Analysis of Motivation and Learning Difficulties in Mandarin Among Non-Chinese Indonesian Students at the University in Makassar

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The increasing global influence of China and its economic rise have made Mandarin Chinese a valuable skill for international communication and job opportunities, especially in countries like Indonesia that maintain close economic ties with China. The research aims to understand the dominant types of motivation and to identify common obstacles students encounter in acquiring the language. A mixed-method approach was used, combining quantitative descriptive methods through questionnaires distributed to 69 first- and second-year students, and qualitative methods through interviews with 10 students. The findings reveal that most students are instrumentally motivated, driven by the desire for better employment prospects and educational advancement, rather than integrative factors such as cultural interest or native-like fluency. Major learning difficulties include pronunciation (particularly tones and retroflex consonants), grammar, and the memorization and writing of Chinese characters (hanzi), largely due to interference from the Indonesian language and limited exposure to Mandarin in their environment. Despite these challenges, students exhibit a generally positive learning attitude, especially in classroom participation. This study concludes that greater support in pronunciation, grammar instruction, and character acquisition is necessary, and suggests that future research explore broader contexts and more advanced student groups.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of China as a global economic powerhouse has had far-reaching implications across various sectors worldwide, including education and language acquisition. With China's increasing economic clout, many countries have begun to strengthen bilateral relations to take advantage of the resulting economic opportunities (Al-Ababneh, 2022). Indonesia, due to its strategic location in Southeast Asia and long-standing diplomatic ties with China, is one such nation that has experienced

significant influence. As China's official language, Mandarin has gained prominence and is now widely recognized as a crucial asset in international business, diplomacy, and trade. In response to this shift, there has been a growing interest in learning Mandarin among university students in Indonesia, not only among those of Chinese descent but also increasingly among native Indonesians without any Chinese heritage (Gao, Jia, & Zhou, 2015).

This linguistic trend is particularly evident at Universitas Negeri Makassar (UNM), where the Mandarin Language Education Study Program has steadily increased enrollment. Interestingly, a significant proportion of these students are non-Chinese Indonesians who have chosen to pursue Mandarin language studies as their academic focus. Their motivation stems from several factors, including the promise of improved career prospects, the language's global relevance, and personal interest in Chinese culture and linguistics (Saha, 2023). Unlike heritage learners, these students approach Mandarin as a completely foreign language, presenting both opportunities and challenges unique to their background and learning context. Understanding the nature of their motivation and the specific obstacles they face in acquiring Mandarin is critical in shaping effective teaching strategies and curricula (Legaki, Xi, Hamari, Karpouzis, & Assimakopoulos, 2020).

Despite their enthusiasm and high motivation, non-Chinese Indonesian students at UNM encounter several learning difficulties that differ markedly from those faced by their peers of Chinese descent. These challenges include unfamiliarity with Chinese characters, the tonal nature of Mandarin, and significant differences in phonological systems compared to Bahasa Indonesia or local regional languages (Albantani & Madkur, 2018). Furthermore, environmental factors such as limited exposure to native Mandarin speakers and cultural disconnection from Chinese traditions further complicate their learning journey. The limited support outside the classroom often results in slower language acquisition and a potential decline in motivation over time (Akinwamide & Oguntade, 2023). These challenges are important to explore to improve these students' academic experience and inform language policy and instructional design.

One of the unique aspects of this research lies in its specific focus on non-Chinese Indonesian university students studying Mandarin in Makassar, a region with a smaller Mandarin-speaking population compared to cities like Jakarta or Medan. Most prior research on Mandarin language acquisition in Indonesia has concentrated on students of Chinese descent or educational institutions located in major urban centers with more significant Chinese-Indonesian populations (Tao & Xu, 2022). These studies have generally overlooked the unique sociocultural and linguistic dynamics experienced by non-Chinese learners in less cosmopolitan environments. This creates a critical gap in the literature, where little is known about how these learners develop motivation, sustain it, and overcome linguistic and cultural barriers in settings where Mandarin is not commonly used in daily interactions (Pratama, Muchtar, & Darmana, 2021).

Moreover, earlier studies, such as those by Fu Roumei et al., have examined general motivational factors influencing Mandarin learners in Jakarta but have not delved deeply into how those motivations interact with specific learning challenges across different regions. There is limited empirical data on the Makassar context, especially within the framework of higher education, where students are preparing for future careers requiring advanced Mandarin proficiency (Rahmatullah, Mulyasa, Syahrani, Pongpalilu, & Putri, 2022). This research, therefore, seeks to fill that gap by offering a detailed exploration of the motivational factors and learning difficulties experienced by non-Chinese Indonesian students at Universitas Negeri Makassar. It will also consider how institutional support, classroom practices, and peer interactions influence their learning outcomes and perceptions of success (Sahabuddin, Liskawati, & Syamsiah, 2023).

The primary aim of this study is to analyze both the driving motivations and the learning obstacles faced by non-Chinese Indonesian students who are pursuing Mandarin language studies at the university level. Educators and policymakers can devise more effective pedagogical approaches by understanding what inspires these students to choose Mandarin as their academic focus and what hinders their progress. This includes curriculum adaptation, incorporating culturally relevant

materials, and creating support systems sensitive to the learners' backgrounds. Additionally, this study seeks to uncover whether current teaching methodologies align with the students' learning preferences and whether the institutional environment supports language immersion and practice beyond the classroom.

In the long term, this research is expected to contribute to the broader discourse on second language acquisition in multicultural and multilingual societies. It may also serve as a model for similar studies in other parts of Indonesia or Southeast Asia, where non-native speakers are increasingly taking up Mandarin studies. By highlighting the voices and experiences of non-Chinese learners in a lesser-studied region like Makassar, this study aims to provide nuanced insights that could inform both academic research and practical strategies in language education. Ultimately, it is hoped that this research will help create a more inclusive, effective, and context-sensitive Mandarin language education system that supports all learners, regardless of their ethnic or linguistic background.

2.   METHODS

This study adopts a quantitative descriptive research design to analyze the motivations and learning difficulties experienced by non-Chinese Indonesian students enrolled in the Mandarin Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Makassar. The research was conducted during the odd semester of the 2024–2025 academic year, specifically from September to November 2024. The research subjects consisted of first- and second-year students in the program, with a total population of 92 students. From this group, 69 students were identified as being of non-Chinese descent—34 from the first year and 35 from the second year. These students were selected as the primary data source for this study, as the research aimed to focus exclusively on their experiences, excluding students of Chinese heritage who may have different cultural and linguistic advantages in learning Mandarin.

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire distributed to all 69 non-Chinese descent students. The questionnaire was designed to measure various dimensions of student motivation, including instrumental and integrative motives, as well as to identify specific learning difficulties such as pronunciation challenges, grammar comprehension, and vocabulary retention. The questionnaire items used Likert scale responses to enable quantifiable analysis. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire was validated through a pilot test involving a small group of students not included in the main research population. In addition to survey data, interviews were conducted with 10 students from the same non-Chinese descent group to contextual and reinforce the quantitative findings, although these were used strictly for cross-verification and were not analyzed as part of a mixed-method design.

The data collected were then processed using descriptive statistical techniques to summarize and interpret the responses. Frequency and percentage distributions were calculated to identify dominant patterns in both motivation and challenges. The data analysis was conducted using Microsoft Excel and SPSS software to ensure accuracy and reliability. The findings were interpreted to conclude the dominant motivational factors influencing the students' decision to study Mandarin and the most common barriers they encounter during the learning process. Through this approach, the study aimed to offer empirical evidence that could inform future instructional improvements and policy interventions in Mandarin language education for non-Chinese learners in similar academic contexts.

3.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3. 1. Learning Motivation

According to the theory of Robert Gardner and Wallace Lambert, there are two types of motivation in language learning: integrative motivation and instrumental motivation. Integrative motivation means that an individual has a strong personal interest in learning a foreign language and hopes to integrate into the culture of the language being learned, enabling them to become like and interact with native speakers of the target language. In contrast, instrumental motivation refers to individuals who learn a foreign or second language for academic purposes, employment, or to support other future needs. The results obtained from the research have to be supported by sufficient data. The research

results and the discovery must be the answers or the research hypothesis stated previously in the introduction part.

Table 1. Motivation for Learning Mandarin

Motivation for Learning Mandarin	Number of Students	%
A desire to attain native-like proficiency in Mandarin Chinese	8	11%
A desire to learn about Chinese culture	9	13%
Easier to obtain employment	37	53%
Wishing to pursue further studies in China	15	23%

A total of 53% of students chose to study Mandarin because it is perceived as offering better employment opportunities in the future. Furthermore, 23% of students indicated their motivation was the desire to pursue further studies in China. Based on these findings, it can be inferred that non-Chinese-ancestry students possess a strong instrumental motivation. In contrast, integrative motivation appears to be less dominant, with only 11% of students expressing a desire to master Mandarin like native speakers, and 13% stating an interest in learning about Chinese culture as their main motivation.

3. 2. *Learning Difficulties*

The influence of the mother tongue in learning a foreign language can pose a challenge for foreign language learners, including Indonesian students. There is no distinction between aspirated and unaspirated consonants in the Indonesian language. However, Mandarin Chinese distinguishes between these two types of pronunciation. Additionally, Mandarin is a tonal language with four tones: first tone (—), second tone (/), third tone (v), and fourth tone (), whereas the Indonesian language does not have tonal variations.

First-year non-Chinese descent students in the Mandarin Language Education program perceive pronunciation and tones as challenging learning components. In Mandarin pronunciation, difficulties are often encountered with retroflex consonants such as 'zh,' 'ch,' and 'sh,' which are frequently pronounced as 'z,' 'c,' and 's.' This occurs because students often fail to curl the tip of the tongue toward the palate when articulating retroflex consonants. The primary reason for this is that the Indonesian language does not contain the retroflex consonants 'zh,' 'ch,' and 'sh,' leading most students to substitute them with the more familiar 'z,' 'c,' and 's' sounds. Furthermore, students often show insufficient aspiration when pronouncing consonants such as 'c,' 'p,' 'k,' 't,' 'q,' and 'ch,' due to the absence of aspirated and unaspirated consonant distinctions in Indonesian.

Mandarin, which utilizes four tones and one neutral tone, presents a common difficulty for students, particularly with the second and third tones. Students often report that while they can pronounce tones correctly at the word level, they tend to make frequent tonal errors when those words are used in phrases or sentences. Instructors frequently observe this issue, especially during reading and speaking activities.

Indonesian uses the 26 letters, similar to English, with words formed through combinations of these letters. In contrast, Mandarin characters are composed of various strokes: horizontal (横), vertical (竖), left-falling (撇), right-falling (捺), and hooks (勾), which combine to form numerous Chinese characters (hanzi). The large number of hanzi in Mandarin poses a challenge for students in terms of memorization and writing. Most students are able to read a character, but it is often found that they do not know how to write it.

For second-year students, Chinese characters or Hanzi are considered the most difficult aspect. Second-year students take major-specific courses that involve more complex vocabulary than those in the first year, such as Introduction to Business and Industry Chinese, Introduction to Translation and Interpreting, Introduction to Export and Import, and others. Students encounter an increasing number of complex hanzi, which require them to be able to recognize and read characters related to the business world.

An equally important aspect of a language is grammar, which refers to word and sentence usage rules. Grammar in Mandarin is compulsory, just as grammar is studied when learning Indonesian. Mistakes in sentence structure are frequently found among second-year students. When constructing sentences in Mandarin, they often first think of the sentence in Indonesian and then translate it into Mandarin, which results in incorrect word order or inappropriate word choices. The influence of the mother tongue in learning Mandarin causes difficulties frequently experienced by students, such as pronunciation of consonants and tones, as well as the complexity of hanzi and grammar, which pose challenges for non-Chinese-descent students in the Mandarin Language Education Study Program (Ainis Rohtih, Saifuddin Hamzah, & Sakdiyah, 2023).

The surrounding environment, including the learning environment, greatly influences students' learning outcomes in Mandarin. Non-Chinese-descent students who use Indonesian or local languages as their primary daily language often lack confidence when speaking Mandarin. Most students feel embarrassed if they mispronounce words or use the wrong tones, which hinders their progress in developing speaking competence in Mandarin.

3. 3. *Learning Attitude*

A good learning attitude can foster students' interest in learning, while a stable psychological state and support from family can help cultivate an effective learning attitude. The table below shows the questions asked of students regarding their learning experience.

Table 2. Learning Attitudes of Non-Chinese Descent Students

No	Question	Often		Sometimes		Never	
1	Preparing tools and creating a study plan before the semester begins	3	4%	10	14%	56	82
2	Active in class	32	46%	24	35%	13	19
3	Listen carefully to the lecturer's explanation	60	87%	9	13%	0	
4	Summarize the lessons that have been learned	17	25%	42	61%	10	14
5	Preview and review the lessons	26	38%	31	45%	12	17

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and of the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted. The discussion should cover the following components: How do your results relate to the original question or objectives outlined in the Introduction section (what/how)? Do you provide scientific interpretation for each of your results or findings presented (why)? Are your results consistent with what other investigators have reported (what else)? Or are there any differences?

Another challenge is the complexity of Chinese characters, or hanzi. While first-year students initially struggle with pronunciation and phonetic elements, second-year students more commonly identify character recognition and writing as major obstacles. As students progress into more advanced content areas, including translation, business, and technical Mandarin, they are exposed to an increasingly large and complex set of hanzi, many of which require a strong visual memory and consistent practice to master. While most students can recognize characters when reading, many cannot reproduce them in writing, indicating a disconnect between passive recognition and active recall. This gap reveals the need for more effective strategies in teaching Chinese literacy, particularly in helping learners move from recognition to production.

Grammar-related challenges were also reported, particularly among second-year students. Students frequently constructed sentences by translating directly from Indonesian, resulting in syntactical errors and improper word ordering. This suggests that many learners continue to rely heavily on their native language as a scaffold, which can hinder the development of natural syntactic

intuition in Mandarin. These findings align with second language acquisition theories that highlight negative language transfer as a common obstacle in early and intermediate stages of learning.

The learning environment also plays a critical role in either supporting or hindering language acquisition. Non-Chinese descent students reported a lack of confidence in speaking Mandarin, often stemming from fear of mispronunciation or using incorrect tones. This anxiety appears to be amplified by the absence of a Mandarin-speaking community in their immediate surroundings. The limited opportunities for real-life practice and immersion contribute to slower progress in speaking skills, reinforcing a cycle in which low confidence discourages active use of the language. This highlights the need for more communicative and immersive learning approaches, such as language partners, conversation clubs, or virtual exchanges with native speakers (Zaim, Refnaldi, & Arsyad, 2020).

Regarding learning attitudes, most students demonstrated a positive behavioral disposition toward learning Mandarin. A large percentage reported listening attentively in class and engaging actively with lesson content. However, fewer students reported consistent habits such as planning their study schedules, summarizing lessons, or reviewing material outside of class. This suggests that independent learning strategies are underdeveloped while classroom engagement is relatively strong. The findings imply a need for instructors to not only focus on content delivery but also explicitly teach and encourage autonomous learning skills to support long-term language acquisition.

The study confirms that non-Chinese descent students in the Mandarin Language Education Program are primarily driven by instrumental motivation, aiming for academic and professional advancement. However, they face a range of linguistic and psychological challenges rooted in phonological differences, character complexity, grammar transfer, and environmental limitations. These challenges call for targeted pedagogical strategies that incorporate phonetic training, writing practice, grammar reinforcement, and immersive learning opportunities (Ali, Palpanadan, Asad, Churi, & Namaziandost, 2022). Future research may explore the effectiveness of these interventions and how digital tools or intercultural exchanges can enhance motivation and mitigate the challenges experienced by learners in similar contexts.

The findings of this research align with and reinforce several previous studies that emphasize the prominence of instrumental motivation in language learning, particularly among learners in non-native environments. As shown in this study, the majority of non-Chinese descent students at Universitas Negeri Makassar chose to study Mandarin primarily for employment opportunities and academic advancement (Ardiansyah, Nur, Febrianti, & Fitriana, 2022). This pattern of motivation is consistent with the framework proposed by Gardner and Lambert, who classified instrumental motivation as a key driver among learners seeking tangible rewards such as career progression or educational mobility (Indah Sari, Anni Holila Pulungan, & Rahmad Husein, 2020). In this study, 53% of students cited better employment prospects and 23% aimed to pursue further studies in China, illustrating a strong correlation between Mandarin acquisition and perceived socioeconomic benefits.

These findings are also echoed in Fu Roumei's earlier study on non-Chinese Indonesian learners in Jakarta, which found that the majority of students were driven by practical considerations, such as Mandarin's role in global business and its rising influence due to China's economic development. The consistency across both studies indicates that instrumental motivation dominates among Indonesian learners regardless of regional differences, likely influenced by the increasing importance of Mandarin in ASEAN economies and Indonesia's growing engagement with China (Judijanto, Asfahani, Prusty, Krisnawati, & Bakri, 2022).

However, integrative motivation learning with the intent of connecting with Chinese culture or native speakers was significantly lower in both studies. In the current research, only 24% of students reported motivation related to cultural interests or native-like fluency. This relatively weak integrative motivation may be attributed to the limited opportunities for real-life interaction with native Chinese speakers in Makassar (Eyob Kenta, 2019). According to Gardner's Socio-Educational Model, integrative motivation is often more pronounced when learners are in environments with high exposure to the

target language community. In contrast, integrative motivation tends to be secondary in contexts such as Indonesia, where Chinese cultural immersion is limited, especially for non-Chinese descent students.

In terms of learning difficulties, the research findings strongly align with second language acquisition theories that identify first language (L1) interference as a major barrier in foreign language learning. Chen (2018) identified that language learners often face difficulties when the target language contains phonological, grammatical, or orthographic features not found in their native language. The Indonesian language does not include aspirated sounds or tonal distinctions, which are essential in Mandarin. As such, students frequently struggle with tones and retroflex consonants, a challenge also highlighted in studies by Obloberdiyevna D S (2022), who found that tonal errors were among the most persistent pronunciation difficulties for Southeast Asian learners of Mandarin. The substitution of Mandarin retroflexes like "zh," "ch," and "sh" with "z," "c," and "s" in students' speech further supports the presence of negative phonological transfer from Bahasa Indonesia.

The challenge of learning Chinese characters (hanzi) also reflects findings from previous literature. Unlike alphabet-based writing systems like that of Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin's logographic script demands visual memorization, character stroke order, and repetitive writing. Research by Karami (2019) indicates that students whose native languages do not use logographic scripts often find Hanzi one of the most cognitively demanding aspects of learning Mandarin. This is affirmed in the present study, where second-year students, who are expected to master more specialized and complex vocabulary, reported the greatest difficulty with character writing and recognition. These issues underline the need for pedagogical approaches specifically addressing orthographic learning, such as spaced repetition, radical analysis, and visual learning strategies (O'Connor, Ludgate, Le, Le, & Huynh, 2023).

Additionally, grammatical errors commonly stemmed from students translating directly from Bahasa Indonesia into Mandarin, often resulting in inaccurate sentence structures. This is consistent with the Interlanguage Theory proposed by Yusuf, Jusoh, & Yusuf (2019), which posits that language learners construct a mental linguistic system that combines elements of both the target language and the native language. Such errors are natural during the intermediate stages of language acquisition but require targeted intervention. The tendency to rely on L1 syntax while constructing L2 sentences suggests that grammar instruction must be more contextualized and contrastive, helping learners internalize Mandarin sentence patterns rather than depend on translation-based strategies.

The influence of learning environment and affective factors also plays a critical role, as evidenced in this research. Students reported low confidence in speaking Mandarin, driven by fear of making tonal or pronunciation mistakes. Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982) is particularly relevant here (Ramlah, Riana, & Abadi, 2022). It suggests that learners with high anxiety and low self-confidence are less likely to absorb language input effectively. Since the learning context at Universitas Negeri Makassar lacks immersive experiences and peer interaction in Mandarin, the absence of a Mandarin-speaking community raises the affective filter, limiting opportunities for spontaneous communication practice (Munandar & Newton, 2021).

Despite these challenges, the findings suggest that many students maintain a positive learning attitude, particularly in classroom engagement. The majority are attentive and actively participate in learning activities, which aligns with (Ibna, 2018) theory of motivational self-regulation. Although independent learning behaviors such as previewing, reviewing, or summarizing lessons remain underdeveloped, classroom motivation remains relatively strong. This mixed result calls for instructional support that fosters participation and promotes autonomy in language learning, an essential element in sustaining long-term motivation and progress. The analysis underscores the importance of culturally responsive teaching strategies, the incorporation of communicative practice, and the development of learner autonomy to address the multidimensional needs of Mandarin learners in non-native settings.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the motivations and learning difficulties experienced by non-Chinese descent students in the Mandarin Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Makassar. The findings affirm the researcher's concern regarding the dominance of instrumental motivation, primarily driven by the desire for better job opportunities and further education, as opposed to integrative motivation, which remains limited. Furthermore, this study reveals significant learning challenges faced by students, particularly in mastering Mandarin pronunciation, tones, grammar, and Hanzi. These difficulties are largely influenced by differences between Mandarin and the Indonesian language and a lack of immersive language environments. Despite these challenges, students generally maintain a positive learning attitude, especially within classroom contexts, though self-directed learning habits require further cultivation.

However, this study is not without limitations. The research was conducted at a single university and limited to first- and second-year students, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study primarily relied on self-reported data through questionnaires and interviews, which may be subject to bias. Future research should consider expanding the participant pool to include more diverse regions and academic levels, and could also incorporate longitudinal studies to assess changes in motivation and learning outcomes over time. Investigating the role of instructional methods, peer interaction, and the integration of digital tools in Mandarin learning could also offer valuable insights for improving teaching strategies and learner engagement.

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