



Why is Mandarin Needed by MFL Learners in Malaysia?

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ABSTRACT

According to Hutchinson and Waters's Target Situation Analysis framework, the question of 'why do learners need to learn a language?' should be the first question when investigating learners' target needs. Thus, this study aims to identify the purposes of learning Mandarin by MFL learners in Malaysia. Questionnaire was used as the research instrument to gather information from the UiTM and Non-UiTM students who had undergone two different mediums of instruction, Pinyin Romanised Mandarin and Chinese characters, respectively. The findings show that both UiTM (73.9%) and Non-UiTM students (76.2%) rated the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for improving job prospects' as their most important one for learning Mandarin. The second and third highest responses went to the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for dealing with future Mandarin-speaking clients at work' and the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for communicating with Mandarin-speaking friends'.

KEYWORDS : Mandarin as a foreign language, target situation analysis, tertiary level

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, most of the Chinese learn Mandarin language in their six-year formal primary Chinese education, thus, MFL (Mandarin as a foreign language) learners in Malaysia at tertiary level are mostly Malay students. At tertiary level, Mandarin courses have been offered in public universities such as Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), etc. Most of the universities offer MFL courses as optional elective courses. In contrast, UiTM offers Mandarin courses as one of the compulsory third languages, great demand for MFL learning is found among UiTM students as evidenced by the fact that more than 9,000 students, including 3,000 from UiTM branch campuses, take MFL courses for a semester. Although the number of MFL learners at tertiary level has increased rapidly, however, there has not yet been any nationwide Mandarin needs analysis conducted in Malaysia.

Objectives of the study

This study aims to identify the purposes for the MFL learners in Malaysia to learn Mandarin in order to answer the first WH question of "why" in the Target Situation Analysis (hereafter TSA).

Significance of the study

The findings of the study is important as if learners, syllabus designers and Mandarin teachers have an awareness of why MFL learners in Malaysia need Mandarin, the content adopted in the Mandarin course will as a result be more useful to learners.

TSA FRAMEWORK

Hutchinson and Waters (1992[1987]) set up their TSA framework on the basis of WH questions, namely, 'why, how, where, when, what and who' to gather information for the purpose of analysing learners' target needs. According to TSA, the question of 'why do learners need to learn a language?' should be the first question when investigating learners' target needs. The rationale is when the curriculum planners, syllabus designers and teachers are informed about the purposes why the target group is learning a particular language, the content selected for the language course will definitely be more useful to learners.

METDODOLOGY

Questionnaire was chosen as the research instrument because it offers the most efficient ways to gather information from a large number of respondents. The questionnaire was meant for UiTM and Non-UiTM students who had undergone two different mediums of instruction, Pinyin, the Romanised Mandarin and Chinese characters, respectively.

The UiTM group surveyed 2,500 MFL students from the five different programmes of study. In total, 2,303 questionnaires were returned with a response rate of 92.1%, and 2,151 questionnaires (86.04%) were valid for analysis. The Non-UiTM group surveyed 500 MFL learners at USM, UM, UPM and UKM. Overall, four hundred and eighteen (418) sets were completed with a return rate of 83.6% and 383 sets

were valid for further analysis.

All data gathered was analysed quantitatively. Descriptive analyses were used to obtain the frequency information and mean values wherever needed. The comparison of perceptions between UiTM and Non-UiTM students were identified based on the Pearson's chi-square test.

FINDINGS

Twelve purposes for learning Mandarin were proposed in the questionnaire to investigate why the respondents chose to learn Mandarin. The questionnaire allowed the respondents to select up to three of the most important purposes for learning Mandarin. The most important purpose was ranked as 1, the second priority as 2, and the third priority as 3.

Overall perceptions

The findings presented in Figure 1 imply that three purposes were given priority. The purpose of 'learning Mandarin for improving job prospects' received the highest response by respondents. Both UiTM (73.9%) and Non-UiTM students (76.2%) rated this purpose as their most important one for learning Mandarin (chi square test: $\chi^2 = .917$, $df = 1$, $p = .338$). The second and third highest responses went to the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for dealing with future Mandarin-speaking clients at work' and the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for communicating with Mandarin-speaking friends'. Comparatively, more responses were received from the UiTM students (56.4%) than from the Non-UiTM students (41.3%) for the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for dealing with future Mandarin-speaking clients at work'. In contrast, less responses were given by the UiTM students (44.4%) than from the Non-UiTM students (62.9%) for the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for communicating with Mandarin-speaking friends'.

As Figure 1 shows, the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for mastering a world language' was selected by 28.4% of the UiTM students and 35.8% of the Non-UiTM students, whereas the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for doing business with local Chinese people' was rated as a lower priority by students (UiTM 27.6%; Non-UiTM 21.9%). A small number of learners (UiTM 28%; Non-UiTM 11.7%) declared that their purpose in learning Mandarin was to fulfil the university requirement to do a third or foreign language.

'Learning Mandarin for academic purposes' was not a high priority for students, less students (UiTM 12%; Non-UiTM 18%) chose this as one of their learning purposes. The learners also did not aim to learn Mandarin for understanding Chinese culture. Only 7.9% of the UiTM students responded to this purpose compared to 14.4% of the Non-UiTM students. The learners gave a lower priority to both the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for travelling to mainland China or Taiwan' (UiTM 5.7%; Non-UiTM 8.9%) as well as the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for studying or working in mainland China or Taiwan' (UiTM 4.5%; Non-UiTM 6%). The lowest priority was given to the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for developing business in mainland China or Tai-

wan' (UiTM 2.7%; Non-UiTM 3.4%) and the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for becoming a Mandarin language teacher' (UiTM 2.6%; Non-UiTM 3.4%) see Figure 1.

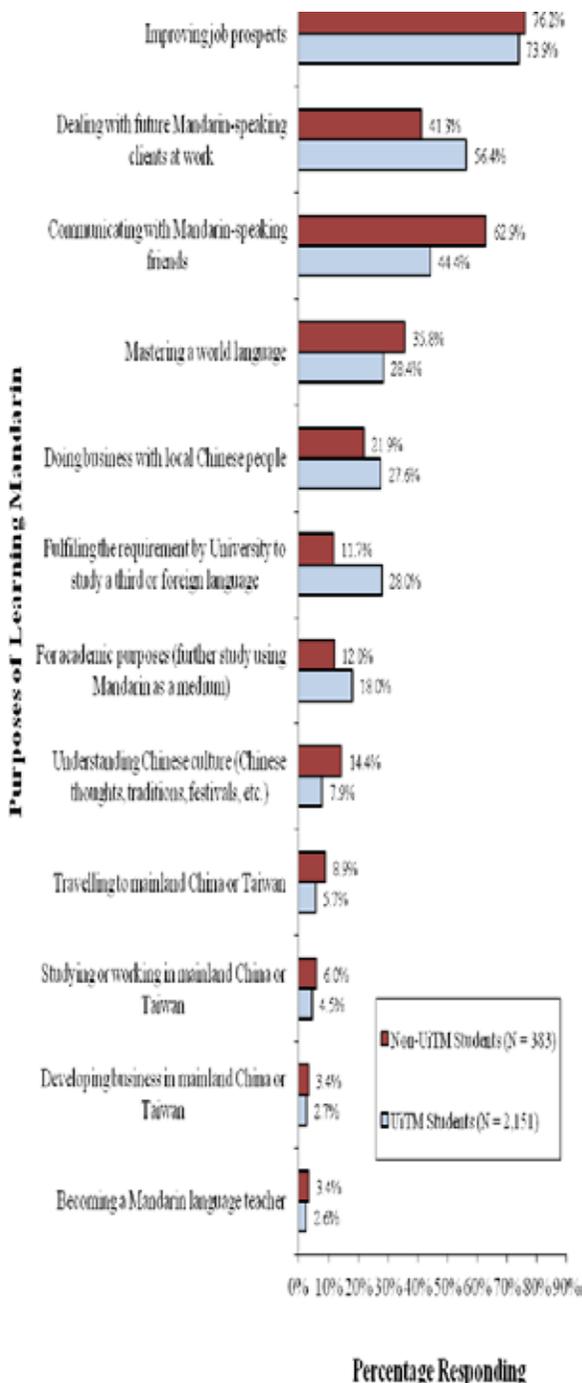


Figure 1 Purposes of learning Mandarin by UiTM and Non-UiTM students.

Perceptions by ranking of preference: Top three purposes
 In this section, the top three purposes according to the respondents' ranking preference will be elaborated on. With reference to Figure 2, 64.8% and 69.5% of the UiTM and Non-UiTM students, respectively, indicate the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for improving job prospects' as their first choice. No significant difference was detected by a chi-square test ($\chi^2 = 2.477$, $df = 2$, $p = .290$).

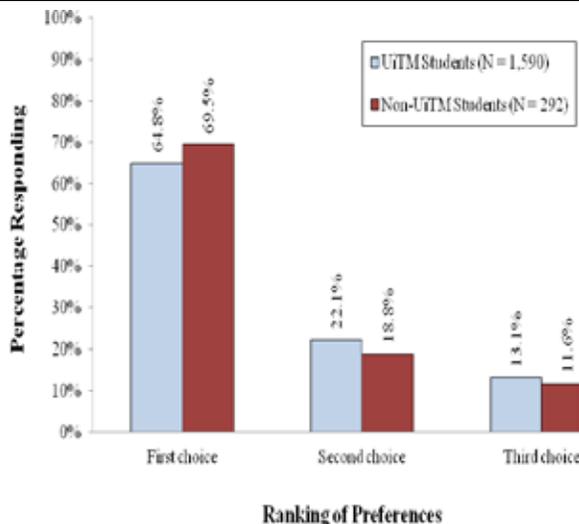


Figure 2 Students' purpose of 'learning Mandarin for improving job prospects' by ranking of preferences

Table 1 Students' Purpose of 'learning Mandarin for dealing with future Mandarin-speaking clients at work' by Ranking of Preference

Respondents		Ranking of preferences for 'learning Mandarin for dealing with future Mandarin-speaking clients at work'			Total
		1. First choice	2. Second choice	3. Third choice	
UiTM		314	540	359	1,213
		25.9%	44.5%	29.6%	100.0%
Non-UiTM		23	72	63	158
		14.6%	45.6%	39.9%	100.0%
Total		337	612	422	1,371
		24.6%	44.6%	30.8%	100.0%

In contrast, a quarter (25.9%) of the UiTM students ranked 'learning Mandarin for dealing with future Mandarin-speaking clients at work' as their first choice compared to 14.6% of the Non-UiTM students (Table 1). Significant differences were shown between UiTM and Non-UiTM students' responses (chi-square test: $\chi^2 = 12.131$, $df = 2$, $p = .002$).

Regarding the purpose of 'learning Mandarin for communicating with Mandarin-speaking friends', no significant differences were found between responses from UiTM and Non-UiTM students (chi-square test: $\chi^2 = .735$, $df = 2$, $p = .692$). The findings clearly show that the students' motivations for learning Mandarin were focused mainly on their future careers.

DISCUSSION

Overall, the views of MFL learners in Malaysia were rather different from the general perceptions of MFL learners in other parts of the world. Justification will be made wherever there is a need to explain the different language needs of MFL learners in Malaysia.

The respondents in this study focused more on extrinsic motivations than intrinsic ones. Intrinsic motivations emphasise the interest in and love for a language, while extrinsic motivation refers to external factors to motivate someone to learn such as rewards in terms of grades, money or job promotion. More than 70% and 50% of the student-respondents (Figure 1) aimed to learn Mandarin to improve their future employment prospects and to interact with their future clients, respectively, in the multiethnic society of Malaysia. Feng

(2003) indicated that short-term international MFL learners in China tend to learn Mandarin for instrumental reasons. They aim for some kind of return from their learning, for instance, learning Mandarin for a salary increment, improving their social status, improving future job prospects, and completing studies.

In regards to the intrinsic motivation to learn Mandarin for communicating with Mandarin-speaking friends, some students showed interest in making friends with Chinese so that they could exchange ideas or information. The finding in this study shows that more than 60% of the Non-UiTM students ranked 'learning Mandarin for communicating with Mandarin-speaking friends' higher compared to 40% of the UiTM students (Table 1). The finding implies that Non-UiTM students had a greater interest in being accepted as members of Chinese society. Non-UiTM students are in a multiethnic environment where they can meet and make friends with other Chinese students, but UiTM students do not have this environment because the UiTM accepts only Bumiputra students.

Research about why international MFL learners in China learn Mandarin indicates that MFL learners with a non-Chinese background ranked the 'learning of Chinese culture' as their third highest motivation for learning Mandarin (Wang, Ni, Wang & Jiang, 2004). However, MFL learners in Malaysia held very different views and only 7.9% of the UiTM students and 14.4% of the Non-UiTM students (Figure 1) thought that understanding the Chinese culture was their driving force in learning Chinese. One reason for this might be that most of them are not of Chinese origin. According to a study of Indonesian learners' motivation to learn Mandarin, being of Chinese origin determines the motivation to learn Mandarin (Guo, 2009). Learners from a non-Chinese background had a higher extrinsic motivation, while learners from a Chinese background had higher intrinsic motivation

to be integrated into Chinese culture and to communicate like a native Chinese speaker (Wang et al., 2004; Guo, 2009).

With respect to 'learning Mandarin for business purposes', generally it is believed that many people outside mainland China are keen to learn Chinese because of economic growth and trade exchanges between China and foreign countries (Liao, 2008). However, surprisingly, only a very small number of student-respondents (UiTM: 2.7%; Non-UiTM: 3.4%) (Figure 1) have shown an interest in learning Mandarin for the purpose of developing business in China, which suggests that the argument for 'learning Mandarin for business purposes in China' may not be true for MFL learners in Malaysia. However, a higher number of student-respondents (UiTM: 27.6%; Non-UiTM: 21.9%) (Figure 1) were interested in learning Mandarin to do business with local Chinese people.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on an interrogative approach, this paper illustrates the WH question of 'Why' as a way to identify learners' target language needs in learning Mandarin: 'Why did the respondents choose to learn Mandarin?', i.e., the learners' purposes for learning Mandarin. In regards to this question, MFL learners in Malaysia strongly expressed their extrinsic motivation to improve their future employment prospects and to converse with their future clients as opposed to an intrinsic motivation such as 'learning Chinese culture', which has been found to be a driving force in learning Chinese for MFL learners from other countries. Justifications are made for the findings which are rather different from the common perceptions of MFL learners in other parts of the world. The findings of the study is important as if learners, syllabus designers and Mandarin teachers have an awareness of why

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