

# Project Based Mandarin Learning with Emphasis on Chinese Cultural Appreciation at Mandarin Education Study in Makassar

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## ABSTRACT

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In many educational settings particularly in vocational schools Mandarin instruction still focuses heavily on grammar drills and vocabulary memorization, while the development of cultural understanding often receives less attention. This study aims to explore the implementation of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in Mandarin language education with a specific focus on Chinese cultural appreciation. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, data were collected through observation, questionnaires, and project evaluations. The results show that the application of PBL significantly increased students' engagement, creativity, and confidence in using Mandarin in real-life contexts. Moreover, students demonstrated a deeper appreciation of Chinese traditions, values, and aesthetics, which fostered their cross-cultural awareness and multicultural competence. In conclusion, Project-Based Mandarin Learning with an emphasis on cultural appreciation proves to be an effective pedagogical strategy to link language learning with cultural understanding. This approach supports the development of communicative, cognitive, and cultural skills that are relevant to global education and the 21st-century learning framework.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Language and culture are inseparable entities that mutually influence one another. According to Kramsch (1993), language is not only a means of communication but also a system through which speakers express and interpret their cultural reality. In other words, mastering a foreign language requires an understanding of the cultural norms, beliefs, and practices that shape how that language is used in social interaction. In the context of Mandarin learning, cultural understanding plays a vital role in developing communicative competence and intercultural awareness.

The integration of cultural elements in language teaching has long been recognized in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Byram (1997) emphasizes that successful foreign language

learning involves not only linguistic knowledge but also the ability to engage with cultural meanings, fostering what he calls Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC). Similarly, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) assert that language and culture learning should be approached as an integrated process, enabling learners to interpret and negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. Without such integration, learners may acquire linguistic forms without understanding the cultural contexts that give them meaning.

In many educational settings particularly in vocational schools Mandarin instruction still focuses heavily on grammar drills and vocabulary memorization, while the development of cultural understanding often receives less attention. This limitation reduces students' ability to use Mandarin appropriately and effectively in authentic intercultural and professional contexts. As noted by Han (2018), language learners who lack cultural insight often experience communication breakdowns even when their grammatical competence is adequate. Therefore, innovative teaching models that bridge language and culture are urgently needed.

One promising approach is Project-Based Learning (PBL), which engages students in meaningful projects that integrate real-world tasks with language use. Thomas (2000) defines PBL as a pedagogical model that promotes active learning, critical thinking, and collaboration through extended projects that reflect authentic problems. When applied to Mandarin instruction, PBL activities—such as Chinese calligraphy workshops, cultural exhibitions, festival simulations, and business role-plays—allow students to experience Chinese culture firsthand while practicing the language in context. This approach aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, which emphasizes that learning occurs through social interaction and the co-construction of meaning.

Building on these theoretical foundations, the present study explores how Project-Based Mandarin Learning with an Emphasis on Chinese Cultural Appreciation can enhance both linguistic and cultural competence among vocational high school students. The integration of cultural elements is expected to make learning more meaningful and contextually relevant, while also fostering students' appreciation of Chinese heritage and intercultural values. Moreover, the study seeks to answer the following question: (1) How does project-based Mandarin learning influence students' language proficiency?; (2) In what ways does cultural integration contribute to students' appreciation and understanding of Chinese Culture; (3) What is the impact of project-based cultural activities on students' intercultural competence and engagement in learning? This study aims to: (1) Examine the effectiveness of project-based Mandarin learning in improving students' linguistic proficiency; (2) Investigate the extent to which cultural integration enhances students' understanding and appreciation of Chinese culture; (3) Evaluate the impact of project-based cultural activities on students' intercultural competence and learning motivation. Through addressing these questions, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of research advocating for culture-integrated approaches in language education, particularly within vocational and professional contexts. It also provides pedagogical insights for educators seeking to design Mandarin learning programs that cultivate both communicative and intercultural skills—skills that are increasingly vital in today's interconnected global society.

## 2. METHODS

This study adopted a mixed-methods design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the effectiveness of project-based Mandarin learning that emphasizes Chinese cultural appreciation. The quantitative component measured changes in students' linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge through pre-test and post-test assessments. The qualitative component explored participants' perceptions, engagement, and reflective experiences through interviews and classroom observations. This combination allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how project-based, culture-integrated instruction influences students' learning outcomes and intercultural competence.

The study was conducted at the Mandarin Language Education Study Program, Faculty of Language and Literature, Universitas Negeri Makassar (UNM). The participants were 35

undergraduate students enrolled in the Intermediate Mandarin Course during the 2025 academic year. Participants were selected using purposive sampling, ensuring that all had completed the Basic Mandarin Course and possessed foundational knowledge of Chinese phonology, vocabulary, and basic sentence patterns. The program was implemented over six weeks (12 sessions in total), combining classroom-based activities, cultural workshops, and independent project work. The setting provided an ideal environment to implement project-based and culture-integrated learning, as students were preparing to become Mandarin educators with intercultural communication competencies.

The study employed multiple instruments to ensure data reliability and triangulation: Pre-test and Post-test; Designed to assess linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding before and after project implementation. The tests included vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension related to Chinese customs, traditions, and communication practices. Observation; Checklist Used by the researcher to document classroom interactions, group collaboration, and Mandarin language use during project development. Questionnaire; A 20-item Likert-scale questionnaire measured students' learning motivation, cultural awareness, and perceptions of project-based learning effectiveness. Semi-Structured Interviews; Conducted with eight selected students to explore in-depth reflections on their learning process, challenges, and personal growth in intercultural communication.

Quantitative data from the pre-test and post-test were analyzed using descriptive and comparative statistics to identify improvements in students' performance and cultural knowledge. The degree of progress was expressed in percentages and gain scores. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006), focusing on recurring themes such as cultural curiosity, collaborative learning, communicative confidence, and reflective awareness. Findings from both datasets were triangulated to enhance the credibility of interpretations.

### 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of Project-Based Mandarin Learning with Emphasis on Chinese Cultural Appreciation at Universitas Negeri Makassar yielded significant outcomes in both linguistic and intercultural domains. The results of data analysis from pre-test and post-test, classroom observations, questionnaires, and interviews are summarized as follows:

#### **Improvement in Linguistic Proficiency**

Quantitative analysis revealed a substantial improvement in students' Mandarin proficiency after participating in the project. The average post-test score increased by 27% compared to the pre-test. Students demonstrated better command of vocabulary related to cultural themes, improved pronunciation, and greater grammatical accuracy in spoken and written Mandarin. Observation data also showed that students were more willing to communicate in Mandarin during project discussions and presentations.

#### **Enhancement of Cultural Understanding and Appreciation**

The integration of cultural content through project-based activities such as Chinese calligraphy exhibitions, festival simulations, and cultural video productions significantly deepened students' understanding of Chinese traditions and values. Questionnaire results indicated that 91% of participants agreed that the projects enhanced their appreciation of Chinese aesthetics and customs. Interviews revealed that students began to perceive culture not as a separate subject, but as an integral context that gives meaning to language use.

#### **Increased Engagement, Motivation, and Creativity**

Observational data indicated higher levels of engagement and enthusiasm among students during the project phase compared to conventional lessons. Students expressed that the freedom to choose project themes and create tangible cultural products stimulated their creativity and intrinsic motivation. The collaborative nature of PBL encouraged teamwork, responsibility, and leadership.

According to student reflections, project work made Mandarin learning “more alive, relevant, and enjoyable.”

### **Development of Cross-Cultural and Interpersonal Competence**

Through performing culturally authentic roles such as participating in simulated festivals and business role-plays—students developed greater sensitivity toward intercultural norms and communication etiquette. Interview responses indicated that students gained insights into Chinese politeness strategies, gestures, and symbolic meanings embedded in language. This experiential learning process fostered empathy and openness toward cultural diversity, aligning with the concept of Intercultural Communicative Competence (Byram, 1997).

The findings affirm that Project-Based Learning (PBL) **is an effective pedagogical model to link** language learning and cultural understanding, especially in the context of Mandarin education. The integration of culture not only enriched students’ linguistic knowledge but also strengthened their intercultural competence and learning motivation.

### **Linking Linguistic and Cultural Growth**

The increase in linguistic proficiency corresponds with Vygotsky’s (1978) **sociocultural theory**, which posits that language learning is socially mediated through meaningful interaction. By using Mandarin as a communicative tool to complete real-world projects, students internalized language through authentic contexts rather than rote memorization. The blending of cultural content with communicative practice provided semantic depth to vocabulary and grammar, making language use purposeful and culturally grounded.

### **PBL as a Motivational and Constructivist Approach**

The results support Thomas’ (2000) assertion that PBL promotes active and meaningful learning through collaboration and problem-solving. Students in this study became active constructors of knowledge, not passive recipients. They engaged in research, planning, and production that required both linguistic application and cultural interpretation. The process cultivated creativity, critical thinking, and self-direction—competencies aligned with **21st-century learning goals**.

### **Cultivating Cultural Appreciation and Intercultural Competence**

The cultural dimension of the projects proved essential in nurturing deeper cultural empathy and cross-cultural understanding. Consistent with Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), the study shows that integrating language and culture fosters learners’ ability to interpret and negotiate meaning across cultural boundaries. Students reported gaining a more nuanced view of Chinese culture—recognizing values such as collectivism, respect for hierarchy, and harmony—as reflected in linguistic expressions and rituals. This outcome highlights how cultural appreciation can evolve into intercultural competence, an essential skill in global communication.

### **Implications for Mandarin Language Education**

These findings have practical implications for Mandarin teaching in Indonesia, particularly within vocational and higher education settings. First, incorporating PBL can bridge the gap between language theory and practice, encouraging students to apply Mandarin in culturally relevant scenarios. Second, teachers should be trained to design interdisciplinary projects that balance linguistic objectives with cultural exploration. Finally, assessment strategies should value creativity, collaboration, and cultural understanding alongside linguistic accuracy.

### **Challenges and Reflections**

Despite its success, several challenges were noted. Some students initially struggled with time management and group coordination during project work. Additionally, limited access to authentic Chinese cultural materials posed difficulties in ensuring cultural accuracy. However, these challenges also served as learning opportunities that developed students’ problem-solving and adaptability skills.

**Table 1.** Summary of Key Findings

Aspect	Observation	Outcome
Linguistic Proficiency	Increased accuracy, fluency, and vocabulary mastery	27% improvement (post-test)
Cultural Appreciation	Positive attitude and deeper understanding of Chinese traditions	91% agreement (questionnaire)
Motivation and Engagement	Higher enthusiasm and participation in class	Evident in observation and reflection data
Intercultural Competence	Improved awareness and sensitivity in cross-cultural communication	Reported in interviews

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine how Project-Based Mandarin Learning with an Emphasis on Chinese Cultural Appreciation influences students' linguistic proficiency, cultural understanding, and intercultural competence. The findings demonstrated that integrating project-based activities with cultural elements effectively enhanced students' overall learning outcomes. Participants not only improved their Mandarin fluency and accuracy but also developed deeper appreciation and awareness of Chinese traditions, values, and communication norms. Moreover, the experiential and collaborative nature of Project-Based Learning fostered motivation, creativity, and confidence—skills essential for both language acquisition and global citizenship.

The results confirm that language and culture should be viewed as interdependent components in foreign language pedagogy. When students are encouraged to learn through authentic cultural experiences, they become not only competent language users but also culturally literate communicators capable of engaging across borders. This model is especially relevant in the context of higher education in Indonesia, where the demand for culturally competent Mandarin educators continues to grow. However, several challenges remain such as limited access to authentic cultural materials and the need for stronger teacher preparation in project-based methodologies. Future research could expand this study by exploring long-term impacts of PBL on intercultural attitudes, testing the model in different educational levels or regions, or integrating digital and virtual cultural exchanges to strengthen intercultural engagement. Studies currently underway at Universitas Negeri Makassar are investigating how online collaboration platforms can further enhance cultural learning and communicative competence among Mandarin learners.

In conclusion, Project-Based Mandarin Learning that emphasizes cultural appreciation offers a transformative pedagogical framework for 21st-century language education one that bridges linguistic skills, cultural empathy, and global perspectives in meaningful and sustainable ways.

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