THE MANDARIN ORAL MASTERY PROGRAMME AS PERCEIVED BY NON-NATIVE LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

Background and Purpose: Pinyin is required in learning Mandarin. The challenge of Romanised Pinyin is that learners must decipher the meaning of words based on the change of tone. Communication research is often conducted without accounting for the effects of the change of tone in learning a language. With the aim of avoiding miscommunication while strengthening awareness, Campus Buddies Programme was employed to provide tone practice for learners and consequently explores the effectiveness of the intervention.

Methodology: This quantitative classroom-based research gathered information through the administration of a questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to 32 Mandarin Level 1 learners identified through purposive sampling. The students studied five topics from the syllabus. A total of 10 native speakers who scored A in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) mentored the learners during the programme. The participants were instructed to answer both pre- and post-tests. Part A consists of demographic details, whereas Part B focuses on the effectiveness of questions and Part C consists of 30 questions of content learned by the respondents. The data were then analysed using SPSS 26 software.

Findings: The respondents demonstrated a positive response towards the programme and suggested further improvement ideas such as prolonging the training session and adding more topics and oral activities. The results implicated the programme as a motivator for oral fluency. Many non-native speakers can benefit from conversation with Mandarin native speakers because it is a strong indicator and sound oral mastery strategy.

Contributions: This research provides insights into the effectiveness of the current programme in motivating students' oral learning. The outcome is essential in determining the Mandarin conversation strategy. More studies adopting different variables are proposed to explore correlations from different perspectives in order to improve students' oral learning.

Keywords: Tonal pronunciation, native speakers, non-native speakers, foreign language instruction, Mandarin conversation.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Learning Chinese as a non-native speaker is difficult, especially for those coming from an alphabetic first language background, with one of the most challenging obstacles being the large number of Chinese characters and the opacity of the Chinese writing system (Lü, 2017). Mandarin is a tonal language, and tone changes do not exist in non-tonal languages. Hence, Chinese Pinyin is the precondition in learning Mandarin. In most local universities in Malaysia, non-native learners are taught the pinyin system approach to learn the language. Mandarin Chinese is a monosyllabic language in which each Chinese character constitutes a single syllable. Hanyu Pinyin is one of the most widely adopted writing systems for Romanised Chinese characters. However, Pinyin can mislead non-native speakers because some pinyin letters do not represent the same Chinese sounds in Malay or English. For example, in the four lexical tones (indicated by diacritics), c- is pronounced [tsʰ] rather than [k] or [s], and q- is pronounced [tɕʰ] rather than [kʰw]. It signifies the vital element of that tone pronunciation in Mandarin. Simultaneously, the tone is the most confusing and challenging part of Mandarin language.

There are five tones in Mandarin Chinese i.e., tone 1, tone 2, tone 3, tone 4, and neutral tone (no tone). The same syllable can be pronounced with different tones and the meaning can vary depending on the tone. The tones in Mandarin resemble a pitching change. The voice range changes from the same level to going up and down, up again, and down again. For example, the word /ma/ can be the mother /mā/, numb /má/, horse /mǎ/ and scold /mà/. Tone 3 is effectively learned while tone 2 is the least effectively improved but better than tone 3 and tone 4 pronunciation through an intensive training assessment (Zajdler & Chu, 2019).

In Mandarin syllables, initials and finals are further compartmentalised into smaller acoustic units known as phones. Mandarin tones typically have a longer duration compared to phones. Tonal information is presented throughout the final syllable. A non-native speaker could commit a few types of mispronunciation at the syllable level (Tong, Chen, Ma, & Li, 2016). First, phone error only which the syllable is phonetically wrong but has a correct tone. Second, tone error only which the speaker pronounces the phones correctly but the Mandarin tone is produced wrongly.

In other words, tones provide a very typical condition and can cause miscommunication if not given proper consideration. Therefore, a lot of efforts such as direct oral drilling, implicit feedback, and using technology-enhanced tools have been made to unearth strategies for mastering the tone effectively. Within the literature, numerous studies have focused on the concepts of tonal gain. Yang (2015) observed the problems related to Mandarin from five perspectives i.e., learning tones without original settings, avoiding learning favourites, ignoring the contrasts, incompetent in the empirical measurement, and not adjusting for learners' inconsistency.

In terms of awareness, Zajdler and Chu (2019) disclosed that speech sound consciousness is insufficient among students and humans need to train their brains to distinguish speech sounds and process them into phonemes. The attention to speech sound arises while listening to a foreign language. The other language's phonetic structure is from the learners' mother tongue. This refers to a situation where it is difficult for the learners to choose the sound features that contribute to the language's phonemes. In short, self-regulated speech and monitoring phonetic awareness contribute to effective pronunciation. In other word, it is a challenge to have native-like pronunciation.

Other than that, there is a vast body of literature on tone differences. First, Ding (2012) revealed Mandarin beginner learners who perceived the more implicit group feedback made considerable improvement in tone production than those who perceived the more explicit group feedback (Bryfonski & Ma, 2019). Li and Vuono (2019) listed two basic corrective types of

feedback in language learning, input-providing and output prompting. Implicit prompts such as clarification requests do not explicitly point out any errors while direct feedback in writing, also known as explicit feedback, accords learners with precise information about the mistake committed and ways to rectify it.

Indeed, there have been significant attempts to examine strategies for tone pronunciation gain, and it has been experimentally proven that oral drilling training could enhance Mandarin tones (Ding, 2012; Wang, Spence, Jongman, & Sereno, 1999). Furthermore, Bryfonski and Ma (2019) discovered that implicit feedback (working memory) produces a more significant improvement in tone production than explicit feedback.

More recently, it was demonstrated that innovation with technology-aided learning could enhance Mandarin learning. For example, first, researchers discovered that advanced mobile technology offers multimedia affordances such as access, recording, listening, and downloading dictionaries, thus enabling learners to improve their listening and speaking skills (Miangah, 2012). Second, the voice recording apps assist students in audio recording, thus enhancing the students' oral speeches (Ju, Mei, & Mohamed, 2017). Third, Tong et al. (2016) identified that most computer systems only provide pronunciation correctness as feedback known as segmental feedback. It focuses on the pronunciation accuracy of individual phonetic units (Witt, 2012), and suprasegmental feedback, which focuses on rhythm, stress, and intonation of the non-native speech (Cucchiarini, Strik, & Boves, 2000). The researchers further noticed that the feedback was not informative for the learners, thus proposing a context-aware multilayer framework for Mandarin mispronunciation detection. The framework incorporated the context information in the detection process and provided phonetic, tonal, and syllabic level feedback. Researchers further revealed that the context awareness as proposed by the framework has improved the mispronunciation detection performance in all three levels.

In fact, tonal change plays a vital role in semantic activation in the process of speech input recognition (Zhou, Qu, Shu, Gaskell, & Marslen-Wilson, 2004). Tong et al. (2016) proffered a framework incorporating context-awareness in Mandarin pronunciation training that enhanced students' mispronunciation detection performance. In short, most of the research in tone revolves around native-like pronunciation as exposure to Mandarin Chinese, which can facilitate tonal identification (Hao, 2012; Yang, 2015). Thus, a native-speaker's remedy strategy called Campus Buddies was executed to improve non-native learners' oral ability with the following research questions:

i.   What are the strengths, weaknesses, content learned, and suggestions of the remedy programme perceived by non-native students?

ii.   Is there a difference in the impact of students' learning, native speakers and remedy programme between different genders?

iii. Is there a correlation between Chinese speakers and students' Mandarin learning?

iv.   Is there a difference in the scores between pre- and post-tests of content learned?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Importance of Tone Pronunciation

Many studies have consistently reported on the importance of tones. Thomson and Derwing (2015) indicated that pronunciation instruction is effective and frequently leads to significant improvement. The growing number of studies on this matter denotes the field is multiplying. Nevertheless, there are inconsistencies in writing requirements which restrict replicability. The study believed explicit instruction of phonological forms upholds a significant impact as it provides students with phonetic information. Providing comprehensive education is crucial and a skilled instructor can determine learners' pronunciation needs. It insinuates that foreign language learners require support in building confidence to have the skills to interact with native speakers (Liu & Fung, 2004).

As a case in point, an instructor provides input to serve as a scaffold in oral recast and direct feedback. Oral recasts also afford phonological information that may help acquire features phonologically (Benati & Batziou, 2019). Although immediate written or explicit feedback may be characterised as a scaffold for more complex features, learners can carefully process the corrections over time. However, they may hamper communication and position an enormous cognitive burden on the learners.

Hussein et al. (2011) discovered that listeners having high contact with the Chinese attained higher accuracy than those who had less interaction with native speakers. The study suggested that it is challenging to discriminate between the second, third, and neutral tones, with the third tone representing the most significant challenge. When Pinyin transcription and Chinese characters are prepared, the learners' tone correctness shows improvement. The researchers postulated lower correctness rate when confronted with mere German cues. This is probably related to the increased memory load. Further tests should be conducted to verify whether the results are related to actual pronunciation problem or whether German learners have difficulties memorising and retrieving tonal features. The results also showed that

students' tonal confusion had regular and irregular patterns. Besides, the critical finding attested that contact with Mandarin Chinese could facilitate tonal identification (Ding, 2012).

In the literature, there is an extensive theoretical and experimental evidence describing the importance of tone pronunciation. Hao (2012) assessed the differences in tone acquisition between second language tonal and non-tonal learners. The results demonstrated that both groups' first language backgrounds differed in their perception and production of tones. The three findings identified no significant difference between the performance and tone perception and production. The tonal similarities also slightly represented learners' difficulty in acquiring Mandarin tones.

Additionally, Long (1981) emphasised that native and foreign-language speakers have different ways of modifying their conversations' contents to reach the same understanding. Ellis (2005) suggested that interaction in the second language plays an essential role in developing second language proficiency and if both input and output are required for language acquisition. In other words, language learners who receive comprehensible input and immerse in real-life contexts can enhance their communication skills. Unfortunately, most learners encounter problems in enhancing communication ability, such as the lack of time or motivation (Lys, 2013) to practice the target language in or outside the traditional classroom.

Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1989) argued that knowledge could be extracted from a part of a product, an activity, context, and culture when it is developed and used. Specifically, the more chances of language interaction with native speakers, the more the learners could obtain the knowledge and understanding of using the target language properly, thus optimising language skills. Therefore, according to the sociocultural theory, there must be an effective way of delivering the new language elements, such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and sentence patterns to ensure effective acquisition of the foreign language. However, the forms and levels of language acquisition that should be provided during the instructional process rely on the teacher's proper consideration.

Bryfonski and Ma (2019) examined the effects of a more explicit versus more implicit corrective feedback on Mandarin beginner learners' perception and production of Mandarin tones. The study investigated the acquisition of Mandarin tones among the beginners using a mixed-method design among adults who enrolled in a 14-week, one-on-one, synchronous computer-mediated communication course. Learners with more implicit group feedback made significant improvement in tone production compared to learners with more explicit group feedback.

2.2 Remedy Strategy

Auditory training is accepted as a helpful strategy in the identification of non-native segmental distinctions. For example, in Wang et al. (1999) eight American Mandarin learners were trained to identify the four Mandarin tones appearing in various phonetic contexts in natural words produced by various native Mandarin talkers in eight sessions. Listeners' performances in the pre- and the post-tests were compared to determine their improvements. The result revealed an increase in trainees' identification accuracy.

Past studies were conducted to address the language mispronunciation using advanced technology, for example Tong et al. (2016) proposed a framework incorporating context-awareness in Mandarin pronunciation training. The research of different mispronunciation levels used phone co-occurrence probability and vector space modelling. There was a multilayer framework that demonstrates different types of pronunciation errors separately. First, the framework did not consider the speaker's tone in the phone level mispronunciation detection. Second, the discriminative tone model was for mispronunciation detection and third, the phone and tone level detection results were used together to derive the syllable level feedback. The experimental results showed that the proposed method outperformed the conventional goodness of pronunciation (GOP) approach for pronunciation error detection.

Similarly, Godfroid, Lin, and Ryu (2017), in a web-based study of Mandarin tone training mediated by colour discovered an increase in scores from pre-test to immediate post-test and from pre-test to delayed post-test. Scores for item learning were higher than those for system learning at each of the post-tests. The learners enjoyed learning tones with colours. However, the scholars suggested that colour must be linked to a concrete object that helps make an abstract target for learning to optimise colour in the second language instruction. The approach might ease the learning with colour integration. The technique suits the digital natives' learning environment where colour always predisposes a prominent role in attracting them to education. The study provided information regarding colour, input enhancement of devices and a method of learning.

According to another study conducted in South Africa, teaching Mandarin as a second language can significantly boost academic achievement. Employing mixed research method by combining quantitative and qualitative approaches, Nel and Krog (2021) identified no significant correlation between learner preferences and Chinese phonetics. However, musical skills students performed better at the Pinyin phonics table from the quantitative data. Two themes emerged from the qualitative data, (i) the challenges of learning Chinese phonetics and (ii) the aspects to be considered in Chinese phonetics learning. Based on the integrated quantity

findings, the results have contributed to the existing knowledge on the topic. In addition, the discovery revealed a recommendation for implementing a language-specific curriculum, taking into account the reading and writing of Chinese characters (De Man, 2017).

Previous studies have shown that contact with native speaker (Hussein et al., 2011), auditory training (Wang et al., 1999), implicit feedback (Bryfonski & Ma, 2019) and other variables influence students' pronunciation. Pronunciation instruction is crucial as it enhances students' oral competence. Most studies emphasised the importance of sociocultural learning in communication, highlighting the hindrances of time constraint, lack of motivation and other obstacles to practise the language. Despite the sizable influx of Mandarin pronunciation among foreign language learners, historical research on the mastery of oral Mandarin with native speakers remains scant. Based on the research gap, this study explored Mandarin verbal learning with native speakers to analyse the depth of the strategy, the native speaker, and the learning content that influence students' learning which hopefully can gather valuable insights about self-pedagogical practice and students' learning strategies.

3.0 RESEARCH DESIGN

A quantitative classroom-based research was conducted to explore and examine students' attitude and opinions on three aspects i.e., students' learning, Chinese speakers/native speakers, and the Campus Buddies programme to elicit students' attitude, achievement, effectiveness, weaknesses, and suggestions specific to social context. The demographic details are explained in Table 1.

Table 1: Participants' details

Participants	Details	Condition
Buddies	10 Chinese students	Expert in Mandarin—they scored A in their SPM certificate for Mandarin subject.
Non-native learners	32 Malay students	All Mandarin Level 1 students who learn Mandarin.
Content and related information	Topics: 1. To Greet (2 times) 2. To Introduce (2 times), 3. To Count Numbers (2 times) 4. To Invite for Food (2 times) 5. To Order Food and Drink (2 times) Meeting time: 10 Learning time: one hour	The topics were chosen after discussion with the other foreign language lecture.

The questionnaire was distributed to 32 students selected using purposive sampling who enrolled for Mandarin Level 1 in a higher learning institution. A total of 10 Chinese students (Campus Buddies), who outstandingly scored A for the Mandarin subject in SPM were appointed to be the teachers in the programme. The students learned five topics, including "To Greet", "To Introduce Oneself", "To Count Numbers", "To Invite for Food", and "To Order Food and Drink". Each lesson lasted an hour and was conducted 10 times throughout the entire semester (14 weeks). During the task, the native speakers were instructed to guide the learners based on the given topics. The participants were asked to answer the survey questions before the programme started and after it ended.

The survey was administered after the programme, intending to gauge learners' responses to the programme. At the same time, pre- and post-tests were conducted to determine the effectiveness of the programme. The questionnaire consists of three parts as illustrated in Table 2. Part A contains questions related to gender (one question), Part B includes questions related to the effectiveness of Campus Buddies (22 items), and Part C has inquiries related to the content learned (30 questions).

Table 2: Details of the questionnaire

Part	Constructs	Questions
A	Gender	1
B	Effectiveness of native speakers (eight items)	22
	The students (six items)	
	CB Programme (eight items)	
C		15
Pre-test		
Post-test		15
Total		53

Afterwards, the data were quantitatively analysed using SPSS 26 software. The reliability was determined based on the 46 items used on the scale in assessing the effectiveness of Campus Buddies. The 18 items in the survey had a very high internal consistency level with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.987$, indicating the selected items' reliability in measuring the construct.

4.0 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Students' Learning

The effectiveness of the Campus Buddies program was analysed and discussed according to the students and native speakers involved and the content of the programme itself. First, the three variables, students' learning, native speakers, and remedy programme, were compared against the gender of the respondents. Table 3 presents the results, showing no differences were found between male and female respondents. The *p*-values for students' learning is 0.914, Chinese speaker is 0.374 and programme Campus Buddies is 0.066.

Table 3: Students' learning, native speakers and programme Campus Buddies between genders

| Constructs	Gender	Mean	SD	Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
				F	Sig							
Students' Learning	Male	2.4667	.11547	3.764	0.062	-0.108	30	0.914	-0.05057	0.46648	-1.00325	0.90210
	Female	2.5172	.79555									
Native speakers	Male	2.9167	.14434	4.104	0.052	0.903	30	0.374	0.41667	0.46127	-0.52538	1.35871
	Female	2.5000	.78632									
Remedy Program	Male	2.8000	.00000	6.238	.018	1.911	28	0.066	0.27586	0.14432	-0.01977	0.57149
	Female	2.5241	.77720									
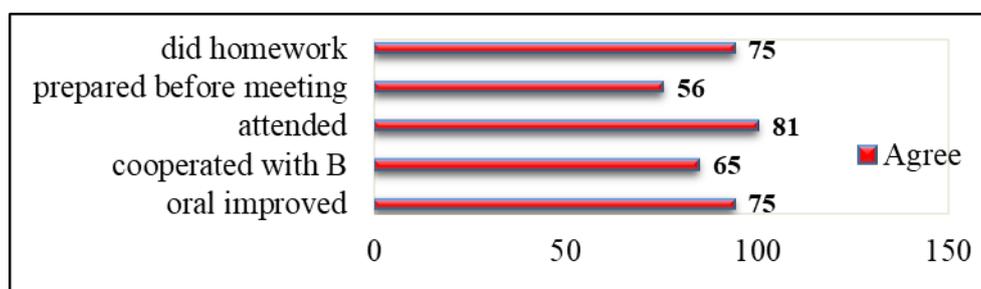
Figure 1: The perceptions of students' learning

Students' learning attitudes are shown in Figure 1. It was found that 81% of the students always attended the programme with 75% of them perceived that their oral skills had improved and they completed all the assigned homework. Meanwhile, 65% of them perceived that they cooperated with native speakers, and 56% of the students were ready for the programme before the meeting. The students perceived that they had learned Mandarin words, pronunciation, sentences, conversation, and others in students' learning. Additionally, all students admitted to

wanting to learn through the help of native speakers, and most of them prepared themselves for the remedy programme.
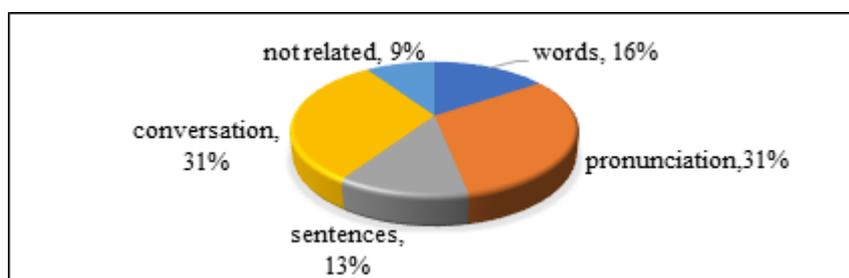

Figure 2: Things students have learned

The learning items perceived by non-native students are next on the list as shown in Figure 2. In the remedy programme, the students learned more about conversation and pronunciation (31%). They also learned words (16%), sentences (13%), and others (9%). To put it another way, students learned how to converse in Mandarin as all the determined items represented the qualities related to speaking skills.

4.2 Native Speakers

Native speakers refer to the Chinese students who helped the non-native learners learn Mandarin during the programme. Figure 3 depicts that the non-native students discerned the native speakers as having both positive and negative characteristics.
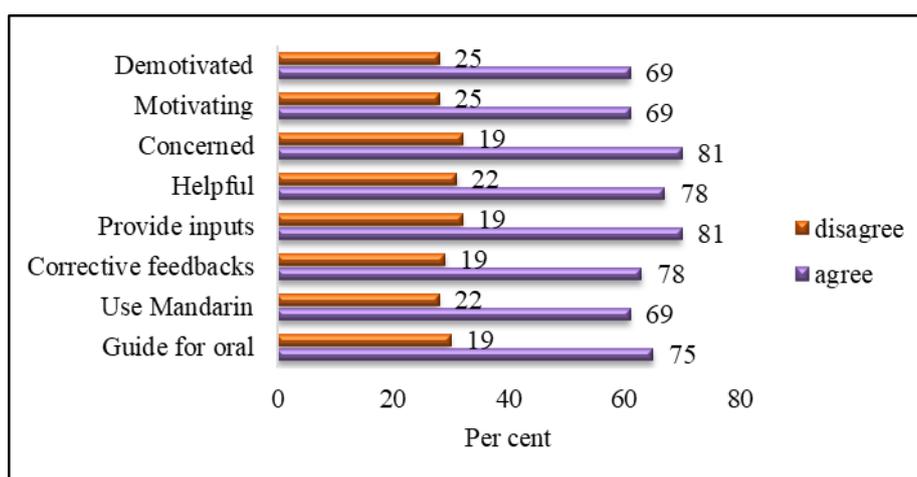

Figure 3: The characteristics of native speakers

Figure 3 describes the students' perceptions of the native speakers' attributes. The positive traits comprised the following results, i.e., motivating (69%), concerned (81%), helpful (78%), providing inputs (81%), giving corrective feedback (78%), guiding them to learn oral (75%) and using Mandarin during the programme (69%). However, 69% of the students disclosed that some of the programme's native speakers demotivated them from learning Mandarin. In this case, the students assumed that the native speakers were responsible for the programme. Nevertheless, the students perceived the highest rate on providing inputs, being concerned, and helpful, while the negative attribute showed only 69% of the students felt demotivated.

A correlation test depicted in Table 4 was conducted to investigate the relationship between Chinese speakers and students' learning. The results of $r = 0.586$ and $p = 0.000$ implied a moderately strong relationship between these variables. It could mean that there were other factors influencing students' learning besides the guidance of the Chinese speakers.

Table 4: The relationship between Chinese speakers and students' learning

			Chinese speakers	Students' learning
Spearman's rho	Chinese speakers	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.586[**]
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	32	32
	Students' Learning	Correlation Coefficient	.586[**]	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	32	32

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

4.3 Campus Buddies Programme

Figure 4 shows that students were told to evaluate the programme and share their views on the changes in their learning.
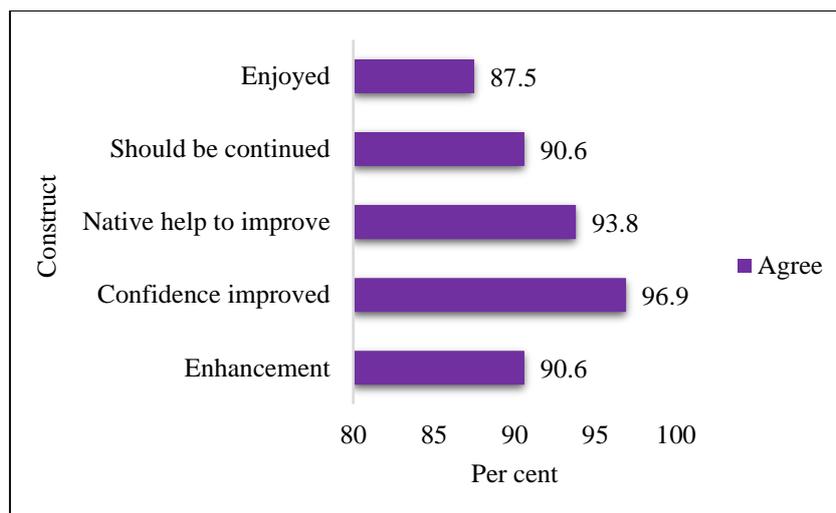
Figure 4: The perceptions towards Campus Buddies programme

Figure 4 illustrates that more than 80% of the respondents believed that the programme influenced their Mandarin oral learning. They sensed that their confidence in speaking Mandarin improved (96.9%), the native speakers helped them orally (93.8%), their Mandarin achievement was enhanced (90.6%), and this programme should be continued in the future (90.6%). Lastly, 87.5% of them agreed that they enjoyed the technique of learning Mandarin through the assistance of native speakers. In short, the help of native speakers has contributed to the increase of confidence in learning to speak Mandarin.
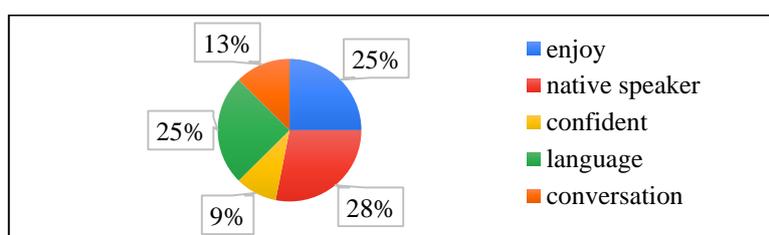

Figure 5: The strength of Campus Buddies

Figure 5 illustrates that the programme's highest strength was it provided the students with opportunities to interact with native speakers (28%). In addition, it was an enjoyable way of oral learning (25%), the students learned to converse with the language (25%), they were able to practise engaging in conversation (13%), and they became confident (7%) by participating in this programme. In short, the result portrayed the students' satisfactions in learning oral Mandarin with the help of native speakers.
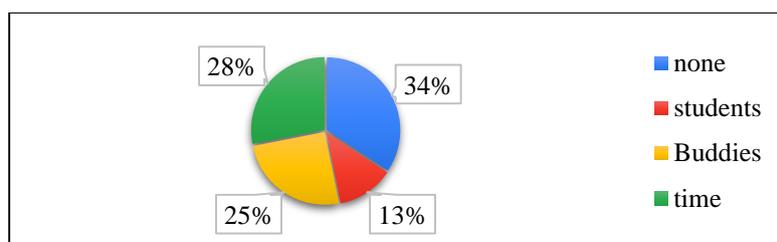
Figure 6: The weaknesses of Campus Buddies

Conversely, Figure 6 shows the weaknesses of the programme as perceived by the respondents. Most of the students (34%) did not detect any defect throughout this programme. In comparison, 28% of them perceived that time was the primary constraint. It was challenging to assemble all students from different courses (the Mandarin students were from various programmes) to meet at a specific time. The other weakness mentioned by the students was related to the native speakers (25%), and the problems stemmed from the participants themselves (13%). Overall, this programme was well accepted by the students despite having some weaknesses (66%), thus further adjustment to improve its efficiency in the future is recommended.
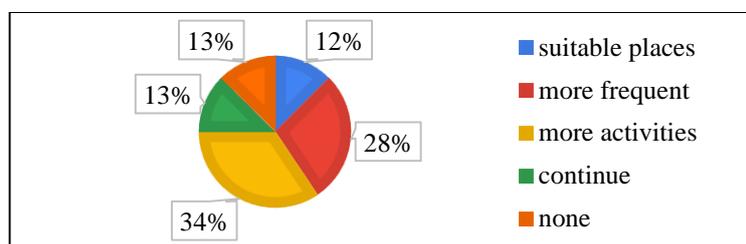

Figure 7: Suggestions to improve Campus Buddies

Students' suggestions to improve Campus Buddies are delineated in Figure 7. The students regarded that the remedy programme should have more activities to enhance their oral skill (34%), to plan more frequent meeting times (28%), to be continued in future (13%), and to have a suitable place for the meeting (12%). In comparison, others (13%) did not suggest anything. Nevertheless, the results implied that students enjoyed and liked the programme, and consequently suggested upgrading the programme.

In summary, the results revealed the students' desires to improve their spoken Mandarin and enjoyed learning Mandarin with the native speakers who were also their friends in the same university. Most native speakers demonstrated positive traits, responsibleness, and willingness to help them with their oral Mandarin. The result indicated general improvement, especially

the students' confidence level in conversing in Mandarin. On gender variables, there were no significant differences between male and female on students' learning, Campus Buddies programme and Chinese speakers. The students anticipated a continuation of this programme, with some adjustments, to benefit from the programme entirely.

4.4 Content Learned

This study showed that students noticed an improvement in themselves and became more confident in oral Mandarin. Therefore, questions in Part C were asked and analysed as an attempt to examine students' growth based on the topics learned, including "To Greet", "To Introduce Oneself", "To Invite for Food", and "To Order Food and Drink". In Table 5, the *p*-value of 0.000 (< .05), indicates a significant difference between the scores of pre- and post-remedy programme. The differences are shown in Figure 8.

Table 5: The comparison of pre and post-tests

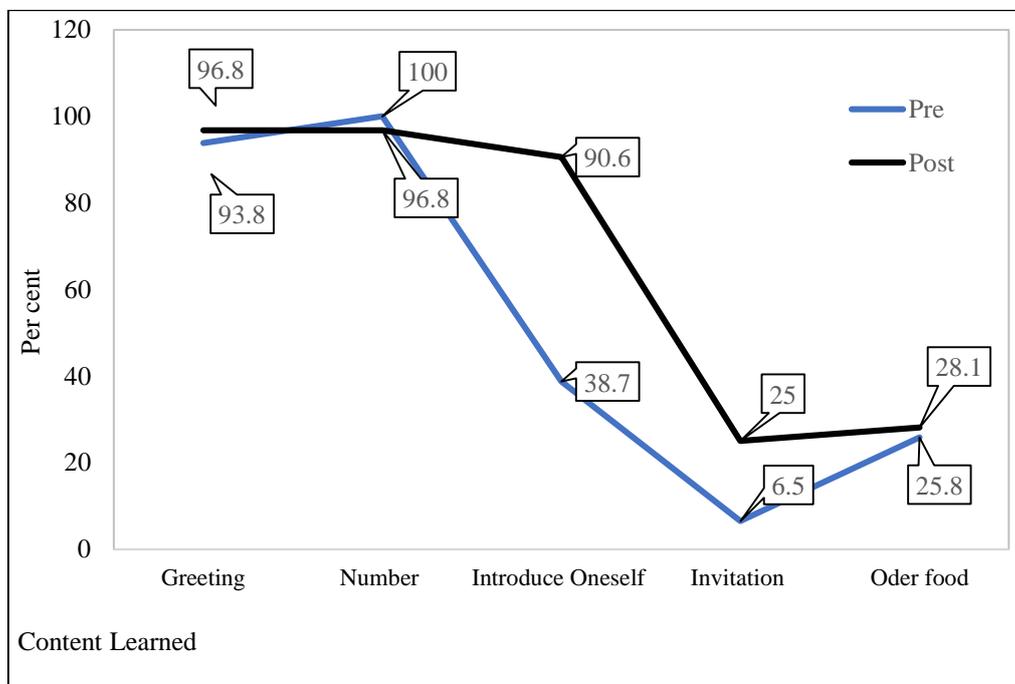|	Mean (SD)			
Variable	Before Program	After	T statistic (df)	P value
Total Score	1.2500	1.545673	5.524 (31)	0.000

Figure 8: Content learned

Finally, Figure 8 displays students' learning performance regarding the content provided. The students admitted to having the greatest improvement in introducing themselves from 38.7% (pre-test) to 90.6% (post-test). They also agreed they had improvement in the topics of 'To Invite' from 6.5% (pre-test) to 25% (post-test); 'To Order Food' from 25.8 % (pre-test) to 28.1% (post-test); 'To Greet' from 93.8% (pre-test) to 96.8% (post-test). However, the 'number' score slightly decreased from 100% (pre-test) to 96.8% in the post-test.

4.5 Discussion

The present study has outlined several findings. First, learning to converse with native Mandarin speakers upgraded the students' belief that practising with native speakers enhances communication skills. Secondly, students proclaimed that they enjoyed and improved their confidence by practising their spoken Mandarin skill with native speakers. Thirdly, this study discovered that learning a language requires more language activities and a conducive environment, besides conversation and pronunciation. The extent to which students benefited from this programme relied on many personal, academic, linguistic, and cultural variables. The factors were deemed to have the potential to determine the degree to which students demonstrated improvement in their oral proficiency.

Next, the conversation practice with native speakers enhanced the students' communication skills. The result supports the study of Ding (2012) who stated that listeners who have high degree of contact with the Chinese attain higher accuracy compared to those who have less exposure to native speakers. The vulnerability with native speakers is crucial as the variation of Chinese lexical tones in words and sentences is complicated and challenging. Shih (2000) believed that foreign adult learners could learn tonal variation at the linguistic level in isolation if they have enough exposure to the Chinese language. In this sense, students should learn with the help of advanced speech technology. The pronunciation mistakes can be presented visually by comparing pitch contours and audibly through listening to the sound. As in many repeated sessions, learners' brains can overcome the mother tongue's constraints and develop a system to successfully recognise and produce Chinese tonal categories. The result is strengthened by Wang et al. (1999) which disclosed that auditory training increases trainees' identification accuracy.

On the other hand, intensive training can develop Mandarin pronunciation, which is in line with the findings in Zajdler and Chu (2019). Ergo, the learners can achieve more experience and knowledge using the target language by providing more language contact opportunities with native speakers, which enriches language skills. However, students' vocal

performance may not indicate a significant difference between performance, tone perception and production. At the same time, their similarities did not substantially demonstrate learners' difficulty in learning Mandarin (Hao, 2012).

This study asserts that it is challenging to learn Mandarin, especially pronouncing the second and third tones. Besides, the direct feedback from native speakers may hamper conversation and impose vast cognitive stress on the learners (Benati & Batziou, 2019), which is manifested by students' sluggish progress. However, the learners can carefully process the corrections over time from the explicit feedback. It shows that providing comprehensive instruction and a skilled instructor is crucial to determine learners' pronunciation needs. Furthermore, it indicates that foreign language learners need support in building confidence to acquire interaction with native speakers (Liu & Fung, 2004). This study also confirms that there are many factors influencing the experience of learning foreign language, and a focused curriculum should be designed for the selected context.

Next, there are several factors that enhance the enjoyment and confidence in students' speaking abilities. Inside or outside of the traditional classroom, inadequate time and motivation hinder conversation practice. This study showed that fun learning had motivated and improved individual confidence in using Mandarin for communication purposes. Ellis (1997) posited that motivation is under the variable of individual learner differences that affects educational outcomes. The result seems consistent with other research where learners who have more implicit feedback have better improvement than those who have more explicit feedback (Bryfonski & Ma, 2019).

The more strategies learners use, the more progress they can achieve in their language learning. In other words, motivation is essential in learning. Since a motivated learner will have a positive mindset for learning, he or she will be proficient at identifying the learning anxiety and overcoming the difficulties. This finding is parallel with Long (1981) who mentioned both native speakers and learners would try to modify the contents to reach the same understanding. The way of learning makes the students feel interested in trying a newly learned language to get the same point.

The critical challenge in education success is an adjustment to the different needs in students' learning. Apart from learning strategies, foreign language learners need assistance in developing the confidence to have the competence to interact with native speakers (Liu & Fung, 2004). Similarly, Brown et al. (1989) contended that learning could be discovered in the component of an activity, a product, context, and culture. Giving comprehensive tutoring is crucial, and a skilled trainer can ascertain learners' pronunciation and learning needs. Native

and foreign language speakers have different ways of adjusting the contents of their dialogues to reach the same interpretation. In this programme, the native speakers were undergraduates who was not trained for coaching; hence educators need to plan and guide the native speakers to assist non-tonal foreign learners with their oral skill. Teaching is a unique task in which during the activity, instructors are required to devise multiple tasks and goals concurrently and flexibly. A teacher must reflect on how one's teaching approach can engage students in the subject taught and achieve the intended learning outcomes. In addressing all of the fundamental issues, a student needs to be trained and experience the process. Simultaneously, an effective instructor should understand the role of teaching and the way of learning.

In summary, in answering the first research question, the Campus Buddies program could improve students' oral Mandarin in terms of new vocabulary, accurate tone pronunciation, and confidence in speaking Mandarin. The respondents suggest having longer and more frequent training hours and having more language activities. The weaknesses include buddies' lack of experience in handling the training. In answering the second research question, the findings show there is no significant difference in the impact of students' learning, native speakers, and remedy programme between the genders. The results show that this study implies a moderately strong relationship between these variables. It could mean that there were other factors influencing students' learning besides the guidance of the Chinese speakers. Lastly, the study indicates a significant difference between the scores of the pre- and post-remedy programme.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Peer guidance through native speakers becomes another approach to students' learning strategy to enhance their Mandarin oral ability. The finding in this study implicates that the non-native speakers experienced deep interest and, with the help of native speakers in tone-related conversations, became self-assured in conversing in Mandarin. Additionally, the students suggested having more activities and increasing the frequency of the programme in the future. The research findings have provided some feedbacks concerning the effectiveness of the current programme which is considered as a motivating strategy in students' oral learning. The results are essential in determining the right strategy in order to become fluent in conversing Mandarin. It is proposed that more research in different variables to be conducted to seek a correlation in different perspectives to enhance students' oral learning. Above all, people should take up the challenge of learning Mandarin as it can be a "ticket" to a lifetime of endless reward.

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Questionnaire of the study:

THE MANDARIN ORAL MASTERY PROGRAMME AS PERCEIVED BY NON-NATIVE LEARNERS

Part A: Demography

Gender:

Part B: Effectiveness of Campus Buddies (CB) Program

  i.   Strength of Native speakers

CB1. CB has enhanced my Mandarin oral.

CB2. CB has guided me to speak correct Mandarin pronunciation.

CB3. CB always talked to me in the Mandarin language.

CB4. CB always corrects my mistakes while I am speaking Mandarin.

CB5. CB has given me a lot of helpful input/materials to enhance my oral.

CB6. CB was helpful in helping me to speak Mandarin.

CB7. CB always concerns of my weakness and help me to improve my oral.

CB8. CB has improved my confidence in speaking Mandarin.

  ii.   Students' Improvement

CB9. I have improved my Mandarin oral.

CB10. I co-operated with the CB to enhance my oral.

CB11. I always attend the session with my CB.

CB12. I did enough preparation before the session.

CB13. I did the homework given after the session.

CB14. I enjoyed the session with my CB.

CB15. CB has motivated me to further learn Mandarin.

CB16. CB has demotivated me in learning Mandarin.

CB17. Talking to native speakers really improve my Mandarin.

CB18. Activity which involved native speakers should be continued in the future.

  iii. The effectiveness of CB program

CB19. What did you learn from CB?

CB20. The strength of CB

CB21. The weakness of C

CB22. Suggestion (ways for oral improvement).

Pre and Post-Test: Content Learned

Part A: A Student's background:

A1 Institute:

A2. Email:

A3: Gender:

Part B: Language experience

B1. Do you have knowledge of Mandarin?

B2. If not formal, how did you get that knowledge?

B3. The social media involved is ……………

Part C: Content

C1. Do you know the types of greetings?

C2. What kinds of greetings and parting words do you know?

C3. Do you recognise numbers in Mandarin?

C4. Can you say the number orally?

C5. Can you write those numbers?

C6. Do you use those numbers in your daily life?

C7. Can you introduce yourself in Mandarin?

C8. Do you understand if someone introduces himself in Mandarin?

C9. Do you understand someone's invitation in Mandarin to a place (to a restaurant, to a store ...)?

C10. Can you invite someone in Mandarin to a place (to a restaurant, to a shop...)?

C11. Are you able to apply the invitation verse in your daily life?

C12. Can you order food in Mandarin?

C13. Is it easy for you to order food in Mandarin?

C14. Is it difficult for you to order food in Mandarin?

C15. What is your level of proficiency in Mandarin?