hard probably because the Chinese orthographic system is foreign and new to the students as compared to the Hanyu Pinyin system which is learned in romanized alphabets. In this situation, the students need to work harder to identify and memorize the characters they learn through effective teaching methods.

CONCLUSION:

The analysis found that the students' preference over a foreign language is based on the advantages the language has, which is beneficial and profitable for them. Some of the main factors they choose Mandarin language course are; it gives them an advantage in getting a job, it enriches their knowledge about the language, and it has commercial values as well as its extensive use on the era of globalization. The students' achievement on the basic level (Level 1) can be considered as good, but most of the students think that it is hard to acquire the speaking skills. Furthermore, learning the Chinese characters is also considered as difficult for them. As a consequence, this research suggests that more focus should be given on the teaching of Hanyu Pinyin pronunciation by emphasizing on group activities for more frequent communication in Mandarin language, and by using varieties of teaching aids and tools in the classroom to make the students interested.

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