

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

Hwee Ling Kwan

hweeling.kwan@nottingham.edu.my
University of Nottingham Malaysia

Yut Moy Leong

yutmoy.leong@nottingham.edu.my
University of Nottingham Malaysia

Seungyeon Lee

seungyeon.lee@nottingham.edu.my
University of Nottingham Malaysia

Hazel Jin May Ng

hazel.ng@nottingham.edu.my
University of Nottingham Malaysia

Sandrine Yee Chin Sim

sandrine.sim@nottingham.edu.my
University of Nottingham Malaysia

Abstract

Proficiency in Mandarin is increasingly valuable in multilingual regions like Malaysia, where it serves as both a lingua franca and a key cultural element. This study explores the challenges of teaching and learning Mandarin at the University of Nottingham Malaysia (UNM), focusing on diverse student backgrounds, localized Mandarin variations, and the disconnect between standardized curricula and practical application. Data from surveys and reflections reveal obstacles such as limited practice opportunities, diverse proficiency levels, and insufficient time for teaching Chinese characters and cultural nuances. Teaching staff face difficulties adapting resources to meet student needs, while students struggle with motivation, peer support, and authentic language use. The study highlights the importance of cultural immersion, linguistic adaptability, and innovative teaching methods in addressing these issues, offering practical recommendations for improving Mandarin education in multicultural university settings.

Keywords: heritage language education, Mandarin learning, multicultural university, language teaching strategies, language learning challenges, Malaysia.

1. Introduction

Mandarin is not only the most spoken native language in the world but also one of the most influential, playing a vital role in international business, diplomacy, and cultural exchange. With over a billion native speakers, the global prominence of Mandarin continues to grow, driven by China's emergence as a significant global power. As China's economic, political, and cultural influence expands, proficiency in Mandarin has become an essential skill for individuals and nations seeking to engage effectively with Chinese-speaking regions and markets.

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Within this global context, Malaysia stands out as a unique multicultural society where Mandarin holds significant sway, alongside Malay and English (David & Govindasamy, 2003). Malaysia's historical and cultural ties with China have reinforced Mandarin's role within its society. The Chinese Malaysian community, which constitutes about 23% of the population, predominantly speaks various Chinese dialects, including Mandarin (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023)[#]. This demographic has not only preserved traditional cultures and languages but has also facilitated Mandarin's integration into the wider Malaysian sociolinguistic fabric. Malaysia's Southeast Asian position as a melting pot of cultures is mirrored in its linguistic diversity, where multilingualism is the norm. In both urban and rural settings, Mandarin is widely spoken and understood, reflecting its importance as a lingua franca among different ethnic groups, especially in business and commerce where Chinese Malaysian entrepreneurs are particularly active.

The global impact of Mandarin is profound, and its role in Malaysia exemplifies a unique blend of cultural, economic, and educational dynamics. As Malaysia continues to foster its relationship with China and emphasizes multilingual education, the significance of Mandarin will naturally expand, moulding future generations to be globally competent and culturally aware. This background sets the stage for examining the specific challenges and strategies associated with teaching and learning Mandarin in a British university setting within Malaysia, where such multicultural and linguistic dynamics are vividly present.

2. Literature Review

The globalization of education has led to a significant increase in the number of students learning Mandarin as a foreign language worldwide. According to statistics, Chinese, including its varieties, is the most spoken language globally with 1.31 billion speakers, accounting for about 16% of the world's population. Mandarin is the predominant variant, with 898 million speakers among the 7 to 13 main regional groups of the Chinese language (McCarthy, 2020). As one of the most spoken languages globally and a key language for international business and diplomacy, Mandarin has become an important asset in the global educational landscape.

Given this, Malaysia offers a unique environment to students as a significant portion of the population uses at least one of the Chinese varieties in their everyday life, including Mandarin. Proving its importance, public schools and universities, where a majority of students are from non-Chinese speaking backgrounds, teach Mandarin as a subject in their curriculums. A study from UiTM, for instance, acknowledges 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 presents that one of the challenges perceived in Mandarin education is overcoming the cultural differences that the majority of students need to familiarize themselves with (Loh et al., 2021). Another study highlights 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 (Hoe & Lim, 2013). A study from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu shows similar findings, focusing on majority Malay students' demographics (Chua et al., 2020). These studies emphasize the cultural and language backgrounds of the majority of students, highlighting the challenge of integrating Malaysia's rich multicultural background into teaching and learning Mandarin.

In this context, the British university campus in Malaysia encounters additional challenges when teaching Mandarin to their students. First, the backgrounds of each student vary widely – they include not only the major group within Malaysia but also students from other parts of the world, with the increase of international students, and the exchange students from the UK campus. Second, the unique cultural and language background in Malaysia cannot easily be matched with textbooks and curriculum developed by mainland Chinese sources, which students in the current Mandarin course often find alien to use outside the campus. What they learned in the classroom may not be practically applicable in real-life situations in Malaysia, where different Chinese dialects are prevalent, and the subtle differences of Mandarin exist between in Malaysia and the Mainland China.

Connected with this issue, students familiar with other Chinese varieties often face a challenge. They cannot sit in the classroom with other beginner-level students because they do not qualify as

beginners when the curriculum is built to start as a beginner. Thus, this research attempts to explore the current state of teaching and learning Mandarin at a British university in Malaysia, examining pedagogical approaches, challenges, and the role of technology. Taking a mixed method of qualitative and quantitative research, this research will first conduct an online questionnaire combining numerically rated items and open-ended questions targeting the existing student group and alumni, to find out the current obstacles and their practical usage of the language after graduation.

This research investigates challenges encountered by teaching staff and students, proposing strategies to overcome them. It highlights cultural immersion, linguistic adaptability, and pedagogical innovation as crucial elements. The study seeks to optimize these factors to enhance learning experiences for a diverse student body. By examining the different struggles faced by all parties involved in the teaching and learning process, we are aiming at fostering a supportive learning environment that celebrates linguistic diversity and cultural exchange, where students are empowered to not only navigate but also thrive within the diverse linguistic (cultural) landscape.

1. To examine the different challenges faced by both teaching staff and students
2. To explore strategies for overcoming these hurdles, emphasizing the importance of cultural immersion, linguistic adaptability, and pedagogical innovation.

3. Methodology

A qualitative research cycle which consists of design, data collection and analytic cycle (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 illustrates the site and setting, participants and procedure.

3.1 Site and Setting

This study was conducted at the UNM, a private British higher learning institutions in the prefecture of Selangor, Malaysia. The main medium of communication 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 5 contact hours weekly (12 weeks per semester; 2 semesters per academic year). It is also offered as an elective module to students from all faculties with 4 contact hours weekly; number of weeks and semester same as core language mentioned above. Students who need to study Mandarin as a core language module are learning the language consecutively for 3 years (6 semesters) throughout their undergraduate programmes.

3.2 Participants and Demographics

The first step in respondent selection is to define who will provide required data to answer the research question. Secondly, the researcher ensured that the respondents were easily accessible to the teaching staff. For 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 3 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 Mandarin teachers who had taught at UNM for more than 10 years.

From the total of 52 responses received, a wide range of nationalities are observed. 37 respondents are Malaysian from different ethnicities according to the parent's mother tongue: Bidayuh from Sarawak Malaysia (1); Chinese (either parent is from Chinese ethnicity, 5); Indian (5); Lun Bawang from Sarawak Malaysia (1) and Malay (25). The remaining 15 respondents are non-Malaysian: Bruneian (1); British (2); Burmese (2); German (1); Hindu (1); Japanese (1); Mainland Chinese (1); Maldivian (1); Polish (1); Malay Singaporean (1); Sri Lankan (1); Thai (1) and Vietnamese (1).

The medium of communication between the parents and the Malaysian respondents are English, Malay, Mandarin, Tamil, as well as Chinese dialects such as Cantonese and Hokkien. It is also worth noted that:

(a) A British respondent's parent's mother tongue is Swahili but converses with the respondent in English; while another British respondent's parent's mother tongue are English and Spanish and converses with the respondent in both English and Spanish;

(b) A Bruneian respondent's parents' do speak Cantonese, Hokkien, English and Mandarin, but mostly speak with the respondent in English and a little bit of Mandarin;

(c) A Mainland Chinese respondent who attended international school does not consider Mandarin as his/her mother tongue (the mother speaks Mandarin; the father speaks English);

(d) A Tamil speaking parent also understands Mandarin but converses in Tamil with the respondent.

While the medium of communication between the parents and the non-Malaysian respondents are Dhivehi (Maldives), English, German, Hindi, Japanese, Kachin (Myanmar), Spanish (in Britain), Singhala (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, Tamil) with the respondents but in English.

Seven respondents state "Yes" and 45 state "No" in the question "Is either of your parents categorized as Chinese ethnically?" Of the seven whose answer is "Yes", only 2 parents speak Mandarin. And from these 2 parents who speak Mandarin, only 1 parent speak 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 15-20 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 but only 52 responded. The survey data was coded and categorized.

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 some time ago, 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. Findings

According to the survey, teachers' and students' challenges are categorised into 7 areas. "S" represents students while "T" represents Teacher.

5.1 Unique Challenges of Mandarin

S: Most of the respondents in this research are English speakers who are familiar with Latin alphabets. The challenges related to the target language reported by the respondents are memorization of characters, differentiation of tones, the large amount of vocabulary and grammar.

T: The teaching staff mainly finds that it is difficult to teach the Chinese characters one by one during the 4-5 contact hours per week because there are many other skills to be covered. Students are expected to do self-study outside of the class, including practicing the writing of Chinese characters. But it fully depends on how much time a student invests in the self-study due to the non-existence of compulsory monitoring or reporting system in making sure the students have really done so.

5.2 Environment (Class Setting)

S: Regional dialect differences between Malaysia and China often lead to confusion, as the various dialects make it difficult to follow conversations and identify topics being discussed. The lack of Mandarin-speaking peers, especially in environments where people are more comfortable speaking English, limits practice opportunities. Non-native speakers, particularly Malays, face additional challenges due to limited support, such as the absence of study groups. The fast pace of speech and unfamiliar vocabulary also contribute to a lack of understanding, while differences in words and cultural nuances create further communication barriers.

T: The lower number of students makes it challenging to create dynamic and engaging activities and to pair students effectively. The lack of peer support and motivation further complicates the learning environment. Different gaps between students of varying levels due to differences in learning pace. Students' limited time for self-study and diverse learning methods add to the challenge. Moreover, exposing students to genuine and authentic Chinese culture is difficult due to constraints such as timetable matching, school budgets, and the availability of someone to lead field trips.

5.3 Technology

S: No significant challenges identified.

T: Many students prefer in-person tandem learning over virtual alternatives, while some prefer using hardcopy materials for revision. Although students were informed about the resources available on Moodle, most did not log in to access them.

5.4 Resources

S: 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 was taught in classes. This makes it difficult for them to apply their learned knowledge. Variations in word usage between Mainland Chinese and Malaysian Chinese add to the challenge. Although students are not expected to sign up for extra courses off-campus, time constraints and high course fees outside of university further hinder student's ability to improve their language skills.

T: Teaching either Mandarin used in Malaysia or Mainland China presents challenges, particularly for incoming and outgoing inter-campus exchange students. At UNM, the short duration of the course requires standardizing syllabi to align with inter-campus exchanges, as students need to catch up with 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.

5.5 Activities

S: Students face challenges mastering pronunciation and speaking due to limited practice, which also leads to a lack of confidence in their pronunciation. Fast speech and thick accents further hinder comprehension, while inconsistency in learning, particularly in speaking skills, worsen the issue. The lack of practice outside of class slows progress, and the non-phonetic nature of the language makes it even more difficult to learn. Students often need to translate or repeat words to ensure understanding.



T: Students at different levels due to varying learning paces, making it difficult to encourage in class participation from slower-paced learners. Providing Mandarin-speaking partners for everyday practice is also challenging, as most local students are more comfortable speaking English with Mandarin learners, limiting opportunities for tandem learning. The limited time during class restricts the ability to thoroughly teach each Chinese character.

5.6 Employability

S: In the question of “What could have been done to increase your motivation in learning Mandarin?”, respondents find their motivation would increase when they: know Mandarin helps expand career opportunity; do an internship that requires them to use basic Mandarin; sit for a proficiency exam; get to know there were seniors who performed well in Mandarin and landed on a good job after graduating because it is an assurance that the efforts will pay off in the future.

T: The teaching staff finds that if the proficiency of Mandarin among students are strengthened, undoubtedly the stakeholders would be very keen to recruit our graduates who can utilize the language in the massive world market. But due to the difficulties in learning Mandarin and its limitation of the proficiency level, some graduates who have yet to master the language well may find it challenging to increase their employability.

5.7 Personal

S: A student with ADHD and Asperger’s Syndrome finds it challenging to communicate with peers or when practicing the language. Others indicate the lack of time to practice outside of the class; lack of self-consciousness to practice regularly; low level of motivation; lack of financial aid to attend additional language classes outside of the class. It is also worth noted that a respondent finds that “motivation in language learning is always personal and everyone improves as quickly as they can/want to.”

T: The teaching staff finds that it would have been helpful to know if a student is struggling with neurodevelopmental conditions and other challenges mentioned above.

6. Discussion

6.1 Unique challenges of Mandarin

To attain complete literacy in Chinese, one needs to learn 3,000 - 4,000 characters. Nevertheless, one will be able to comprehend 92% of written material by mastering 1,000 characters (Wong et al., 2012). According to Yan and Lin (2023), Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese language share more similarities with Chinese than alphabetic languages. The two Japanese and Vietnamese respondents in this research who are associated with the use of Chinese characters in their native logographic writing systems do not consider Chinese character writing a challenge in their learning. Logographic Chinese characters has long been a huge challenge to those who are native to non-logographic writing systems. Respondents who are more familiar with alphabetic language such as English and Thai, indicate that they have problems recognizing and remembering Chinese characters.

In the question “Do you think it is necessary to be able to handwrite Chinese characters?”, 34 respondents (65%) answer “Yes”. They find handwriting Chinese characters is a significant skill for understanding and mastering Mandarin. While 18 respondents (35%) answer “No”, by emphasizing the use of technology helps eliminating the hassle of memorizing the writing of Chinese characters.

It could be impractical to teach Chinese characters one by one in the classroom due to the limitation of contact hours. In order to tackle the difficulties in memorization of characters, vocabulary and grammar, students can incorporate the use of technology such as apps and online tools (see “Technology” and “Activities” below). To enable one to differentiate between *yī* in the four tones that each 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 any online channels

and speaking exercises with peers or online conversation partner (see “Technology” and “Activities” below) will gradually improve students’ ability to differentiate the tones. But these have to be executed in a disciplined manner to yield results.

6.2 Environment (class setting)

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.

This study reveals that students feel classroom learning alone is insufficient for effective language practice, highlighting the need for engagement outside the classroom. At UNM, students had one-on-one online tutoring sessions with native Chinese speakers, who were university students in China, majoring in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. Each UNM student participated in 10 sessions per semester, lasting 45 minutes to an hour, with flexible scheduling. However, some students felt that in-person interactions with real-life language partners might be more beneficial.

While online sessions offer additional practice, research indicates that in-person engagements often foster a stronger sense of community and provide immediate, personalized feedback. Real-life conversations tend to be more spontaneous and less structured, allow learners to practice language in authentic situations, 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, students agreed that more daily exercises help reinforce what they learn in class. 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.

However, students expressed the need for more encouragement and less judgment from peers when practicing 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.

6.3 Technology

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, A. T., 2022). Research has shown that these apps boost student motivation compared to those who do not use them (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 about 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 can also be included to promote regular practice, helping students reinforce and build on their language skills. Kang (2016) found 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 its users to engage in the target language beyond the individual sentence level by integrating additional meaning-focused or task-based activities (Loewen et al., 2019).

6.4 Resources

The Mandarin textbooks used at UNM emphasize the standardized form of Mandarin from Mainland China, which can create challenges for learners, particularly when they attempt to engage with Malaysian Chinese 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 Malaysian Chinese speakers more difficult (Ong, T. & Troyer, P., 2022).

In addition, recent studies have emphasized 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 (Shadiey 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 contextualized approach could mitigate communication issues, many students still feel a sense of accomplishment when their Mandarin resembles the standardized 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 standardized textbooks at the core could offer a balanced approach to Mandarin education. This allows students to achieve formal proficiency while becoming more adept at navigating regional language variations.

6.5 Activities

This study found that the repetition method is an effective approach to foreign language learning, emphasizing repeated exposure to language inputs and exercises to strengthen knowledge and improve retention. Various practices and tools are 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 by repeated retrieval practices, conducted within the same learning session, 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 programs—both local and abroad—encourage learners to apply the language in real-world settings, which accelerates proficiency and reduces fear of mistakes by normalizing daily language use (Amor et al., 2023).

Finally, from teacher's perspective, one of the significant challenges in Mandarin language education is managing the gap between students of different learning speeds, which is especially evident in a flipped classroom model. Slower-paced students may 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.

Additionally, logistical challenges such as limited time to teach Chinese characters and insufficient exposure to genuine Chinese culture, due to constraints in timetabling, budget, and personnel, hinder students' cultural immersion. Many students prefer in-person tandem learning and hardcopy materials for revision, rather than virtual platforms, which further limits their engagement. Despite being notified about resources available on platforms like Moodle, many students did not log in to access them, indicating a lack of motivation and self-study habits. Peer support is also lacking, and the diversity in learning methods contributes to inconsistencies in progress, as many students fail to invest enough time in self-study, which is crucial for mastering a language.

6.6 Employability

In a World Bank policy research report released in 2002, it defines the new wave of globalization began from around 1980. Globalization has immensely increased the opportunities on cross-cultural communication, which undoubtedly led to the finding of "communication" being ranked the second highest soft skill sought by the business workplace (Robles, 2012). Although Robles does not specifically indicate foreign language communication, given the unstoppable waves of globalization, it is undeniable that cross-culture communication occurs more than ever in the early 21st century. Yang (2017) points out that labour market demands proficiency in language, disciplinary expertise and global networking skills. Being a global hub for cross border collaboration, UNM is determined to enhance the employability of graduates.

Opportunities of internship can be further explored as how Ishengoma and Vaaland (2015) conclude that student internships, joint student-industry projects and industry influence on modernizing 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 utilizing Mandarin in their current jobs. This will encourage and boost the motivation of students when they witness their seniors are now leveraging Mandarin to perform their ongoing professional tasks in very diverse workplaces. (In this



research, 8 respondents are using Mandarin in their current jobs such as administrative assistant; artist; copywriter; executive; finance analyst; human resource officer; IT executive and part-timer.)

6.7 Personal

Support from the teaching staff can only take place when students reach out to address their issues, especially the challenges on a personal level. Students are encouraged to notify the teaching staff even with the minimal information so that the staff is aware, and support can be provided accordingly.

To address the lack of time to practice outside of the class, students can utilize technology to better manage their time in performing self-study (see “Technology”). In regard to the lack of self-consciousness to practice regularly, as mentioned earlier, students are expected to do self-study outside of the class, including practicing the writing of Chinese characters, learning vocabulary and grammar, and performing listening and speaking exercises. But due to the non-existence of compulsory monitoring or reporting system in making sure the students have gone through their self-study, a portfolio or self-reflective log could be adopted to help monitoring the progress of the self-study. The issue of low level of motivation usually derives from the lack of sense of achievement. Hu (2008) points out that the sense of achievement plays a crucial role in sustaining the learning motivation among university students. The ability to apply Mandarin in real life situations boosts interest, motivation and sense of achievement that will become a positive cycle for the acquisition of Mandarin. The strategies in “Environment”, “Technology” and “Activities” discussed above can be adopted to help boost students’ motivation and visualize the efforts they make will pay off.

Students are not expected to attend additional or private language classes outside of the class and can avoid spending money by utilizing the existing resources. Online tools can be made useful to facilitate the learning.

7. Implications and conclusion

Students face difficulties inherent to learning Mandarin, including memorising characters, distinguishing tones, and managing the vast amount of vocabulary, whereas for the teacher, limited class time restricts in-depth instruction, particularly in teaching character writing. As a result, students are expected to engage in autonomous learning to keep up with the syllabus. Additionally, small class sizes reduce opportunities for peer support and make it difficult to foster a dynamic learning environment, as well as makes differences in students' learning pace more apparent, which complicates lesson planning.

Apart from that, the University of Nottingham Malaysia faces unique challenges due to standardizing Mandarin teaching across its tri-campus system (UK, China, Malaysia), where confusion arises from differences between the local and the Mainland Chinese variety taught in class. Additionally, learners found that on-campus Mandarin speakers prefer to use English when interacting with them. All these contribute to the lack of practice which coupled with a lack of time and motivation to practice outside of class, impede students' progress. Apart from that, budget, manpower, and timetabling constraints make it challenging to organize authentic cultural activities for immersion and language application.

Interestingly, although language learning technologies have advanced, many students still prefer in-person tandem learning and physical materials for revision over virtual alternatives like Moodle. There were no significant technology-related challenges reported by the students, indicating that they generally manage well with the technological tools available for language learning.

These challenges can be addressed by giving more support to the teacher. Offering student assistantships to existing students who are fluent in Mandarin, where these students act as in-class teaching aids, allows for differentiated instruction and personalised learning support by the teacher. Student assistants can also act as out of classroom language mentors, paired with a learner for conversational language practice. This is in line with the results which showed that students preferred face-to-face practice and were not receptive to the use technology in this aspect. With regards to

the lack of peers at the same level of proficiency, this can only be resolved if there were a larger intake of students.

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 personal motivation. A good way to motivate them is to showcase those who have successfully secured employment or internships due to their Mandarin language skill, and sharing how it has opened doors for them in their careers.

Lastly, neurodivergent students find communication and practicing Mandarin especially difficult. Personalized learning approaches and support could help them overcome these barriers. While a wellbeing centre exists to support neurodivergent students, not all seek assistance. As such, additional effort should be made to encourage students to seek support from the university 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 teacher can take the appropriate steps to accommodate them.

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