

The Orientations for Learning Mandarin amongst Malay Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

In learning a second or foreign language, motivation has been identified as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second or foreign language. It can be very motivating for students to learn something that is corresponding to their learning orientations. Thus, this study was carried out to investigate the learning orientations of Malay undergraduates who were learning Mandarin as a foreign language. Purposive sampling was used to collect the data. 18 students who enrolled in the Mandarin course in three different levels (elementary, intermediate and advance) during the July 2010 – November 2010 semester were chosen to take part in the study. The students were chosen based on the criteria set by the researcher. The criteria included moderate achievement in Mandarin, aged 20-22, and show good learning attitude. The researcher employed semi-structured conversational type of face-to-face interview with the participants. Content analysis was employed to explore information from the transcripts. Fourteen themes of learning orientations were found from the interview data which were subsequently grouped into four major categories: Career-orientated, Enjoyment and Interest, Friendship, and Influence by Others. The study recommends curricula planners to exploit students' orientations when reviewing the present curriculum for the Mandarin course. In addition, other methods such as survey, educational artefacts, and classroom observation can be employed for future study to gather more information in order to give deeper insights into the investigation and serve for triangulation purposes.

Keywords: Motivation, Orientation, Mandarin, Malay, Foreign Language

Introduction

Mandarin is the most common spoken language amongst the Chinese throughout the world. Following China's rapid economic growth, the interest in learning Mandarin among non-Chinese has been generated all over the world (Ramzy, 2006). The interest in learning Mandarin is also noticeable in Malaysia where there is a huge demand for learning Mandarin as a foreign language among undergraduates at tertiary level. For example, according to Cheun (2006), the number of MARA University of Technology (UiTM) students who took Mandarin in 1994 was about 788 and the number has increased tremendously to about 8000 students in 2004.

However, it is always being questioned why foreign language students could score in their written examination but could not communicate effectively in the language they learn (Naimah, 2005). Besides the barriers mentioned by Cheun (2006), no known study has been carried out to examine the cause. Does the problem exist due to the curricula planners and practitioners who do not know the needs of the students? Are the syllabus and course design appropriate with the students' learning orientations? It is very important for the students to learn something congruent with their orientations. It can be very de-motivating for students to learn something that is not corresponding to their orientations.

If the students' learning orientations are known, then syllabus, materials, and activities can be tailored to appeal to their values and interests (Dörnyei, 2001). Thus, to know the students' learning orientations is very important in order to motivate them to succeed in their learning. Furthermore, learning orientations are the essence of learning motivation (Gardner, 1985). Many studies have shown that motivation plays a premier role in determining success in language learning (Csizér & Dörnyei, 2005; Ellis, 1994; Gardner, 1985, 2001; Nyikos & Oxford, 1993; Oxford & Ehrman 1995; Oxford & Nyikos, 1989; Oxford & Shearin, 1994).

This study hopes to add to the extant literature in the discipline of teaching and learning of Mandarin as a foreign language and to provide empirical data for understanding the motivation of Malay undergraduates learning Mandarin as a foreign language. It is also hoped that the findings of this study could provide teachers with insights into learners' motivation. This is to inform the teachers of the setting of the teaching goals in designing curriculum and course syllabus, preparing lesson plans and adopting suitable teaching methodologies for more effective teaching and learning in a more conducive environment so that the learners will learn better and subsequently increase their proficiency. Thus, the study is conducted to answer the research question:

“What are the learning orientations portrayed among Malay undergraduates learning Mandarin as a foreign language?”

Literature review

One of the important elements in learning a language is language learning motivation. In the field of second and foreign language learning, motivation has been identified as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second or foreign language (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Norris-Holt, 2001). As a social psychologist and one of the pioneering researchers in second and foreign language acquisition, Gardner (1985) views motivation to learn a language as “the extent to which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity” (p.10), and believes that a language learner “wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable effort to achieve this goal, and experiences satisfaction in the activities associated with achieving this goal” (Gardner & McIntyre, 1993, p.2).

Gardner and Lambert (1972) examined motivation as a factor in a number of different learning orientations. They grouped two clusters of orientations into two basic types of language learning motivation, namely, integrative and instrumental motivations. This integrative-instrumental dichotomy has influenced virtually all second language learning-related research in this area (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). The integrative motivation refers to a favourable attitude towards interacting or identifying with another ethno-linguistic group (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) whereas, the instrumental motivation is the motive for utilitarian purposes, for example, getting a better job, improving social status, enhancing job promotion prospects (Gardner & Lambert, 1972).

Along the lines of integrative-instrumental motivation, the distinction between intrinsic-extrinsic motivations in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is another formulation that has received attention of researchers in the field of second and foreign language learning motivation (Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei, 1994). SDT has been adapted and embraced by scholars in the field of second and foreign language learning as a means to gain insight into motivation (Dörnyei, 1994, 1998; Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999; Noels, Clément & Pelletier, 2001; Vallerand, 1997; Williams & Burden, 1997).

Deci (1975), Deci and Ryan (1985), and Ryan and Deci (2000a, 2000b) consider intrinsic motivation as behaviour of an individual doing an activity simply for the pleasure and satisfaction that accompany the action, and in the absence of a reward contingency or control. The feelings of pleasure arise from fulfilling innate needs for competence and self-determination. The individual's intrinsic need for feelings of competence and self-determination makes him/her aware of potential satisfaction, which, in turn, provides the energy for him/her to set goals and to behave in such a way to try to achieve them. Noels, Pelletier, Clément, and Vallerand (2003) categorize a three-part taxonomy of intrinsic motivation, namely, intrinsic motivation-knowledge, intrinsic motivation-stimulation, and intrinsic motivation-accomplishment. On the other hand, extrinsically motivated behaviours are those which the actor engages in to receive some positive and avoid negative incentives such as rewards, examinations and punishment.

There were studies which showed strong significant correlations between integrative-intrinsic; and extrinsic-instrumental motivations.

Noels, Clément and Pelletier's (2001) study revealed intrinsic motivation significantly predicted the integrative motivation. In another study, Noels, et al. (2003) examined the relationship between the six components in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation with the four motivational types: instrumental, knowledge, travel, and friendship from Clément and Kruidenier (1983). The result showed that among these four types, instrumental orientation correlated significantly with external regulation in extrinsic motivation.

As a result of this, several theorists have equated these two models (e.g. Dickinson, 1995; Jakobovitz, 1970; Noels, Clément and Pelletier, 2001, 2003). However, there are other theorists who have emphasized the distinctiveness of these two models (e.g. Brown, 2007; Schmidt, et al., 1996; Stevick, 1996). The strong correlations between integrative and intrinsic motivations; instrumental and extrinsic motivations may be due to both dichotomies sharing some similar characteristics. They are somewhat similar but not identical (Schmidt, & Watanaabe, 2001). The correlated motivations may not occur together in the same situations. For example, a learner who learns the language does not have the intention to integrate into the target language community but enjoy learning the language (-integrative, + intrinsic); a learner who is required to learn the language but does not appreciate its practical rewards (+ extrinsic, - instrumental). In addition, some researchers (e.g. Azizaeh & Zohreh, 2010; Kan 2003) used Motivational Dichotomies (Bailey, as cited in Brown 2007) to explain the differences between these two models. According to them, extrinsic and instrumental motivations are different because extrinsic motivation focuses on the external factors outside of a person, whereas instrumental motivation is the motives of a person learning the language to achieve a utilitarian purpose. According to them too, intrinsic and integrative motivations are also different because intrinsic motivation has to focus on the internal factors which make the individual feels good while integrative motivation is about integrating oneself within a culture to become a part of that society.

Recent studies of foreign language learning motivation, especially in the Eastern context (Azizaeh & Zohreh, 2010; Chan & Chin, 2008; Chang & Huang, 2006; Guo, 2010; Kan, 2003; Kang, 2000a, 2000b; Kimura, Nakata, & Okumura 2001; Peng, 2002; Warden & Lin, 2000), have shown that orientations that may seem either correlated or antithetical can coexist, thus proving that the integrative-instrumental motivation and intrinsic-extrinsic motivation are not identical even when the proximity of the two dichotomies has been noted.

Methods

Purposive sampling was used for collecting the data. Students who enrolled in the Mandarin course during the July 2010 – November 2010 semester were chosen to take part in the study. They were students of a public university which only caters for the indigenous people. The students were chosen based on the criteria set by the researcher such as moderate achievement in Mandarin, aged 20-22, and have shown good learning attitude. Initially, the researcher invited 45 students for the interview sessions; however, the interviews reached data saturation after the interview with the eighteenth interviewee. As a result, the interview ended at the eighteenth interviewee. The researcher did not interview the other 27 students as they were from homogenous group and the researcher strongly believed that no extra information will be gathered from the remaining 27 students. Among these 18 interviewees, six of them (two males and four females) from the Faculty of Office Management and Technology were taking Mandarin Level One. Another six students (two males and four females) taking Mandarin Level Two were from the Faculty of Business Management. The remaining 6 students (one male and five females) were students from the Faculty of Engineering. All of them aged 20-22.

The researcher employed a semi-structured conversational type of face-to-face interview with the participants. The face-to-face interview was guided by open-ended questions which were formulated based on the literature review and guided by the research question. Potential questions which could arise during the interviews were also drawn up to facilitate probing so that an in-depth understanding of the interviewees' orientations for learning the foreign language could be obtained (Ary, et al., 2006).

The interviews were conducted for three consecutive nights from 28th – 30th October, 2009. Every participant was interviewed individually in Malay by the researcher in an air-conditioned room at the university. The interviews were conducted in Malay since this is the first language or mother tongue of the interviewees, and every attempt was made to ensure that the interviewees had no difficulties with the language used during the interviews. All participating students were assured of full confidentiality. The interviews were recorded with a tape recorder with the consent of the participants. Each interview lasted for about 10-15 minutes. All the interviewees were given pseudonyms in their interview transcripts to protect their confidentiality.

Content analysis was employed to elicit meaning from the text and to summarize the message content. The method used to analyze the data is the traditional yet powerful method of immersion, through persistent listening to the tapes, reading and rereading the transcripts (Ary et al., 2006). The data was analyzed in three key stages as suggested by Ary et al. (2006) in order to arrive at a conclusion. They are: (i) familiarization and organization, (ii) coding and recoding, and (iii) summarizing and interpreting.

Results

Fourteen themes of learning orientations were found in the face-to-face interviews. The frequency count of the occurrence of each coding theme from the analysis is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Frequency Count of Coding Theme for Interviews

No.	Code	Theme	Frequency
1	CGAJ	enhance the chance to get a job	10
2	INTL	interested in this language	2
3	LTLT	interested to learn the language	2
4	ELT	enjoy learning it	1
5	IBFM	influenced by family members	2
6	IBF	influenced by friends	3
7	FICC	facilitates interaction and communication	2
8	TUCC	to understand Chinese neighbours and friends' conversation	4
9	WTSC	want to speak Chinese	2
10	TCWC	to be closer with the Chinese	1
11	TFWC	to be more friendly with the Chinese	1
12	TRWC	to strengthen relationship with the Chinese	1
13	IKOL	increase knowledge concerning other languages	1
14	TBML	to be a multilingual	1

These themes for learning Mandarin, extracted from the interviews, were subsequently grouped into four major categories, which are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Categories Found in the Interview Data

	Category	Code belong to the category	Frequency
(i)	Instrumental Motivation	CGAJ, FICC, IKOL, TBML	14
(ii)	Intrinsic Motivation	INTL, LTLT, ELT, WTSC	7
(iii)	Friendship	TUCC, TCWC, TFWC, TRWC	7
(iv)	Influence By Others	IBFM, IBF	5

The results strongly indicated that learning Mandarin for future career was viewed as the most important orientation. Forty-two per cent of the interviewees said that they learned Mandarin to enhance their employment prospects. For instance, Aina explained,

“I eagerly want to learn Mandarin, I will secure a job easily later.” (Aina, 28/10/09, 20:40 pm)

In addition, two interviewees disclosed that they were learning Mandarin because they wanted to increase their knowledge of other languages. As said by Hafizah and Norakirah,

“to increase in my knowledge regarding other language”
(Hafizah, 30/10/09, 20:30 pm)

“to be a multilingual”
(Norakirah, 29/10/09, 21:10 pm)

There were also five interviewees who revealed that they were learning Mandarin because of their interest in the language and the joy of learning it.

“This language is new to me. I am interested and attracted to learn it”
(Sakirah, 28/10/09, 21:10 pm).

The interviewees' attitudes towards learning Mandarin vary considerably. Eight students said that Mandarin is a difficult language to learn. In contrast, another ten students said that it is an interesting language to learn. However, all agreed that it is enjoyable and challenging to learn the language, but requires immense effort. In Norbatiq's words,

"Although it is a difficult language, it is enjoyable to learn"
(Norbatiq, 30/10/09, 20:50 pm)

Rina expressed the joy of learning Mandarin:

"I will smile when people ask me about the language, feeling happy in my heart. I enjoy learning Mandarin"
(Rina, 30/10/09, 21:30 pm)

The face-to-face interview data revealed that the interviewees also hope to foster their relationship or friendship with their Chinese friends and neighbours. This intention was revealed in the following utterances,

"I can communicate in Mandarin with the Chinese. We should know some Mandarin to foster our relationship"
(Shazuani, 30/10/09, 21:15 pm)

"There are many Chinese here, hope to know their conversation, and join in to be their close friend"
(Hafizah, 28/10/09, 20:25 pm)

"To be much closer with the Chinese"
(Zuriati, 28/10/09, 21:30 pm)

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that the students are strongly motivated to take up the Mandarin course because they believe Mandarin will help them in their future career and also their interests in learning the language. Learning a language for utilitarian purposes, such as getting a better job, improving one's social status, fulfilling the academic requirement, getting better grades or passing an examination, are aspects of instrumental orientation (Lambert & Gardner, 1972; Gardner, 1985). The instrumental orientation of the sample in this study was strongly oriented towards the learners' future careers. The results revealed that the students who were learning Mandarin were strongly motivated by instrumental goals, in particular, boosting their opportunities of employment. One possible explanation is that the practical value of learning Mandarin is its employability in the job market in Malaysia, which in turn helps undergraduates perceive the learning of Mandarin positively. However, the students did not learn the language for other types of instrumental goals such as to fulfill the academic requirement, to get better grades and others. The results of this study seem compatible with the findings of previous quantitative studies which presented instrumental motivation as the major type of language learning motivation (Al-Tamimi & Munir Shuib, 2009; Guo, 2010; Kan, 2003; Kang, 2000a; Kimura et al., 2001; Warden & Lin, 2000; Wen, 1997).

Besides, the findings also showed that the students have a strong inclination towards intrinsic orientation. The students learned the language for their own interest, enjoyment and satisfaction. Some previous studies have also shown that their samples' motivation is strongly leaning towards instrumental and intrinsic motivations (Coleman, 1995; Tan & Ooi, 2006). One possible explanation is that the students in this study were allowed to learn any foreign language they like. Thus, the students chose Mandarin due to the inherent pleasure, enjoyment and satisfaction in learning it.

There are two aspects of integrative motivation: a general desire for wider social contact and a desire to belong to a community by acquiring the psychological characteristics of the target language community (McDonough, 1981). The results of the study which draw attention to *Friendship* may represent McDonough's first aspect. The second aspect of McDonough's integrative motivation was not demonstrated in the study. Integrating into the Chinese community appeared to be irrelevant to the students. This finding seems congruent with the findings of many foreign language motivation studies in Asian contexts which demonstrated the first aspect of integrative motivation (Chan & Chin, 2008; Guo, 2010; Kan, 2003).

It can be concluded that the students in the present study generally have an interest in the foreign language to strengthen friendship, but do not desire to integrate into the target community. This situation seems to reflect the socio-political environment in Malaysia which encourages close rapport between the different ethnic groups of people.

However, the data also revealed that the influence of other people such as family members and friends provided reasons for some interviewees to learn the language. For instance, Ishi wanted to learn Mandarin because her brothers and sisters were Chinese- educated. She said,

“Because my brothers and sisters were studying in Chinese school, this makes me want to learn Chinese too”
(Ishi, 29/10/09, 20:20 pm)

Rina was another example who also has family members who speak Chinese. Like Ishi’s family members, they encouraged her to learn Mandarin. She revealed,

“I was encouraged by my two sisters. They learn Chinese before and they always talk in Chinese at home. I want to join them, so I must learn Mandarin....They encourage me to pick up Mandarin as my compulsory elective”
(Rina, 30/10/09, 21:30 pm).

As for Norbatiq, she was not influenced by her family but she just followed the majority. She revealed,

“lately, people concentrate more on Chinese, so I follow friends to learn this language”
(Norbatiq, 30/10/09, 20:50 pm)

Like Norbatiq, some interviewees who were learning Mandarin had been influenced by their friends who were also learning Mandarin. Atikah and Shahirah were among these interviewees.

“urged by friends....I asked my secondary school teacher, he said easy to find job later.”
(Atikah, 28/10/09, 22:00 pm)

“all my friends sign up for Mandarin, furthermore, they said Chinese language provides more work potential.....”
(Shahirah, 29/10/09, 20:40 pm)

In addition, the data also uncovered some minor reasons which were unique. Some of the students (7 cases) wanted to be able to bargain when purchasing goods from Chinese sellers. As most of the traders and small businessmen in Malaysia are Chinese, speakers of Mandarin would be able to bargain with these business people. At the same time, there were a few students who believed that the ability to communicate in Mandarin will make it possible for them to avoid being cheated by dishonest sellers. There were also some students who revealed that they learnt Mandarin to eliminate unnecessary misunderstandings or suspicious feelings.

The results of the interview not only revealed the students’ learning orientations but also showed that the students were strongly motivated to learn Mandarin. Besides eliciting the learning orientations, the respondents’ reaction to the questions of the interview may provide the basis for identifying other motivational factors. Language learning motivation is the combination of effort and desire to achieve the goal of learning the language as well as favourable attitudes towards learning the language (Gardner, 1985). The responses provided by the students in the interview indicated that they have a favourable attitude towards learning Mandarin. All of them believe that Mandarin is very important and they need to learn it for instrumental reasons. Most of the students believe that Mandarin will soon be one of the influential international languages besides English and everyone needs to learn it.

Conclusion

The results of this study has shown that the learning orientations of Malay undergraduate students are not only future career-orientated but also intrinsically motivated at the same time.

The absence of the ethnocentric aspect in their learning orientation may be due to the reason that all the participants were non-heritage learners. Besides, they do not need to learn Mandarin as a way to know the Chinese culture as Chinese community is the second largest group in Malaysia. The students can obtain the information regarding Chinese culture or community from their Chinese friends, teachers or neighbours.

The study might have implications on the curriculum adaptation, instructional design and teaching methodology. It is recommended that curricula planners exploit students' orientations when reviewing the present curriculum for the Mandarin course. The identified types of language learning orientations should be utilized in formulating any future course objectives, course design and syllabus. The most important finding in this study is that *Instrumental Motivation*, especially future career interests, is the most important type of language learning motivation. Besides reformulating the course objectives and restructuring the existing syllabus, some new Mandarin courses should be introduced too. As the Mandarin course in the university emphasizes daily communication but not occupation-related communication, it fails to draw on the *Instrumental Motivation* of the students. Therefore in order to satisfy students' *Instrumental Motivation*, it is important for curricula designers in the Mandarin Unit of the university to consider introducing occupation-related Mandarin or Mandarin for special purpose courses to the students. Courses such as Mandarin for Business, Mandarin for Law, and Mandarin for Health Science could be introduced in the future to help students develop the proficiency to handle communicative tasks in work situations. Such courses would help students acquire appropriate lexical knowledge in the specific fields.

At the same time, Mandarin instructors should adopt suitable teaching methodology to take full advantage of the students' language learning orientations. Since *Intrinsic Motivation* and fostering *Friendship* with the Chinese community are another two major factors, the teacher teaching Mandarin is suggested to take the following tips to motivate their students in learning the language:

1. Create tasks and opportunities for their students to practise Mandarin and to interact in Mandarin with the Chinese community outside the campus.
2. As a way to motivate the students, they should be encouraged to find suitable Mandarin-speaking peers as close friends to practise Mandarin.
3. Employ motivational strategies, use learner-centred teaching method and encourage students to become more active participants and cooperate in the learning process.

The last point worthy of mention is that the conclusion of the study is limited to the participants under study and should not be generalized to other academic settings with different participants. As only interview data was gathered for analysis, it is not strong enough to give an overview regarding the learning orientations of the participants. Other types of data collection such as through survey, educational artefacts, thinking aloud protocol and classroom observation are strongly recommended for further study to give more in-depth insights into the meaning of the results.

Nevertheless, this is a pioneer attempt to investigate the learning orientations of Malay undergraduates who were learning Mandarin as a foreign language. It provides valuable input for the curricula planners and practitioners regarding the learning orientations of the learners. In this way, the curricula planners and practitioners could prepare the curriculum, course syllabus, learning materials and appropriate activities to suit the learners' orientations. This is very important in foreign language learning as it will be very motivating for learners to learn what is corresponding to their orientations.

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