

# Learners' Attitudes towards Engaging in Online Communication Activities

Goh Chin Shuang<sup>1\*</sup>, Tan Teow Ghee<sup>2</sup>, Turisiana Ahmad Buhari<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia  
cassgoh04@yahoo.com

<sup>2</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA,  
08400 Sungai Petani, Kedah, Malaysia  
tgtan05@yahoo.com.my

<sup>3</sup>Academy of Language Studies, Universiti Teknologi MARA  
40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia  
turisiana@salam.uitm.edu.my

## ABSTRACT

*Blended learning has been implemented in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) since 2009. However, there is still no known study on the attitudes of learners who engage in online communication activities in the study of Mandarin. Thus, this study was carried out to investigate the attitudes of learners who engage in online communication activities while studying Mandarin. The sample for this study comprised 201 students from eight classes of seven faculties at UiTM, Shah Alam. The data were collected via observations of the sample's online communication activities in the i-Learn portal for one semester. Throughout the semester, the researchers monitored the sample's activities and the results revealed that most of the sample showed a positive attitude towards online communication activities despite certain challenges faced by lecturers in online communication activities. The findings of this research will serve as a helpful reference to guide the teaching and learning of Mandarin among non-native or third language learners to actively engage them in online communication activities that create flexible, flipped and active learning of Mandarin as a foreign language.*

**Keywords:** blended learning, learners' attitudes, online communication activities, teaching and learning of Mandarin

## INTRODUCTION

Learning a third or a foreign language has become immensely popular at Malaysian universities since students are increasingly aware that knowledge of foreign languages facilitates travel and enhances career opportunities (Morris, 2005). One of the most popular foreign languages taught in Malaysian schools and universities is Mandarin, which is also one of the United Nation's official languages. In a multiracial country like Malaysia, mastering a third language certainly opens up more opportunities for jobs and career advancement. More importantly, China's rapid economic growth has encouraged many who are interested in doing business with the Chinese and exploiting economic opportunities in China to take up Mandarin.

At Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia's largest university in terms of enrollment, Mandarin is one of the most popular foreign or third language options for students. Mandarin is an elective taken by several thousand students each semester at the main and satellite campuses in Malaysia. Blended learning (BL) has been implemented in UiTM since 2009. Since its inception, a lecturer can teach with a well-structured lesson in the classroom, and then follow up with online forum/online communication course via the university's Learning Management System known as *i-Learn*. A lecturer is able to conduct a variety of learning activities with the use of technology to facilitate and enhance lecturer and peer interaction. The role of students is to join the online forum/online communication to enhance their learning experience. The rationale for having an online academic discussion is to provide a channel for students to continue learning after classes. However, there does not seem to be any significant study on attitudes of learners who engage in Mandarin online communication activities. Thus, this study was carried out to investigate the attitudes of learners who engage in online communication activities. To enable investigation, several activities were designed for students based on learning approaches such as collaborative learning, cooperative learning, flipped learning, and active learning.

## **PROBLEM STATEMENT**

It needs to be pointed out that foreign language courses offered at the undergraduate level are very basic, catering to students with no prior knowledge of the foreign language taken. In UiTM, these foreign language courses focus on basic skills in listening, speaking, writing and reading with two contact hours a week. It is common knowledge that limited contact hours can impede learning. Instructors facing time constraints may neglect listening and speaking exercises in the classroom in order to complete the syllabus.

A survey carried out by Naimah (2005) found that although the majority of UiTM undergraduates obtained outstanding results in examinations, they were unable to speak and understand foreign languages outside the classroom. As such, it was felt that a fundamental change is needed to equip undergraduates with practical real life communication skills – in other words, language skills which they can confidently use to interact with native/speakers of the language learned. To achieve this objective, language teachers would need to adopt new methods of teaching foreign languages, for example, integrating traditional ways of teaching foreign languages with technology such as via BL.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The advent of technology has made it possible for lessons to be conducted via the Internet and other digital media. Thus, the foreign language teacher can transform teaching materials or contents into a different format for use on a variety of portable devices as well as diversify their teaching methods such as conducting online communication activities after classroom teaching. In an effort to implement BL, UiTM students were also exposed to online communication activities for the Mandarin course. Thus, this study intends to look into the attitudes of students who engaged in online communication activities during their study of Mandarin.

## METHODOLOGY

The research design for this study was based on the qualitative approach, in which the data were collected via observations of online communication activities through *i-Learn* portal of the sample for one semester. The sample comprised 201 students in eight classes in seven faculties at UiTM, Shah Alam, i.e., Architecture, Planning & Surveying (AP), Business Management (BM), Computer Science & Mathematical Sciences (CS), Health Sciences (HS), Information Management (IM), Office Management Technology (OM) and Pharmacy (PH). This selection was made in order to provide an extensive representation of the participants of this study. One Mandarin class was selected from each faculty, except for two classes from the Health Sciences (HS) faculty. Students attended their Mandarin classes at the TEC (Technology Enabled Classroom) at the respective faculty. Outside the classroom, the sample accessed *i-Learn* to participate in online communication activities via “i-Discuss”. Throughout the entire semester, the researchers monitored the students’ activities with the aim of investigating the sample’s attitudes to online communication activities.

**Table 1: Online Communication Activities Setting**

a) <b>Announcement</b>	The lecturer posted any important announcement here.
b) <b>i-Discuss</b>	This consisted of two main folders, namely : <b>General&amp;Academic</b>
<b>i) General folder</b> consisted of topics	
General	Students could post any question about Mandarin 1.
Welcome	Lecturers wrote welcome messages to students.
Chatting	Students chatted with their peers or with their lecturers.
<b>ii) Academic folder</b> consisted of topics	
Hanyu pinyin	Hanyu Pinyin and Questions & Answers (Q&A).

Mandarin 1 Note/Nota	Students printed out this study material via the subfolder <i>Mandarin 1 nota</i> to enhance their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Additionally, students submitted their exercises here.
Podcast/Listening	Students downloaded materials into their digital devices such as mp3, mp4, i-phone, smart phone, etc.
<b>Chapter 1 to Chapter 8:</b> Each chapter had three subfolders, namely:	
<i>Internet resources link:</i>	Students posted links to Internet resources related to Chapter 1 to Chapter 8. For example, some <i>YouTube</i> links related to learning Mandarin, etc.
Questions & Answers (Q&A)	Students asked questions pertaining to Chapters 1 to 8. The group in charge of a particular chapter answered the questions posted by other classmates. Students referred the questions to their lecturer.
Exercises	The group members posted exercises here. The exercises included rearranging sentences, constructing sentences, translating, and carrying out dialogues in Q&A format.

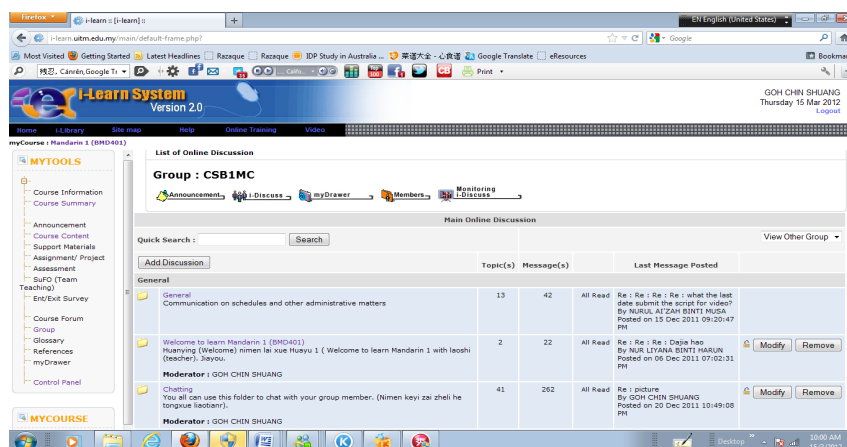


Figure 1: Online Communication Activities Setting

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Online communication activities for one semester were monitored by investigating the attitudes of students who participated in these activities. From the data gathered, all the students in this study had no prior experience of participating in online communication activities for the study of Mandarin. All activities in the online forum were based on the learner centered approach and collaborative learning. Since the online communication activities were divided into two main categories - general discussion and academic discussion, the data analysis was done according to these two categories.

### **Students' Attitudes to Using Online Communication for General Discussion**

In the general discussion section, students were provided with three folders to use to discuss general topics in the Mandarin syllabus. The three folders were named *General*, *Welcome* and *Chatting*. In the *General* folder, students could post any general question on Mandarin. However, an analysis of this folder found that some students posted academic questions instead, and these questions were also posted in the *Welcome* folder. This provided evidence for the researchers to conclude that some students had not read or referred to the manual provided. The *Chatting* folder, on the other hand, was set up to allow students to converse with their peers on any topic regarding their learning experiences, including sharing of information, with the condition that they had to use the Mandarin they had learned in their interactions with peers and lecturers. It was observed that students from different faculties posted different kinds of questions in this folder. A similar occurrence is that there were still several students from certain faculties who posted academic questions in the *Chatting* folder. On the other hand, students from the Faculty of Health Sciences (HS), Computer and Mathematical Sciences (CS), Office Management (OM) and Pharmacy (PH) posted questions on general topics in the *Chatting* folder. They posted the questions they had learned in conversation format and their peers/classmates responded to their questions. Some students also shared information obtained from websites. For instance, some students posted some Internet links in the *Chatting* folder, or posted some information regarding the learning of Mandarin 1. One student also shared her experience of watching Chinese movies with others. Overall, most of the students used sentences

they had previously learned when chatting with other students. Apart from that, the researchers also posted two questions for the students, to ask them why they learned Mandarin and what problems they encountered when learning Mandarin. However, not many responded to these questions. Those who did respond explained that they learned Mandarin to communicate with Chinese friends and for their future career, since the ability to speak Mandarin is an asset. Some students drew attention to the difficulty of identifying and using the correct tones and pronouncing words correctly. Generally, the pattern of online communication was clear. Students asked their classmates and lecturers some questions, which were then answered by their classmates and lecturers.

### **Students' Attitudes in Using Online Communication for Academic Discussions**

The rationale for having an online academic discussion is to provide a channel for students to continue learning after classes. To enable continuity of learning, the researchers had designed some activities for students based on learning approaches such as collaborative learning, cooperative learning, flipped learning and active learning.

The Academic Folder comprised four topics - *Hanyu pinyin*; *Mandarin I Note/Nota*; *Podcast/Listening*; and *Chapter 1- Chapter 8*.

For the *Hanyu pinyin* folder, students could post all information relevant to *Hanyu pinyin* via this folder. Surprisingly, some students posted other questions or information here. It was clear that certain students did not pay any attention to the instruction given by the researchers or refer to the manual for online communication activities.

For the *Mandarin I Note/Nota* folder, not many students submitted their exercises and posted them here. Most probably, lecturers had already discussed answers to exercises in the classroom.

For the *Podcast/Listening* folder, the lecturers did not receive many questions from the students regarding this topic. Most of the students merely downloaded and studied these materials by themselves. They preferred to study on their own, and not engage in any discussion via "i-Discuss".

Meanwhile, for the folder *Chapter 1 - Chapter 8*, most students posted exercises into different sub-folders and let other students do the exercises. In this part of the academic discussion, students were assigned to groups of two to five students. Each group was responsible for a specific chapter. Cooperative learning, collaborative learning and flipped learning approaches were adopted to encourage students to engage actively in online communication activities. It is believed that these learning approaches would help students to become proficient in Mandarin. Besides, they would also acquire teamwork skills such as collaborating and brainstorming with peers and lecturers.

The researchers' monitoring of the students' activities showed that each group did post several exercises and other students posted their answers. The exercises ranged from gap filling, translation activity, dialogue completion, dialogue writing, sentence reformulation, sentence construction to question and answer types of exercises. If the correct answer was posted, encouraging comments were given. Examples of the comments included "CONGRATS, friends. all your answers are correct :) WELL DONE", or "Jiāyóu". Some students replied to these comments with "xièxie" (thank you). When lecturers monitored the online communication activities, they identified and corrected the mistakes for the students. As a result, other students could also learn from the mistakes when they viewed the post. If students put in a great effort to give correct answers, the lecturer praised the students by commenting "Němen zhēn cōngming. Jiāyóu. 😊", (You are /All of you are so clever. Work harder). The student responded to the lecturer by commenting "xièxie laoshi. wǒmen zhēn cōngming" (Thank you, Teacher, we are really clever). Some groups posted some Internet resources links, but most groups did not post this information in the subfolder labeled *Internet resources links*.

### **Challenges of Participating in Online Communication Activities**

All in all, most participants in this study seemed to be very interested in online communication activities. The online communication activities created a learner centered learning environment and the lecturer became a facilitator, allowing students to take charge of their learning and interrupting their discussion only when necessary. Students also practiced what they



learned from Multimedia e-Learning Materials (MELMs) with their peers and lecturer via *i-Discuss*. However, the researchers also found that certain students were not actively participating in the online communication activities even after the lecturer identified them in class as well as in the *Announcement* folder via *i-Learn*. Consequently, the lecturers had to compel the students to participate in online communication activities. After listing the names of inactive students in the announcement folder, the number of students participating in the online communication activities increased considerably; there were even complaints from the students that they were unable to download or upload their materials or exercises due to technology glitches, and there were students who requested their lecturers to provide feedback promptly to them. This occasionally occurred as lecturers were unable to respond or answer the students' questions promptly or immediately as a result of a demanding teaching workload.

### **Suggestions for Student Engagement in Online Communication Activities**

The present study has identified some challenges in online communication activities namely, a) a small group of the students who never posted questions and answers; b) technology glitches issues; and c) inability of lecturers to give prompt or immediate feedback to students.

In response to students who are inactive in online communication activities, the researchers suggest certain strategies to prompt students to participate in these activities. The lecturer can reward active students with small gifts, provide more exercises and assignments that are related to their Mandarin syllabus and their assessments, as well as make it compulsory for students to submit assignments via *i-Learn* to get marks, thus promoting collaborative learning among students (Anbalagan, Kumar & Biljlani, 2015), and overall, encouraging students to participate in online communication activities. As suggested by Salter and Conneely (2015), online communication activities should provide structured discussion forums whereby lecturers can post "starter" questions to students, hence creating an enjoyable and interesting way for them to engage in online discussion forums.

Regarding technology glitches, the *i-Learn* system should be upgraded with state-of-the-art capacity to avoid problems that are technical in nature. Besides that, *i-Learn* should provide more multimedia functions such as audio and video chats (voice communication) and more image features with the aim of making online communication more interactive (Osipov, Prasikova & Volinsky, 2015).

Immediate or prompt feedback to students' questions is crucial in online communication activities. The researchers recommend lecturers to use social networking elements or social networking tools such as *whatsapp*, *wechat*, *line* and others to create a special group for students. If the student needs immediate answers from the lecturer, that particular student could inform the lecturer via these tools and the lecturer could promptly give feedback to the student.

## CONCLUSION

The data gathered from the observation of the activities in *i-Discuss* via the *i-Learn* portal has led the researchers to conclude that the online communication activities do aid the learning of Mandarin. Most of the participants/students showed a positive attitude towards online communication activities as indicated by their participation in online language exercises and online communication activities such as chatting and discussing with their peers and lecturers. Students also shared information and resources with each other. The online communication activities motivated students to collaborate on their learning. Moreover, they enhanced students' social capital (information and interaction) and human capital (knowledge and skill) (Belz, 2002; Chung, Graves & Wesche, 2005; Cai, 2011; Chen, 2011; Shrewsbury, 2012). The online discussions promoted active learning, cooperative learning and collaborative learning aside from flexible learning and flipped learning among students.

In conclusion, this study yielded a wealth of information on online communication activities as a suitable platform to learn Mandarin.

## REFERENCES

- Anbalagan,R., Kumar,A., & Biljlani,K. (2015). Footprint Model for Discussion Forum in MOOC. *Procedia Computer Science*, 58(2015), 530-537.
- Belz, J. A. (2002). Social Dimensions of Telecollaborative Foreign Language Study. *Language Learning & Technology*, 6 (1), 60–81.
- Cai, S.R. (2011). *The Impact of an Online Learning Community Project on University Chinese as a Foreign Language Students' Motivation* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis database. (UMI No. 3450613)
- Chen, Y.L. (2011).*The Influence of Integrating Technology in Language Learning Courses* (Doctoral dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis database. (UMI No.3458352)
- Chung, Y., Graves, B., Wesche, M., & Barfurth, M. (2005). Computer-Mediated Communication in Korean-English Chat Rooms: Tandem Learning In An International Languages Program. *The Canadian Modern Language Review / La Revue Canadienne Des Langues Vivantes*.62(1), 49-86.
- Morris, B. (2005). Why Study A Foreign Language? <http://www.learnnc.org/lp>. Accessed 25 Aug 2010.
- Naimah, A. (2005). Permasalahan Yang Dihadapi Oleh Pelajar Penutur Bukan Jati Yang Mempelajari Bahasa Ketiga. *Proceedings of ILANNS 2005 Conference*. MARA University of Technology Malaysia.
- Osipov, V.I., Prasikova, Y.A., & Volinsky, A.A. (2015). Participant Behavior And Content Of The Online Foreign Languages Learning And Teaching Platform. *Computers in Human Behavior* 50 (2015), 476–488.
- Salter, P.N., & Conneely, R.M. (2015). Structured and Unstructured Discussion Forums As Tools For Student Engagement. *Computers in Human Behavior* 46 (2015), 18–25.

Shrewsbury, Eric-Gene J. (2012). *Interaction Through Asynchronous Audio-Based Computer Mediated Communication In The Virtual Foreign Language Classroom*. (Doctoral Dissertation). Available from ProQuest Dissertations and Thesis database.(UMI No. DP20062)