

Mandarin Language as A Catalyst for Global Competitiveness: A Case Study on Multilingual Education in Higher Education

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Abstract

Multilingual proficiency is increasingly essential for enhancing students' competitiveness in the job market. The addition of Mandarin to the curriculum is seen as a strategic move to comply with national education policies and meet international educational needs. Despite its importance, there remains a significant gap in Mandarin curriculum integration, with existing research focusing on pedagogical practices and student willingness to communicate. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how the integration of Mandarin curriculum into the Diploma programmes enhances the educational and professional outcomes of students. Using a qualitative case study design, the research involved purposive sampling of eight students and employed general inductive thematic analysis for in-depth interviews and document analysis. Key findings include: 1) language policy and institutional commitment, 2) bilingual to trilingual transition, and 3) professional and academic communication skills. The study revealed that Mandarin serves as a valuable addition, significantly boosting students' global competitiveness by equipping them with a critical language skill highly valued in international job markets. Future research should include longitudinal studies tracking graduates' career paths to assess Mandarin's long-term impact on global competitiveness and employability. Comparative studies with other institutions, both locally and internationally, can reveal best practices for Mandarin curriculum integration, providing insights to optimize language education and boost students' global readiness.

Keywords: Employability, Global Competitiveness, Higher Education, Mandarin Curriculum, Multilingual

Introduction

In today's globalized world, language proficiency has emerged as a critical asset for graduates, especially in higher education, where multilingualism significantly enhances students' competitiveness in the job market. Among the various languages, Mandarin language stands out due to China's significant role in the global economy and its influence across various sectors, including trade, technology and diplomacy (International Monetary Fund, 2022; The World Bank, 2022). As a result, the ability to communicate in Mandarin is not merely an academic asset but a critical skill that can greatly improve career prospects and global

engagement (Gil, 2021; Xie, 2021). Wei and Ros (2024) further support this by noting that Mandarin speakers often have a competitive edge in securing employment roles.

Li (2021) emphasized on the growing importance of Mandarin among job applicants. These scenarios underscore the broader value of multilingualism, particularly its role in enhancing employability. The relationship between multilingualism and career prospects becomes more evident, especially Mandarin language as a key factor in equipping graduates with the skills needed to excel in a globalized workforce. The ensuing discussion addresses the intersections between multilingualism and employability, alongside an exploration of language learning within the Malaysian higher education landscape. This is followed by examination of the research problem, objectives and significance of the study.

Multilingualism and Employability

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) described multilingualism – or the ability to communicate more than one language – as an essential skill in the context of 21st century (Covacevich & Champaud, 2021). According to the OECD's 2021 report, multilingualism is a critical component for one to navigate an interconnected world. These competencies include not only language skills, but also the ability to understand and engage with diverse cultural perspectives, a key factor in today's complex job market. As businesses expand across borders and interact with diverse markets, the ability to communicate in multiple languages is increasingly recognized as a significant competitive advantage.

For a case of students in higher education institutions, the integration of Mandarin into the curriculum can directly address this need, equipping them with language skills that are essential in a globalized economy. Studies consistently demonstrate that individuals with multilingual abilities have an advantage in enhancing employability by opening doors to a wider range of job opportunities and increasing their marketability to employers (Dafouz, 2024; Goble, 2024). Multilingual individuals are often perceived as more adaptable and resourceful, qualities highly valued in today's dynamic job market.

The European Commission (2015) noted that multilingual employees significantly contribute to organizational success by leveraging their language skills to manage international projects and engage with global clients. They (multilingual individuals) tend to have better problem-solving abilities, allowing them to approach challenges from multiple perspectives. Their ability to connect and collaborate with colleagues and clients from different backgrounds leads to more innovative problem-solving and fosters a more inclusive workplace, making multilingual professional indispensable assets in a globalized economy.

Language Learning in Malaysia Higher Education

Malaysia's education system, with its focus on multilingual proficiency, reflects the country's diverse cultural and linguistic heritage (Pillai et al., 2021). The national education policy mandates the learning of multiple languages, with Bahasa Melayu as the national language, English as a second language, and opportunities to learn other languages such as Mandarin and Tamil. This strategy of incorporating multiple languages is designed to foster unity among various ethnic groups while equipping students with the linguistic skills needed to thrive in a globalized world. According to the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2025, the Ministry of

Education aims to produce students who are proficient in at least two languages, recognizing that language skills are crucial for both national integration and international competitiveness (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

In the context of Malaysia higher education, many institutions offer students the opportunity to take global language courses during their undergraduate studies (Chua & Lin, 2020; Ahmad Radzi et al., 2021). Research indicates a growing interest among students in learning Mandarin as foreign language (Lam et al., 2020; Tan & Tan, 2021). For instance, the number of students enrolling in Mandarin language courses at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) has been higher compared to other global language courses (Boon et al., 2023). At UiTM, the Mandarin curriculum is described as culturally oriented language education (San et al., 2021), while Mandarin curriculum at Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia focuses on communication skills (Yip et al., 2021). Similarly, Mandarin courses at Universiti Putra Malaysia emphasize on the value of Chinese characters (Tay et al., 2022).

There is a diverse range of research interests in Mandarin language learning in Malaysia. These include motivation to learn Mandarin (Cheng et al., 2021; Pae et al., 2024), online learning for Mandarin language (Eng et al., 2022; Ismail, Che Mat & Mohd Ali, 2022), Mandarin language learning strategies (Yee et al., 2021; Min et al., 2022; Leong, Mohd Salleh & Chew, 2024), as well as Mandarin language skills (Ghee, Terng & Chui, 2019; Lew, 2020; Yin, 2021; DeWitt, Chan & Loban, 2022). Incorporating Mandarin into higher education curricula is viewed as a strategic initiative to equip students with valuable linguistic skills that open doors to diverse opportunities. This is particularly relevant for students in higher education institutions.

Despite the recognized importance of Mandarin, there remains a significant gap in its integration within diploma programmes in one of the Malaysia higher education institutions. Previous research has primarily examined teachers' pedagogical practices (Jafri, Abd Manaf & Razali, 2020), students' willingness to communicate in Mandarin (Jafri & Abd Manaf, 2020) and strategies that influence students' willingness to communicate (Li, Razali & Mohamad Arsad, 2021). This study, however, addresses a broader impact: the role of Mandarin language in boosting students' global competitiveness. This gap represents a missed opportunity for students to gain a competitive edge in the job market, particularly in sectors where multilingualism, especially in Mandarin, is highly valued.

As indicated in a study by Dewitt and Sukhoverkhov (2023), Mandarin and English hold substantial value in a globalized world of business and commerce. The authors noted that with the necessary intercultural and communication skills, students are better prepared to meet international demands, as proficiency in Mandarin and English can provide them a competitive advantage. Therefore, enhancing Mandarin language education in Malaysian higher education can serve as a catalyst for equipping students with the linguistic and intercultural competencies needed to thrive in diverse professional environments and contribute meaningfully to the global economy.

Moreover, there is a notable lack of comprehensive research into the impact of integrating a Mandarin curriculum on students' academic and professional outcomes, as most existing studies focused on aspects such as language learning strategies, Mandarin language skills,

teacher-student dynamics, rather than examining broader academic and career-related implications. This highlights the urgent need to address this issue. In this regard, the main purpose of this research is to investigate whether the integration of Mandarin curriculum into the Diploma programmes can enrich the educational value for diploma students. From this, the central research question arises: How do students perceive the inclusion of Mandarin in the Diploma programmes?

By addressing these questions, the study aimed to provide valuable insights for the effective implementation of Mandarin language courses, ultimately enriching diploma graduates' educational offerings and global preparedness. Moving beyond classroom dynamics and individual engagement, this research explored how Mandarin language skills can benefit students' academic and professional development. This broader perspective not only complements existing studies but also provides new insights into how Mandarin proficiency can shape students' success in an increasingly interconnected world. Additionally, it provides actionable recommendations for educational policies and practices aimed at maximizing the benefits of language education.

A Case Study of Diploma Programme in a Malaysia Higher Education Institution

In the case of this research, a qualitative case study design was selected as the foundation to guide the inquiry, enabling the researcher to explore and understand the intended phenomenon (as suggested by Yin, 2018). This higher education institution was chosen as the sampling site due to its unique educational context, particularly related to the nature of Mandarin curriculum implementation and relevance to the research objectives. As the primary research instruments, the researcher directly obtained the informant's insights through in-depth interviews and document analysis. Eight students were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The decision to include this number of students was made due to reaching data saturation (Hennick & Kaiser, 2022).

Following the completion of the interview sessions, the researcher began analyzing related documents, including Mandarin course documents, textbooks, assessments and other relevant materials. Then, the researcher analyzed both the interview and document analysis data using a general inductive data analysis approach. By applying inductive reasoning, the researcher identified similarities and patterns within the interview data and document analysis. These patterns were then examined to extract meanings from the data set, leading to the formulation of general conclusions and the potential development of new theories. This entire process is aligned with the thematic analysis technique (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

In this case, the themes were derived through systematic thematic coding process, where key phrases from interview transcripts, such as "policy-driven", "mandatory", and "enhancing employability", were initially coded. These codes were then grouped into categories that reflected broader trends observed across multiple informants and were cross-validated with document analysis findings. Triangulation of interview and document data ensured that the themes are well-supported and accurately reflect the research outcomes. To enhance the trustworthiness of the case study, the researchers employed other strategies, such as expert validation, member checking and peer debriefing.

Findings

The purpose of this case study was to investigate the impact of incorporating Mandarin into the curriculum of Diploma programmes at one of Malaysia higher education institutions, specifically in terms of its ability to improve the competitiveness and employability of students. Accordingly, throughout the data analysis procedures, the researcher identified a notable pattern in students' understanding of the Mandarin curriculum implemented at the institution, which led to the emergence of three distinct themes. The themes are 1) Language policy and institutional commitment, 2) Bilingual and trilingual transition, and 3) Professional and academic communication skills.

Language Policy and Institutional Commitment

The majority of the informants agreed that the integration of Mandarin in the Diploma programmes is significantly influenced by language policy and institutional commitment (INF01, INF04, INF05 and INF09). According to INF01 and INF05, Mandarin courses are categorized as compulsory elective courses within their Diploma programmes. Additionally, INF04 emphasized that the students are required to take Mandarin courses for two consecutive semesters and must pass these courses to graduate. This institutional policy mandates that Mandarin language instruction be made compulsory, acknowledging China's dominant role in the global economy.

Document analysis revealed that the Mandarin language has been made compulsory to align with institution's mission of preparing students for global challenges and opportunities, thereby enhancing their employability and entrepreneurial potential in both local and international markets. This initiative also supports the development of essential multilingual competencies, fostering linguistic skills and cultural adaptability within the Malaysian context, where Mandarin is one of the key languages spoken among various ethnic groups. Overall, this policy reflects global trends that recognize Mandarin language skills as vital for enhancing students' employability in the 21st century.

In alignment with the institution's commitment to producing well-rounded graduates, the *Hànyǔ Shuǐpíng Kǎoshì* (HSK), also known as the Chinese Proficiency Test, has been incorporated into the curriculum. This inclusion ensures that the Mandarin offerings adhere to standardized benchmarks of language proficiency. According to INF09, the textbook materials used are aligned with HSK Level 2. Document analysis further supports this, confirming that the Mandarin curriculum is structured to meet HSK Level 2 standards, ensuring the curriculum's rigor and relevance. This strategic integration demonstrates the institution's dedication to providing a high-quality language education.

Bilingual to Trilingual Transition

In general, the students of the respected institution are Bumiputera, with Malay language as their first language and English as their second language. Consequently, Mandarin language is introduced as their third language. Several informants noted that the institution designed the Mandarin curriculum to equip the students with third language skills (INF01, INF02, INF04, INF06, INF07 and INF09). Example of the informants' quotations are evident as follows:

“...They (the institution) want to make Mandarin as the third language...” (INF04)

“...Mandarin as our third language, it will help us for our future...” (INF01)

“...to produce graduates who have third language skill...” (INF09)

From the responses provided, the informants viewed the inclusion of the Mandarin curriculum as beneficial for enhancing students' soft skills and facilitating the transition from bilingualism to trilingualism. INF07 noted, “...nowadays, there are many bright graduates with flying colors, but very little have third language proficiency skills.” They believed that mastering a third language, specifically Mandarin, would set them apart in today's competitive job market. Similarly, INF06 concurred that knowledge of Mandarin as a third language would be advantageous in the globalized world. As an International Business student, FGD06 highlighted that in addition to English, proficiency in Mandarin would significantly benefit his career in the business industry.

INF02 also emphasized, “...for me, Mandarin is very important. The first one is English language. Then is Mandarin. With these languages, we can do anything, such as into the business. Wherever you go, you must have the third language... like Mandarin language. I think if you can master Mandarin language, it is perfect, besides English...” Although INF02 is an English Communication student, she underscored the value of adding Mandarin as a third language to her skill set. This reflects a broader recognition of the advantages of transitioning from bilingualism to trilingualism through the Mandarin curriculum at the respected institution. Overall, the informants perceived the Mandarin curriculum as a valuable component in this transition, enhancing their employability and global competitiveness.

Professional and Academic Communication Skills

Many informants highlighted Mandarin as a crucial communication skill (INF01, INF04, INF05 and INF06). In Malaysia, a multiracial country, Mandarin represents the language of the Chinese – one of the major ethnic groups. Proficiency in Mandarin provides an advantage by facilitating interactions with diverse races, fostering new friendships, and establishing connections (INF01 and INF05). INF01 elaborated that “...certain Chinese, especially the elders, they are not fluent in other languages. They might know Hokkien or Cantonese. So, when we speak in Mandarin, even though not fully in Mandarin, we are able to help them in certain ways. For instance, if we volunteer at the old folks' home, we can communicate with them. Alternatively, we can give our support regardless of race to show us as Malaysian, help each other.”

Beyond everyday interactions, informants also believed that Mandarin language skills would be advantageous in professional and academic contexts. Proficiency in Mandarin facilitates smoother business negotiations and transactions with Mandarin-speaking partners, enhancing professional effectiveness (INF04 and INF06). For instance, INF04 mentioned that “...when dealing or buying something from the Mandarin, it is easier. Or we can get a discount because of our ability to communicate in Mandarin.”

However, although the majority of informants indicated their agreement with the notion that having Mandarin language skills is beneficial, only two informants adopted a positively passive stance (INF02 and INF03). These two individuals acknowledged the potential advantages of Mandarin proficiency but did so in a measured way, expressing their views without fully

committing to a strong opinion. Their responses suggested an awareness of the importance of Mandarin skills, yet they remained somewhat ambivalent about the extent to which these skills would impact their personal or professional lives.

Whereas, in academic settings, Mandarin proficiency can enhance opportunities for collaboration and research with international scholars, particularly in fields where Mandarin is a significant language of study. This ability to communicate effectively in Mandarin supports broader academic and professional networking, allowing graduates to engage more fully in global discourse. The informants' recognition of Mandarin as a vital communication skill aligns with the curriculum's goals (A1, B1, and C1), which emphasize the development of communication skills as crucial transferable competencies. These skills not only enhance interpersonal interactions but also prepare graduates to excel in diverse professional and academic environments.

Discussion and Conclusion

In an increasingly globalized world, the integration of Mandarin curriculum in the Diploma programmes represent a strategic response to the rising importance of language proficiency in professional development. From the findings, it can be seen that the informants acknowledged the importance of Mandarin as a foreign language, and they were embracing the value of Mandarin curriculum. The discussion regarding this matter is further elaborated below, followed by several recommendation for future research.

Mandarin as Value-Added for Students

The increasing global demand for Mandarin language skills highlights its growing importance across various contexts (Wang, 2020; Nel & Krog, 2021). It is relatively becoming an important trend for people to learn and speak in Mandarin language. The optimal role of Mandarin language in the global world is also becoming a topic of debate in an increasing number of academic writings (Pham & Jackson, 2020; Xie, 2021; Marconi et al., 2023). There are various grounds for Mandarin language learning. In the context of the respected institution, the Mandarin curriculum is aimed to equip the learners with Mandarin communication skills as value-added, specifically to enhance the employability of the graduates.

Integrating Mandarin into the diploma programs as a third language, is complementing students' native Malay and their second language, English. This trilingual approach supports Malaysia's Education Blueprint and responds to the growing emphasis on multilingual proficiency in today's interconnected world (Liyange & Tao, 2020; Caminal et al., 2021; Hahm & Gazzola, 2022). This perception aligns with document analysis, which highlights institution's goal of preparing students to navigate a globalized environment where multilingual communication is boosting students' global competitiveness. In this context, the value of Mandarin extends beyond personal and academic growth into the professional realm.

The research informants believed China's growing power has strengthened the value of Mandarin language, given the industry is dominated by the Chinese stakeholders both locally and globally. With China's growing global influence, Mandarin has emerged as a key language in international business, where proficiency can significantly boost one's employability (Zhou et al., 2020). As China continues to be a major global manufacturer and exporter, the ability to conduct business in Mandarin is seen as a significant advantage for entrepreneurs and

business professionals (Yang, 2022). This underscores Mandarin's role not just as a language skill, but as a strategic asset in the global market.

However, a critical analysis indicates that while the curriculum positions Mandarin as a strategic skill, students may not fully grasp its relevance to their future careers. Some informants expressed reservation about the practical applications of their Mandarin skills. Although the respected institution's trilingual approach aims to leverage the strategic value of Mandarin for students' employability, Fong (2023) highlighted that Mandarin remains underutilized outside of Chinese-dominated sectors. This gap reinforces the need for the institution to align its Mandarin curriculum more closely with sectors that recognize Mandarin's benefits, alongside enhancing career guidance that explicitly links language proficiency with professional opportunities.

Furthermore, synthesizing both analyses revealed that while the curriculum supports Malaysia's Education Blueprint and emphasizes multilingual proficiency, there are areas for improvement. For instance, integrating experiential learning opportunities, such as internships with Chinese companies or industry partnership, could better prepare students for the complexities of a multilingual workplace. Additionally, the curriculum should extend beyond technical knowledge to adopt a more holistic approach. Embedding Mandarin within broader soft skills training is essential.

For example, a study by Tan, Ali and Abdullah (2022) emphasized the importance of communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, teamwork, ethics and professional values for graduates. This holistic approach would prepare students to navigate both local and international contexts, enhancing their employability in a multilingual and digital economic business landscape. By integrating Mandarin into a balanced soft-skills curriculum, the respected institution can address current weaknesses, such as students' limited ability to express themselves or communicate using the targeted language effectively, thereby aligning language proficiency with real-world professional needs.

Against this background, the integration of Mandarin into Diploma's curriculum provides students with a valuable asset that enhances their academic, professional, and social capabilities. This emphasis on Mandarin reflects a broader understanding of its role in facilitating global communication, supporting economic engagement, and contributing to students' overall development. The inclusion of Mandarin curriculum also aligns with the international vision of promoting multilingualism and intercultural competence, as well as preparing students for the complexities of a globalized world.

Conclusion

The question raised at the outset of this case study underscores the significance of Mandarin curriculum integration at the respected institution beyond mere knowledge transfer. This strategic initiative aims to equip graduates with Mandarin language skills, aligning with the growing global demand for multilingual proficiency. By incorporating Mandarin, the institution addresses the evolving needs of a globalized economy and positions its graduates advantageously in diverse professional environments where language skills are increasingly valued. This approach not only enhances educational offerings but also ensures that the

institution remains attuned to economic and cultural trends, providing students with a competitive edge in the international job market.

To further expand on the findings of this study, future research is recommended to conduct longitudinal studies that track the career trajectories of Diploma graduates who have studied Mandarin. These studies could provide valuable insights into the long-term impact of Mandarin proficiency on global competitiveness, exploring how language skills translate into real-world advantages in various industries. Additionally, such research could help identify whether Mandarin language curriculum leads to sustained career growth, international opportunities, and higher employability rates among graduates over time.

Moreover, comparative studies across different educational institutions, both within Malaysia and internationally, would be beneficial. By examining how other higher education institutions have successfully integrated Mandarin into their curricula, researchers could identify best practices and strategies that could be adapted for the institutions. Evaluating the effectiveness of various Mandarin teaching methods and curricula in these diverse contexts would also contribute to a deeper understanding of how to optimize language education for enhancing students' global competitiveness. These research avenues could provide critical insights for policymakers and educators looking to strengthen the role of Mandarin in higher education.

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