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EXPLORING BEST PRACTICES IN TEACHING MANDARIN CHINESE ONLINE TO ADULT LEARNERS IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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Abstract: This exploratory study examines the current best practices in teaching Mandarin Chinese in an online environment in Trinidad & Tobago, a context where online language learning is relatively new and growing in importance. The growing cultural and economic connections between China and Trinidad & Tobago have increased the demand for Mandarin language skills, particularly in the virtual classroom. This study focuses on identifying effective strategies for engaging learners in a digital environment, integrating culturally relevant content, and utilising technology to enhance learning outcomes. The methodology involved surveying fifty (50) adult learners who studied Mandarin online for at least one semester (52 contact hours) at the Centre for Language Learning, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus. Despite some challenges inherent to virtual learning such as connectivity issues, students expressed satisfaction with their classes due to effective practices adopted by their instructors. These included the use of ICT tools and the incorporation of culturally relevant material, which bridged the gap between Chinese and Caribbean contexts. This study intends to provide insights into the successful application of online teaching methods for Mandarin Chinese in Trinidad & Tobago. Although the study is limited by its small sample size, its findings offer recommendations for improving student engagement, autonomy, and proficiency in foreign language education across the Caribbean.

Keywords: Mandarin Chinese, online learning, learner engagement, teaching practices, foreign language education, Trinidad and Tobago

Introduction

Since the arrival of the first set of Chinese indentured labourers in Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) in the 1800s, the Chinese community has made significant contributions to the socio-cultural and economic landscapes of the twin-island republic. It is therefore unsurprising that Mandarin Chinese, the official language of the People's Republic of China, was eventually incorporated into the foreign language offerings at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus (The UWI). In 1999, the first Chinese language course was introduced through the Centre for Language Learning (CLL), a department within The UWI's Faculty of Humanities and Education. Since its inception, the programme has expanded to offer language instruction in two distinct formats: face-to-face and online. The online component was launched in 2020 in response to the sudden shift to remote teaching brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Now in its fifth year, the programme is now well-positioned for a thorough evaluation through research at this stage of its development. This study aims to address this by assessing the current teaching strategies to ensure the continued delivery of high-quality instruction, and to optimise student satisfaction.

This study is significant as it can contribute to the growing body of literature and conversations surrounding the topic of online foreign language instruction, particularly in the under-researched English-speaking Caribbean contexts. Though research on online language learning has received increasing global attention, there remains a notable gap in research focused specifically on the teaching

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and learning of Mandarin Chinese in virtual environments across this specific region. As such, this study can provide insights that can better inform curriculum development, teacher training initiatives and the adoption of more effective online pedagogical strategies catered to adult students learning Mandarin Chinese and, by extension, other foreign languages in similar Caribbean contexts.

This study will address three (3) main research questions:

1. How effective is online Mandarin Chinese instruction for adult learners in Trinidad and Tobago in terms of engagement and satisfaction?

2. What are the most effective teaching strategies and activities for enhancing adult learners' experience in online Mandarin Chinese classes?

3. Is engagement linked to what motivates students to learn Mandarin Chinese?

Literature Review

Student engagement in the online environment

Student engagement is essential to the effectiveness and success of both teaching and learning in any online learning environment. As contemporary education trends continue to shift toward fully virtual and even blended formats, understanding how to create and sustain high levels of student engagement has become a top concern for educators and researchers alike. Numerous studies in recent years have explored the factors that influence student engagement in online classrooms, such as course design, the teacher's role, and technological knowledge (Khoza, 2022, p. 47), communication strategies, and the use of interactive technologies. In online courses, engagement is not only linked to one's academic performance but also to overall student satisfaction and retention. As Wang (2017) highlights,

"Student engagement is an important element of active learning and participatory learning and an important factor in student learning success, therefore, it is necessary to combine the elements of online learning, and the establishment of online learning student engagement model" (p. 2872)

This underscores the need for intentional strategies that blend best pedagogical practices with other elements that support online teaching and learning (e.g. technological tools) to sustain active and meaningful participation in online learning environments.

Research on the topic of engagement, has continuously highlighted engagement as a dynamic state in the classroom, rather than static (Hiver et al., 2021, pp. 2-3). A learner's engagement can fluctuate over time, influenced by a variety of factors such as the learning environment, type of activity, student-teacher interactions, and the learner's personal motivation or emotional state. When students are highly motivated, they are more willing to participate in class and actively engage with the course material presented. Motivation to learn foreign languages like Mandarin Chinese can be influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors. These may include personal interest, the desire to improve professional prospects, the aim of expanding one's ability to communicate with native speakers or fulfilling academic requirements in a university programme. In a study conducted by Zubairi and Sarudin (2009)

on Mandarin language learners in Malaysia, findings revealed that students were motivated by a personal interest in learning a new language (p. 84), the potential for increased business opportunities within the local Mandarin-speaking business community (p. 82), and the desire to engage with Chinese culture such as its literature (p. 84). Similarly, a study on Zimbabwean students revealed that increased job prospects, particularly opportunities to work as Chinese language teachers, interpreters, and translators in Chinese-run institutions, constituted a major motivating factor for choosing to study Mandarin Chinese (Mkize & Chisoni, 2015, p. 256). The findings from these studies suggest that when students' motivation stems from intrinsic factors such as personal interest or even cultural curiosity, they may be more inclined to remain actively engaged in the online Mandarin Chinese classroom.

Challenges teaching foreign languages online

With the increase in instruction delivered virtually, studies discussing the challenges of online teaching have emerged, particularly in the field of foreign languages. Both learners and teachers may encounter several difficulties that negatively impact the virtual learning environment, often resulting in a reduced level of student engagement. For instance, Altakhaineh et al. (2023) investigated the various challenges faced by Jordanian English language learners and instructors in the online classroom. Their findings identified ten (10) distinct types of challenges affecting both vocabulary acquisition and instruction (pp. 580–581). These included classroom management issues such as ensuring each student has a chance to participate in exercises (p. 581), technological issues like unreliable internet connectivity and device access (p. 582), and physical exhaustion from prolonged use of digital devices (p. 583). Additionally, a lack of adequate training for instructors was cited as a significant barrier to effective teaching (p. 584). This not only affects the teachers involved, but also the quality of instruction the students received.

Mandarin Chinese language learners and teachers are not exempt from such difficulties, as they, too, encounter unique challenges in the online classroom. Many of these challenges stem from the linguistic and cultural complexities of the language itself coupled with the challenges of the virtual environment. Zhao et al. (2020) reinforce the impact of technical issues on students' learning experiences, noting that some participants reported difficulties understanding spoken Chinese from their classmates due to audio lags and poor internet connectivity (p. 95). Their study also highlighted the absence of non-verbal cues in virtual settings, which students would normally benefit from in a traditional classroom (p. 94). This absence is particularly significant in foreign language acquisition, as gestures, facial expressions, and body language carry important cultural connotations that support more effective communication. Furthermore, Zhang (2020) identified the difficulty of learning to write Chinese characters as another challenge, especially for beginners and even instructors, despite the use of digital whiteboards designed to replicate face-to-face instruction (p. 26). Given that the Chinese writing system differs fundamentally from alphabetic systems like English, learners often require more time and practice to develop proficiency in character recognition and writing.

Online teaching strategies

As online education continues to evolve, global educators and researchers have increasingly focused on identifying highly effective strategies to support teaching and learning in virtual learning environments.

A growing body of literature offers evidence-based recommendations for improving aspects of online teaching such as course design, delivery of course material, student engagement, and learning outcomes in online settings. These strategies help to meet the needs of diverse learners, ensuring that they remained interested in and engaged with what is taking place in the online classroom.

Zhou and Wang (2023) suggest nine strategies for improving online student engagement that rely on a mix of technology use, effective feedback techniques, and collaborative learning (pp. 3–5). For example, they recommend shorter video lengths to prevent students from becoming distracted in class (p. 5). Also, they put forward the idea of "blogfolios," a type of student-centered learning blog written in a public classroom space to reflect on the learning process. As it is written in an open space, it allows students in the class to actively comment on each other's learning journey (p. 5). This interaction fosters peer motivation since students are more likely to remain engaged when they see their classmates continuously participating, progressing, and offering encouragement. Lastly, they recommend smaller online classes, aligning with existing research that emphasizes the importance of strong teacher-student interaction (p. 3). Young & Bruce's 2011 study also supports Zhou and Wang's research. Their research produced results that identified creating a community environment in the online setting as important to promote student engagement, making the conclusion that "students who are motivated to working and helping each other are also engaged in their own learning" (p. 225). Mkize & Chisoni (2015) also cite gamified experiences as one way to engage students and make them feel more comfortable to participate (p. 256).

By examining strategies currently employed in the online Mandarin Chinese classroom in Trinidad and Tobago and critically comparing them alongside existing and established best practices in the literature, this study seeks to identify context-specific methods that foster deeper engagement among adult learners. In doing so, it aims not only to enhance language acquisition outcomes, but also to contribute to the broader discourse on online foreign language teaching in Caribbean societies. The findings may also inform future teacher training initiatives, curriculum development, and policy recommendations tailored to the Caribbean educational context

Methodology

Participants

A total of fifty (50) adult Chinese language learners participated in this study and they were selected through purposive sampling. Every participant has studied Mandarin Chinese for at least one semester in the online classroom setting at the Centre for Language Learning (CLL), The University of the West Indies St. Augustine campus. The participants' ages ranged from eighteen to over forty-six. Surprisingly, 94% of them previously studied a foreign language, with the majority having studied European languages such as Spanish (68%) and French (60%). This aligns with the language learning environment in T&T where existing language policy supports the teaching of Spanish and French in public schools, giving participants an early exposure to these languages. Additionally, 90% of the participants in the sample were female, with the remaining 10% being male. As seen in Table 1 below, most of the participants were under the age of thirty-six. The participants came from different class

levels at CLL, ranging from Chinese 1B – 3B, which correspond to beginner to lower-intermediate competence levels.

Table 1: Table showing the age range of participants in the study

Age Range	Number of participants	Percentage
18-25	13	26%
26-35	23	46%
36-45	7	14%
46+	7	14%

Data collection instruments

Data was collected through a single self-reporting questionnaire with open and closed-ended questions organised into five (5) sections. Self-reporting questionnaires are a common method for doing research related to student engagement due to its ease of administration and it gives crucial information on the topic from the student's viewpoint (Zhou et al., 2021, p. 80). Questions gathered general biographical information on the participant as well as personal insights into their various experience in the online classroom, their level of engagement with the course material presented and their recommendations for improvement of the overall online learning experience. Question types included the following:

Close-ended questions – These were used to collect more standardised data that could be easily compared across participants in the study. These included Likert-scale items (using a scale ranging from 1 to 5) designed to assess specific aspects of the participants' online learning experiences.

Open-ended questions – These allowed participants to explain and elaborate on their choices. Their responses provided much deeper insight into their personal learning experiences, capturing information that may not be fully captured solely through close-ended questions. Additionally, the qualitative data gathered enabled the identification of emerging themes across participants, providing the opportunity for greater analysis.

Data collection process

The questionnaires were administered online using JotForm over a one-month period, allowing participants the convenience to complete them at their own pace. Participants were recruited through email class lists. All responses were anonymous and voluntary, with all participants giving their informed consent to participate. At the end of this period, the results were processed and analysed. Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive statistics, an approach chosen to ensure that data is presented in a clear, concise manner. Descriptive statistics are particularly useful in helping effective decisions based on data gathered (Alabi & Bukola, 2023, p. 3). Meanwhile, qualitative data was examined through thematic analysis to identify patterns and trends in the data collected. This type of data gives an insight into the Mandarin Chinese learner's firsthand experiences in the classroom,

allowing for the research to accurately capture opinions on engagement and perceived challenges that cannot be expressed solely with numerical data.

Results and Discussion

Reasons for studying Mandarin Chinese

Participants were asked to indicate their reasons for studying Mandarin Chinese. As shown in Figure 1, results indicated that participants are driven by intrinsic motivational factors. Most participants want to learn Mandarin Chinese due to their own personal interest (96%). Some participants explained that learning Chinese for them is a new challenge, with one participant highlighting: *"I was personally interested in learning an Asian language to challenge myself and try something new while also learning more about Chinese culture."* Cultural appreciation, i.e. the interest in getting to know Chinese culture, was the second most frequently selected reason, with it being chosen by 74% of participants. Another participant explained why they chose this option, *"Hugely into culture especially from an international relations perspective, learning languages, in particular Mandarin, helped shape insight on Chinese modern culture and politics which I believe gives me a greater advantage professionally as well as socially."* Personal development and travel were each selected by 64% of the participants. For example, one participant is learning Chinese to enhance their abilities to perform their duties at work, *"I'm a nurse and sometimes we have Chinese speakers coming in to see the doctor with little English knowledge."*
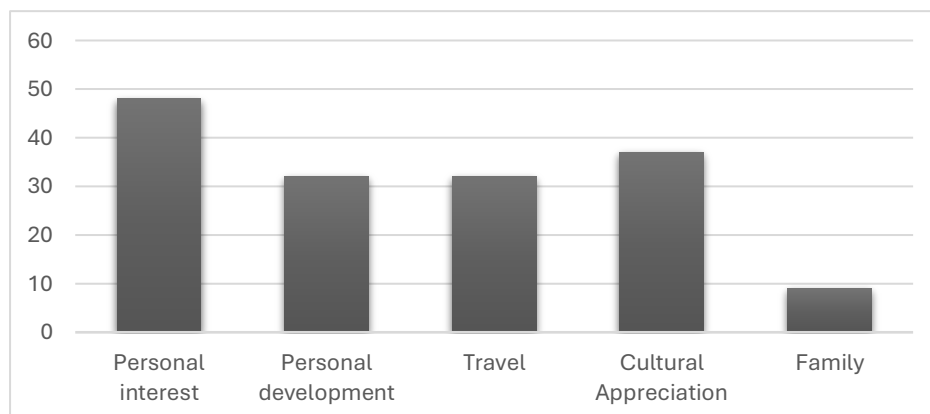

Figure 1: Bar chart showing the participants' reasons for studying Mandarin Chinese (n=50)

The data showed the personal nature of the participants' motivations for studying Mandarin Chinese. Participants are genuinely committed in the learning process because their motivations for studying the language are related to themselves; self-improvement, personal interest in Chinese culture, and even travelling. This is consistent with existing body of research in international contexts, which shows that learners are often motivated by personal and professional goals when choosing to study Mandarin. For instance, Zubairi and Sarudin's (2009, p. 82) study on Malaysian students and Mkize and Chisoni's (2015, p. 256) study on Zimbabwean students found that learners were driven by the desire to pursue business opportunities requiring proficiency in Mandarin Chinese. Participants in this study from

Trinidad and Tobago showed intrinsic motivation, which suggests a greater chance of long-term dedication and deeper, more meaningful engagement with the course material.

Satisfaction and engagement level in online Mandarin Chinese class

A 5-point rating system, ranging from "very satisfied" to "very dissatisfied", was used to assess participants' overall satisfaction with the online Mandarin Chinese learning environment. The findings showed that 70% of participants were very satisfied, 28% were satisfied, and 2% were neutrally satisfied, showing a high degree of participant satisfaction. None of the participants selected "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied."

The elevated level of participant satisfaction may be attributed to the quality of the course content and digital tools used in the online classes. The participants' ratings of the tools support this connection. When asked to rate the quality of these tools on a 5-point scale (1 being the lowest and 5 the highest), 66% of participants gave a rating of five, while 32% selected a rating of four, and only 2% rated them a three. Notably, none of the participants chose the lower ends of the scale (rating of 1 or 2) as their response. These findings suggest that the technological tools were not only effectively used in the online classroom by the instructor but were well-received and are likely to have certainly enhanced the learners' engagement and satisfaction with the course in general. This aligns with Zhou and Wang's study (2023, pp. 3-5), which highlighted the integration of digital tools to improve the quality of teaching in online environments and help to maintain learner interest. Their findings reinforce the idea that when digital tools are pedagogically aligned and user-friendly, they can serve as a powerful enabler of learner satisfaction in virtual classrooms.

Furthermore, participants were asked to indicate which aspect of the Mandarin Chinese class they enjoyed the most. As seen in Table 2, the top three choices were learning about Chinese culture, learning new vocabulary, and writing Chinese characters. It is unsurprising that cultural content ranked the highest among other choices, as earlier findings of this study indicated that cultural appreciation was a key motivator behind the participants' decision to study Mandarin.

Table 2: Table showing the most enjoyable content according to participants (n=50)

Aspect of Mandarin Chinese lesson	Number of participants	Percentage
Learning about Chinese culture	38	76%
Learning new vocabulary	37	74%
Writing characters	27	54%
Speaking practice	26	52%
Listening practice	22	44%

The spread of preferences among participants also suggests that the participants place value on a balanced curriculum. While some learners gravitate toward receptive skills (listening) or cultural content, others find production-based activities like speaking and writing enjoyable. This diversity in

learner preferences suggests that future course designers should consider incorporating more customizable and differentiated learning pathways in the online Mandarin Chinese programme. Doing so would allow learners to engage on a deeper level with content that aligns with their individual interests, strengths, and goals, thereby enhancing both motivation and the possibility of achieving learning outcomes.

Despite the high levels of satisfaction, 84% of participants reported encountering some challenges while learning Mandarin Chinese online. Three major themes emerged from the participants' comments as seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Table showing the top three (3) challenges experienced by the participants who experienced difficulties during their Mandarin Chinese language learning experience in the online environment. (n=42)

Theme	Number of participants	Description
Technical difficulties	10	Issues with internet, devices, audio, or connectivity periodically disrupt learning.
Challenges with Chinese characters	10	Difficulty learning writing, recognizing, and remembering Chinese characters.
Lack of interaction	8	Feeling disconnected from classmates or teacher.

Technical difficulties and challenges with Chinese characters were the most frequently reported issues in the online environment. Technical problems including unstable internet connections, malfunctioning devices and audio issues were cited by several participants as barriers to effective participation in the virtual classroom. One participant stated, "The most challenging part of studying Chinese online is dealing with occasional technical difficulties, like connectivity issues or audio glitches." Such disruptions, which were also noted as a major concern by Altakhaineh et al (2023, p. 582), can affect the continuity of learning and can hinder the students' ability to participate and interact in real-time with their classmates and instructor. This is vital in any language learning environment, whether it be face-to-face or online. In line with findings in Zhang's study (2020, p. 26), writing Chinese characters was considered a challenging issue for 20% of the participants. Although participants did not elaborate extensively on this, it can be inferred that the difficulty stems from the complexity of Chinese characters, which requires careful attention to strokes, structure, and memorization. This challenge may be even more pronounced in an online environment, where immediate teacher guidance and feedback are less accessible compared to face-to-face classroom settings.

Preferred activities in the Mandarin Chinese virtual classroom

Participants were asked to rate how interesting they found the content (e.g. vocabulary, topics etc.) covered in the online classes using a 5-point scale (very interesting, somewhat interesting, neutral, not very interesting and boring). Findings revealed that 90% of participants think that the content covered is very interesting and 10% rated it as somewhat interesting. Participants were also asked to evaluate its relevancy to their life in T&T. Results were more varied; 34% found to content to be very relevant, 40% somewhat relevant, 24% neutral and 2% not very relevant. These results suggest that while interest levels are quite high, there is room to improve perceived relevance by incorporating more activities in class that bridge the gap between Mandarin Chinese learning and a learner's lived experiences in the Caribbean context. Doing so could enhance the perceived practicality and immediate application of the language, leading to more engagement in the virtual learning space.

Additionally, participants rated a series of activity types typically done in the online Mandarin Chinese classes at CLL, using a 5-point scale where five indicated the highest level of favourability and one the lowest. As shown in Table 4, the top three most favourably rated activities were vocabulary exercises, listening exercises, and speaking exercises. Some of the preferred exercises cited included making vlogging/TikTok videos in Mandarin Chinese, watching short cartoon clips, discussing infographics with thematic vocabulary, and using Bitmoji scenes on PowerPoint for stimulating topical conversations.

Table 4: Table showing participants' ranking of activity types done in the online Mandarin Chinese classes (n=50) on a scale of 1-5 based on their personal experience and satisfaction with its delivery in class. A rating of five indicates the highest level of satisfaction, while one indicates the lowest.

	Rating				
Activity type	5	4	3	2	1
Vocabulary exercises	45	4	1	0	0
Listening exercises	38	7	4	1	0
Speaking exercises	37	11	2	0	0
Cultural lessons	33	9	6	0	0
Writing characters	35	8	6	1	0
Group activities (e.g. breakout rooms)	28	9	10	2	1

According to the findings in Table 4, participants value core language skills that support immediate communication needs. Cultural lessons and character writing also received mostly positive responses, though with slightly more variation in ratings than the top three choices, while group activities such as breakout rooms had the most mixed reviews, with a few participants rating them as 2 or 1. These results are in line with Zhou and Wang's (2023) suggestions, who stress the importance of implementing more interactive and student-centered strategies, such as blogfolios and smaller class sizes, to encourage and maintain high engagement. The comparatively lower scores for group activities may reflect challenges in creating meaningful interaction in larger or more poorly structured virtual groups, as also noted by Young and Bruce (2011), who placed emphasis on the need to create a keen sense of online community to enhance motivation. Moreover, the popularity of vocabulary and listening activities reflect a need for more structured input-focused tasks. These tasks can then be further enhanced through gamified approaches, as suggested by Mkize and Chisoni (2015), to sustain participation and enjoyment in online learning.

These findings underscore the value of continuing tech-enhanced, real-life communicative activities in the online Mandarin Chinese classroom. The popularity of vocabulary, listening, and speaking exercises suggests that learners are more likely engaged when activities done in class mirror authentic language use. Interactive and creative exercises like vlogging and discussing infographics helped bridge classroom content with everyday situations. Such activities not only build linguistic skills but also maintain interest in online settings. Future courses should prioritize interactive, contextualized learning to sustain engagement, as supported by Zhou and Wang's (2023) emphasis on student-centered digital tools.

Conclusion

This study sought to examine the best ways to keep students engaged in the Mandarin Chinese virtual classroom. Findings revealed that participants remained highly engaged despite challenges brought on by external variables such as technological difficulties. Engagement was sustained through teaching strategies that emphasized communicative language skills such as vocabulary acquisition, cultural knowledge, listening and speaking. Participants mentioned many creative exercises as being particularly engaging and interesting such as creating vlogs or TikTok-style videos, watching short cartoon clips, using thematic infographics, and interacting with PowerPoint Bitmoji scenes for speaking practice. These activities promoted interaction, encouraged creativity, and contributed to sustaining students' interest in the virtual learning environment.

However, the study was not without limitations. The small size of the sample can affect the generalisation of the findings. Moreover, relying heavily on self-reported data presents the possibility of response bias, as participants may have provided desirable answers or misremembered certain details in the virtual classroom. As such, further studies could be done with a larger sample population and incorporate additional data collection methods such as more classroom observations and interviews. It would also be beneficial for future research to investigate various learner characteristics such as gender, previous language learning experience and age among those who study Mandarin Chinese in the Caribbean context. The data generated from a study like that could help teachers and curriculum

developers to design Mandarin Chinese programmes to meet learner's needs and to create content and strategies that sustain motivation levels over time. Likewise, conducting comparative studies involving other English-speaking Caribbean territories where Mandarin Chinese is taught online could help to determine the extent to which the findings of this present study are context-specific or universally applicable.

Despite these limitations, the study's findings are noteworthy because they imply that current teaching methods in the online Mandarin Chinese classroom in Trinidad and Tobago are phenomenally successful in giving students an enjoyable, relevant, and meaningful learning experience. Additionally, the teaching techniques and activities identified may also serve as a useful model for enhancing foreign language instruction in other virtual learning contexts across the region.

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The author declares that she has no conflict of interests.

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