

Analysis of Practical Mandarin during Short-term Learning and Travelling Program in China among Non-Chinese Students

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Abstract

Practical Mandarin among non-Chinese speakers is essential in learning Mandarin as Foreign language. It is observed that the actual use of a foreign language differs greatly from classroom learning. For instance, a non-Chinese student who travels to China will perform differently in actual Mandarin speaking situations. Previous research substantiated that foreign language experience enable learners to improve their communication competencies in every domain. Studies have been carried out in this area but the language performances of Mandarin learners in real speaking circumstances such as travelling, has not raised much scholarly interest. Therefore, this study aims to determine the effectiveness of practical Mandarin after attending Mandarin courses among non-Chinese students. A total of 10 students from Universiti Malaysia Pahang who have joined a short-term learning and travelling program in China have been recruited to fill out a set of questionnaire. It examines their actual use of practical Mandarin after practicing their Mandarin in China. The findings are presented in the form of descriptive statistics such as topic of practical Mandarin, target audience, types of mastered language skills, challenges in practical Mandarin and self-evaluation of practical Mandarin usage. Accordingly, this article offers useful suggestions and strategies to enhance practical Mandarin among non-Chinese students.

Keywords: Practical Mandarin; Language Use; Mandarin speaking; Mandarin as a foreign language; Mandarin for travelling.

1. Introduction

Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), a competency based technical university which specialises in the fields of engineering and technology offers a variety of foreign languages such as Mandarin, Japanese, German, Arabic, Spanish and Turkish to equip students with the necessary language skills for the job market. UMP aligns with The Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025 (MEB), which aims to develop Malaysians with knowledge, critical thinking skills, leadership skills, language proficiency, ethics, spirituality and national identity to strive in the 21st Century. Mandarin happens to be the most popular option for students among foreign languages in recent years due to China's rapid growth and strong influence in politics; economy and social (Sung, 2009). The increasing numbers of students who learn Mandarin as a foreign language has urged the review of the effectiveness of teaching and learning process of Teaching Mandarin as a foreign language (TMFL). In present, the TMFL in UMP lays great emphasis on the listening and speaking skills based on the UMP Strategic Plan (2011-2015) that aims to produce proficient graduates equipped with effective communication skills.

In the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), many studies substantiated that foreign language experience enable learners to improve their communication competencies in every domain (Kinginger, 2013). The TMFL in UMP has made great efforts to provide a variety of language environment for students to practice their listening and speaking skills beyond classroom interaction. With the establishment of Mandarin Language & Culture Centre (MLCC) in UMP, various language and culture activities have been carried out to create a virtual environment for student to listen and

speak in Mandarin after formal learning in the classroom with instructors. For instance, a total of 10 UMP students who had participated in a short-term learning and travelling program in China which was co-organized by MLCC and Hebei University, took the opportunity to communicate with native speakers from China in real-life situations. The contents of the programme were comprehensive and fruitful. The programme included dialog on infrastructure in Hebei University, China, dialog on working culture in China industry, community service at Hebei school, hand-on experience in entrepreneurship exposure, Chinese Tea cultural practice, academic visit to Geosciences Museum in mining technology exposure, interactive engineering discussion at Hebei University of Science and Technology, hand-on authentic Mandarin learning program with international students of Hebei University, China and others. In addition to that, this short-term learning and travelling program also promoted the inter-cultural dialogue with international Muslim students and Islamic Friday prayer at Great Mosque in Beijing.

It is observed that the actual use of Mandarin among non-Chinese students from UMP differs greatly from classroom learning. In that view, this paper aims to measure the effectiveness of the practical Mandarin usage after attending Mandarin courses among non-Chinese students in UMP.

2. Problem Statement

The lack of actual language environment for learners to practice their foreign language speaking skills is one of the crucial dilemmas when the learners learn a foreign language in their motherland. As Tarana Mahmudova (2010) argues, the domination of the learner's mother tongue in the communication often hinders learning new languages. The similar situation occurs in the Mandarin learning environment in UMP. Stated in the Eleventh Malaysian Plan (2015-2020) and the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025, English is highly used and emphasized in higher education institutions of Malaysia, including UMP as one of the efforts to improve English proficiency among students. The preference and inclination towards English has become possible predicaments for learners to practise other foreign languages such as Mandarin.

Due to the lack of actual language environment, the classroom learning turned out to be the essential platform for students to learn and perform language skills. The Mandarin courses offered in UMP comprises of two levels. Each level contains 2 hours of learning hours in fourteen weeks. According to Hoe and Lim (2013), this length of contact hours is seriously inadequate from the request of Hanban (2002) which actually recommended ten hours per week. The shortage of learning hours has a pernicious influence on the Mandarin proficiency among the learners. The insufficient learning hours and the lack of naturalistic environment seriously impede the development of Mandarin language skills especially in speaking skills. As stated by Tarana Mahmudova (2010), learners commonly have a hard time transferring what they learn in the classroom to the real situation.

The learning and practice process among UMP learners is presumably affected as the Mandarin they learnt in the classroom is the spoken Mandarin in China which greatly differs from the Mandarin spoken among Malaysian Chinese community. Malaysian Mandarin is considered as the regional variety of Mandarin language that displays its uniqueness in vocabulary (Wang, H. D., 2009). This creates a great dilemma for both language learners and instructors. The learners will unable to deliver their meaning effectively when they use China's native spoken Mandarin and standard vocabulary which the Malaysia Chinese are not familiar with. The instructors will nevertheless confront with dilemma in the use of vocabulary from China's spoken Mandarin and Malaysian Chinese' spoken Mandarin during the course of lecture.

Accordingly, UMP has organized a short-term learning and travelling program to Hebei University. It aims to overcome the above shortcomings by providing a naturalistic environment for UMP students to practise their speaking skills with the Mandarin native speakers along with the cultural immersion and industrial educational visits of China. The UMP students' Mandarin speaking performances during this one-week academic mobility is the foundation of this study. This study empirically reviews the effectiveness of the practical use of Mandarin from various aspects such as the topics of practical Mandarin, target audience, types of mastered language skills, challenges in practical Mandarin and self-evaluation of practical Mandarin usage. Optimistically, this study would offer useful suggestions and strategies to enhance practical Mandarin among non-Chinese students.

3. Literature Review

Language learners aim to master the four language skills that include listening, speaking, reading and writing (Widdowson, H.G. 1978, pg1). However, these language skills are not easily learned by foreign language learners especially the audio-oral (listening and speaking) skills as more attentions were needed on these skills (Ghazali et al., 2011). Communication fluency among foreign language learners is oftenly doubted even though they have shown good scores in written examinations (Naimah, 2005). According to Liu (2003), the fundamental teaching goal of TMFL is to develop the ability to communicate in Mandarin which coincides with one of the four pillars of education proposed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) which stated “learning to be”. Learners are expected to display effective Mandarin communication skills for socialising in different communities in the Mandarin speaking countries.

In order to achieve the above goal, it is important to examine the practical use of Mandarin among learners for measuring the level of communication competency. Clark (1996) defines that language use is a form of joint action which is carried out by an ensemble of people acting in coordination with one another. He believes that language use always involves speaker’s meaning and addressee’s understanding. Clark (1996) further suggests that the basic setting for language use is via face-to-face conversation. Widdowson (1978:18) holds that the language use involves the ability to select which form of sentence is appropriate for a particular linguistic context and the ability to recognize which function is fulfilled by a sentence in a particular communicative situation. Widdowson (1978:18) emphasizes the language use is the way the system is realized for normal communicative purposes. He demonstrates that knowing a language means ‘both knowing what signification sentences have as instances of usage and what value they have as instances of use’. In short, language use is the communicative process that involves the speakers who have knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to deliver speech for the listeners.

The learners’ communicative skill can be improved through virtual speaking environment beyond classroom learning. Mandarin instructors are encouraged to create tasks and opportunities for learners to practise Mandarin and to interact with the Malaysia Chinese communities instead of classroom interaction (Tan et al., 2012). Tarana Mahmudova (2010) stresses the importance for learners to leave classrooms and practically communicate with outsiders as much as possible. Recent studies also suggested that the development of learners’ communicative competence could be more expeditious where they can practice the language use in real situations that involved a majority of native speakers. Freed (1995) point out that the students who study abroad make the most progress in their language fluency of the target language. DeKeyser (2007) agrees that study abroad can be seen as the ultimate opportunity to practice a foreign language. He suggests that the experience of study abroad can be more fruitful when the learner had well-prepared for fluency improvement in the sense of automatization. Kinginger (2013) goes along with the above opinions that learners’ oral skills and abilities for meaningful social interaction can be boosted by studying abroad.

Since study abroad becomes the popular belief that can effectively improve the learners’ language proficiency, it leads to the development of language tourism in the SLA field. Iglesias (2014, p.10) defines language tourism as a tourist activity undertaken by those travellers (or educational tourists) taking a trip which includes at least an overnight stay in a destination outside of their usual place of residence for less than a year and for whom language learning is a primary or secondary part of their trip. Language tourism can be defined as part of the education tourism that provide the participants travel to a location as a group with the primary purpose of engaging in a learning experience directly related to the location (Rodger, 1998, p.28). For instance, the academic mobility which included 10 Non-Chinese students from UMP can be considered in the norm of language tourism that promotes practical language use of Mandarin among students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Respondents

A total of ten non-Chinese students took part as the respondents. All the respondents are female. 70% of the respondents are Malay and 30% are Indians as stated in Table 1.

Table 1: Races of respondents

Respondents	Number	Percentages (%)
Malay	7	70
Indian	3	30
Total	10	100

70% of the student's mother tongue is Malay while 30% is Tamil. However, family language medium differs among Indian students. Tamil takes up 20% and only 10% of student speaks English at home.

Table 2 : Family language medium

Mother tongue/ first language	Number	Percentages (%)
Malay	7	70
Tamil	2	20
English	1	10
Total	10	100

About 30% of the students enrolled in Mandarin for Beginners course from UMP and 20% enrolled in Mandarin for Intermediate. They learn Mandarin in *hanyu pinyin*, which is an alphabet Mandarin phonetic system. About 20% of the students took Conversational Mandarin course which was offered by Mandarin Language and Culture Centre (MLCC), UMP. All of them learned Mandarin in Chinese characters. 20% of the students' had UPSR Mandarin level while 10% had prior pre-school Mandarin level. These students learned Mandarin in *hanyu pinyin* and Chinese characters at primary school. Although they have good basic in Mandarin until UPSR level, but they lack of actual practise in secondary school.

Table 3: Mandarin level of students

Mandarin Level	Number	Percentages (%)
Pre-school	1	10
Primary School (UPSR)	2	20
Mandarin for Beginners (University course)	3	30
Mandarin for Intermediate (University course)	2	20
Conversational Mandarin (MLCC course)	2	20
Total	10	100

The duration of Mandarin learning among participants is different. About 40% of students learnt Mandarin for one year; while 30% of students learnt Mandarin for three months and join the program to practise the Mandarin in China. The remaining 10% had each Mandarin lesson for six months, six years and eight years.

Table 4: Duration of Learning Mandarin

Duration of Learning Mandarin	Number	Percentages (%)
3 months	3	30
6 months	1	10
1 year	4	40
6 year	1	10
8 year	1	10
Total	10	100

3.2 Research Instrument

This study is conducted in the form of survey questionnaire. The first part consists of respondents' demographic while the second part consist of types of mastered language skills, challenges in practical Mandarin and self-evaluation of practical Mandarin which aims to investigate the practical Mandarin among non-Chinese in short-term learning and travelling program in China in regard to situation of practical Mandarin.

3.3 Research Procedure

Mandarin Language and Culture Centre (MLCC) organized a short-term learning and travelling program to Hebei University (HBU), Baoding, China during semester break from 8 November 2015 to 14 November 2015. 10 UMP students who participated in this programme were requested to answer sets of questionnaire after the programme. The questionnaires were then analysed by using frequency analysis.

4 Findings and Discussion

This section discusses description of practical Mandarin, types of mastered language skills, challenges in practical Mandarin and self-evaluation of practical Mandarin.

4.1 Description of Practical Mandarin

4.1.1 Purpose of short-term learning and travelling program to China

UMP students who joined the short-term learning and travelling program to China had different purposes. 80% of the students aimed to mainly practice Mandarin in real situation. About 70% is for travelling and sight-seeing purposes, while 30% aimed to make industrial visits. Another 30% of students joined the program with the purpose shopping in China.

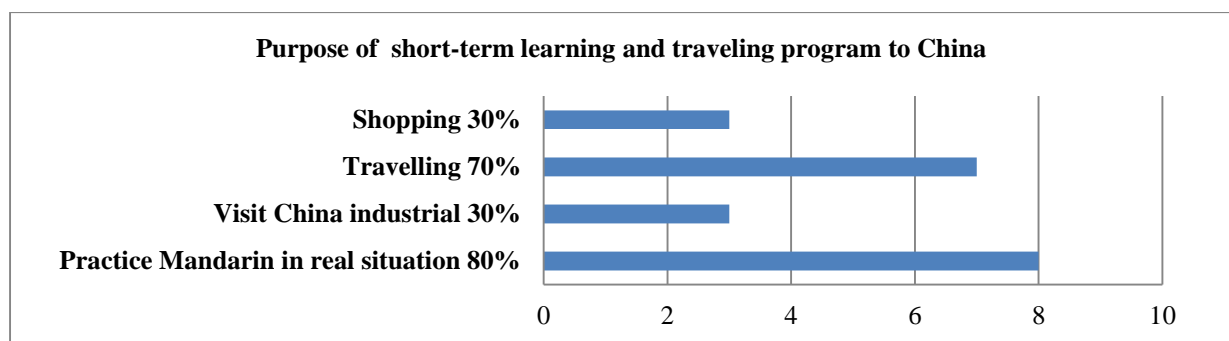


Figure 1: Purpose of short-term learning and travelling program in China

4.1.2 Reported Benefitted Activities

The responses from the students were encouraging. 40% of the students found that a visit to manufacturing industry at Hebei, China was the most beneficial, followed by a visit to Great Wall of China (30%). Separately, 10% of the students ranked a visit to campus of Hebei University; a visit to the Geoscience Museum at Hebei, a visit to the private school at Hebei, China equally beneficial.

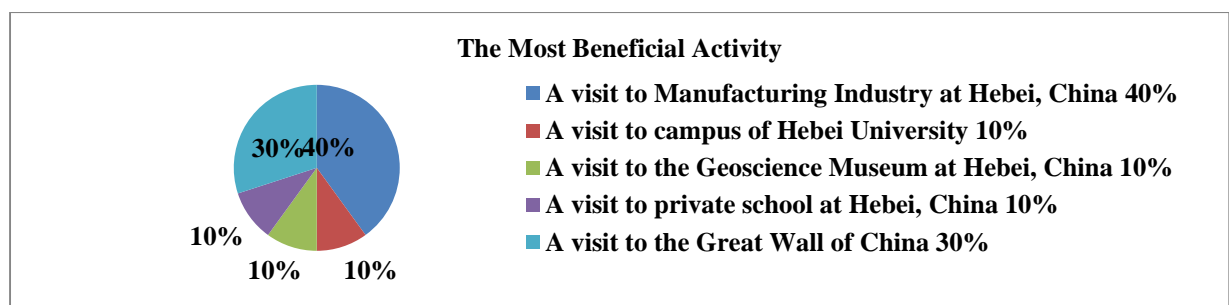


Figure 2: The most beneficial activity

4.1.3 Topic of Mandarin Usage

There are different topics of Mandarin used by these students in China. 80% reported that self-introduction (among students and instructors) and shopping as the most popular topic. 50% experienced usage in food and drink topic while 40% used travelling topic. 10% reported the less used topic is accommodation. This is because accommodation had been booked earlier by Hebei University, China prior to the arrival of UMP students.

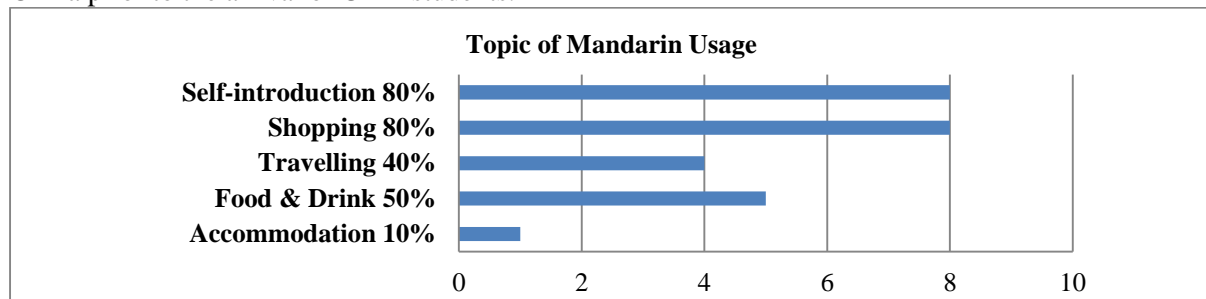


Figure 3: Topic of Mandarin Usage

4.1.4 The most often spoken vocabulary/ phrases

The most often spoken vocabulary/ phrases used in topic of self-introduction among students and instructors were 你好[Nǐ hǎo] “Hello”, 我叫.....[Wǒ jiào...] “I am...” and 我是大二的学生 [Wǒ shì dà'èr de xuéshēng] which means “I am Second-year student”.

The most often spoken vocabulary/ phrases used in shopping topic is 这个多少钱？[Zhè ge duōshǎoqián?] “How much is this?”. On the other hand, from the observation made on students’ practical mandarin, Mandarin numbers is the least to be used in bargaining. This is because most bargaining activities took in the form of sign languages between the sellers and buyers.

The most often spoken vocabulary/ phrases used in travelling topic were 很冷 [hěn lěng] “very cold”, 很累 [hěn lèi] “very tired”, 不要 [búyào] “don’t want”, 再见 [Zàijiàn] “Good bye/ See you again”, 我要去厕所。 [Wǒ yào qù cèsuǒ.] “I want to go to the toilet” and 厕所在哪里？ [Cèsuǒ zài nǎli?] “Where is the toilet?”. The Mandarin phrase used in topic of food and drink were 我要吃饭。 [Wǒ yào chīfàn.] “I want to eat rice” and 不辣 [bú là] “not spicy”.

4.1.5 Target audience

In this short-term learning and travelling program, all UMP students were required to communicate Mandarin with designated target audience. 90% reported to have communicated mostly to their language partner. The concept of language partner provided a chance for each students to be peered with a Master student from Hebei University, China. As the language partners were almost well versed with International Students, UMP students may feel at ease and comfortable when communicate with their language partner in Mandarin. Followed by that, 80% reported to have used Mandarin with shopkeepers and hawkers. 50% communicated with public audience and lecturers. Only 20% reported to have conversed with manufacturing industrial worker or manager. However, the Mandarin level of students is inadequate for communication in manufacturing industry. This is due to the fact that the use of Mandarin in manufacturing industry is technically jargoned.

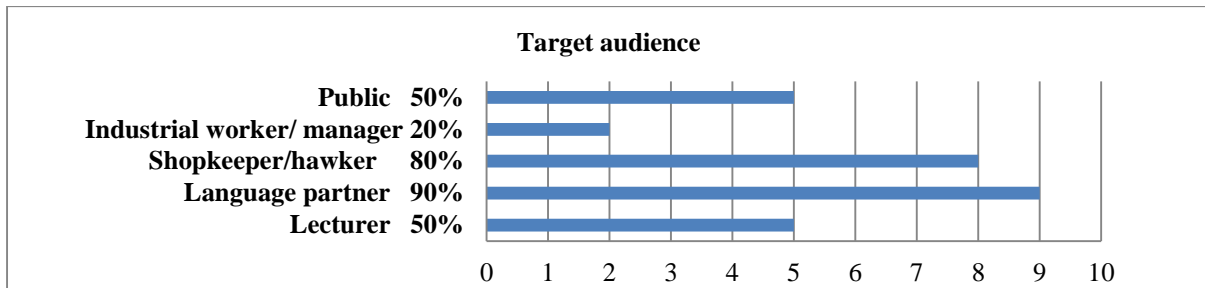


Figure 4: Target audience

4.2 Types of mastered language skills

Communication is a vital process between the sender (speaker) and the receiver (audience). Communication requires both listening and speaking skill. This section presents the students' level of understanding in Mandarin communication, Mandarin speaking, the most often heard and comprehensible vocabulary/ phrases and the most often heard but incomprehensible vocabulary/ phrases.

4.2.1 Level of understanding in Mandarin communication

The existing Mandarin levels of UMP students influenced their level of understanding in Mandarin communication throughout the course of short-term learning and travelling in China. About 50% of students felt the Mandarin short phrases were comprehensible, and 40% felt the Mandarin vocabulary was comprehensible. Only 10% of the student fully understands Mandarin communication in China.

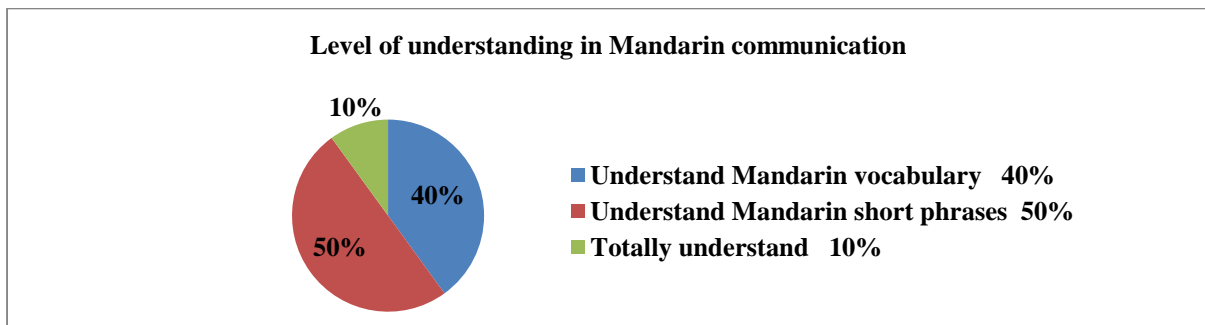


Figure 5: Level of understanding in Mandarin communication

4.2.2 Level of Mandarin Speaking

Prior experience in learning Mandarin influenced the Mandarin speaking levels among these UMP students. About 60% of the students can speak Mandarin short phrases; 30% in Mandarin short phrases; while only 10% of student can fluently speak Mandarin in full sentences.

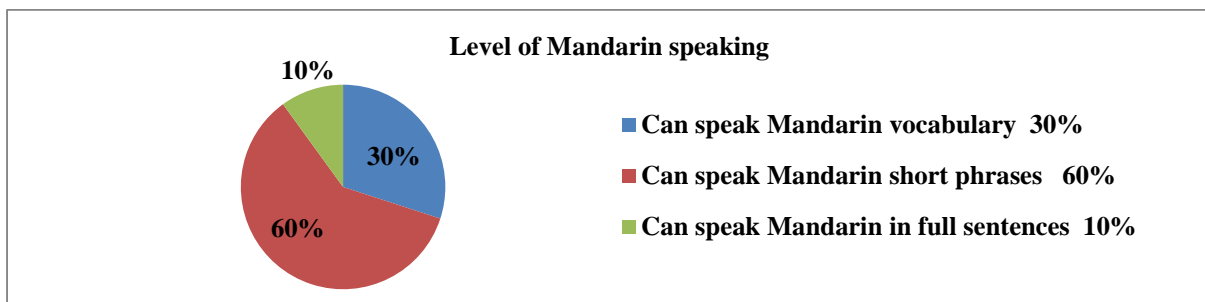


Figure 5: Level of Mandarin speaking

4.2.3 The most often heard (and comprehensible) vocabulary/ phrases

The most often heard and comprehensible vocabulary/ phrases among UMP students were 你很冷吗? [Nǐ hěn lěng ma?] “Are you cold?” and 很冷 [hěn lěng] “very cold”. This is because short-term learning and travelling programme in China was held on November (Winter Season).

Subsequently, UMP students also often heard vocabulary/ phrases in greetings and found them comprehensible. For instance, 你好/ 你们好 [Nǐ hǎo/ Nǐmen hǎo] “Hello”, 很高兴认识你 [Hěn gāoxìng rènshi nǐ] “Nice to meet you”, 欢迎你们到河北大学 [Huānyíng nǐmen dào Héběi Dàxué] “Welcome to Hebei University”, 谢谢 [Xièxie] “Thank you” and 再见 [Zàijiàn] “Good bye/ See you again”.

Besides that, topics which was closely related to daily routine, such a 吃饭 [chīfàn] “have a meal”, 吃午餐 [chī wǔcān] “have lunch”, 喜欢吗? [Xǐhuan ma?] “Do you like it?”, 好吃吗? [Hào chī ma?] “Is it tasty?”, 厕所 [cèsuǒ] “toilet” and 数字 [shùzì] “number” were equally often heard and comprehensible.

As the roads were slippery and cautions need to be made during this winter season, the organizer would always have courtesy reminder for the UMP students to be 小心 [xiǎoxīn] “be careful”. Students who were stranded further apart from group leader during site visits would be required to walk faster, which, in Mandarin is 快点 [kuài diǎn] “faster”.

4.2.4 The most often heard but incomprehensible vocabulary/ phrases

Nevertheless, a handful of students also faced problems in understanding Mandarin vocabulary/ phrases. The most often heard but incomprehensible vocabulary/ phrases is 能重复一遍吗? [Néng chóngfù yíbiàn ma?] “Could you please repeat it?”. This phrases were commonly heard when the target audience were unable to comprehend UMP students during conversations, and were asked to repeat their use of words.

During self-introduction session, language partner from China took turns to introduce themselves. Similarly, UMP students could not understand Mandarin vocabulary/ phrases of 硕士研究生 [shuòshì yánjiūshēng] “Master student” and 有课 [yǒu kè] “have class”.

During site visits, another common incomprehensible vocabulary/phrase was 外国人 [wàiguórén] “foreigner”. It is because of the cultural uniqueness portrayed in both clothing and languages exhibited by the UMP students and regarded as “foreigner”. Other popular incomprehensible vocabulary/ phrases of students was 什么餐? [Shénme cān?] “What type of food?” when they were dining at restaurants.

4.3 Challenges in practical Mandarin

4.3.1 Challenges faced in Mandarin Conversation in China

80% of the UMP students found that Mandarin conversed in China was too fast. 20% felt that native Chinese pronunciation differs greatly from Malaysian Mandarin.

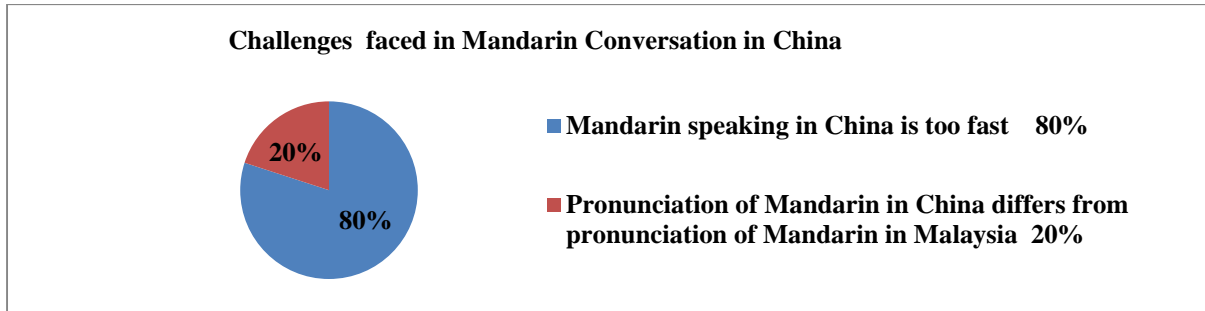


Figure 6: Challenges faced in Mandarin Conversation in China

4.3.2 Constrained vocabulary/ phrases

Nevertheless, a handful of UMP students experienced homesick. The most preferred vocabulary/ phrases but constrained in its use was “I miss Malaysia” in Mandarin 我想念马来西亚。 [Wǒ xiǎngniàn Mǎláixīyà.]

Secondly, when UMP students physically arrived in China, they would like to contact their family at Malaysia at once. Therefore, “I need a local SIM card.” 我想要一张当地的手机卡。 [Wǒ xiǎng yào yì zhāng dāngdì de shǒu jī kǎ.] has also become a preferred vocabulary/phrases but constrained in its used.

Thirdly, “Is the food halal here?” 这里的食物是清真的吗？ [Zhèlǐ de shíwù shì qīngzhēn de ma ?] has also become a constrained word.

Lastly, students who would like to know the places of attraction in China, but failed to convey it in Mandarin was 你可以告诉我一些景点吗？ [Nǐ kěyǐ gàosu wǒ yìxiē jǐngdiǎn ma ?] “Can you tell me the places of attraction?”.

4.4 Self-evaluation of practical Mandarin usage

All participants were requested to evaluate their own performance in practical Mandarin usage. 60% of students were ambivalently neutral of themselves while 30% were dissatisfied with themselves. 10% of the student rated “very satisfied”. The result concluded their lack of confidence in speaking Mandarin with the Chinese native speaker.

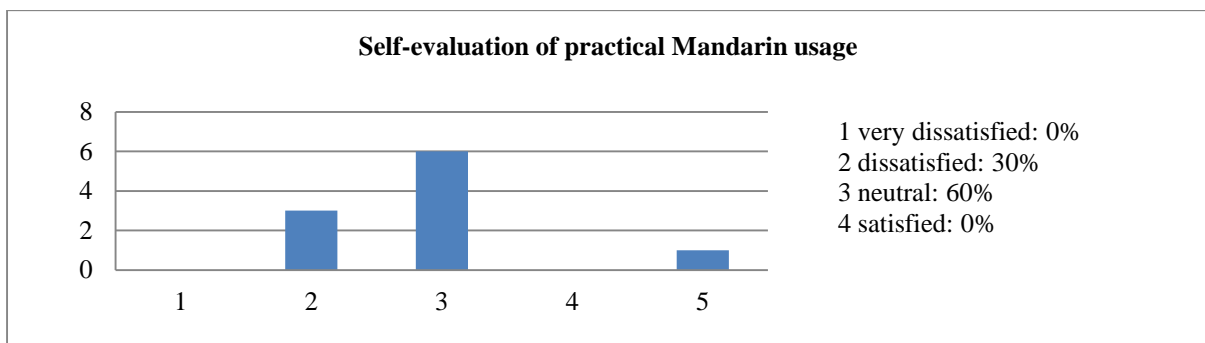


Figure 7: Self-evaluation of practical Mandarin usage

5. Conclusion

Previous research had evidently showed that language proficiency acquired by language learners did not meet the expectations even though longer hours were spent in language classes. Several sources have urged the need for language learners to practise Mandarin in order to enhance their language competencies. Previous research also suggested that foreign language experience would enable language learners to improve their communication competencies. However, studies in

real speaking situations remains lacking. Therefore, this study has been conducted in the form of questionnaire survey, to investigate the effectiveness of practical Mandarin among ten non-Chinese UMP students in UMP who had joined a short-term learning and travelling program in China.

The findings of this study highly suggest that useful Mandarin topics include greetings, food and beverages, travelling, shopping and accommodation. Mandarin vocabularies which are related to weather and seasons, and expressive feelings in the form of adjectives were highly regarded to be mostly used in Mandarin communication among students.

This study also discovered that students were able to understand and converse in simple Mandarin. Lacklustre of contact hours in language classes may have suggest their inability to convey in complete sentences. For beginners, this phenomenon is obvious as they need more time to arrange the sentences before speaking up. Overall, this study shed some light and focal point for researchers to improve the use of phrases and vocabulary in the domains highlighted above. The study also suggests that actual language classes should be complemented by tutorial sessions that would improve students' language competencies and performances.

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