

Subjective and Objective Needs Analysis of Mandarin Learners

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Abstract

Needs analysis for language courses has to be carried out continuously to keep up with global changes and the needs of learners. This mixed-method study aims to describe the subjective and objective needs of the Mandarin learners in Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), Malaysia, and to check if these needs correspond with each other. Targetting at 120 learners and two instructors, a questionnaire survey was distributed, and complemented by qualitative data derived from focus group interviews. Result shows that learners' subjective needs correspond with objective needs for motivational orientation, textbook, and cultural exposure. Statistically insignificant differences were found in the expected skills to learn, lecture-activities ratio, and teaching-learning activities. The study concludes that flexibility, student-centeredness and practicality are elements to look into for course improvement. Future research can explore learners' needs in mastering writing skill, as well as the needs differences among learners across different levels. The study complements the understanding and knowledge of needs analysis in regard to Mandarin learning outside of China.

Keywords

Needs analysis, subjective, objective, Mandarin, learners

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Background

While America and Europe were suffering from global financial crisis about twelve years ago, China started to emerge gradually as the new world economic centre (Pennycook, 2010), and surpassed Japan to become the world's second largest economy in 2011, after America (Rose, 2016). As China's presence has increasingly been seen relevant worldwide, Mandarin Chinese is undoubtedly becoming a language that gains significant attention, with individuals having the language proficiency are highly sought after. Economic globalisation has hence translated into an increase in the teaching and learning of Mandarin (Lam & Kuan, 2019), in which global citizens can witness the language been officially brought into the national education system of 69 countries: more than 2.8 million of people are learning Mandarin in America; more than 5200 and 1700 Mandarin classes are offered in the United Kingdom and Thailand primary and secondary schools, respectively; and the elevation of Mandarin from the third foreign language to the second in countries such as Korea, Australia, dan Indonesia (Xinhuanet, 2019).

The growing interest in the teaching and learning of Mandarin calls for effective instruction of the language. With the field of teaching Mandarin to foreigners in China starting to flourish following its systematic development since 1978 (Li, 2006), it is a common practice for Mandarin-teaching institutions as well as instructors in the overseas to refer to the teaching pedagogies, materials and instructional resources developed in China in carrying out their teaching tasks. However, to ensure effective instruction of the language, one of the stumbling blocks that still haunt overseas instructors are learners' diversified needs and motivation, since research about Mandarin learners in the overseas are still lacking (Wang, 2018; Zhao, 2016; Zhao & Lin, 2012).

It is important to analyse and study the needs of Mandarin learners to ensure effective instruction of the language. Needs analysis first appeared in the 1920s (West, 1997), and started to gain popularity about fifty years later especially in the area of English for Specific Purpose, and employs approaches such as introspection, interview, observation and questionnaire to obtain insights on the needs of the target being studied (Li, 2014; Ni, 2007). There are a number of definitions given to needs analysis. One early definition by Nunan (1988) is that, needs analysis serves as the starting point for syllabus or curriculum design. His definition was improved by Berwick (1989), with the addition of material selection, assessment, and classroom activities, alongside with the design of curriculum, all of which are crucial for decision planners in designing a course. Brown (1995) perceived needs analysis as the systematic process of all subjective and objective information gathering and analysis, which meet the language learning requirements of learners within a particular institution. It can be observed that needs analysis is learner-oriented because their perspective is prioritised. Taking learners' needs and perspective in consideration is crucial when designing a course because it can ensure the instructor and learners are on the same "frequency" throughout the teaching and learning process, namely, instructor knows what the learners want and how best to deliver course content, and learners know their needs are properly heard. Given its importance as such, needs analysis are well-received in designing any language course (Dudley-Evans & St John, 1998; Finney, 2002; Seedhouse, 1995).

Needs analysis for language courses has to be continuously done so that the course keeps up with global changes and changing needs of learners. Even a time-honoured course requires an on-going monitoring mechanism to ensure the content is still relevant and responsive to the learners. As such, scholars (for example, Huang; 2014; Li, 2014; White, 1998) generally agree that, if deemed necessary, needs analysis can be performed any time during a language course, or when the course is still being offered. It helps the instructor to have a clearer picture as of what do the learners still need and wish to gain in the later part of the course, besides setting a benchmark to review and re-evaluate the existing course (Li, 2014).