

AN ANALYSIS ON THE PURPOSE OF OFFERING MANDARIN IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES AND ITS COMMENCEMENT

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ABSTRACT

In this study, the purpose of conducting Mandarin classes at Malaysian public universities is discussed. This is done from the perspective of the university. In this qualitative study, applied literature review and expert interviews were employed to report the development of Mandarin teaching in all the Malaysian public universities. Interviewees and respondents of this study were heads of the respective Chinese department/unit, Mandarin lecturers or language teachers, and some part-time teachers of the public universities. Some part-time teachers were selected because a few of the public universities have no permanent Mandarin teachers or lecturers. The respondents of this study were firstly given the interview questions via e-mail. This is followed by an appointment to carry out a phone interview with each respondent. After a transcription of each phone interview was completed, a copy of the transcription was given to the respective respondent to verify. Each respondent was given the freedom to make amendments to any errors made. The final version of each interview was used in the final analysis. The findings showed that 60.9 percent of the Mandarin classes in the 20 public universities were established with only one purpose. The remaining 39.1 percent have two purposes. On another note, 67.8 percent of the universities took the initiatives to offer Mandarin classes in order to prepare their graduates for employment. The commencement and development of Mandarin classes in Malaysia public universities is closely related to China's economy. With China still rising as one of the world's largest economy body, the Malaysian public universities will continue to encourage their students to take up Mandarin so as to produce graduates who could excel in future endeavour.

Keywords: Mandarin classes; third/ foreign language; employment.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Fan (2011), the earliest record of teaching Mandarin as a foreign language in Malaysia dates back to 1963. In that year, the Department of Chinese Studies in University of Malaya started a program to teach Mandarin to non-Chinese students. Although the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language in Malaysia has quite a long history, the relevant records

are relatively few. In fact, before the year of 2000, one can hardly find any related records. Although there are sporadic records after 2000, there has been no effort to organize this information.

Earlier, the purpose of non-Chinese (mainly Malay university students) learning Mandarin was not to offer services or do business in China. They mainly wanted to communicate with local Chinese and do business with Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau businessmen. However, as China rose as an economic power, the non-Chinese began to learn Mandarin in order to enter and get profits from the China market.

In this study the purpose of having Mandarin classes is examined from the university's perspective.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The researchers who recorded the early history and development of the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language in Malaysia were Cheun Heng Huat, Hoe Foo Terng and Tan Teow Ghee. But, their records were limited to those found in their university only. Later, Huang Kai Xin and others in their course of work recorded the information of teaching Mandarin as a second language in four local universities including UKM. Currently, studies in this area are being done by Fan Pik Shy and Ye Teng Teng (Hoe, 2014).

Cheun (2006) discussed the problems of teaching Mandarin in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM). The most common problems faced in the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language are the teaching of Chinese characters, the negative transfer in Mandarin learning, and inadequate teaching time.

According to Hoe & Tan (2007), among the higher educational institutions in Malaysia, UiTM Malaysia has the largest number of Malay students studying Mandarin language as a foreign language, or as a third language. UiTM Mandarin Unit was established in 1968 and celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2008. After 40 years, UiTM Mandarin Unit has its own set of teaching and learning system, assessment system, and is now in the effort of equipping itself with a full range of teaching aids and academic research.

Regarding the research in the teaching and learning of Mandarin, Tan & Hoe (2007) pointed out that most of these studies in Malaysia were conducted by UiTM lecturers. These studies were conducted to improve the performance and quality of teaching and learning and mainly focused on classroom teaching, individual differences in learning Mandarin, as well as the use of multimedia and networking in Mandarin learning and teaching. Though the studies were not many, they have brought positive impacts and contributed to the teaching and learning of Mandarin in Malaysia.

Huang (2008) investigated and compared the teaching and learning of Mandarin as a foreign language in UiTM, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Huang's study examined the establishment year of Mandarin classes in these universities, the statistics of students and teaching staff, the teaching and learning process, the curriculum, syllabi, and teaching achievements. The data was gathered through telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, questionnaires, online surveys and emails. The

information in this study is not comprehensive, but it was the first article that attempted to compare the Mandarin classes at tertiary level (Hoe, 2014).

Fan (2011) found that some of the public universities in Malaysia were serious in the implementation of Mandarin classes. For example, Universiti Malaysia Pahang has made Mandarin as a compulsory foreign language for its students. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM) have also offered Mandarin as one of the minor subjects in their universities. Among the foreign languages, Mandarin is the most preferred language to learn.

The Mandarin textbooks used in local institutions are mostly written by the local lecturers. Although these textbooks are based on those used in mainland China, the contents have been organized and rewritten to suit Malaysian cultures, students' proficiency levels, learning hours, and learning objectives (Yap, 2011; Fan, 2011).

The teaching and learning of Mandarin as a foreign language in Malaysia looks vibrant. It is taught in government and private schools at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. However, as it flourishes, more and more problems begin to surface. Among them are non-standardized syllabi, inappropriate textbooks, insufficient teaching staff, issues related to teachers' professionalism, and limited teaching hours. In addition, Malaysia does not have a body or institution to lead and coordinate affairs regarding the teaching and learning of Mandarin. As such, the effort to teach and learn Mandarin in a systematic way is still far from reach (Fan, 2011).

3. RESEARCH METHODS

In this qualitative study, applied literature review and expert interviews were employed to report the development of Mandarin teaching in the Malaysian public universities. Firstly, the researcher has identified items such as syllabus, teaching material, teacher's information, student's information, and test specifications that are needed to be studied. Then, opinions regarding the items were sought from experts in the field. Next, the items were revised and finalized.

In the next phase, the respondents were identified. All the 20 public universities in Malaysia took part in this research/study. Interviewees and respondents of this study were heads of the respective Chinese department/unit, Mandarin lecturers or language teachers, and some part-time teachers of the public universities. Some part-time teachers were selected because a few of the public universities have no permanent Mandarin teachers or lecturers. The respondents were firstly given the interview questions via e-mail. Then an appointment was made to carry out a phone interview with each respondent. Each interview lasted for between 45 to 60 minutes. After a transcription of each phone interview was completed, a copy of the transcription is given to the respective respondent to verify. Each respondent was given the freedom to make amendments to any errors made. The final version of each interview was used in the final analysis. The duration to obtain the final version depended on the cooperation of the respondents. The fastest was two days and slowest was three months.

4. PURPOSE OF OFFERING MANDARIN IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

From Table 1, we can see that most public universities have only one purpose in offering Mandarin. In the 20 universities, 14 out of 23 departments that offer Mandarin have only one purpose, and it accounts for 60.9% of the total. Another nine departments have two purposes, and make up 39.1% of the total. There are 23 departments in the 20 national universities that offer Mandarin because Universiti Teknologi Malaysia offers Mandarin to its diploma students at the Kuala Lumpur Branch and degree students at the Johor main campus. There are three departments that offer Mandarin courses at University of Malaya: Department of Chinese Studies, China Studies Institute and Faculty of the Language and Linguistics.

The purposes of offering Mandarin in these 23 departments are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Purpose and the Number of Malaysia.

Only one purpose	The purpose of offering		No. of universities/ departments
	No. of universities/ departments	Two purposes	
Learning more than one language	1	Learning more than one language and will help in employment	3
Understand the language of neighboring country to show friendship	1	Learning more than one language and for self-improvement	1
To help in employment	4	Interest and self-improvement	2
To upgrade foreign language communication skills	3	Promote interaction and self-improvement	1
Compulsory (learn Chinese to understand China better/further studies)	2	To help in employment and convergence to other courses	1
To accumulate credits	2	To upgrade language communication skills and help in employment	1
Dissemination of Chinese culture	1		
Total	14		9

A reorganization of the purposes listed in Table 1, reveals eleven main purposes of offering Mandarin. Table 2 shows the eleven purposes and the quantity of institutions that adopt each purpose.

Table 2: The Statistic on the Purpose and Number of Malaysian Public Universities Offering Mandarin Courses.

The purpose of offering	Quantity	Percentage
1. To help in Employment	9	28.1
2. Learning more than one language	5	15.6
3. Self-improvement	4	12.5
4. To upgrade foreign language communication skills	4	12.5
5. Interest	2	6.3
6. Compulsory (learn Chinese to understand China better/further Studies)	2	6.3
7. To accumulate credits	2	6.3
8. Understand the language of neighboring country to show friendship	1	3.1
9. Promote interaction	1	3.1
10. Convergence to other courses	1	3.1
11. Dissemination of Chinese culture	1	3.1
Total	32	100.0

From Table 2, to help in employment, with 28.1%, is the main purpose of offering Mandarin in the Malaysian public universities. A possible reason for this is the universities are offering Mandarin in order to enhance employment opportunities among their graduates and this is actually understandable. The purpose of learning more than one language ranked second with 15.6%. This shows that the universities also place importance in equipping the graduates with soft skills. University students need to master multiple languages so that they will be able to compete in the workplace. Self-improvement and the ability to communicate in foreign language ranked at third place with 12.5% respectively. These two purposes are related to work and to ensure graduates are able to work successfully in the workplace. In fact, the first four purposes in the list, accounting for 67.8%, are concerned with the workplace. This reflects that the universities are keen in preparing their graduates for employments.

To enable the students to use Mandarin at the workplace and in business, students need to have Mandarin communication skills. Communication skills are built on the language skills and therefore universities students need to have adequate training in language skills in the classroom.

5. COMMENCEMENT OF MANDARIN CLASSES AT MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

All the public universities in Malaysia have started Mandarin/Chinese classes. The first university to do so was University of Malaya (UM) in 1963 and the last was Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM) which began to offer Mandarin classes in September 2011. Table 3 shows the commencement of Mandarin classes in all the 20 public universities in Malaysia.

Table 3: The Commencement of Mandarin Classes in Malaysian Public Universities.

University	Commencement (Year)
1. University of Malaya (UM)	Department of Chinese Studies: 1963 Faculty of the Language and Linguistics: 1972 China Studies Institute: 2006
2. Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)	1968
3. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM)	1969-1972
4. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM)	1970s
5. Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM)	1995
6. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)	1995
7. Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS)	1997
8. Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM)	1999(at Johor main campus) 2003(at KL branch campus)
9. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	1999
10. Universiti Tun Hussain Onn Malaysia (UTHOM)	2002
11. Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP)	2004

(continued)

Table 3: The Commencement of Mandarin Classes in Malaysian Public Universities.

University	Commencement (Year)
12. Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT)	Started Mandarin classes in 1999. Upgraded from university college to university in 2007.
13. Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)	2004
14. Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris Shah (UPSI)	2005
15. Universiti Teknologi Melaka Malaysia (UteM)	Started Mandarin classes in 2000. Upgraded from university college to university in 2007.
16. Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK)	2007
17. Universiti Sultan Zainal Abiddin (UniSZA)	Started Mandarin classes in 1983. Upgraded from university college to university in 2007.
18. Universiti Pertahanan Malaysia (UPNM)	2008
19. Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM)	2008
20. Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM)	2011

Note. Adapted from *A Study of Teachers' Competency Standards and Teaching Mandarin as a Second Language Malaysian Public Universities*, by Hoe Foo Terng, 2014, unpublished doctoral dissertation of Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman, Selangor, pp 120-121.

From Table 3, we can see that in almost every decade, starting from the 1960's, there are some developments in the teaching and learning of Mandarin in Malaysia.

1960's (2 universities)

Malaysian universities that started Mandarin classes in the 1960's were: University of Malaya and Kolej Teknologi MARA (which was upgraded to university in 1999). University of Malaya started Mandarin class in 1963 and Kolej Teknologi MARA in 1968.

1970's (2 universities)

Two Malaysian universities that started Mandarin class in the 1970's were Universiti Sains Malaysia and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Universiti Sains Malaysia introduced Mandarin class to its students gradually from 1969 to 1972 while Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia did the same in the 1970's.

1980's

The Malaysian government did not set up any public universities in the 1980's.

1990's (5 universities)

Mandarin language began to have its economic value in the 1990's. As such, Mandarin became a favorite subject and Universiti Putra Malaysia, which was established in the 1970's, joined the bandwagon and began to introduce Mandarin class to its students in 1995. Universiti Malaysia Sarawak also started its Mandarin class in the same year. The other three universities that commenced Mandarin classes at their respective campuses were Universiti Malaysia Sabah (in 1997), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Sekudai (Johor) Main Campus (in 1999) and Universiti Utara Malaysia (in 1999).

2000's (11 universities)

A total of 11 universities began to offer Mandarin from 2000 to 2008. They were Universiti Tun Hussain Onn Malaysia (2002), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Kuala Lumpur Branch Campus (2003), Universiti Malaysia Pahang (2004), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (2001-2007), Universiti Malaysia Perlis (2004), Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris Shah (2005), Universiti Teknologi Melaka Malaysia (2000-2007), Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (2007), Universiti Sultan Zainal Abiddin (1983-2007), Universiti Pertahanan Malaysia (2008) and Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (2008).

2010's (1 university)

Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia became the latest Malaysian public university to offer Mandarin classes to its students. It did so in September 2011.

Figure 1 shows the summary of the commencement of Mandarin class in Malaysian public universities.

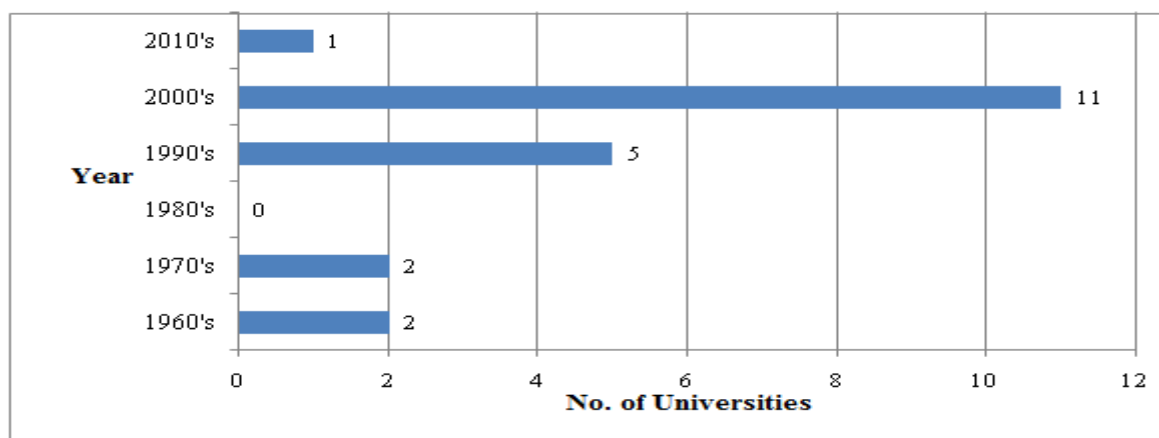


Figure 1: Statistic on the Commencement of Mandarin Class at Malaysian Public Universities.

Figure 1 shows the number of Malaysian public universities that offer Mandarin classes in relation to the development of China's economy. From the 1960's to 1980's, China's economy was in a transition stage whereby the government of China tried to transform its agricultural-based economy in a few provinces to township-industrial economy (Fei, 2007). During the

period of 30 years, only four public universities in Malaysia started their Mandarin classes. In the 1990's, China's economy started to boom and industrial development in coastal cities such as Shanghai, Suzhou, Xiamen, Shantou, Zhuhai, Shenzhen was rapid (Fei, 2007). In line with this development, five more public universities in Malaysia began to offer Mandarin classes. The teaching and learning of Mandarin in Malaysia then flourished rapidly in the 2000s. This is partly due to the bullish growth and expansion of China's economy which has suddenly placed Mandarin as one of the most important and most sought after language in the business world. With China joining WTO in 2011 and its rapid rise as the world's second largest economy body, the Malaysian public universities began to encourage their students to take up Mandarin so as to help their graduates in future employment.

6. CONCLUSION

Students who enroll in Malaysian public universities Mandarin classes are mostly non-Chinese and they start with zero knowledge (Hoe, 2014). Mandarin is taught as a subject and not every language skills are taught. As a result, the students are unable to develop the required language ability. Thus, it is difficult for students to develop a higher level of communication skills in the workplace. According to Cheng (2008), language skills are necessary to develop the literacy ability of the learners. He also believes that language skills and communication skills are two different things. Communication skills are a level higher than language skills. This means that it is more challenging for a student to acquire communication skills than language skills. Based on this postulation and the low proficiency level of Mandarin learners in Malaysian public universities, it can be concluded that most if not all the public universities in Malaysia have to work extremely hard to achieve their purpose of offering Mandarin classes in their institutions. The commencement and development of Mandarin classes in Malaysia public universities is closely related to China's economy. With China still rising as one of the world's largest economy body, the Malaysian public universities will continue to encourage their students to take up Mandarin learning so as to produce graduates who could excel in future endeavor.

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