

Factors influencing foreign language learners' motivation in continuing to learn Mandarin

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Abstract

The study prime motive was to identify factors that encourage learners to be motivated to continue to learn Mandarin. Campbell and Storch (2011) guiding questionnaire was adapted through the interview sessions among 11 Mandarin level two learners of different grades at one of the universities in Kelantan. The learners were interviewed in person in *Bahasa Malaysia*. The interview sessions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim and translated into English. The inquiry revealed that non-native Mandarin learners were motivated to continue to learn Mandarin due to the importance of Mandarin in the aspect of employability, self-interest and improving Mandarin grade. The study gives insight to teachers to plan their teaching to match with the learners' demands that are related to their future career building, hence the learning must consider real life situation. It is also recommended that having interesting and interactive learning activities are encouraged to boost learners' learning motivation.

Keyword: Factors Influencing Learning Motivation, Teaching Mandarin as a Foreign Language

INTRODUCTION

Due to China's rapid development in various sectors, such as politics, science, economy, technology and cultures, more and more countries as well as people around the world pay high attention to China including the language, Mandarin. Mandarin is the official language used in China, followed by Taiwan and Hong Kong. Mandarin is also the most spoken language worldwide, with 1.28 billion speakers scattered in 37 countries including China that make up approximately 16 percent of the world population (McCarthy, 2018). As a result, Mandarin becomes one of the most popular languages to be learnt by non-native Mandarin speakers.

The awareness of mastering Mandarin as an additional language in Malaysia is reflected in the National Higher Action Plan 2007-2010 where tertiary students are required to learn an additional language besides the national language, *Bahasa Malaysia*, and the second language, English. The policy was further enhanced in Malaysia Education Blueprint 2015-2025 (Higher Education) (MEB) and the integrated Cumulative Grade Point Average (iCGPA) Rubric Learning Outcomes Assessment Guide. Language proficiency is stressed as one of the six primary attributes as found in MEB. The language proficiency attribute emphasises on students' proficiency in *Bahasa Malaysia* and English, as well as an emphasis on the learning of a foreign language. According to the latest curriculum development, the iCGPA, communication is included as one of the skills students have to master. Under these policies, non-native Mandarin learners can choose to participate in Mandarin course for at least one semester depending on the universities' Mandarin class availability.

The reasons for non-native Mandarin learners to opt for a Mandarin course are not because just for the sake of learning a language, but they are also looking for the opportunity to use the language for communication and future career prospects that they will gain after learning the language. Some learners participate in Mandarin course because they are curious about the conversation topics their Chinese friends are discussing, and they also want to communicate in Chinese when they are doing with their shopping and other dealings.

However, from the interview between the learners and the teacher, the researcher found that the teacher has highlighted that learners' motivation tends to drop when they started their Mandarin level 2 course. The causes for this phenomenon are explained by Campbell and Storch (2011) in their

research that learners are demotivated at some point over the Mandarin course of the semester due to some factors connected to the language learning environment, such as the nature of coursework (challenges of the learning) and the teaching or institutional changes. On the same notion of understanding, Ushioda (1996) asserted that these are the reasons that influence non-native Mandarin learners' learning motivation to fluctuate over time and this condition usually happens within the context of institutionalised learning.

Thus, this research's objective is mainly to examine the factors that influence non-native Mandarin learners' motivation to continue learning Mandarin as a foreign language. The study took place at one of the local universities in Kelantan, Malaysia.

RELATED LITERATURE REVIEW

Continuity to learn a language or a skill depends on the individual's motivation that drives them to continue to learn the target language. This is because it is an important factor that can greatly influenced the achievement of learners' foreign language acquisition (Zhu, 2014).

Learning motivation

Learning motivation can be defined as the process of starting, guiding, and maintaining goal-orientated behaviours in learning (Gopalan.et.al, 2017). Houssave proposed that motivation is the key behind strength. Motivation is a persuasive feeling that instigates movements, an energy direction, the reason for our behaviour and "what" and "why" the individuals do something. From this point, motivation provides positivism toward learners to accomplish a task or activity to the end and succeed in it no matter how difficult the task is (Ryan & Deci, 2000, Ainley & Ainley 2011, Broussard & Garrison, 2004 and Gopalan.et.al, 2017).

In learning certain knowledge or skills, students' level of motivation is reflected on their engagement and contribution in a learning environment. According to Skinner and Belmont (1993), learners with active and high motivation level will spontaneously participate or involve in activities without expecting any external rewards. Meanwhile, in order to encourage a low motivated learner, external rewards are needed to convince them to participate in activities (Skinner & Belmont, 1993; Gopalan et al., 2017). Thus, motivation is a standpoint for learning, where it initiates success, while at the same time lacking of motivation can trigger major barrier that prevents success (Jeamu, et al., 2008, Gopalan et al., 2017). There are also several reasons that influence motivation level in learning, such as the ability to believe in the effort and the unawareness of the worth characteristic of the academic tasks (Legault et al., 2006, Gopalan et al., 2017).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT)

The rapid rise of English as a global language has led to extensive studies on motivational theories. This phenomenon has also raised a concern on the practicality of the theory proposed by Gardner and Lambert which is said to be hardly related to reality. This is because English has been widely used by speakers who have diverse regional, social, and educational backgrounds (Meierkord, 2012).

Deci and Ryan proposed the Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which highlights the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to internal motivation where one's deed is done for the individual's own sake because he or she finds the activity or task interesting and gives spontaneous satisfaction and enjoyment (Deci 1971; Lepper et al. 1973; Gagné & Deci 2005). While, extrinsic motivation refers to external motivation where one's deed is done for the sake of the outcome, such as getting high grade, to avoid punishment or to gain financial reward.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted among 11 selected Mandarin level 2 students. They were selected based on their Mandarin level 1 results, as shown in Table 3.1 below. The interviews were conducted in person and audio recorded. The interview questionnaire was adapted from Campbell and Storch (2011) guiding questionnaire, which focuses on factors that influence learners' choice making in order to continue Mandarin learning. The interviews were conducted in Bahasa Malaysia.

Table 3.1 The demographic information of the interviewees.

No.	Students' nicknames	Gender	Race	Mandarin Level 1 Scoring Grades
1.	Zuraida	Female	Malay	A
2.	Nurhazirah	Female	Malay	A
3.	Janagi	Female	Indian	A-
4.	Farida	Female	Malay	A-
5.	Masturina	Female	Malay	B
6.	Sharida	Female	Malay	B-
7.	Puteri	Female	Malay	B
8.	Syazwani	Female	Malay	C+
9.	Faizudin	Male	Malay	C+
10.	Ummi	Female	Malay	C+
11.	Badihah	Female	Malay	C-

DATA ANALYSIS

The interviews were transcribed verbatim and translated into English. Transcripts were then analysed individually and collectively, by using a horizontal and vertical content analysis process, to confirm and refute categories and develop themes and patterns. Categories were then confirmed, refuted, or expanded in subsequent discussion between researchers. Validity was attained through triangulation of data.

FINDINGS

Participants were asked questions related to reasons for their choice to learn Mandarin. The responses given mostly concerned job opportunity, self-interest and improving their Mandarin scores. The analysis was then matched to the interview guide and excerpts from selected participants and were used to illustrate the themes that emerged from the data.

Job opportunity

When the participants were asked about reasons for them to choose to continue to enrol in Mandarin course, most of them give reasons related to the importance of Mandarin in the job opportunity aspect. Hence, the importance of Mandarin is related to their future prospect, where proficiency in Mandarin could provide them with more job opportunities that could help them in their carrier building. This phenomenon happens due to the rapid growth in China's economy that indirectly influences the world economy, where most of the Mandarin learners think that proficiency in Mandarin is a gateway for them to get an opportunity to have a job.

Masturina in her interview had mentioned the importance of Mandarin:

“Mandarin has become an important language after English and Malay language. Mandarin has become one of the important languages in the world. There will be more opportunities to get better job if I am proficient in Mandarin.”

Nurhazirah replied on the job opportunity, as she is proficient in Mandarin:

“For me, I am concerned about my future in work that we are graduating in year 2020, where during that time, there will be a lot of investors from China. So, interview in Mandarin gives me an additional opportunity.”

Puteri also mentioned the importance of Mandarin in the working force:

“In working force, one of the languages that will be useful is Mandarin, I mean when working, there will be a need of Mandarin.”

Self-Interest

Besides that, the second reason for learners to choose to enrol in Mandarin course is their self-interest in the language. The building of non-native Mandarin learners' self-interest has to do with their family background and their environment that encourage them to learn the language.

Umami talked about her identity factor that led her to learn Mandarin:

“I choose to take up Mandarin class because starting from the beginning I am interested to learn Mandarin, but taking private course is quite expensive. The other reasons were I live in outskirts area in Johor state, where Chinese schools usually locate in town area that are not available. Moreover, I do not have transport to go to school. I am so enthusiasm to learn Mandarin is because my grandmother is a Chinese, and I do not know Mandarin, that is the reason why I want to learn Mandarin. My grandmother had passed away.”

Janagi in her interview, talked about her interest in learning Mandarin due to her father's influence as well as her Indian friends who are proficient in Mandarin:

“For me start from young age, I am interested to learn Mandarin. My dad is able to speak a bit Mandarin so when he speaks with his Chinese friends, I feel proud of him by having the opportunity to speak Mandarin that can make him have more friends. I am interested to communicate Mandarin with friends. I have Indian friends who studied Mandarin since primary standard in Chinese school. I feel happy for them as they can speak Mandarin. One of them whose name is Darsiny, she studied in Sungai Petani National Primary School. She took Mandarin subject in her secondary school, she has many Chinese friends.”

Improve Mandarin grade

Most of the learners are motivated to learn Mandarin in order to improve and maintain their Mandarin grade. When their Mandarin level one grade was poor, learners are motivated to improve their grades. On the other hand, when their Mandarin level one grade was high, learners were motivated to maintain and improve their grades.

According to Ummi's interview, she was motivated to improve her Mandarin level 1 C+ grade, which was poor. Hence, she replied in her interview:

“My motivation in learning Mandarin is higher compared to last semester because this semester I need to focus more on it to score. I want to change my grade to improve my overall pointer because grade B and A can push up my pointer. During my last semester, I have many subjects, which was 19 credit hours, while this semester I have 16 credit hours so I can more focused on Mandarin.”

In Masturina's interview, although she was motivated to learn Mandarin to improve her grade, but some external reasons held her back:

“My motivation to learn Mandarin during this semester was higher than last semester because I want to do better to get better result compared to last semester. However, I feel that it is difficult because I am busy with my projects and I am afraid that I am unable to catch up. I also afraid that I am busy with my teater performances that I have to skip classes.”

Janagi received grade A- in her Mandarin level 1. As a result, she is boosted to maintain her motivation in order to maintain and improve her Mandarin level 2 grade. Therefore, she replied in her interview:

“Last semester, I was interested in learning Mandarin so I scored A for Mandarin subject. Hence, I was highly motivated to learn Mandarin this semester because I need to score a better pointer compared to last semester.”

DISCUSSION

From the research finding, it was proven that most of the non-native learners experienced extrinsic motivation, whereby their drive to learn Mandarin was based on grades and their future prospect after learning the language. There were certain learners who had intrinsic motivation in learning Mandarin, whereby they were interested in the language. However, they were mostly influenced by their family background and people around them.

Besides that, learners' grades for Mandarin level one influenced their learning motivation. This situation is supported by Tan et al. (2017) who conducted a study to investigate the relationship between language learning motivation and achievement in Mandarin in the Malaysia context. The study showed that the target language learning experience that contains learning pleasure, classroom atmosphere, and teaching approach plays an essential role in students' learning achievement. Hence, the participants' previous learning experience supported their upcoming learning outcomes, in this case, their determination to improve their grades.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This research was an exploratory study and the findings are mainly to investigate non-native Mandarin learners' perspectives to continue to learn Mandarin. This research will give insights to teachers to plan their teaching to match with the learners' demand, which is related to their future career building.

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