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The road to Mandarin at ANU: Capitalising on what students bring with them on the journey

Abstract

This study draws on the results of a study of students at the Australian National University (ANU) who were learning Mandarin Chinese at second year level and above in 2012. Through analysis of 85 questionnaires and 11 follow-up interviews, we look at the year level at which students enter the ANU program, their language and cultural backgrounds and the diversity of proficiency levels and language skills within Mandarin classes. Our study then explores what students say about their language learning experiences and the range of proficiency levels in Mandarin they have encountered in their classes. Finally, we consider the value of this type of data and how it can be used in program planning to engage students, maximise learning outcomes and improve retention rates.

1. Background

There is ongoing concern and discussion about retention rates in language courses at Australian universities. Nettelbeck et al. (2009), in a study of nearly 3000 students studying over 15 languages in beginner courses across nine universities, identify mixed cohorts as one factor leading to attrition. That study found that only 38% of students in the first year of *ab initio* language courses are 'true' beginners, whose morale could be undermined by the presence of students with significant previous experience of language learning. Martin and Jansen (2011: 188-189) hypothesised that such previous knowledge of languages could be seen as 'capital', and that lack of such capital could be an important factor in student attrition.

The use of the concept of capital, based on Bourdieu's (1991) work, highlights the sociocultural and contextual factors involved in second language learning (Swain and Deters 2007). In our study, like Martin and Jansen (2011), we also view the language learning and cultural experiences that students bring with them to their university study as capital. This is a concept which can be applied to fields that are not necessarily oriented towards financial gain but still follow, as Bourdieu (1991: 15) put it, a:

logic that is economic in the broader sense, in so far as they are orientated towards some kind of 'capital' (e.g. cultural or symbolic capital) or the maximization of some kind of 'profit' (e.g. honour or prestige).

In the field of language learning, learners invest time and energy into maximising the profit from using and/or adding to their linguistic capital, profits being in the form things like good grades or opportunities to study or work overseas.

As Nettelbeck et al. (2009) note, particular problems arise when fluent speakers, or students with considerable learning experience of the target language, are in the same class as beginners. Research also shows that speakers of a language with a high degree of cross-linguistic similarity to the target language have significant advantages over learners whose languages are less similar (Ringbom 2007). In addition, students who have already learned an additional language have advantages over monolinguals when learning a third or subsequent language due to their wider repertoire of linguistic and cultural knowledge (Cenoz 2013; Rast 2010). Students who have already learned another language can also call on the experience of language learning and strategies they used (Chamot 2102). All these factors add to the range of linguistic and learning resources, which we will regard as capital, that learners can bring with them to language classes.

2. Introduction to the study

This study investigates the language learning experiences of students enrolled in Mandarin Chinese at second year level and above at the Australian National University (ANU) in 2012. After mapping the year level at which students enter the ANU program, we explore what students say about their language learning experiences and the range of proficiency levels in Mandarin they have encountered in their classes. We then consider the value of this type of data and possibilities for using it in program planning to engage students, maximise learning outcomes and improve retention rates.

Data were collected from 85 ANU students by means of a short two-page 17-question questionnaire, and the results for this questionnaire are given below. Students were free to complete this anonymously or could provide contact details if they were willing to take part in a follow-up interview. Questionnaires were completed during the last 10 minutes of a lecture in the following classes:

- Modern Chinese 4, second semester of second year level of Mandarin (hereafter referred to as Chinese 4);
- Modern Chinese 6 (second semester of third year level); and
- Advanced Readings in Chinese B (hereafter Advanced Readings), an advanced second-semester course in extensive reading and analysis of Chinese texts.

In addition, two students who had completed Chinese 8 (second semester of fourth year level Mandarin) volunteered to take part in the study (see Table 1).

Interviews were conducted by the first author, who is not a member of the Chinese Department, and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. These semi-structured interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and later transcribed for analysis.

Table 1: Responses by class/group

	Total number enrolled	Questionnaires returned	Interviews
Chinese 4	42	32	3
Chinese 6	40	28	5
Advanced Reading and Chinese 8 graduates	44	25	3
Totals		85	11

Of the students who returned questionnaires, 47 were female, 36 were male, and two did not disclose their gender. Eight of the 11 students subsequently interviewed were female.

3. Diversity within classes

In this section we will consider the nature and range of linguistic and cultural capital that these students bring to their study of Mandarin at the ANU. First we look at the year level at which they entered the Chinese program and then explore where and how those with knowledge of Mandarin before ANU had gained this knowledge. We particularly focus on students who enrolled at first year level since this is where complete beginners will be placed. We then consider other types of linguistic capital based on data collected about the level of students' knowledge /use of languages other than English and Mandarin, and students' views about the value of such knowledge.

3.1 Profile of Mandarin students

Students entering in the Chinese language program at the ANU with prior knowledge of the language are required to take a placement test to assess their proficiency, and based on this, enrol in the most appropriate level. As seen in Table 2, approximately one half of the students in this study entered the program after first year.

Table 3 gives the breakdown for prior experience of the language only for those who began their ANU Mandarin Chinese studies in both Chinese 1A (oral) and Chinese 1B (written) in first semester at Year 1 level (N=34). As can be seen, they had a wide range of past experience in the language, with approximately one third (13/34) indicating that they had previously studied the language in a formal language program (five of them to Year 12 level), and three had lived in a Mandarin-speaking country for several years.

*Table 2: Level at which students entered the ANU Chinese program (N=84)**

	Level entered Chinese program	Students enrolled in Chinese 4	Students enrolled in Chinese 6	Students enrolled in Advanced Reading and Graduates from Chinese 8	Total students by semester level entered ANU
		Number (%)	Number (%)	Number (%)	Number
Year 1	Chinese 1 - 2	22 (69%)	16 (59%)	3 (12%)	41 (49%)
Year 2	Chinese 3-4	10 (31%)	6 (22%)	1 (4%)	17 (20%)
Year 3	Chinese 5 -6		5 (19%)	2 (8%)	7 (8%)
Year 4	Chinese 7-8			4 (16%)	4 (5%)
Advanced course	Advanced Reading			15 (60%)	15 (18%)
	GRAND TOTAL	32 (100%)	27 (100%)	25 (100%)	84 (100%)

* One participant in Chinese 6 was omitted due to missing data

Table 3: Mandarin experience of students who entered the program in Chinese 1A and 1B (N=34)

Mandarin learning prior to ANU	Students in Chinese 4	Students in Chinese 6	Students in Advanced Reading	TOTAL Number (%)
Primary School in a Chinese-speaking country (Singapore)		1		1 (3%)
Primary School and High School up to Year 12 + lived 3+ years in Chinese-speaking country, China or Singapore)	2			2 (6%)
High School up to Year 12	2	1		3 (9%)
Some prior study (Primary School, High School, short course, Community language School)	4	3		7 (21%)
No prior study	10	8	3	21 (62%)
TOTAL	18	13	3	34 (100%)

This range of Mandarin language proficiency and Chinese cultural experience in first semester was further increased by the presence of students in Chinese 1B (written) who had been exempted from Chinese 1A (oral) because of their level of proficiency in the spoken language. Three of the four students in our study who enrolled only in Chinese 1B in first semester grew up in Chinese-speaking families.

Questionnaire responses from students who entered the program after first year, plus data from later student interviews, indicates that this mix of proficiency levels continues in higher level classes as students continue to join the program each semester, bringing with them an equally rich variety of formal and informally acquired knowledge of Chinese language and culture. In Advanced Readings, for example, only three of the 25 began their Chinese studies at ANU with no prior knowledge of the language, while over one third (N=9) had completed all or most of their formal schooling in China.

3.2 Other languages and cultures

We explored the range of knowledge and use of languages in addition to English and Mandarin, together with the range of contexts in which students had learned these languages, through the following questions:

- Apart from English and Mandarin, can you speak another language or another Chinese dialect?
- What other language/s or Chinese dialect/s do you speak?
- For each language/dialect, please indicate how well you think you speak it (e.g. very little, enough for a simple conversation, quite well, fluently)
- Where did you learn each language/dialect (e.g. primary school, community language/ethnic school, high school, with a private tutor, with your family)?

Responses indicate that close to two thirds (54/85) of the students had experience of other languages and/or other varieties of Chinese. Eighteen reported speaking another variety of Chinese, for fifteen of whom this was Cantonese (seven reported speaking it fluently or well). These students have the advantage of speaking a language with a similar sentence structure to Mandarin, as well as being familiar with tones.

The range of other languages spoken or studied previously or concurrently was much broader; twelve different languages were reported, including European and Asian languages (most frequently French, N=18; and Japanese, N=15 speakers respectively). Nineteen students reported speaking another language fluently or very well, and of these, 11 had acquired the language through home and school in a country where the language was the national language (Japanese, N=4; Korean, N=3; Malay, N=2; Filipino, N=1; Italian, N=1).

Looking again at the 21 students who had not learned Mandarin prior to enrolling in Chinese 1a (Table 3), the questionnaire revealed that at least eight had a considerable amount of linguistic and cultural capital they could apply to their

Mandarin study. Six were native speakers of another Asian language (Japanese, N=4; and Korean, N=2); one spoke Cantonese fluently and another spoke some Cantonese, having learned informally at home. In addition, one student spoke Vietnamese quite well after a school exchange to Vietnam and seven more spoke some French, having learned through school. Therefore, only five of the 21 students had no previous language learning experience.

Data was then collected on students' views of the value of this language knowledge, and whether it was perceived an advantage or disadvantage for learning. Sixty-seven of the respondents (79%) answered these questions. Of those that gave clear reasons for their views, the vast majority (60) cited advantages, though nine of these also noted some disadvantages. The advantages can be divided into four main categories. By order of frequency, these are:

1. Comments on strategies and learning skills. Most responses in this category were general statements such as "you have a better understanding of how to go about it", "I can use the study methods taught to me by previous language teachers". These advantages were primarily identified by students who had learned another language (and not by those who speak another variety of Chinese).
2. Being able to compare languages. The majority of these advantages were attributed to similarity between the other dialect/language and Mandarin, e.g. in relation to sentence structure (Cantonese), writing system (Japanese, and to some extent Cantonese and Korean) and tones (Cantonese and Vietnamese). The value of these similarities was noted by both speakers and non-speakers of these other languages. Most advantages identified by speakers of other varieties of Chinese or respondents who did not speak another language fell into this category.
3. Advantage of cultural similarities. "I can understand the background culture of the language" (student from Hong Kong), "similar cultural background" (student from Korea).
4. Gives a wider perspective. "Learn how to think differently", "approach ideas and concepts from a different perspective".

The majority of disadvantages identified were also related to comparisons between the other languages/dialects spoken and Mandarin, but with an emphasis on differences between the two. Most problems noted were related to pronunciation and speaking (Chinese dialects).

4. Views of mixed cohorts in Mandarin classes

Data in this section is based mainly on student interviews. Interviewees are identified by a letter and number allocated to each student during analysis of their questionnaire responses.

Most interviewees accepted that mixed cohorts within classes were unavoidable. As student T24 said of some students in Chinese 5 and 6:

Possibly they could have gone into Chinese 7, but it is hard because if someone has done really well in high school they might not be Ch 7 level but they might be better than Chinese 5. I think it's hard for the Chinese teachers, but as long as there is appropriate placing and sometimes people are not kind of honest with their level.

[T24, 21 yr old female in Chinese 6 who had begun in Chinese 1A with a multicultural background and international upbringing and schooling]

Nevertheless, several students pointed out the demoralising effect that the presence of better speakers could have. A mature-aged student (T3, 62 year old male), spoke about a number of very discouraged students of non-Chinese background in his Chinese 6 class. Three or four Australian students in the class were quite disengaged:

They had done 1 and 2, and thought it was quite nice, 3 and 4, and it was getting on top of them, and now they just had to finish ...They had got to get their major, they had invested in this.

Student L23 was extremely concerned about mixed proficiency cohorts, which she said led to some people giving up. She also felt her needs were ignored, especially in Chinese 1B:

[there was a background speaker who] was fluent but had never done the writing ... But the fact was that our writing exams weren't just memorisation-type exams, they were utilising grammar and stuff, so all she literally had to do was [write down what she spoke].

[L23, 21 yr old female in Chinese 4 who spoke no other language and had not learned any Mandarin prior to ANU].

In addition there were students with previous knowledge of Chinese characters who influenced the speed of the class. The tutors were perceived as not able to appreciate the difficulty for a "beginner who has never ever touched characters before" [L23].

The other four interviewees who had begun in Chinese 1A and 1B showed less concern. Three of them had begun with considerably more linguistic capital than L23. They had all learned Mandarin prior to ANU, one (T27) to Year 12 level. The second, T28, a 21 yr old male in Chinese 6, had bilingual skills in English and Filipino and had acquired "some very useful strategies" on a school exchange to Denmark in a "really fast paced [course], every week you had to memorise a set number of words and a set number of phrases." The third, T24, had attended primary school in Singapore for four years. While she did badly on the ANU placement test ("I could pretty much count to ten and remember maybe 20 characters or something"), she now realised the benefit of that experience:

in terms of learning characters and sounds. [Also] I don't think my accent's too bad because I was exposed to the sound of Chinese [when young]. I don't think [first year] was as hard for more as some other people.

The fourth of this first year group had, like L23, enrolled in Chinese 1A with only English and no prior Mandarin learning. However, the main thing she remembered about earlier years was what she described as the annoying attitude of the more fluent Chinese speakers:

We had a few students who would just come to the tutes because they had to and they would just sit up the back and listen to music and not even contribute because they know how to speak Chinese. [R23, 23 yr old female in Advanced Readings]

We could interpret this as indicating they saw no incentive to invest in the course. They could achieve the reward they wanted/needed by calling on their existing capital.

One student who felt disempowered by the imbalance of linguistic capital was E2, one of the graduate students who had completed Chinese 8 (female 30 years old), who said "I felt a bit resentful because I thought they were just coasting along, getting easy marks ... and sometimes it was really, really blatant how good they were".

Some students saw the balance of power could shift with lack of investment. This is shown by student T28 who noted that students with Cantonese backgrounds or Mandarin speakers born and raised in Australia or New Zealand:

have a bit of an advantage because they can hear from their homes and then, as far as characters, even though it's traditional, it gives you some sort of edge. But once you start getting into the nitty gritty, if you don't utilise the edge then you lose the advantage.

Building up one's own linguistic capital could lead to similar results. L23, speaking about her good friend (non-Chinese) who had enrolled in Chinese 1 with Year 12 Mandarin observed:

she had taken a gap year and wasn't really confident enough that she could make Ch3, which is fair enough. But she would have conversations in class very easily and a lot of us were not able to do that. But ... then in Chinese 3, when she was genuinely learning new stuff as opposed to re-learning, I started to overtake her as she is just not used to. So what I'm finding more and more is that I'm prepared to put the effort in. If anything they are at the disadvantage now as they get an easy ride.

On the other hand, more proficient speakers in classes could be "a big advantage to us non-native speakers" (R23, in Advanced Readings). She said:

I am not sure if some people found it daunting or something but I thought it was definitely an advantage and it was very interesting to learn the different perspectives that come from people from different backgrounds and how we saw different issues and things like that.

This student saw Advanced Readings as “a sort of sharing of skills”, which she thought could have been capitalised on more in the program. Student T3 also hinted at this idea. Speaking of a girl in his Chinese 6 class he said:

[her] listening comprehension and speaking was fine but ... she had a very limited character background She was fluent, her communicative ability was 10 times better than mine, but ... when she was reading something, I could read better than she could, and when it came to expressing myself, even though I have to work at it, I would know a word for things that didn't pop up in mother-daughter communication. ... My ability to translate into English was also better than a lot of the other students, not only because [I am a native speaker] but because I have done a lot of writing over my life, know how to craft a sentence etc.

5. Discussion, implications and suggestions

The responses to the questionnaire show the wide range of linguistic and cultural capital the students in this study brought with them on entry into the ANU Chinese program. This capital is related to both Chinese language and culture and other languages and cultures.

In contrast to Nettelbeck et al. (2009), who found 38% of first year students were ‘true’ beginners in first year, only 14% (5/34) of students who enrolled in Chinese 1a and 1b in our study had no previous language learning experience and 41% (14/34) had previously studied Mandarin for some years or were fluent speakers of languages with a number of similarities to Mandarin. Limited conclusions can be drawn from this, given the very small numbers of students involved in our study and the fact that they had successfully completed Year 1 and continued in the program. Nevertheless, this finding could indicate that if students still in Year 1 at ANU had been included in our study, there would have been more concern expressed about students with considerably more linguistic and cultural capital than others in Year 1.

On the other hand, our findings do indicate that the presence of much more proficient speakers in higher classes is seen by some to be a demoralising force. Students may continue in the program because they are committed, for example, to major in Chinese, which requires the completion of Chinese 6, but they can be quite disengaged (comment from student T3). Such experience in Year 1, however, where students may not have yet fully committed to the Mandarin program, might encourage them to drop out. This is an area requiring future research.

We support Nettelbeck et al. (2009)'s recommendation that information on the language learning backgrounds of students be collected and analysed early in the first semester of language study to facilitate program planning. This would enable

students identified as having no, or limited, linguistic capital to be offered extra assistance or targeted support at an early stage. This might help improve retention rates. The forceful views of student L23 and the observations of T3 suggest that such targeted assistance may be equally beneficial in later years as well. We therefore suggest that data on students' language learning backgrounds should also be collected in these years.

One way of providing targeted support could involve offering tutorial groups for students of similar proficiency levels. Student L23 noted the benefits of such a group. Quite by chance, she had found herself in a small tutorial group in Chinese 4:

There's only about 4 or 5 of us in the class so the tutor can focus on us and it's really good. It just so happens that the people who attend that class are about the same level, and that's my most effective class. I don't feel overshadowed.

The views of students about the value of other language study for their learning of Mandarin collected through the questionnaires indicates their understanding of the benefits that speakers of two languages have over monolinguals when learning an additional language, and the particular advantages of speakers of languages of a similar structure or writing system to Mandarin. Their responses also indicate a wide range of knowledge about useful language learning strategies. Unlike many other individual characteristics that students bring to the classroom, learning strategies "are malleable. That is, they can be learned, modified ... and controlled or regulated by the learner" (Chamot 2012: 117). This therefore opens up possibilities for students with more experience of learning a language to share this with others.

Students could be provided with opportunities in class to reflect on and discuss how, why and where they had previously encountered and learned various languages. In first year, for example, students such as T 28, with his bilingual and Danish exchange program experiences, could speak about the helpful techniques he had gained and the possibilities of applying these to learning Mandarin. Students who had previously studied Mandarin formally, such as T27, or had successfully mastered other languages could discuss strategies that had helped them succeed. Giving voice to how students have done something can also make them more aware of the process, which may assist them in their own learning as well. Lear, Tolton and Bramley (2013) found such class discussions to be an effective and efficient way to promote awareness of language learning strategies and learning styles among first year students of Japanese and Spanish at the University of Canberra.

Our findings suggest that this approach would be useful at higher levels too. Students could also be encouraged to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses—in both Mandarin and English languages (as T3 did in his interview). If the sharing of complementary strengths became a formal part of a program it might also increase student engagement. Mullan et al. (2011: 134) point out that peer mentoring in language programs has not been much researched at tertiary level, but such mentoring in other areas has been shown to increase student engagement and/or retention.

6. Concluding remarks

As noted above, there is a need to extend the size and scope of the research. For example, students in Chinese 1 should be included in a future study to further gauge the impact of the presence in beginner classes of students who have studied the language for some years in formal classes in school or are quite fluent speakers who have limited written ability because they have learned the language informally through family. Such a study could also examine retention rates. Comparative studies with programs in other languages are also needed to gauge whether Mandarin programs are particularly prone to very mixed proficiency cohorts due to a number of factors specific to Chinese. These include the sizable number of heritage speakers of Chinese in Australia and Chinese students studying as international students (cf. Tasker, this volume), the complexity of the writing system and the very loose correlation between Chinese characters and their pronunciation. The nature of the program at ANU also needs to be considered. The first year level consists of twice the workload of other courses at ANU, and of Chinese in other years (i.e. 12 credit points, rather than 6). This means that the gap between Chinese 1 and the level of Chinese needed to successfully cope with Chinese 3 may be considerably wider than between first and second year Chinese in other universities.

It is hoped that the findings demonstrate the value of collecting and making use of information about the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of students in language classes. This is capital on which they draw to develop or increase their proficiency of the target language. This study adds to previous research in this area and could be used in program planning to engage students, maximise learning outcomes and improve retention rates.

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