

Navigating Challenges in Teaching and Learning Mandarin at a British University in Malaysia

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Abstract

In an era of globalisation and cultural exchange, Mandarin is increasingly viewed as an asset, particularly in regions where its influence is strong. Unlike the immersive environment of Mandarin education in local Chinese schools, Mandarin classes at a British university in Malaysia face distinct challenges. These arise from the diverse backgrounds of Malaysian and international students, alongside the widespread use of localised Mandarin and variety of Chinese dialects in Malaysia, which complicate both teaching and learning. This study examines the above-mentioned challenges at the University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM), a British branch campus operating in a multilingual and multicultural setting, with the aim of navigating such challenges and exploring possibilities to enhance the teaching and learning of Mandarin on campus. Data were collected through an online survey using Microsoft Forms, with an approach combining survey and open-ended responses from current students and alumni of Mandarin modules. The project, a collaborative team effort of the foreign language lecturers, was led by the teaching staff of the Mandarin stream, drawing on their pedagogical experience and familiarity with the Mandarin teaching and learning context. Findings reveal structural and pedagogical challenges, including differences in learners' prior exposure to Chinese varieties, limitations in curriculum design, and the need for adaptive teaching strategies. Future research could develop more targeted recommendations for classroom practice, adapt curriculum content for diverse learner profiles, and explore comparable multilingual contexts, such as other Asian branch campuses with significant Chinese-speaking populations, to situate these findings within a broader framework and offer practical insights for improving Mandarin education in similar environments.

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1 Introduction

The globalisation of education has led to a significant rise in the number of students learning Mandarin as a foreign language worldwide. Chinese, including its many varieties, is the most spoken language globally, with 1.31 billion speakers – about 16% of the world's population. Among these, Mandarin is the predominant variant, spoken by approximately 898 million people across the 7 to 13 main regional groups of the Chinese language (McCarthy, 2020). As one of the most widely spoken languages and a key medium for international business, diplomacy, and cultural exchange, Mandarin has emerged as a valuable linguistic and cultural asset in the global educational landscape.

Within this global context, Malaysia stands out as a unique multicultural society where Mandarin holds significant sway, alongside Malay and English (David & Govindasamy, 2003). According to the Population and Housing Census of Malaysia 2020 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2022), 23.2% of the population are Chinese Malaysian, the majority of whom are familiar

with at least one variety of Chinese, including Mandarin, in daily life. However, teaching Mandarin in such a multicultural and multilingual environment presents complex challenges, including differences in cultural familiarity, variations in linguistic background, and limitations in curriculum design.

These challenges are particularly evident in private international universities in Malaysia that operate within a global network of campuses. The University of Nottingham Malaysia (hereafter, UNM), for example, standardises its Mandarin instruction in alignment with its UK and China campuses while trying to ensure that lessons remain relevant to Malaysia's local linguistic and cultural context. Students often encounter difficulties reconciling the Mandarin taught in class with the varieties spoken in Malaysian society, where regional Chinese dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, and Hokkien are prevalent, and subtle differences from mainland Chinese Mandarin influence everyday communication.

The research was conducted at UNM, where Mandarin is taught as both a core and an elective module to students from diverse ethnic, linguistic, and national backgrounds. This collaborative team project among the university's foreign language lecturers was led by the Chinese Malaysian Mandarin teaching staff, whose pedagogical expertise shaped both the design of the study and the interpretation of its findings. Using an approach combining survey and open-ended responses, the study draws on perspectives from current students and alumni of the Mandarin modules, providing a well-rounded understanding of their learning experiences and challenges. By examining these matters within this institutional and cultural context, the study contributes to broader discussions on Mandarin teaching and learning in multilingual settings, while acknowledging certain limitations that may be addressed in future research.

In this context, the present study investigated the current state of teaching and learning Mandarin at UNM, a British university in Malaysia, aiming to:

1. Identify the challenges and difficulties faced by students and the teaching staff in teaching and learning Mandarin in a multicultural environment.
2. Investigate potential strategies and solutions to overcome these challenges.
3. Explore ways to incorporate various learning methods to enhance the teaching and learning environment on campus.

2 Literature review

Mandarin's global rise in importance has been matched by increased interest in the language and cultural programmes. In Malaysia, this growth takes place within the distinctive context of a multilingual and multicultural society. Prior research highlights several key themes relevant to understanding the local teaching context.

A study from Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM), for instance, reports that every year, non-Chinese students enrolling in Mandarin language classes outnumber those enrolling in other languages (Loh et al., 2021). However, the same study notes that one of the challenges perceived in Mandarin education is overcoming the cultural differences with which most students are unfamiliar (Loh et al., 2021). A study conducted at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu shows similar findings, based on student demographic data showing that the participants were predominantly Malay (Chua et al., 2020). These studies emphasise the cultural and language backgrounds of the majority of students, highlighting the challenge of integrating Malaysia's rich multicultural background into the teaching and learning of Mandarin.

In addition to cultural familiarity, motivation also plays a significant role in shaping learning outcomes. A study at Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka further evidences the role of motivation as a predictor of Mandarin achievement (Cheong et al., 2015). The researchers identified six motivational factors: future occupation, intrinsic value and self-development, friendship, entertainment, Chinese influence and travel, requirement motivation, and Chinese culture and community, all of which showed a moderate, positive correlation with students' Mandarin scores. These findings reinforce the need for curricula that connect learning outcomes with students' personal, cultural, and career aspirations, rather than solely focusing on linguistic structures. Such an approach is especially crucial in multicultural classrooms, where students' engagement hinges on both the perceived utility and the cultural resonance of learning materials.

Broader research into Chinese as a second or foreign language (CSL/CFL) has also identified areas for pedagogical improvement highly relevant to the Malaysian context (Gong et al., 2020). Gong et al. explain the need to understand the tension, or disconnect, between the approaches to CSL/CFL within and outside of China, which appears to be "two worlds apart" due to the greater emphasis on teaching practices and teacher training within China, whereas there is more focus on learner outcomes and intercultural skills in international education settings outside of China. Hoe and Lim (2013) also highlight the differences in the general approaches to teaching Mandarin between UiTM and Beijing Language and Culture University, noting that the language learning environment is one of the factors challenging the teaching and learning of Mandarin in Malaysia. Understanding this gap is crucial in Malaysia, where teaching methods must balance global best practices with the local multilingual and multicultural reality.

Looking at the history of Chinese education in Malaysia, it is clear that it has evolved through continuous negotiation between community-based efforts and state policies. Raman and Tan (2015) emphasised that although Malaysia possesses Southeast Asia's most comprehensive Chinese-language education system, Chinese primary and secondary schools have faced persistent structural challenges. These include inequitable government funding, limited access to trained teachers, and policy-driven attempts to integrate vernacular schools into a Malay-dominant educational framework. Despite these challenges, Chinese education remains resilient due to strong community support and grassroots mobilisation, particularly among educationist organisations, to "safeguard the development of Chinese education on an equitable basis to ensure the 'co-existence and co-prosperity' (*gongcun gongrong*) of all ethnic groups in Malaya" (p. 2).

Nevertheless, there are deeper insights that need attention — the multilayered "Chinese" within the ethnic group. As there are speakers of a variety of Chinese in Malaysia, including Cantonese, Hakka, and Hokkien, the development of Chinese

language education must also consider the influence of regional Chinese varieties. In this regard, the research of Lee (2020) sheds light: Lee conducted a needs analysis of university-level learners of Cantonese in Hong Kong and found that students from both Mandarin-speaking and non-Chinese-speaking backgrounds identified practical usage and cultural understanding as critical motivations for language learning. Learners emphasised the importance of oral skills for daily interactions, noting that standard course materials were often misaligned with real-life communicative needs. The study concluded that mismatches between textbook content and the local sociocultural environment could demotivate learners and reduce the relevance of classroom instruction.

Insights from Wang's (2017) investigation into Chinese heritage learners in British universities also highlight how motivations for learning Mandarin often merge instrumental and integrative dimensions. While career opportunities and employability were common drivers, many learners also viewed Mandarin as a means to reconnect with cultural heritage, even when their home language was another Chinese variety such as Cantonese or Hakka. Wang's findings additionally point to challenges faced by heritage learners in mixed classrooms, including heightened expectations from peers and teachers, marginalisation in classroom interactions, and the assumption that their success was guaranteed due to ethnic background. These issues parallel difficulties in Malaysia where Chinese Malaysian students with prior exposure to other Chinese varieties may neither fit the "true beginner" profile nor be adequately supported at more advanced entry points.

In this context, the Mandarin teaching and learning environment at UNM encounters relatable yet additional challenges. First, the backgrounds of each student vary widely – they include not only students from the major ethnic group in Malaysia but also those from other ethnic groups, and international students, including exchange students from the UK campus. Second, the unique cultural and linguistic background in Malaysia cannot easily be matched with textbooks and curricula developed by mainland Chinese sources, which students in the current Mandarin course often find alien to use outside the campus. What they learn in the classroom may not be practically applicable in real-life situations in Malaysia, where different Chinese dialects are prevalent, and subtle differences exist in the Mandarin used between Malaysia and mainland China.

These factors highlight the need for a more localised and context-sensitive approach to Mandarin instruction that bridges the gap between formal curriculum content and the linguistic realities students encounter outside the classroom. Addressing this gap is central to understanding the teaching and learning dynamics explored in the present study. Accordingly, the following section outlines the methodological approach used to investigate these dynamics, detailing the research setting, participants, and data collection procedures.

3 Methodology

A qualitative research cycle which consists of design, data collection, and analysis (Hennink et al., 2020) was used in this study to identify the issues faced by students and teachers and to explore strategies for overcoming these issues. This section describes the site and setting, participants, and procedure.

3.1 Site and setting

This study was conducted at UNM, a private British higher learning institution in the state of Selangor, Malaysia. The main medium of instruction at the university is English, but target languages are spoken in each language class. Mandarin courses have been offered under the School of Media, Languages and Cultures as one of the core language modules, with five contact hours weekly (12 weeks per semester; two semesters per academic year). Mandarin is also offered as an elective module to students from all faculties with four contact hours weekly; the number of weeks and semesters is the same as the core module mentioned above. Students who need to study Mandarin as a core language module learn the language consecutively for three years (six semesters) throughout their undergraduate programmes.

3.2 Participants and demographics

In this study, the respondents were undergraduates learning Mandarin as a foreign language at UNM. Specifically, the respondents included students who took Mandarin as a core subject for a duration of three years; those who took it as an elective for a minimum of 12 weeks; students who graduated between 2012 and 2023; and current students in 2024. Additionally, the study included Chinese Malaysian Mandarin teaching staff who had been teaching at UNM for more than 10 years.

A wide range of nationalities was observed among the 52 respondents. Thirty-seven respondents are Malaysians from different ethnicities according to the parents' mother tongue: Bidayuh from Sarawak, Malaysia (1); Chinese (either parent of Chinese ethnicity; 5); Indian (5); Lun Bawang from Sarawak, Malaysia (1); and Malay (25). The remaining 15 respondents are non-Malaysians: Bruneian (1); British (2); Burmese (2); German (1); Indian (1); Japanese (1); mainland Chinese (1); Maldivian (1); Polish (1); Malay Singaporean (1); Sri Lankan (1); Thai (1); and Vietnamese (1).

The languages used for communication between the parents and the Malaysian respondents are English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, as well as Chinese dialects such as Cantonese and Hokkien. The languages of communication used between the parents and the non-Malaysian respondents are Dhivehi (Maldives), English, German, Hindi, Japanese, Kachin (Myanmar), Spanish (in Britain), Sinhala (Sri Lanka), Polish, Thai, and Vietnamese. Some of the parents do not speak their mother tongues (Bidayuh and Burmese, Cantonese, Hokkien, Swahili (in Britain), Malay, and Tamil) with the respondents but used English instead.

Seven respondents stated "Yes" and 45 stated "No" to the question "Is either of your parents categorised as Chinese ethnically?" Of those who answered "Yes", only 2 parents speak Mandarin. Of these parents who speak Mandarin, only one speaks Mandarin with the respondent at home.

3.3 Procedure

Topics for research were discussed based on current issues and were selected by the researchers. A specific topic was chosen, and a range of survey questions was developed. Before distributing the survey questionnaire, it was crucial to consider the ethical principle of “doing no harm,” which involves safeguarding participants' information and ensuring the data remains anonymous (Hennink et al., 2020). The research ethics application form, along with the research proposal and survey questionnaire, was completed and approved by the UNM Research Committee. The questionnaire was designed in English, was anonymous, and was administered online using Microsoft Forms. The form consisted of questions regarding the students' personal background, family background, language background, and so on. It was expected to take approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete. The survey was conducted over one month, ending in July 2024, and approximately 80 students were invited via Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, and Microsoft Teams. Fifty-two responses were received; the survey responses were analysed and then categorised based on recurring themes.

4 Limitations

This case study is based solely on data collected from a survey questionnaire; no interviews were conducted. Some responses were provided by students who graduated more than 6 to 12 years prior to the study, which may affect the consistency of the data. Additionally, this study focused on various teaching methods applied to different groups of students, which could result in differing viewpoints.

5 Results and discussion

Table 1. Reasons for choosing Mandarin over other languages at UNM

No.	Theme	No. of responses
1	Employment	12
2	Future	6
3	Utility	33
4	Familiarity	2
5	Interest	12

Note. Some responses included more than one category.

Respondents frequently cited employment and career-related motivations for learning Mandarin, emphasising its potential to enhance job prospects, improve employability, and support professional advancement. This reflects a perception of Mandarin as an asset in the workplace. Additionally, many viewed Mandarin as a skill with long-term benefits, particularly in relation to future plans such as pursuing further studies in Mandarin-speaking countries, where language proficiency would be advantageous. The practical utility of Mandarin also emerged as a key theme, with respondents noting its usefulness in everyday life for socialising, engaging with the local community, and communicating in one of the world's most widely spoken languages. Familiarity played a role for some, especially those who had previously studied Mandarin or spoke another East Asian language like Japanese, which shares Chinese characters. Personal interest was another motivating factor, with some respondents drawn to Mandarin through media consumption or a connection to their ethnic heritage. Overall, the responses suggest that Mandarin is seen as both a practical and forward-looking language, valued for its career benefits as well as its cultural and personal significance.

Table 2. Perspectives on the practical value of Mandarin

No.	Theme	No. of responses
1	Communication	28
2	Global presence of Chinese	24
3	Future prospects	22
4	Historical and cultural value	5
5	Leisure	3
6	Self-esteem	3

Note. Some responses included more than one category.

Table 2 shows reasons provided by the respondents who answered “Yes” to the question “In general, do you think Mandarin is a useful language?” All 52 respondents answered “Yes”, and some respondents provided multiple reasons. Two respondents did not provide further detail.

Most of the respondents perceived Mandarin as a practical and strategic language – valuable for interpersonal communication skills, global engagement, and long-term career or academic opportunities. Reasons that were less frequently mentioned but were still significant included the historical and cultural value of Mandarin; Mandarin for leisure activities such as travel and

consumption of media content; and aspects related to self-esteem, such as the intention to become a multilingual speaker and the desire for social recognition. These added more personal or intrinsic motivations, suggesting that for some learners, Mandarin also offers cultural enrichment, enjoyment, and a sense of personal achievement. Overall, the responses demonstrate that Mandarin is widely regarded as a useful language, especially for its communicative function and relevance in a globalised future, while also offering cultural and personal value to a smaller but meaningful group of learners.

Table 3. Suggestions to increase learning motivation

No.	Theme	No. of responses
1	Classroom learning environment	10
2	Media consumption	8
3	Professional use	4
4	Classroom experience	17
5	Cultural exposure	9

Note. Four respondents did not provide any suggestions.

Table 3 shows suggestions made by respondents to increase their learning motivation, where they highlighted several factors such as the classroom learning environment, media consumption, professional use, classroom experience, and cultural exposure.

Many expressed that increased speaking opportunities and having friends who share an interest in the language would make the learning experience more engaging and encouraging. Moreover, media consumption, such as watching dramas and movies, listening to songs, and using language-learning apps, was seen as a way to make learning more enjoyable and to help sustain interest. The prospect of using Mandarin in internships or future careers was also highly motivating, especially when learners observed senior students successfully applying their Mandarin skills in real-life work settings. Within the classroom, respondents suggested that a slower teaching pace, more peer support, interactive activities or games, and opportunities to engage with in-person language partners rather than online ones would boost their motivation. Additionally, field trips to culturally significant locations and travel to Mandarin-speaking regions like Taiwan or China were seen as valuable experiences, with one respondent even proposing that participation in exchange programmes be made compulsory. Overall, the responses indicate that motivation could be significantly increased through both classroom enhancements and greater opportunities for real-world language use in the surrounding environment.

S12, S30, S31, and S52 associated their motivation with practical opportunities and employability.

S12: Internship with requirement of basic Mandarin

S30: When language helps expand career opportunity

S31: When knowing that many job opportunities are being offered for those who are fluent in Mandarin. That's what motivates me the most. Also, I sometimes can get discounts too at Chinese local stores here in Malaysia.

S52: I think if I knew that there were seniors who were able to flourish and do well in mandarin even after graduating, that would have been a good motivation to know what whatever efforts I put in will pay off in the future.

Besides the suggestions provided by the respondents, such as increasing speaking opportunities, media consumption, a larger peer group, a greater range of interactive activities, and cultural exposure such as field trips and travel, the necessity of using Mandarin in the workplace is also crucial. Internship opportunities could be further explored, as Ishengoma and Vaaland (2016) identify that student internships, joint student-industry projects, and industry influence on modernising curricula and programmes are the three most effective university-industry linkage activities that can boost students' job prospects. Meanwhile, sharing sessions on the learning journeys and experiences by alumni, especially those who are now utilising Mandarin in their current jobs, could encourage and boost the motivation of current students when they witness that their seniors are now leveraging Mandarin to perform professional tasks in diverse workplaces. In the study, eight respondents were using Mandarin in their current jobs as administrative assistant, artist, copywriter, executive, finance analyst, human resource officer, IT executive, and part-timer.

The issue of low motivation usually derives from a lack of a sense of achievement. Hu (2008) points out that a sense of achievement plays a crucial role in sustaining learning motivation among university students. The ability to apply Mandarin in real-life situations boosts interest, motivation, and a sense of achievement that can create a positive cycle for the acquisition of Mandarin.

Table 4. Perceived challenges in learning Mandarin at a British university in Malaysia

No.	Theme	No. of responses
1	Unique challenges of learning Mandarin	33
2	Language environment in Malaysia	22
3	Technology	0

4	Language learning resources	1
5	Practical activities	4
6	Personal constraints	5
7	No challenge	1

Note. Some responses included more than one category.

Table 4 reveals the challenges faced by Mandarin learners, where in some cases more than one challenge was reported, and one respondent indicated that they did not face any challenges. The most reported difficulty relates to the unique challenges associated with Mandarin, such as mastering Chinese characters, followed by issues with pronunciation and tone, while fewer respondents struggled with vocabulary, sentence structures, and grammar. Apart from that, the Malaysian environment, where English is predominantly spoken, limits opportunities for Mandarin practice, and exposure to locally influenced Mandarin further confused learners. Respondents also noted that the textbooks used in class, mostly published in mainland China, differ from the Mandarin used in Malaysia, creating a gap between classroom instruction and practical usage. Additionally, a lack of practice outside the classroom hindered progress, even though some respondents recognised its importance but could not engage consistently. Lastly, personal factors such as limited time, self-consciousness, and neurodevelopmental conditions also contributed to the challenges. The following subsections discuss the perceived challenges in detail.

5.1 Unique challenges of learning Mandarin

To attain complete literacy in Chinese, one needs to learn 3,000 to 4,000 characters. Nevertheless, one would be able to comprehend 92% of written material by mastering 1,000 characters (Wong et al., 2010). According to Yan and Lin (2023), Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese languages share more similarities with Chinese than alphabetic languages. The two Japanese and Vietnamese respondents in this research, who are familiar with the use of Chinese characters in their native logographic writing systems, did not consider Chinese character writing a challenge in their learning. Logographic Chinese characters have long been a significant challenge for those who are native speakers of non-logographic writing systems. Respondents who were more familiar with alphabetic languages, such as English, indicated that they had problems recognising and remembering Chinese characters.

In response to the question “What are some challenges you have encountered while learning Mandarin in Malaysia?”, some respondents indicated multiple unique challenges of Mandarin. S7 provided a comprehensive description as follows:

I had encountered many challenges, personally.

1. *To learn language that is foreign to me during MCO for long hours behind the screen.*
2. *Writing its unique structure and to understand it.*
3. *Each stroke and pronunciation lead to multiple meanings*
4. *The vocabulary*
5. *Self-conscious as whenever I try speaking it, people hardly understood what I was trying to say.*

Meanwhile, 65% of the respondents answered “Yes” and 35% answered “No” to the question “Do you think it is necessary to be able to handwrite Chinese characters?”

Those who answered in the affirmative mentioned that it was necessary to be able to handwrite Chinese characters mostly because it helped them recognise the characters and understand the language better.

S5: *It's important to be able to handwrite Chinese characters when the situation calls for it like when you don't have your phone with you and need to ask for help.*

S13: *Being able to handwrite characters help to familiarise and memorise characters easily.... Being able to speak, read and listen is sometimes not sufficient for communication.*

S40: *Yes, especially for business purposes.*

Those who responded in the negative mentioned that it was unnecessary to be able to handwrite Chinese characters. The main reasons provided were the use of technology such as typing on their electronic devices, and reading and speaking were deemed sufficient for the purpose of communication.

S22: *Unfortunately, technology has made it easy to read and type out the language, so there's not really a need to write them.*

The teaching staff mainly found it difficult to teach Chinese characters one by one in the classroom due to the limitation of contact hours because there were other skills to be covered. Students were expected to engage in self-study outside class, including practising the writing of Chinese characters. However, students could incorporate the use of technology such as apps and online tools in order to tackle the difficulties in the memorisation of characters, vocabulary, and grammar.

For instance, to enable one to differentiate between *yī* in the four tones, each of which may represent multiple meanings (e.g., *yī* “one/clothes/medical”; *yí* “aunt/doubt/move”; *yǐ* “already/chair/second”; *yì* “benefit/easy/translate”), listening exercises, songs,

dramas on online channels, and speaking exercises with peers or an online conversation partner will gradually improve students' ability to differentiate the tones. These, however, must be executed in a disciplined manner to yield results, and students must be willing to invest their time in self-study.

5.2 *Language environment in Malaysia*

Results show that regional dialect differences between Malaysia and China often lead to confusion, making it difficult for learners to follow conversations and understand the topics being discussed. S13 explained that the Mandarin spoken in Malaysia is somewhat mixed and differs from the standardised version learned in class, which is more similar to the Mandarin used in mainland China. Similarly, S36 highlighted the distinct differences between Malaysian and China Chinese dialects, while S26 pointed out that the use of local dialects – often not mutually intelligible – further complicates communication.

S7, S24, S25, and S33 shared that their Chinese Malaysian peers often preferred to speak in English, sometimes advising them to do so due to difficulty understanding their Mandarin pronunciation. This preference for English, combined with a general lack of Mandarin-speaking friends – as reported by S31, S35, S39, S45, S46, and S47 – limits opportunities to practise the language. Non-native speakers, especially Malays, face added challenges due to limited support systems, such as the absence of study groups or Mandarin-speaking communities. The fast pace of speech, unfamiliar vocabulary, and cultural nuances also contribute to misunderstandings, creating further barriers to effective communication and language development.

This study reveals that respondents felt classroom learning alone was insufficient for effective language practice, highlighting the need for engagement outside the classroom. At UNM, students have one-on-one online tutoring sessions with native Chinese speakers, who are university students in China, majoring in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. Each UNM student participates in ten sessions per semester, lasting 45 minutes to an hour, with flexible scheduling. However, some respondents felt that in-person interactions with real-life language partners might be more beneficial. This finding is supported by research which indicates that in-person engagements often foster a stronger sense of community and provide immediate, personalised feedback. Real-life conversations tend to be more spontaneous and less structured, allowing learners to practise language in authentic situations, thereby enhancing fluency and conversational skills (Golonka et al., 2014). Nevertheless, well-designed online interactions can be equally effective, especially when they incorporate interactive tools, timely feedback, and strategies to build a sense of community among learners (Lieberman & Schroeder, 2020). Furthermore, respondents agreed that additional daily exercises helped reinforce their classroom learning. Engaging with Mandarin speakers, both locally and online, is essential. Regular practice with friends, teachers, and peers helps address pronunciation issues and improves fluency. Research shows that consistent practice is vital for building language skills, with frequent interactions crucial for overcoming language barriers (Ju et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). This consistent practice also boosts learner confidence and engagement.

Nevertheless, respondents expressed the need for more encouragement and less judgement from peers when practising speaking. They also wanted a larger circle of friends interested in learning Mandarin, especially at similar proficiency levels. A supportive and collaborative environment would help learners improve together, fostering confidence and reducing anxiety. Such an environment allows for mistakes and learning without fear of criticism, with positive reinforcement enhancing the overall learning experience.

The classroom learning environment is a formal setting where students learn under a teacher's supervision, following a structured curriculum and lesson plans (Gagné et al., 1992). It provides direct instruction, immediate feedback, and opportunities for collaboration, reinforcing knowledge in a controlled space. In contrast, the out-of-classroom learning environment is informal and less structured, including online platforms, community involvement, and self-directed learning (Jackson, 2013). Here, learners apply knowledge in real-world contexts, developing independence and critical thinking skills (Beames et al., 2012). This environment promotes experiential learning, creativity, and self-motivation.

The teaching staff found that the small class size was a challenge in creating dynamic and engaging activities and in pairing students effectively. The lack of peer support, disparities in proficiency levels, and learning pace further complicated the learning environment. Moreover, exposing students to genuine and authentic Chinese culture was difficult due to constraints such as timetable conflicts, school budgets, and the lack of personnel to lead field trips.

5.3 *Technology*

No significant challenges were reported by the respondents. However, the teaching staff found that many students preferred in-person tandem learning over virtual alternatives, while some preferred using hard copy materials for revision. Although students were informed about the resources available on Moodle, most did not log in to access them.

This study demonstrates that technology has significantly impacted Mandarin learning by offering a wide range of resources and tools that increase accessibility and convenience. Mobile applications have proven effective in supporting Mandarin learning. Flashcard apps like Quizlet have been used during the semesters to improve students' vocabulary retention and practice, serving as valuable tools for teaching vocabulary (Pham, 2022). Research has shown that students who use these apps demonstrate higher motivation than those who do not (Setiawan & Wiedarti, 2020). According to Jureynolds et al. (2021), mobile apps are frequently used to support both classroom learning and independent study at home due to their flexibility and accessibility. Many of the respondents mentioned the importance of social media and streaming services in providing continuous exposure to Mandarin, enhancing both comprehension and practical application. Many studies have shown that students perceive social media as a valuable tool for academic purposes (Borau et al., 2009; Lee & Markey, 2014).

At an institution like UNM, platforms such as Moodle are integrated with YouTube content, sharing learning materials that include Mandarin-language media like Chinese music, movies, and dramas. Platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok provide access to a wide range of diverse language content, which supports language learners by exposing them to authentic language use. These platforms not only foster informal learning but also encourage interaction with native speakers and culturally relevant content. According to Snelson (2016), YouTube plays a particularly important role in language education

by offering learners access to both formal language instruction and exposure to informal, real-world language use, improving their overall comprehension and fluency.

Language learning apps such as Duolingo, Anki, and Pleco could also be incorporated to promote regular practice, helping students reinforce and build on their language skills. Kang (2016) finds that spaced repetition helps bridge learning gaps caused by inconsistent practice, supporting long-term retention even for learners struggling with limited exposure. Having said that, apps such as Duolingo may need to help their users engage in the target language beyond the individual sentence level by integrating additional meaning-focused or task-based activities (Loewen et al., 2019).

5.4 Language learning resources

According to S24, learning Mandarin from textbooks is quite different from using the language in real-life conversations. S27 added that the way Mandarin is spoken in Malaysia is very different from the way it is taught at university. Furthermore, S12, S33, S35, S37, and S45 mentioned that the difference between textbook Mandarin and the Mandarin slang used in Malaysia adds to the confusion. Certain words differ between the mainland version of Mandarin and the local slang, making it difficult to fully understand what the locals are saying.

The differences between textbook Mandarin from mainland China and local slang used in Malaysia create confusion for students, as the Mandarin spoken in daily life differs from what is taught in classes. This makes it difficult for them to apply their knowledge. Variations in word usage between mainland Chinese and Chinese Malaysian Mandarin add to the challenge.

The teaching staff found that teaching either the Mandarin used in Malaysia or mainland China presented challenges, particularly for incoming and outgoing inter-campus exchange students. At UNM, the short duration of the course requires standardising syllabi to align with inter-campus exchanges, as students need to catch up with the University of Nottingham Ningbo Campus (UNNC) in China, leading to rushed lessons. Catering to students at different proficiency levels is difficult, as preparing tailored materials demands more time and effort.

The Mandarin textbooks used at UNM emphasise the standardised form of Mandarin from mainland China, which can create challenges for learners, particularly when they attempt to engage with Chinese Malaysian communities. The formal and structured language taught in class often contrasts with the colloquial Mandarin spoken in Malaysia. Recent studies highlight this disconnect, as learners struggle with the variations in slang, idioms, and regional expressions. Such differences in linguistic practices, especially in vocabulary influenced by local languages like Malay, English, and local dialects, make communication between mainland Chinese and Chinese Malaysian speakers more difficult (Ong & Troyer, 2022).

In addition, recent studies have emphasised the importance of contextual learning, advocating for integrating local language and cultural elements into Mandarin education to bridge this gap. A review of mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) in Mandarin education suggests that embedding learning in authentic social and cultural activities significantly enhances language acquisition, making the learning experience more practical and connected to real-life use (Shadiev et al., 2020). The inclusion of real-life materials in Chinese textbooks, along with practices and cultural perspectives, is considered essential for developing language skills and fostering global citizenship (Guenier & Li, 2022).

However, while this contextualised approach could mitigate communication issues, respondents reported feeling a sense of accomplishment when their Mandarin resembled the standardised form used in China. This aligns with findings from intercultural competence studies, which suggest that feedback confirming learners' "authenticity" can boost confidence and encourage further learning (Liu, 2022). Thus, integrating local materials as supplementary resources while keeping standardised textbooks at the core could offer a balanced approach to Mandarin education. This would allow students to achieve formal proficiency while becoming more adept at navigating regional language variations.

5.5 Practical learning activities

The respondents reportedly faced challenges in mastering pronunciation and speaking due to limited practice, which often resulted in a lack of confidence. Inconsistency in learning, especially in developing speaking skills, further contributed to the difficulty. Responses related to practical activities are highlighted as follows:

S2: *Lack of practice*

S17: *Did not have any study group*

S48: *Spoken is poor, want to practice more in class*

S49: *Don't practice it outside of class enough*

S52: *Personally, not being consistent with learning, especially when I'm okay with comprehension and writing, but not as good with speaking.*

The teaching staff found that differing levels and varying learning paces made it difficult to encourage in-class participation from slower-paced learners. Additionally, the lack of practice outside the classroom slowed progress, while the non-phonetic nature of Mandarin made it even more challenging to learn. Providing Mandarin-speaking partners for everyday practice was an additional challenge, as most local students were more comfortable speaking English with their peers, limiting opportunities for tandem learning.

S8, S9, and S44 found that the repetition method was an effective approach to foreign language learning, emphasising repeated exposure to language inputs and exercises to strengthen knowledge and improve retention. Various practices and tools were used to apply this method, such as repetitive drills, sentence-building exercises, word reordering puzzles, Chinese storytelling, and flashcard games, all of which help reinforce language acquisition. Research supports the effectiveness of repetition in various areas of language learning, particularly in vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. For example, Nakata (2016) underscores the importance of active retrieval in vocabulary learning through repeated retrieval practices; when conducted within the same learning session, these practices significantly boost retention and recall, highlighting an effective strategy for second language learners aiming to improve vocabulary acquisition. However, there are some factors that influence the effectiveness of repetition, including learner characteristics (e.g., age, prior vocabulary knowledge), the type of learning (spaced vs. massed learning), and the use of visual aids or engagement techniques.

Despite the strengths of the repetition method, learners still face several challenges in mastering speaking skills. Difficulties such as limited practice opportunities, lack of confidence in pronunciation, and challenges with fast speech and thick accents hinder progress. Additionally, the non-phonetic nature of certain languages, like Mandarin, adds complexity to learning, often requiring translation or repetition to ensure comprehension. Inconsistent practice, especially outside the classroom, further slows progress, as learners need regular and varied exposure to the language for fluency (Suzuki, 2017).

Studies indicate that practice outside formal settings is crucial to language mastery. These difficulties highlight the need for supplementary learning activities beyond repetition, such as immersive experiences and regular practice sessions. Incorporating immersive activities like field trips, cultural exhibits, and visits to Mandarin-speaking communities is highly recommended. Studies consistently highlight the benefits of cultural immersion, which goes beyond language mechanics to provide contextual, cultural, and practical exposure that deepens language skills. For example, cultural immersion programmes – both local and abroad – encourage learners to apply the language in real-world settings, which accelerates proficiency and reduces the fear of making mistakes by normalising daily language use (Amor et al., 2023).

Finally, from the perspective of the teaching staff, one of the significant challenges in Mandarin language education is managing the gap between students with different learning speeds, which is especially evident in a flipped classroom model. Slower-paced students struggle to catch up, making it difficult for teachers to prepare diverse learning materials and effectively encourage their participation. This gap is further exacerbated by the lower number of students in some classes, making it challenging to create dynamic, engaging activities and pair students for learning exercises. In tandem learning, finding suitable Mandarin-speaking partners for everyday practice is often problematic, particularly when most local students are English speakers, limiting authentic language exchange opportunities.

5.6 Personal constraints

Responses related to personal constraints are as follows:

S2: Lack of time and motivation to practice

S7: Self-consciousness

S27: As someone who has been diagnosed with ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome, I learn very differently compared to my neurotypical peers. I have to find fun and exciting ways to learn that makes sense for me in order to keep up with the rest. This takes up a lot more effort for me to learn in general.

S29: In UNM the course was for short period, and outside of UNM the course was expensive. My challenge was to pay high fees.

S43: Initially being scared to practice as there is the assumption that I should already be fluent.

It is also worth noting that S43, in response to a separate question, remarked that “motivation in language learning is always personal and everyone improves as quickly as they can/ want to”.

The teaching staff found that it would have been helpful to know if a student was struggling with neurodevelopmental conditions and other challenges such as those mentioned above, because support from the teaching staff can only take place when students reach out to address their issues, especially challenges at a personal level. Students are encouraged to notify the teaching staff even with minimal information so that the team is aware, and support can be provided accordingly.

To address the lack of time to practice outside of class, students may optimise learning by utilising existing online and offline resources and better managing their time for self-study (see Section 5.3 “Technology”). However, students are not expected to attend additional or private language classes outside of the university.

6 Implications and future directions

Students face difficulties inherent to learning Mandarin, including memorising characters, distinguishing tones, and managing the vast amount of vocabulary, whereas for the teaching staff, contact hours limit in-depth instruction. Additionally, small class sizes reduce opportunities for peer support and make it difficult to foster a dynamic learning environment, as well as make differences in students' learning pace more apparent, which complicates lesson planning. These challenges can be addressed by implementing new pedagogical strategies and curriculum design for the module. In line with the results, which showed that students preferred face-to-face practice and were not receptive to the use of technology in this aspect, future research could

explore the effectiveness of peer assistantship models in enhancing differentiated instruction within higher education, while also facilitating out-of-classroom language mentorship and providing learners with more opportunities for real-life communication.

Apart from that, UNM faces unique challenges due to standardising Mandarin teaching across its tri-campus system (UK, China, Malaysia), where confusion arises from differences between the local variety and the mainland Chinese variety taught in class. All these contribute to the lack of practice which, coupled with a lack of time and motivation to practise outside of class, impedes students' progress. One consideration would be for the teaching staff to create their own textbook, tailored to the local as well as international context of the sister campuses in the UK and China. As the organisation of extra-curricular cultural exposure for language application and immersion is challenging due to budget, manpower, and timetabling constraints, the university could consider including an obligatory immersion programme as part of the curriculum – for instance, a short semester during the summer in a country where Mandarin is spoken. This would provide the students with real-world experience of applying and practising their language skills as well as a deeper understanding of the target culture.

Future research could explore the effectiveness of peer assistantship models in enhancing differentiated instruction within higher education, while also facilitating out-of-classroom language mentorship and providing learners with more opportunities for real-life communication. Alternatively, studies might examine the potential of pairing students with tutors majoring in Teaching Chinese as a Second or Foreign Language at local Malaysian universities, which could contextualise their learning within the Malaysian environment and foster a stronger connection to local language varieties and their speakers. Finally, future work should also take into account structural constraints such as small class sizes and limited student intake, which reduce opportunities for peer interaction and remain largely beyond the control of individual teachers.

Although language learning technologies have advanced, many students still prefer in-person tandem learning and physical materials for revision over virtual alternatives like Moodle. Despite this preference, there were no significant technology-related challenges reported by the students, indicating that they generally managed well with the technological tools available for language learning. Therefore, one topic to consider for future research could be to investigate the ways in which artificial intelligence (AI) can step into the role of a conversational partner, as a compromise to having a real-life one. As the field of AI continues to grow, more language learning platforms such as Duolingo, Babbel, Busuu, and Memrise, amongst many others, incorporate AI into their programmes for speaking practice. These can provide personalised feedback and correction to the learner. For now, however, these features are largely only available to paying users.

Students are primarily motivated by extrinsic factors, such as improving employability and securing internships. While these motivations can push them to invest more time and effort into learning, some still struggle with intrinsic motivation. A good way to motivate students is to showcase those who have successfully secured employment or internships due to their Mandarin language proficiency and share how it has opened doors for them in their careers.

Lastly, students with varied cognitive profiles may find communication and practising Mandarin especially difficult. Personalised learning approaches and support could help them overcome these barriers. While a Wellbeing and Learning Support Centre exists at the university to support these students, not all seek assistance. As such, additional effort should be made to encourage students to seek support from the wellbeing centre, where appropriate learning support plans can be created to accommodate their conditions. These support plans would then be shared with the teachers, and subsequently, the teachers can take targeted instructional adjustments to accommodate them.

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