

PROBLEMS FACED BY NON-CHINESE STUDENTS IN LEARNING THE CHINESE LANGUAGE: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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This research aimed at investigating the problems faced and causes of errors made by non-Chinese students in learning the Chinese language. In addition, the views held by the students on learning Chinese were sought. The respondents comprised 100 Form One to Form Five students from two secondary schools. Data were collected via the administration of questionnaire and interviews. The findings revealed that the students faced problems in learning the literary component of the Chinese language and in the mastery of classical Chinese, among others. The major cause of problems is the low frequency of using the Chinese language. However, these students were very much encouraged by their parents to learn Chinese. They themselves realized the importance of the Chinese language in the present globalization era. They said that knowing Chinese language would increase their competitiveness in the job market in the future.

Keywords: Chinese language, literacy component, competitiveness, job market

Chinese (Mandarin in spoken form) is a unique language as it has a logographic writing system which is different from the alphabetic writing system such as English or Malay. The written symbols of Chinese, known as character, represent lexical morphemes. About 80% - 90% of the Chinese characters are composed of two components: a semantic radical that gives a clue to meaning and a phonetic radical that offers a clue to pronunciation (Ho & Cheng, 2004; Hoosain, 1991, in Shu & Anderson, 1997).

Although the Chinese writing system consists of eight basic strokes, the number of strokes in one character ranges from one to more than twenty. Based on the structure of Chinese characters, children with specific learning difficulty can be taught by making use of the semantic and phonetic components. Leong, Cheng, and Lam (2000, in Ho & Cheng, 2004, p. 2) suggested that learning in the recognition of the functions of semantic and phonetic radicals is an important step in learning to read and spell (write; note by author) Chinese characters.

The transcript system for standard Mandarin (spoken Chinese) is 'hanyu pinyin'. Mandarin is a tonal language. Therefore, one may encounter Chinese characters with exactly the same pinyin, but if they are pronounced with different intonations, they will be composed of different characters with completely different meanings.

Presently 54,678 characters are found in the Hanyu Dictionary (Wang, 1994). However, it is said that knowledge of about 3,000 characters enables one to read about 99% of the characters in Chinese newspapers and magazines. Nevertheless, to read Chinese literature, technical writings or classical Chinese, one needs to be familiar with about 6,000 characters (Chinese Script and Language, 2007).

Practice in vocabulary is an essential part of Chinese learning. The Chinese language is different from the alphabetic languages in that it does not have gender, tense and number variations. The predominant grammatical concern lies in semantics and syntax, or the meaning and order of words. Therefore, the principal task of learning Chinese is vocabulary building, which relates to character learning and cultural understanding (Hu, 2003, p. 68).

Chinese Language Learning in the Malaysian Context

In Malaysia, the Chinese language is the medium of instruction for the Chinese primary schools. And Chinese is offered as a language subject at secondary level. In the multiracial and multilingual society of Malaysia, not only the ethnic Chinese are learning the Chinese language; in fact, more than 60,000

non-Chinese students are studying in the Chinese primary schools. Normally many of these non-Chinese students from the Chinese primary schools would still be attending Chinese classes at the secondary level. The time allocated for Chinese Language subject in the secondary schools varies from 3 to 5 periods per week, that is, 120 minutes to 200 minutes per week.

Several studies related to the learning of the Chinese language at the secondary level have been done locally. Fan (1998) analyzed the errors made in the essays written by Form One students, and also explored the factors causing the occurrence of errors. A research study by Leong (2004) investigated the problems faced by Form One students in writing narrative essays in Chinese. A study by Chong Y. F. (2004) focused on the problems faced by Form One students in learning classical Chinese prose. On the other hand, Tong (2008) intended to find out the achievement of Form Four students in the comprehension of modern Chinese prose. Eng's (2005) research aimed at investigating the problems faced by Form One students in learning the Chinese excerpts. Chong S. C. (2004) studied the attitudes of the Form Four students towards the learning of the Chinese language.

All these researchers have revealed some enlightening findings pertaining to the learning of Chinese in the local context. Nevertheless, all the respondents of the above-mentioned studies were ethnic Chinese. Considering that those Chinese students were facing various problems in the learning of Chinese, presumably non-Chinese students would also be facing problems. Hence, this prompted the researcher to carry out this preliminary study to investigate the general problem faced by the non-Chinese students in learning the Chinese language at secondary level. By knowing the problems and their causes, further studies could then be carried out to resolve their problems and institute appropriate remedial measures.

Research Questions

The objectives of this research are to investigate the problems faced by the non-Chinese students in learning the Chinese language at the secondary level; to explore the factors that cause their problems; and to find out the views held by these students on the learning of the Chinese language. Hence, the research questions are:

1. What are the problems faced by the non-Chinese students in learning the Chinese language in secondary schools?
2. What are the factors that cause their problems?
3. What are the students' views on the learning of the Chinese language?

Significance of the Study

In Malaysia, Chinese is offered as a language subject in the secondary schools. With Chinese gaining in importance as an international language, it is beneficial for our students to learn and master the Chinese language in this globalization era. However, possibly due to the uniqueness of the Chinese scripts and other reasons, the learners of Chinese language seem to face various problems, especially for those non-native speakers of Chinese. Hence, this research is carried out to investigate the non-Chinese students' learning of the Chinese language; to explore their specific problems and to determine the contributory factors causing the problems. In addition, their views pertaining to the learning of Chinese are also elicited.

The findings of this research would give an overview of the problems faced by the non-Chinese students in learning the Chinese language at secondary level. By knowing their specific problems and the causes of problems, appropriate remedial measures can be taken to resolve them, thus enhancing their mastery of the Chinese language. It would be useful for the Chinese language teachers to refer to the findings of this research in order to prepare teaching materials and relevant and effective activities for the non-Chinese students. The findings also could be referred by the syllabus and curriculum planners in designing curriculum materials that are appropriately geared to the needs of students learning Chinese as a second language.

Methodology

The data of this research were collected via the administration of questionnaire and interviews. The findings will be presented descriptively with illustrations of tables and figures.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study comprised of 100 Form One to Form Five students selected from 2 secondary schools situated in the state of Kelantan. For the purpose of this study, the two schools are named School A and School B. All the 100 students graduated from the Chinese primary schools, and are still attending the Chinese language classes in their respective schools. The detailed information of these respondents will be presented later.

Instruments

Besides the researcher, whom Merriam (1998) considered as the prime instrument in a research; a set of questionnaire and interview guides were prepared for the students. In addition, a set of interview guides for the Chinese language teachers of these respondents was used to gather more information. However, due to space constraints, the information provided by the teachers would not be included in this paper.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire comprised three parts: (A) Student Profile; (B) Problems in learning the Chinese language; and (C) Causes of problems in learning the Chinese language. For part (A), besides the demographic information, the students were also asked to provide the grades they scored for the Chinese language papers in the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR or *Ujian Pencapaian Sekolah Rendah*) and the Lower Secondary Assessment (PMR or *Penilaian Menengah Rendah*).

Part (B) consisted of 20 items which included the possible problems faced by the students in learning the Chinese language. The students were also requested to write down any other problems not mentioned above. Part (C) listed 23 contributory factors to their problems. Similarly, the students were told to add in any other factors not mentioned in the list.

The administration of the questionnaire was helped out by individual Chinese language teachers involved in teaching the respondents of this research.

Interview Guide

Dexter (1970, p. 136) defines interview as a “conversation with purpose” (in Merriam, 1998, p. 71). The main purpose of an interview is to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind (Patton, 1980, p. 278). Hence, semi-structured interviews were carried out to elicit more information from the respondents of this research, to supplement data obtained from the questionnaire. Thus, an interview guide was prepared as it acts as a checklist to ensure all relevant topics are covered (Patton, 1980).

The main objective of the interviews was to see the self-exploring of the students regarding their problems and causes of problems in learning the Chinese language, and their views or opinions on learning the Chinese language. Information gathered from the interviews was used to triangulate the results of the questionnaire. Marshall and Rossman (1995, p. 144) said that triangulation is the act of bringing more than one source of data to bear on a single point. Denzin (1978) aptly opined that triangulation is an important element in qualitative research as it strengthens the inherent weaknesses or biases of a single method of data collection. Therefore, interviews with the participants helped to strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings of this research.

Due to the large number of students, group interviews were carried out, with the assistance of the Chinese language teachers involved. The students were requested to jot down their answers briefly after the interviews as audio-recording was not able to be carried out; and that supplemented the

interview notes. Data elicited from the interviewees mainly provided answers for the third research question, that is, their views held on the learning the Chinese language.

Results

After analyzing the questionnaire and interview data, the following results were obtained. Tables and figures were used, where necessary, for illustrations during the discussion.

Table 1 shows the number of respondents from each form for School A and School B. The total 100 respondents comprised of 42 boys and 58 girls. Out of these students, 66 were from the lower secondary and 34 were from the upper secondary.

Table 1
Number of Students by Gender from Each School

Form	School A			School B			Total
	Male	Female	(No)	Male	Female	(No)	
One	3	7	(10)	12	9	(21)	31
Two	2	3	(5)	4	9	(13)	18
Three	4	3	(7)	4	6	(10)	17
Four	3	2	(5)	0	3	(3)	8
Five	4	9	(13)	6	7	(13)	26
	16	24	(40)	26	34	(60)	100

The demographic information of the students is shown in Table 2.

Table 2
Background of the Students

Form	No. of Students	Ethnic Group			Language Most Used at Home			
		Malay	Indian	Thai	Malay	Tamil	Thai	Others
One	31	28	1	2	28	1	1	1 (English)
Two	18	16	1	1	16	1	1	
Three	17	17			17			
Four	8	6	1	1	7		1	
Five	26	22	2	2	21	2	2	1 (English)
	100	89	5	6	89	4	5	2

The respondents comprised 89 Malay, 5 Indian and 6 Thais. As for their first language (L1), or the most used language at home, that is, the dominant language, the data revealed 89 students with Malay as L1, 4 students with Tamil as L1, 5 students with Thai as L1, and another 2 students, one Indian and one Thai, have English as their L1.

Table 3
Results of Chinese Papers in the UPSR and PMR Examinations

Form	No. of Students	UPSR (Grade)										PMR (Grade)				
		Paper 1					Paper 2									
		A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E
One	31	1		13	12	5	1	2	10	8	10					
Two	18		1	5	10	2		1	3	9	5					
Three	17		2	6	7	2		3	4	4	6					
Four	8		1	3	3	1		2	4		2				1	7
Five	26		5	10	9	2	1	3	9	9	4		3	5	10	8
	100	1	9	37	41	12	2	11	30	30	27		3	5	11	15

Paper 1 and Paper 2 of UPSR indicated essay writing and comprehension test respectively. Obviously, only about 10% of the students could be considered as scoring good results. The large majority could only be said to show mediocre performance. Similarly for the PMR results, the majority of them did not perform satisfactorily. Based on their performance in the public examinations, it could be inferred that they were facing problems or difficulties in the learning of Chinese.

In Part (B) and Part (C) of the questionnaire, the students were required to select the most appropriate answer under: 1 – Strongly disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Agree, 4 – Strongly Agree. After analyzing their answers, the researcher grouped 1 and 2 under the category of Disagree; and 3 and 4 under the category of Agree. With that, all the answers were re-arranged according to the preferred choices of the students, in descending order, as shown in Table 4. In other words, it can be seen at one glance the seriousness of each problem in terms of the number of students who agreed with the statement. Similarly, Table 5 displays the contributory factors of the problems in descending order.

Table 4
Problem Faced by the non-Chinese Students in Learning the Chinese Language

Ranking	Agree (%)	Problems
1	82	I cannot understand the in-depth meanings of 'mingju' (excerpts or extracts).
2	79	I am not able to understand the historical and cultural backgrounds of mingju.
3	76	I am not creative in composition writing.
4	71	I find it difficult to translate the meaning of 'abstract words' (<i>xuci</i>) in classical Chinese (<i>wen yan wen</i>)
5	71	I am lacking vocabulary to express my ideas.
6	66	I find it difficult to understand the sentence structure of classical Chinese.
7	64	I find it difficult to understand the Chinese grammar.
8	63	I am not able to memorize 'mingju jinghua' (excerpts or extracts).
9	60	Content wise, I always mix up main points and secondary points in

		compositions.
10	59	I find it difficult to understand the main points of a text.
11	57	I cannot express an incident coherently.
12	57	My mother tongue/first language influences the semantics and syntax of my Chinese language.
13	57	I always am unable to complete my composition in time.
14	55	I cannot answer the comprehension questions with fluent and complete sentences.
15	50	I always make orthographical errors.
16	50	For composition, I always write out of point.
17	41	I do not participate actively in activities carried out in Chinese lessons.
18	40	I find it difficult to pronounce accurately the different tones of Chinese characters.
19	40	I cannot pronounce correctly homographic and homophonic words.
20	39	I am not able to catch up with the speed of teaching in class.
21	Other	Faced difficulties in writing summary and writing comments after reading an article or news item.

Evidently, the majority of respondents faced difficulties in the area of mingju learning. Mingju comprises excerpts or extracts of classical or modern Chinese poems, literature or idioms. Mingju is considered the literary component of the Chinese language subject in the secondary Chinese syllabus. Understandably, with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, it would be difficult for the respondents of this study to grasp the in-depth meanings of mingju; and to understand the historical and cultural backgrounds, which is beyond their experiences.

These students also faced problems in the learning of classical Chinese, in which certain vocabulary and sentence structure could be different from the modern Chinese language. Half of the students admitted that they always made orthographical errors, that is, they faced difficulty in writing the Chinese characters. Some 40% of the respondents said that they could not pronounce accurately the different intonations in Chinese; and had difficulty in differentiating the homophonic and homographic words. These findings reflected the factor of universal hierarchy of difficulty in second language acquisition advocated by Richards and Sampson (1974). It is concerned with the inherent difficulty in the mastering of certain phonological, syntactical or semantic items or structures. Some forms may be inherently difficult to learn no matter what the backgrounds of the learners.

The students also faced problems in composition writing, in understanding the grammar, in comprehension of texts, and in the writing of summary and comments. However, only 39% of the students admitted that they could not catch up with the speed of teaching in class.

Based on the list given, the respondents of this research self-explored the possible causes of problems. Their responses were analyzed and shown in Table 5. First and foremost, the low frequency in the usage of the Chinese language could be the major factor in causing their problems. Another contributory factor was the quiet unfavourable sociolinguistic environment at home. Despite the fact that the majority of these students having siblings who know Chinese, they still preferred to use their first language in communicating with each other. Other causes of problems included weak foundation in the acquisition of the language; the texts were too difficult to comprehend; and certain personal attitudes and perceptions of the students towards the learning of the Chinese language.

Table 5
Causes of Problems Faced by the Non-Chinese Students in Learning the Chinese Language

Ranking	Agree (%)	Causes of problems
1	78	I seldom read newspapers or books in Chinese.
2	67	I do not prepare drafts in composition writing.
3	66	My family members are not able to assist me in my Chinese assignments.
4	65	I am lacking in imagination and not creative in composition writing.
5	62	I do not have enough reference materials in Chinese.
6	59	I hardly use Mandarin/ Chinese to communicate with my family members.
7	56	The Chinese language texts are too difficult for me.
8	55	I have never attended Chinese tuition class.
9	51	My foundation of Chinese language in primary school is weak.
10	51	I do not take the initiative to study Chinese language at home.
11	51	I seldom seek help when facing difficulties or problems in learning the Chinese language.
12	43	My teacher always teaches too much material in class.
13	43	Time allocated for Chinese lessons in school is insufficient.
14	39	I find that class activities during Chinese lessons are monotonous and boring.
15	39	My teacher is not able to give personal attention due to the large number of students in class.
16	36	I find it difficult to memorize the strokes of Chinese characters.
17	35	I am not paying attention during Chinese lessons.
18	35	I am not bothered whether I pass the Chinese language paper in examination.
19	34	I do not think that Chinese Language is an important subject in school.
20	34	My teacher explains too fast and I cannot catch up.
21	30	I am not interested in learning Chinese.
22	29	My teacher always does not prepare enough materials to be taught in class.
23	15	My parents do not encourage me to learn Chinese language.
24	Others	Nil - The respondents did not provide any other factors.

It is interesting to note that the majority of the students actually have very positive attitudes in learning Chinese, even though their overall performance in the examinations is not very satisfactory.

Some very enlightening findings were obtained from the interview information. The majority of the students have siblings also studying Chinese in either the primary or secondary schools. A few students revealed that their parents speak Chinese. They sometimes would communicate in Mandarin with their family members.

The students were asked how to overcome their learning problems. Based on the data available, several resolutions were given by the students themselves. First, they should speak more, read more and write more in Chinese; that is, increase the usage of the Chinese language. In addition, they should seek help from their friends or teachers when facing problems in learning the language, or take the initiative to refer to the dictionary or reference books. They should attend tuition class; the teachers perhaps should consider giving extra classes for those weak students. Also, some of the students admitted that they should pay more attention in class and do more Chinese assignments to improve their proficiency in the Chinese language.

As for the views held on the learning of the Chinese language, very interesting and insightful findings were obtained. The following list summarizes the views held by the majority of the students. Surprisingly, Form One to Form Five students unanimously held these views.

- They are very much encouraged by their parents to learn Chinese.
- They themselves are keen in learning Chinese.
- They have admitted that Chinese is a very important language in the present globalization era.
- Therefore, they feel that Chinese language should be made a compulsory subject in school.
- They have an edge over those who do not learn Chinese.
- Chinese language is very important for their future careers, as it increases their competitiveness to work in other countries, or just work locally.
- They are quite concerned that they should pass the Chinese papers in the public examinations.
- They would sit for the Chinese papers in the PMR and SPM (*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia*, or Malaysian Certificate of Education) examinations, despite the fact they did not perform outstandingly in the previous examinations. This is because they would not want to waste all the effort in learning the Chinese language for the past years since their Year One; moreover, they need the certificate to prove that they have learnt the language and would use it to cope with future job demands. This indeed is a very far-sighted view held by this group of students.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this research, evidently these students are facing various difficulties and problems, with different degree of gravity, in the learning of the Chinese language at the secondary level. Notwithstanding, the majority of them are highly motivated in learning Chinese. Not only are they very much encouraged and supported by their parents, they themselves realized the importance of the Chinese language in the present competitive world. As pointed out during the interviews, the students expressed that they have an edge over their friends who are not learning Chinese. Thus, that would enhance their competitiveness in the job market in the future. These students also have foreseen their working opportunities in other countries besides Malaysia.

Despite the positive perceptions and far-sightedness of these students, in the mean time, their problems in learning Chinese need to be resolved. Remedial measures should be taken by all parties concerned, including the students themselves, in order to facilitate their mastery of Chinese. By building up a good foundation of Chinese in schools, and given the fact that Malaysian society provides a very conducive sociolinguistic environment for using the Chinese language, surely the language proficiency of the students would be improved tremendously. It is necessary for them to master Chinese at a level that is not just for communication purposes alone, but also to meet their career demands in the future.

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