

The Language of the Future: The Motivation of Adults in Malta to Study Mandarin Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

China's economic growth and opening up to the western world have led many people in the West to study Mandarin Chinese as a second or as an additional foreign language. Due to the rise of China, many people in the West are seeking to learn Mandarin Chinese in order to be able to communicate better with the endless opportunities that such a great culture and economy bring with it. As Hu Jintao said in his address to the Australian Parliament on the 24th of October 2003: 'The Chinese culture belongs not only to the Chinese but also to the whole world', suggesting that the Chinese actually welcome foreigners to learn their language and culture. In fact, many adults in the Western world are choosing to learn Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language for a number of different reasons, among which to improve their future career prospects. The current study aims to find out what motivates adult learners to choose to attend courses in basic Mandarin Chinese language and culture in Malta.

Keywords:

Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language, non-native teachers of Chinese, adult education, foreign language teaching.

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Literature Review

According to a number of studies, motivation is an essential property of a learner of a foreign language, as without motivation it would be almost impossible to learn a foreign language successfully (Dörnyei and Csiz'er 2005; Fu 2013; Jurisevic and Pizorn 2013). Dörnyei and Csiz'er (2005) list seven components that form part of the motivation learners have to study a foreign language. They discuss the learners' positive attitude to the target language (TL) and culture, the benefit of learning the TL, attitudes towards speakers of the TL, interest in the culture associated with the TL, the importance and the economic power of the community that speaks the TL, the importance given to the study of foreign languages in the learners' surroundings, and also the self-confidence of the learners in learning the TL. These seven components of learners' motivation are very relevant to this research paper as they are all related to the participants' motivation to study mandarin Chinese in adulthood.

Motivation to learn a foreign language is examined in a number of ways, among which by Deci and Ryan (2000), who speak about intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for foreign language learning; the former is a want to learn a foreign language for personal enjoyment, because one really wants to do it, because the learner wishes to communicate with speakers of the TL, because they are interested in the culture of the TL and because the challenge of learning a foreign language gives them joy, while the latter is learning a foreign language for a particular reward such as better job prospects. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation contribute to the participants' motivation to learn Mandarin Chinese.

I believe that in the case of Malta, as Khalid (2016) mentioned about Pakistan, foreign language learners are more likely to become additive multilinguals because the vast majority of the learners, especially adults, would have already studied Maltese and English throughout all of compulsory schooling and an additional one or two foreign languages throughout the final five years of compulsory schooling. In addition to this, for multilingual learners of Chinese in Malta, Chinese is an additional foreign language and it could never replace the

official languages Maltese and English.

Research about the motivations of a number of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in different parts of the world suggests that a number of people choose to study English because it is an international lingua franca (Crystal 2003) and so through the medium of English they could promote their home culture to the rest of the world better. According to Orton (2008) many Chinese learn EFL to promote the Chinese cultural identity and culture to the western world. In addition to this, a number of persons choose to study a foreign language so that through it they could work for their country in the fields of international trade and diplomacy with the country of the foreign language they have learned. This might be very close to the situation of CFL in Malta: surely a number of learners choose to study Chinese in order to widen their prospects of working in China.

This has motivated the current study as one of the aims of the current research is to find out why adult learners decided to choose Mandarin Chinese over the language options available. Did they decide to choose Chinese because of the huge number of native speakers it has? Or because many other learners worldwide are also studying Mandarin Chinese as a second or as a foreign language? Or because they have a general interest in foreign languages and they want to choose a very different foreign language? Such questions all lead to what the motivations are for learners to choose to study Mandarin Chinese in Malta.

Instrumental motivations are more related to wanting to learn a foreign language to gain something such as a certificate or a diploma, to pass an exam or to have better job prospects. In his discussion on motivation, Dörnyei (2009) mentions the learners' need for achievement and new challenges and also the motivation to study a foreign language in order to broaden one's mind. Dörnyei (1998) also investigates who learns which foreign languages, where and why. He also investigates the level of proficiency foreign language learners wish to achieve.

According to Fu Xiao (2013), the teacher has an important role in maintaining and protecting learners' motivation, in

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reducing anxiety and in providing language exercises that are level-appropriate for the learners, so that success in them will lead to more motivation. The first lesson should be positive and make learners feel safe and that the task of learning the target language is doable. They should also feel successful: that they have achieved something great; this could be the ability to introduce themselves or to say a greeting in the target language. Teachers could also maintain motivation by guiding learners to set goals, to involve learners in the lesson and to arouse their curiosity and attention.

In addition to motivation, this study briefly mentions beliefs about the target language. Horwitz (1988) comes up with five points that summarise the 'Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory' (BALLI). The first point discusses the difficulty of language learning; I believe that this is very relevant to the current study because Mandarin Chinese tends to be perceived as a difficult language, but in fact, it is different from and not necessarily more difficult than languages people in the West are used to. The second point discusses foreign language aptitude which is an essential part of foreign language learning. The third point discusses the nature of language learning. The fourth point discusses learning and communication strategies, and the fifth point discusses motivations and expectations of foreign language learners. Horwitz (1988) lists a number of motivations and beliefs in relation to foreign language learning such as a cultural interest in the language, the desire to travel to the country where the target language is spoken, to foster friendships with native speakers of the target language, to have better job prospects, to preserve one's heritage language and to enable communication with native speakers of the target language. The motivations mentioned above, along with others, will be investigated in the current study.

Methodology and Background to the Study

This research was born out of the need to find out about the motivation of adult learners who decided to start and to successfully complete one of the evening courses held for adult learners in Mandarin Chinese language and culture in Malta.

Malta is officially bilingual: both Maltese and English are

the official languages of Malta. Both languages are taught equally throughout compulsory education in all schools and all students are expected to gain competence in both languages. In addition to Maltese and English, when children are around 11 years old, they move on to secondary school where a foreign language is introduced and is taught throughout the five remaining years of compulsory schooling. In the third year of secondary school, students could choose another foreign language if they wish. The foreign languages that have been widespread in most schools are Arabic, French, German, Italian and Spanish. Mandarin Chinese has been on offer at St. Margaret's College (Bormla) since academic year 2017/2018, but the number of students who actually choose Mandarin Chinese is low. Mandarin Chinese is also available in a few church schools in Malta. The Directorate for Lifelong Learning (part of the Ministry for Education and Employment) offers an evening course in Mandarin Chinese language and culture in addition to other foreign languages, namely Arabic, French, German, Greek, Italian, Russian, Turkish, Japanese and Spanish.

All the participants in this study are Maltese nationals and bilingual in both Maltese and English. Most of the participants are multilingual; they would have previously learned other languages either in compulsory schooling or at the Directorate. A total of 24 adult learners participated in this study. 9 of the participants are males and 15 are female. 18 out of the 24 participants are under the age of 40, 6 are over the age of 40, two of whom are close to retirement age. The fact that most of the participants are young is in line with research on adult education conducted by Borg, Mayo and Raykov (2016) and with the Adult Education Survey 2016 conducted by the National Statistics Office (NSO) Malta (published in 2018).

All of the participants in this research project completed compulsory education and all of them had furthered their studies beyond compulsory education. 7 (29%) of the participants achieved post-secondary education. 8 (33%) of the participants had a graduate level of education and 9 (37%) of the participants had a post-graduate level of education. The participants' level of education led to their current employment; the vast majority of the participants, 87.5% are

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in a professional job, 1 participant (4%) is retired (but did a professional job before retirement); 1 (4%) of the respondents has a technical job while another 1 (4%) participant is a university student.

All of the 24 participants are citizens of Malta: an EU member state whose official languages are Maltese and English. In the context of Malta's multilingualism, one of the questions about the background of the participants asks what other languages the participants have knowledge of. The language options available to tick are the languages currently taught in schools; so the first two languages on the list are Maltese and English – Malta's official languages, compulsory throughout all the levels of compulsory schooling and both essential to function in Maltese society in many different contexts. In addition to this, all the participants ticked both Maltese and English. This could also be seen during the lectures as both languages were used in addition to Mandarin Chinese; in fact, as teacher, the researcher translated in both Maltese and English when it was necessary. In addition to this, both the learners and the researcher as teacher switched to Maltese when explaining certain grammar points as both parties thought that certain grammar points could be better outlined in Maltese than in English. This could be because certain grammar points might be closer to certain Maltese grammar points. The researcher feels that future research is necessary on typology; possibly a comparative study of language typology of Mandarin and Maltese in order to better understand how Maltese learners learn grammar structures in Mandarin.

In addition to Maltese and English, the questionnaire also gave the options of Arabic, French, German, Italian, Russian, Spanish and the option to specify any other language. The foreign language that is the most popular among the participants is Italian; in fact, 91% claimed to have knowledge of Italian. 55% of the participants also claimed to have some knowledge of French. 25% of the participants claimed to have knowledge of German and 12.5% of the participants claimed to have knowledge of Spanish. The fact that this study was conducted in a multilingual context where both the learners and the teacher have knowledge of a number of foreign languages suggests that they might be more open to learning an additional foreign

language (Cook 1999), in this case Mandarin Chinese, because this is not their first experience in learning a foreign language. It is of significance that three (12.5%) of the 24 participants wrote Chinese in the section where they could list any other foreign languages that they have knowledge of and that are not listed on the questionnaire. These participants had been studying Mandarin Chinese for quite some time, suggesting that possibly, the longer a person studies a foreign language, the more likely they are to claim it as a foreign language that they know.

The linguistic situation in Malta could be compared to the linguistic situation in Pakistan where a number of languages are spoken simultaneously and where the learners are additive multilinguals (Khalid 2016), as when they learn a new language they add it to the repertoire of languages that they already know. Khalid's (2016) study about EFL in Pakistan is very relevant to the current study, as according to Khalid, Pakistani learners of English are very proud of their first language (L1) and study English as a second (L2) language for a mostly instrumental reason; to have better career prospects. This is similar to this research as the participants are also additive multilinguals; they are adding Mandarin Chinese to the languages that they already know.

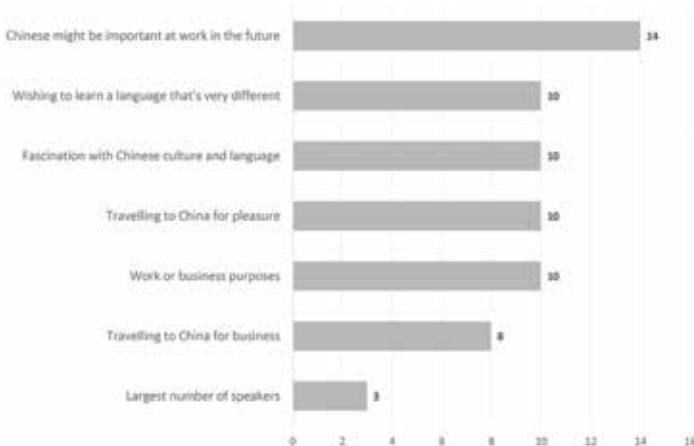
Discussion of Results

The participants were asked why they decided to enrol in a course to learn Mandarin Chinese at this stage in adulthood, when the vast majority of the participants have completed their studies and have a stable job. The participants were given 7 possible reasons to choose from, they could choose more than one option and they were also given the opportunity to list any other reasons if they wished. The first option was 'Mandarin Chinese is the language that has the biggest number of speakers' and only 3/24 (12.5%) ticked this option. The second option was 'I wish to learn Chinese for work or business purposes'. 10/24 (41.6%) of the participants chose this option. The third option was 'I wish to learn Chinese to be able to travel to China for business', 8/24 (33%) of the respondents chose this option. The fourth option was 'Chinese might be important in the future at work'. 14/24 (58%) of the respondents chose

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this option. The fifth option was 'I wish to learn Chinese to be able to travel to China for pleasure'. 11 (45%) of the total 24 respondents chose this option. The sixth option was 'I am fascinated by Chinese language and culture'. 10/24 (41.6%) of the respondents chose this option. The seventh option was 'I wish to learn a language that is very different from the languages that I already know'. 10/24 (41.6%) of the total 24 participants chose this option. The data in this paragraph is shown in the figure 1.

Figure 1: Why are you studying Chinese?



Most of the participants claimed that they were studying Mandarin Chinese because it might be important in the future at work. This suggests that while the teaching of Mandarin Chinese is still in its infancy in Malta, many people are already seeing the benefits of studying Mandarin Chinese for work or business purposes. Travelling to China for pleasure and because they are fascinated by the Chinese culture are also very popular options.

The participants were also asked how they felt after completing the course in Mandarin Chinese language and culture. The questionnaire had six options to choose from and participants could tick more than one option. The first option says 'Mandarin Chinese is too hard for a Western person to master'. 3/24 (12.5%) of the participants chose this option. The second option says 'Mandarin Chinese is too complicated

to understand'. 2/24 (8.3%) of the participants chose this option. The third option says 'Mandarin Chinese is too alien and different from the languages that I have learned before.' 3/24 (12.5%) of the participants chose this option. The fourth option says 'Learning Mandarin Chinese is too stressful'. 1/24 (4%) of the participants chose this option. The fifth option says 'I enjoyed learning Chinese'. 16/24 (66.6%) of the participants chose this option. The sixth option says 'Mandarin Chinese grammar is quite simple, but characters and tones are very difficult to master'. 17/24 (70.83%) of the participants chose this option. The data in this paragraph is shown in the figure 2.

Figure 2: Participants' opinions on completion of the course

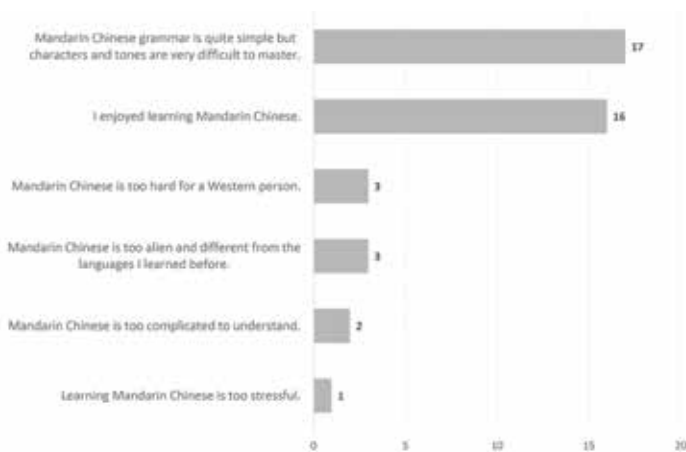


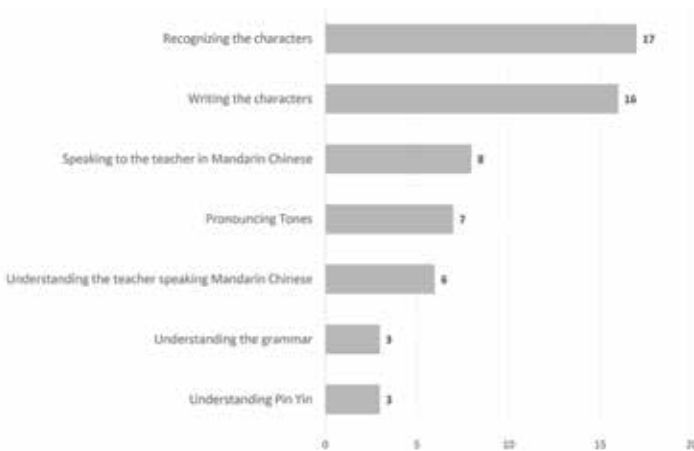
Figure 2 shows that the vast majority of the adult learners agree with the statement 'Chinese grammar is quite simple, but characters and tones are very difficult to master'. This could be because Mandarin Chinese is the first non-alphabetic and tone language that the learners are being exposed to and so they feel that it is very different from the languages that they already have knowledge of.

The questionnaire also asked which language skill was the most difficult to master. The respondents could tick more than one answer. The options were the following; 'understanding PinYin' was ticked by 3/24 respondents (12.5%), 'pronouncing tones' was ticked by 7/24 respondents (29%), 'speaking to

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the teacher in Mandarin Chinese' was ticked by 8/24 (33.3%) respondents, 'understanding the teacher in Mandarin Chinese' was chosen by 6/24 (25%) respondents, 'recognizing the characters' was chosen by 17/24 (70.8%) of the respondents, 'writing the characters' was chosen by 16/24 (66.6%) of the respondents and 'understanding the grammar' was chosen by 3/24 (12.5%) of the respondents. The data in this paragraph is shown in figure 3.

Figure 3: What was the most difficult language skill to master?



In addition to the options presented in figure 3, the adult learners also had the opportunity to write any other skills that they found difficult to master during their course in Mandarin Chinese language. One of the respondents said that understanding rapid natural dialogue was quite hard. Another adult learner said that the concept of the measure word and which measure word to use in which context was quite a hard skill to master. Another two participants mentioned the characters as one of them said that it was hard to understand how to look up characters in a dictionary when one does not know how they are pronounced while another adult learner said that remembering how to write the characters and their respective pronunciation was one of the hardest skills to master while learning Mandarin Chinese. As one could see in the data in Figure 3 and in the additional comments, writing

and recognizing the characters is the most difficult task to master, according to the respondents. The researcher, who also taught the courses that the respondents attended, believes that this is due to the language background of the participants, because like her, they are Maltese nationals and the languages they had previous knowledge of are mostly EU languages which use the Latin alphabet, unlike Mandarin Chinese which uses a system of quite abstract characters in its writing system.

After discussing what the greatest challenges the participants faced while studying Mandarin Chinese language, they were asked whether they would like to continue studying Mandarin Chinese language in the future and why they would choose to do so. 18 out of the 24 participants (75%) said they wish to continue studying Mandarin Chinese language in the future while 4 out of the 24 participants (16.6%) said that they do not want to continue studying Mandarin Chinese language in the future.

Most of the participants who claimed that they wanted to continue studying Mandarin Chinese language in the future said it was because they had found it fascinating and very interesting. Other participants said they wanted to continue studying Mandarin Chinese language because they often visit China for business or work purposes and they also need to communicate with the Chinese people for business or work purposes, so being familiar with the language would be very useful for their respective jobs as many claimed that they wanted to continue studying Mandarin Chinese language in order to be able to keep up simple conversations in Mandarin Chinese and to make their business trips to China easier. Other participants who did not claim to be studying Mandarin Chinese language for work or business purposes, said that they wish to continue studying the language because it's an enjoyable and interesting challenge and that they enjoy it when they manage to keep up a short conversation in Mandarin Chinese, for example in a restaurant or shop. Another one of the respondents said that she might continue studying Mandarin Chinese language.

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Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Studies

In line with the results above, one could conclude that the majority of the adult learners were motivated to enrol in Chinese Mandarin language and culture courses mainly because Chinese is useful at work in the future and because they wish to travel to China for business and pleasure. Most of the participants also claimed that they enjoyed learning Mandarin Chinese. The idea of enjoyment in learning Mandarin Chinese further adds to the motivation of the participants to continue learning Mandarin Chinese. This study also shows that very few participants agree with the statement that Mandarin Chinese is too hard for a Western person to master. This is because the participants in this study were highly motivated to learn Mandarin Chinese, especially for business reasons.

The researcher believes that further studies need to be conducted on the idea that Mandarin Chinese is too difficult for a Western person to learn. This is because very often, when the researcher introduces herself as learner or as teacher of Mandarin Chinese in Malta, many people seem to have an attitude that it is too hard and almost impossible to learn, so further studies need to be conducted to find out about attitudes towards learning Mandarin Chinese. The researcher also feels that further studies need to be carried out to find out about which aspects of Mandarin Chinese multilingual persons learn the fastest and which aspects of the language take the longest to be learned. All in all, if a person is really motivated to learn a particular foreign language, it is possible to achieve fluency if the person is committed to study and practice.

In addition to further studies on teaching pedagogy of Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language in the European context, the researcher also suggests further development in the teaching of Mandarin Chinese in Malta. The researcher suggests that Mandarin Chinese, is to be made available as a foreign language option in all public schools in order to enhance multilingualism in our schools. Such availability would, on the short term, enhance multilingualism in our schools, and in the long term, enhance multilingualism and more international opportunities.

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