

Improving Students' Vocabulary Mastery Using Mandarin Songs: A Study at Universiti Teknologi MARA, Kelantan Branch (UiTMCK)

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Abstract:- Learning a new language is not easy. One of the biggest challenges that language learners face in learning a new language is memorizing a massive amount of vocabulary to enable them to speak and interact in the language. This problem is also faced by the majority of Universiti Teknologi Mara, Kelantan Branch (UiTMCK) students taking Mandarin Language as an elective subject. Based on previous studies, the use of songs in improving Mandarin vocabulary mastery has shown positive effects on students. Therefore, quantitative research was carried out to analyze the effects of using songs to enhance Mandarin vocabulary mastery among UiTMCK students. The sample of this study was 60 students of the Basic Mandarin Language Level 1 class. The data were collected through questionnaires, in-class observations, and interviews with students and analyzed using descriptive analysis (frequency and percentage). The findings showed that using songs in teaching and learning Mandarin vocabulary is more effective than conventional teaching methods. In addition, the students are also more active and motivated during teaching and learning sessions in the classroom.

Keywords:- Mandarin Language; Song Usage; Acquisition; Vocabulary Mastery; Teaching Method.

I. INTRODUCTION

Mandarin is one of the four most difficult languages to learn in the world, besides Arabic, Japanese, and Korean. Along with China's economic development today, the need to master the Mandarin language in the Malaysian community has increased, especially for students in public and private higher learning institutions (Razali, 2018). However, the Mandarin language is difficult to learn. This is due to its writing system called 汉字 *hanzi*. This system, which uses Chinese characters in the form of logograms is complicated and complex. Due to these challenges, students in the early stages of the Basic Chinese course learn the Chinese writing system using the Hanyu Pinyin system (汉语拼音); in which the Chinese writing or characters are translated into Roman letters or known

as Chinese phonetic lettering scheme. This writing system contains three components, which are the initial phoneme, final phoneme, and tone. Generally, there are 21 initial phonemes, 38 final phonemes, and 4 types of tones in the Hanyu Pinyin system (Teh, 2015). This system eases the students to read Chinese writing or characters, therefore, reducing the main constraints in learning Mandarin.

The initial phoneme is a consonant found at the beginning of a syllable consisting of b, p, m, f, d, t, n, l, g, k, h, j, q, d, x, zh, ch, sh, r, z, c, s, y and w. The final vowel, on the other hand, is always at the end of a syllable. It can be formed in the form of a simple vowel, compound vowel or a vowel followed by a nasal consonant. In the Mandarin language, there are 38 final phonemes in total, and they are: er, -i, i, u, ü, a, ia, ua, o, uo, e, ê, ie, üe, ai, uai, ei, uei, ao, iao, ou, iou, an, ian, uan, üan, en, in, uen, ün, ang, iang, money, eng, ing, ueng, ong and iong. The combination of initial and final phonemes leads to the formation of syllables in Mandarin. Examples of syllables in the initial and final phonemes are 吃饭 *chīfàn* (eat), 可爱 *kě'ài* (cute), 老师 *lǎoshī* (teacher), and 什么 *shénme* (what).

The students face some problems in pronouncing some syllables in the Mandarin language. This situation often happens to beginner students attending their first Mandarin language course. They usually have trouble pronouncing some early phoneme sounds in the Mandarin phonetic system. This situation occurs due to the differences in the Malay language and Mandarin pronunciation and students are more likely to pronounce a syllable according to their native language, which is the Malay language. For example, in the Mandarin language, the consonant Q is pronounced as 'chi' and not 'ki'. As in the word 'thousand', in Mandarin is 千 *qiān*, and the pronunciation is 'chien'. As for the consonant B, it sounds like the letter P. For example, the spelling of the word 'no' in the Mandarin language is 不 *bù*, while the pronunciation is 'pu'. This situation makes the process of learning the Mandarin language challenging for the students.

Besides the main problem of writing and pronunciation, another problem faced by the students is the difficulty in memorizing Mandarin vocabulary. There are over 400 basic syllables in Mandarin (Ho et al., 2020), which make up a large number of its vocabulary. Limited vocabulary mastery prevents students from speaking well in Mandarin. Therefore, students need to memorize a massive amount of vocabulary to enable them to understand and communicate in Mandarin.

In addition, another factor that contributes to the lack of Mandarin vocabulary among UiTMCK students is the short meeting hours of the Mandarin Language course in which the students, especially degree students, only have two hours of Mandarin session a week. Furthermore, with the implementation of Open-Distance Learning (ODL), students are not able to fully focus on this language class. They also cannot practice what they have learned in Mandarin class with classmates directly and consistently. Apart from that, compared to the core courses taken, these students are also found to be less motivated in the Mandarin language course because it is an elective course. Lau (2012) asserted most students only take third language courses to meet the credit hour requirements at the university and to achieve good results in the examination. Therefore, they are less interested and lack the motivation to learn the Mandarin language. Due to all the factors mentioned, this study is carried out to understand the students' views on learning Mandarin vocabulary. This study also focuses on analyzing the effects of using songs to enhance students' Mandarin vocabulary.

The objectives of this study are:

- to gather students' perceptions of the use of Mandarin songs to acquire Mandarin vocabulary.
- to analyze the effects of using songs to enhance Mandarin vocabulary mastery among students.

The research questions of this study are as below:

- What are the students' perceptions of the use of Mandarin songs in learning new Mandarin vocabulary?
- What are the effects of using songs on students' Mandarin vocabulary mastery?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

First, confirm that you have the correct template for your paper size. This template has been tailored for output on the A4 paper size. If you are using US letter-sized paper, please close this file and download the f Previous studies have shown that the main cause of low language proficiency is a lack of vocabulary. A study conducted by Abdullah and Hussin (2018) on students learning the Japanese language found that a lack of vocabulary impedes the students' ability to use the Japanese language fluently in both oral and written form. Based on their findings, they came to the conclusion that one of the most successful strategies for Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) students to increase their vocabulary of the Japanese language is through the use of songs. This result is consistent with research by Farrug (2008) and Mori (2011, as cited in Abdullah & Hussin, 2018), which found that the use of songs is very effective and aids students in acquiring foreign language vocabulary. This is due to the fact that when students listen to

a song, they are actually exposed to the native speakers' correct pronunciation. Later, when they sing the song, they are able to pronounce the words more naturally and accurately and for that reason, this strategy is preferred by the majority of instructors who are committed to helping their students learn a foreign language.

Songs have been proven to be an effective tool in learning a foreign language. Kocaman (2016) found in his study titled 'The Effects of Songs on Foreign Language Vocabulary Acquisition' that learning vocabulary through songs is a successful method. He added that songs help students in various ways, such as learning pronunciation, spelling, meaning, and usage to varying degrees since they spark their attention and curiosity. He concluded that exposure to songs piques curiosity which motivates students to learn the new vocabulary of the target language. Additionally, using songs to teach students to learn foreign languages makes the experience more fun and memorable. According to Alipour (2012), incorporating songs in the classroom leads to a much more uplifting learning environment which rarely exists in a traditional classroom setting. Songs foster a stress-free environment, lessen students' nervousness, and boost their confidence as they are actively involved in their learning process. When students have fun and excitement, it lowers the affective filter, which promotes language acquisition (Krashen, 1981). Therefore, it is undeniable that songs have a positive influence on vocabulary acquisition and retention. As Thornbury (2002) explains, with the help of songs, students acquire new vocabulary more easily and are able to recall it in a short time.

However, despite the advantages of using songs in language teaching and learning, based on the researchers' surveys and observations, there have not been many studies on the use of songs in teaching Mandarin vocabulary, either locally or abroad. Abdullah and Hussin (2018) provide support for this in their research. They found that numerous studies have used this approach to teach English (Brett et al., 1996), Spanish (Pressley, et al., 1980), French (Abrate, 1983) and Italian (Nuessel & Cicogna, 1991). Mandarin, on the other hand, is left out in the cold. Most of the studies focus on Mandarin language syllables and other methods to expand Mandarin vocabulary. One of the studies is 'Vocabulary Learning Strategies: The Case of Mandarin Learners in Sarawak' conducted by Lam and Kuan (2019). This study suggested several strategies to increase Mandarin vocabulary mastery, such as note-taking, studying the sound and stroke order of a word, asking classmates, and reviewing vocabulary regularly. In their research, 'Mandarin Vocabulary Learning Strategies among Islamic Science University of Malaysia (USIM) Mandarin Learners', Ye et al. (2021) reported that most USIM students learning the Mandarin language employed cognitive strategies the most, such as revision of words and note-taking, and metacognitive strategies the least. The study revealed that with the strategies employed by these students, they acquired a poor vocabulary size of between 200 and 400 words. Only a very small number of the students achieved a vocabulary size of 600 to 1200.

Therefore, due to the advantages of using songs in Mandarin vocabulary acquisition and limited studies on this subject, the researchers took the initiative to do this research to determine the impact songs can have on the students' Mandarin vocabulary mastery. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide knowledge, guidance and assistance to instructors, so they can utilize songs as a tool to teach the Mandarin language and later improve students' Mandarin vocabulary mastery.

III. METHODOLOGY

A total of 60 respondents, comprising 7 male (11.7%) and 53 female (88.3%) undergraduates, were involved in this study. They were from Bachelor in Office System Management program (BA232) of the March to October 2021 semester and took a Mandarin Level 1 course at UiTMCK. Purposive sampling was used to select 60 respondents from the population. Data were obtained through questionnaires, in-class observation, and interviews with students. According to Cohen and Manion (1989, as cited in Singh et al., 2006), several instruments were used as they provide multiple perspectives on a single phenomenon.

A. Questionnaire

The instruments of this study consist of a set of questions divided into two parts. The first part focuses on the demographic background of the respondents. The second part contains questions on students' perceptions of the use of selected Mandarin songs to improve their Mandarin vocabulary. The three selected songs were short, simple and matched the vocabulary found in the textbook "初级华语—" Mandarin Level 1. The selected Mandarin songs were uploaded to Google Classroom learning web application, so the students could access them freely in and out of the classroom session. In week five of their semester, after the completion of the first and second chapters of their learning syllabus, the respondents were

asked to fill out a set of ten-question questionnaires. This was done to obtain study data on students' perceptions of the use of selected songs to improve their mastery of Mandarin vocabulary.

B. In-class interview

Data were also obtained from interviews with students via Google Meet video calls after the class session. This was done to acquire an insight into the students' perceptions of the use of songs to teach new Mandarin vocabulary. It involved flexible questioning to uncover what lies behind an individual's thinking. The questions posed during the interview vary depending on the response of the students.

C. Classroom Observation

Classroom observation was carried out to investigate the effects of using songs to improve students' Mandarin language vocabulary. According to Day (1990, as cited in Singh et al., 2006), classroom observation provides rich descriptive data about what happens in the language classroom, and in this case, the Mandarin language classroom. Furthermore, this instrument was chosen to obtain additional study data that were not obtained in the questionnaire.

IV. FINDINGS

The data collected were analyzed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This was done to obtain the results of the study regarding the students' perception of the use of Mandarin songs in improving their vocabulary proficiency. The data collected from the study samples were compiled, categorized into several categories and summarized. The results are shown below.

A. Study Sample Feedback on Songs Used

Samples of studies were asked to rate themselves on the songs used in the study. The results of the feedback collected from the self-assessment form are recorded in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Feedback Assessment Form

Song	Feedback (%)					
	Strongly Like	Like	Total	Dislike	Strongly Dislike	Total
" Wǒ de péngyǒu zài nǎlǐ?" 我的朋友在哪里	60.00	40.00	100%	0.00	0.00	0%
" Shùzì gē " 数字歌	70.00	30.00	100%	0.00	0.00	0%
" Nǐ shì shéi " 你是谁	58.30	40.00	98.3%	1.7	0.00	1.7%

From the answers collected, it was clear that almost all respondents of the survey were very fond of and liked the three selected songs. The data clearly show that 100% of the respondents liked the first and the second song, while for the third song, 98.3% of them liked it. Only one respondent (1.7%) did not like the third song. The first and second songs were favored by all respondents because the rhythm and melody of the songs were catchy, easier to follow and resembled the rhythm of children's songs that they used to listen to. As a result, the respondent could sing the songs better according to

the rhythm. However, the third song was quite challenging for the respondents as they were unfamiliar with the rhythm and melody. Hence, they need to get used to the melody first before they can sing the song well. This also explains the feedback of a respondent who said he did not like the third song. In conclusion, the data clearly show that the respondents felt good and positive about the use of songs in the process of teaching and learning Mandarin vocabulary and believed that it helped broaden their Mandarin vocabulary.

The findings of this study are in line with the findings of a study conducted by Muhammad Alif Redzuan Abdullah and Sanimah Hussin (2018), as well as other studies by Abrate (1983), Bancroft (1999), Brady (1980), Gatti-Taylor (1980), Little (1983), Melpignano (1980), and Pyper (2005). They all mutually agree that the majority of students love songs being used in the teaching and learning of foreign languages.

B. Respondents' perceptions of the use of Mandarin songs in Mandarin vocabulary acquisition.

The findings showed that almost all respondents stated that learning Mandarin using songs or singing made them more interested in learning the Mandarin language. Almost all respondents (96.7%) agreed that the use of Mandarin songs in learning Mandarin was very interesting. Respondents also revealed that the melody and rhythm of the songs increased their interest to learn and were very helpful in memorizing Mandarin vocabulary more quickly and effectively. In fact, some respondents mentioned that the use of songs had made the learning environment more interesting and livelier. Other respondents added that using a song in class changed the learning environment to be more interactive and active, as the interaction between the instructor and the students was naturally built through this approach.

The findings also showed that 96.7% of the respondents agreed that the use of songs or singing in Mandarin could expand their Mandarin vocabulary. These Mandarin songs also helped them to recognize and memorize Mandarin vocabulary more effectively. This was because when they enjoyed singing Mandarin songs repeatedly, their confidence level increased and their constraints on mastering new vocabulary reduced. Compared to the conventional learning and teaching method, which practices rote memorization, students have to memorize Mandarin vocabulary in the textbooks by repeating them as much as they can until the words can be memorized and used. The downside of this method is it easily bores the students and requires a high concentration level to be able to memorize just a single vocabulary. Therefore, by using songs and singing to teach Mandarin vocabulary, the students can memorize the vocabulary more casually and naturally in a relaxed mode. This method also does not require high concentration which can drain not just the students' energy, but also their interest to learn the Mandarin language. Apart from that, it was discovered from the researchers' observation that when the students listened to the songs, got in tune with the rhythm and melody, then sang the song repeatedly, it eased and strengthened their memory of the vocabulary. The students' minds recorded the vocabulary much better when it was repeated and sung. Jäncke (2008), who studied the relationship between music, memory and emotion, shared the theories behind this; since music evokes strong emotions and emotions boost memory processes, we can understand that music is involved in forming memories. He continued that frequently listening to the music we like significantly improves verbal memory and focused attention.

For the selected song, the students were required to pronounce the words in the first song, the second song and the third song, then lastly sang all the songs together according to the video shown in the classroom. The selected chapter is chapter 2 of the Basic Mandarin Book Level I. In this chapter, the students were taught about the topic "Wǒ de jiā" or My Family as well as how to pronounce numbers in Mandarin. The song chosen was the first song "Wǒ de péngyǒu zài nǎlǐ" and the second song "Shùzì gē" and the third song "Nǐ shì shéi?". This song was chosen because it has vocabulary compatible with chapter 2.

TABLE 2: Song "Wǒ de péngyǒu zài nǎlǐ"

Mandarin vocabulary (pinyin)	English vocabulary
一, 二, 三, 四, 五, 六, 七 Yī, èr, sān, sì, wǔ, liù, qī	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
我的朋友在哪里? Wǒ de péngyǒu zài nǎlǐ?	Where is my friend?
在这里, 在这里, 我的朋友在这里 Zài zhèlǐ, zài zhèlǐ, wǒ de péngyǒu zài zhèlǐ	Here, here, my friend is here

In the first song, there are 13 words in total which are yī, èr, sān, sì, wǔ, liù, qī, wǒ, de, péngyǒu, zài, nǎlǐ dan zhèlǐ. After the students memorized the words, they were asked to sing the song guided by the video.

TABLE 3: Song "Shùzì gē"

Mandarin vocabulary (pinyin)	English vocabulary
一, 二, 三, 四, 五, 六, 七, 八 Yī, èr, sān, sì, wǔ, liù, qī, bā	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
汉语数字, 汉语数字 hànyǔ shùzì, hànyǔ shùzì	Chinese Numerals
九, 十, 九, 十 jiǔ, shí, jiǔ, shí	9, 10, 9, 10
汉语数字, 汉语数字 hànyǔ shùzì, hànyǔ shùzì	Chinese Numerals

In the second song, there are 12 words in total, which are yī, èr, sān, sì, wǔ, liù, qī, bā, jiǔ, shí, hànyǔ and shùzì. After the students memorized the words, they were asked to sing the song guided by the video.

In the first and second 3 songs, the emphasis was given to repeating numbers in Mandarin. This is because, in learning Mandarin vocabulary, numbers are important basic vocabulary that helps in the development of subsequent vocabulary. For example, once students are able to memorize and pronounce numbers in Mandarin correctly, they can then apply that knowledge to pronounce days, dates, months and hours in Mandarin. This is due to the fact that numbers play an important role in the change and combination of syllables that will construct meaning for other words. For example, as in the table below:

TABLE 4: Examples of the use of number in Mandarin syllable

Number	Day	Date	Month	Hour
一 Yī (One)	星期一 Xīngqī yī (Monday)	一号 Yī hào (first)	一月 Yī yuè (January)	一点 Yī diǎn (1 o'clock)
二 èr (Two)	星期二 xīngqī'èr (Tuesday)	二号 èr hào (second)	二月 èr yuè (February)	两点 èr (liǎng) diǎn (2 o'clock)
三 sān (Three)	星期三 xīngqīsān (Wednesday)	三号 sān hào (third)	三月 sān yuè (March)	三点 sān diǎn (3 o'clock)
四 sì (Four)	星期四 xīngqīsì (Thursday)	四号 sì hào (forth)	四月 sì yuè (April)	四点 sì diǎn (4 o'clock)
五 wǔ (Five)	星期五 xīngqīwǔ (Friday)	五号 wǔ hào (fifth)	五月 wǔ yuè (May)	五点 wǔ diǎn (5 o'clock)
六 liù (Six)	星期六 xīngqīliù (Saturday)	六号 liù hào (sixth)	六月 liù yuè (June)	六点 liù diǎn (6 o'clock)

Thus, it is clear that if the students are able to memorize and master the vocabulary for numbers in Mandarin, it eases them to memorize vocabulary related to numbers such as days, months, months and hours in Mandarin. In fact, the vocabulary for this nominal number is also used on the other subsequent learning topics, such as age pronunciation and phone numbers at level 1, plus ringgit and cents at level 2. Therefore, the mastery of syllables for these numbers is very important because when students have a solid foundation in the pronunciation and memorization of numbers in Mandarin, they can use them more confidently and smoothly when they need to combine syllables related to numbers as well as on subsequent learning topics.

TABLE 5: Song “Nǐ shì shéi?”

Mandarin vocabulary (pinyin)	English vocabulary
这是我的爸爸 Zhè shì wǒ de bàba	This is my father
那是我的妈妈 nà shì wǒ de māmā	That is my mother
这是我的叔叔 zhè shì wǒ de shūshu	This is my uncle
那是我的阿姨 nà shì wǒ de āyí	That is my aunty
这是我的爷爷 zhè shì wǒ de yéyé	This is my grandfather
那时我的奶奶 nà shí wǒ de nǎinai	That is my grandmother
你是谁 nǐ shì shéi	Who are you?
这是我的哥哥 Zhè shì wǒ de gēgē	This is my brother
那是我的弟弟 nà shì wǒ de dìdì	This is my little brother
这是我的姐姐 zhè shì wǒ de jiějie	This is my sister
那是我的妹妹 nà shì wǒ de mèimei	This is my little sister
这是我的朋友 zhè shì wǒ de péngyǒu	This is my friend
那是小偷 nà shì xiǎotōu	That is a thief

In the third song, there are 19 words in total namely, Zhè, nà, shì, wǒ, nǐ, de, bàba, māmā, shūshu, āyí, yéyé, nǎinai, gēgē, dìdì, jiějie, mèimei, péngyǒu, xiǎotōu, and shéi. After the students memorized the words, they were asked to sing the song guided by the video.

The vocabulary of these three learned songs was then combined and applied to the sentence structure being studied. Next, students were asked to build their own sentences based on the vocabulary they had learned from the songs. Most of them were also more motivated to do vocabulary exercises related to the songs they had learned. Despite the time constraints, respondents remain committed to complete the exercises given. Next, continuous monitoring was carried out by collecting the respondents' scores of vocabulary exercises, which were in an Excel file and were summed up on week 14 of the first semester, the March-July 2022 session. The overall score of the study sample showed a continuous increase in vocabulary mastery from the first until the last vocabulary exercise. It was found that through the exercises, the students could answer better by constructing sentences using vocabulary they had learned through songs. In addition, they were also able to combine that vocabulary with the new vocabulary they had learned in chapter two. Among the sentences built are: 你的妈妈在哪里? Nǐ de māmā zài nǎlǐ? (Where is your mother?), Wǒ de bàba zài zhèlǐ (My father is here), Tā shì wǒ de péngyǒu (She/He is my friend).

Therefore, the study data show that the use of songs helps respondents pronounce new Mandarin vocabulary better and more accurately. The repetition of vocabulary through the rhythms and melody of the songs can also improve their memorization of Mandarin vocabulary. In addition, through this method, respondents were seen as more interested in learning and memorizing Chinese characters (hanzi). Indirectly, as they followed the melody of the song, they not only memorized the new Mandarin vocabulary, but they also memorized Chinese characters better. Students were also seen to be more excited to do vocabulary and hanzi exercises after learning the lyrics of the songs. Based on the instructors' continuous monitoring, generally, students can improve their vocabulary mastery consistently throughout the semester compared to conventional learning methods that do not use songs and rely heavily on rote memorization.

Additionally, based on the data gathered from questionnaires, the students had also come out with a few interesting suggestions to expand their Mandarin vocabulary. For example, watch Mandarin dramas and movies, watch YouTube videos related to Mandarin language learning, listen to Mandarin songs and compose their own songs based on the vocabulary learned. In addition, they also suggested group-work activities that require them to sing Mandarin songs together, record the video and upload it to Google Classroom. Through these activities, they become more enthusiastic, engage in the learning process and have fun throughout those activities. Compared to the traditional teaching method, these fresh and lively activities are much more appreciated by the students because the traditional method forces students to memorize Mandarin vocabulary through repetition without any meaningful connection with the Mandarin language.

V. CONCLUSION

It has been proven that the use of Mandarin songs in the teaching of new Mandarin vocabulary to students can increase their motivation and interest. The students did not feel bored and became more enthusiastic in the process of teaching and learning Mandarin. They also became more active and enjoyed learning as they could engage in the activities. The use of Mandarin songs with interesting rhythms and melodies helps students memorize and remember Mandarin vocabulary more effectively. Thus, all students agreed that the singing method used for memorizing vocabulary is an excellent move in learning Mandarin. After the method of using the song was introduced, the students' vocabulary knowledge also increased, thus helping to improve their achievement on the test. Overall, the use of songs in the teaching of Mandarin vocabulary gave positive effects in enhancing the mastery of Mandarin vocabulary among students in UiTMCK. Based on this research, this method is very suitable to be applied in the teaching and learning process of the Mandarin language. It is hoped that these findings will provide beneficial inputs to lecturers in UiTM and other institutions teaching the Mandarin language.

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