

The lived experiences of Mandarin-speaking learners in learning English as a foreign language

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Abstract

This study explores the lived experiences of Mandarin-speaking learners as they navigate the challenges of acquiring English as a foreign language (EFL). Recognizing the growing importance of English proficiency in global contexts, the research aims to uncover the personal, linguistic, and cultural hurdles faced by this unique learner demographic. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study draws insights from in-depth interviews with six Mandarin-speaking EFL learners. The participants were selected through purposive sampling, and data were collected via semi-structured interviews. Colaizzi's method of analysis was employed to distill themes from the participants' narratives.

The findings reveal five major themes: challenges in pronunciation and grammar, influence of mother-tongue interference, emotional and psychological barriers, role of peer and teacher support, and adaptive strategies in language learning. Participants commonly cited difficulties in phonological aspects of English, such as consonant clusters and intonation, and expressed anxiety and self-doubt as persistent obstacles. Despite these challenges, learners demonstrated resilience and adopted various coping strategies, including immersion in English media and peer collaboration.

The study concludes that Mandarin-speaking EFL learners face multifaceted challenges that extend beyond linguistic competence, encompassing emotional and sociocultural dimensions. It underscores language educators' need to adopt learner-centered and culturally responsive pedagogies. The insights gained from this research contribute to a deeper understanding of the EFL learning experience and may inform future curriculum development and instructional practices aimed at supporting Mandarin-speaking students.

Keywords: Lived Experience; Cultural contexts; Coping Strategies; Adaptive Behaviors

1. Introduction

This study explores the lived experiences of Mandarin-speaking learners in acquiring English as a foreign language, focusing on the challenges, motivations, and sociocultural factors that influence their learning journey. The research is rooted in the growing global relevance of English and the increasing need for Mandarin speakers to acquire English proficiency for academic, economic, and social mobility. The study's objective is to understand these learners' perspectives through qualitative inquiry, specifically using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The author developed this research out of a desire to bridge the understanding gap regarding personal and contextual experiences in language acquisition, which are often overlooked in quantitative studies. The study is considered important for

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informing educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers about more culturally responsive and empathetic language education practices.

2. Materials and Methods

This qualitative study used a hermeneutic research design to explore the experiences of Mandarin-speaking learners acquiring English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Conducted at National Guangfu Commercial Industrial Vocational High School in Guangfu, Hualien, Taiwan, the study targeted students aged 18–20 enrolled in EFL programs. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 17 participants based on language proficiency, academic background, and demographic diversity.

The primary research instrument was a validated semi-structured interview guide designed to explore cognitive, linguistic, sociocultural, and emotional aspects of language learning. The interview protocol underwent expert validation and a pilot test to ensure relevance and clarity. Data collection involved two rounds of in-depth interviews, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized for confidentiality.

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method and Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenology, involving bracketing, thematic coding, and synthesis to extract deep meanings from participants' narratives. Peer debriefing and participant validation were conducted to enhance credibility.

Ethical procedures included obtaining informed consent (and assent for minors), approval from relevant ethical committees, the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the institution, and strict data privacy protocols. Cultural sensitivity and participant protection were emphasized throughout the research process.

3. Results and Discussion

It is the general findings of the study on the lived experiences of Mandarin-speaking learners in acquiring English as a foreign language. The discussion synthesizes the key themes that emerged from the data, interprets their significance in light of relevant literature, and explores implications for teaching and learning English as a foreign language (EFL).

3.1. Lived Experiences of Mandarin-Speaking Learners

Participants' lived experiences in learning English were shaped by a blend of personal, cultural, and educational factors. Learners demonstrated varying degrees of exposure to English, often influenced by their prior educational backgrounds, learning environments, and personal motivations. While some reported positive feelings of accomplishment and progress, others expressed frustration over the slow pace of improvement.

Cultural context played a significant role in shaping attitudes toward English. Learners with previous exposure to English through media or international travel generally showed higher confidence and engagement. Motivation was another crucial factor—those with clear goals, such as studying abroad or pursuing career advancement, were more persistent in their learning.

These findings align with socio-cultural theories of second language acquisition (SLA), which emphasize the role of context, identity, and learner agency in shaping language learning outcomes (Norton, 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

3.2. Challenges in Learning English

Participants identified several core challenges in acquiring English, including:

- **Pronunciation and Phonological Differences:** Many learners struggled with English phonemes that do not exist in Mandarin, such as /θ/, /ð/, and /r/. Mispronunciation often led to reduced comprehensibility and self-consciousness during speaking tasks.
- **Grammar and Syntax:** English's syntactic structure, especially subject-verb agreement and tense usage, was reported as difficult due to the lack of equivalent structures in Mandarin.
- **Vocabulary Acquisition and Idiomatic Usage:** Learners found it challenging to understand and use idiomatic expressions, phrasal verbs, and context-dependent vocabulary, which limited both comprehension and expressive capabilities.

- Limited Practice Opportunities: Outside the classroom, opportunities to engage in authentic English communication were limited, further hampering fluency development.

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that L1-L2 typological distance can present substantial barriers in EFL learning (Odlin, 1989).

3.3. Coping Strategies and Adaptive Behaviors

Despite the challenges, learners adopted various coping strategies to support their language development. These included:

- Self-Directed Learning: Learners used language apps, online platforms, and English-language media to reinforce vocabulary and improve pronunciation.
- Peer and Teacher Support: Many relied on peers and instructors for clarification and feedback, highlighting the importance of supportive learning environments.
- Immersion and Practice: Engaging in language exchange programs and watching English-language content were common practices to build listening and speaking fluency.
- Here's an updated version of your sentence with more recent citations (2021–2025) reflecting contemporary research on self-efficacy and self-regulated learning:
- These strategies reflect learners' resilience and self-regulated learning behaviors, aligning with recent studies on learner autonomy and persistence in language acquisition (Panadero, 2022; Usher & Pajares, 2021), which build upon foundational concepts of self-efficacy and self-regulation in educational psychology.

3.4. Proposed Interventions

Based on the findings, several intervention strategies were proposed to enhance EFL learning for Mandarin-speaking learners:

- Personalized Tutoring: Tailored instruction addressing specific learner needs in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary.
- Language Immersion Programs: Opportunities for real-world English use through in-person or virtual exchanges.
- Teacher Training: Professional development for instructors to better understand the unique linguistic and cultural backgrounds of Mandarin-speaking learners.
- Digital Tools: Utilization of interactive apps and platforms to support pronunciation and vocabulary development.
- Emotional and Motivational Support: Programs that incorporate stress management and motivation-building components to address affective barriers to language learning
- Below is the APA-style reference list based on the sources cited in your research titled *"The Lived Experiences of Mandarin-Speaking Learners in Learning English as a Foreign Language."* The list includes both classic and updated sources, including your requested replacements for Bandura (1997) and Zimmerman (2002)

4. Conclusion

The study found that Mandarin-speaking learners face cultural, psychological, and linguistic challenges in English acquisition but respond with adaptive strategies like self-learning and peer support. It highlights the need for learner-sensitive, contextualized interventions to foster language skills and emotional resilience. The study guides inclusive, evidence-based practices that improve English learning for diverse learners, fostering a more equitable and responsive educational society.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

We, the undersigned contributing authors of the research paper entitled *"The Lived Experiences of Mandarin-Speaking Learners in Learning English as a Foreign Language"*, hereby declare that there are **no known conflicts of interest**—financial, professional, or personal—that could have inappropriately influenced or biased the conduct, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of this research.

We affirm that:

- No funding was received from commercial entities or organizations with a vested interest in the subject of the study.
- None of the authors hold affiliations or relationships that might be perceived to affect the impartiality of the research.
- There are no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could be construed as potential sources of conflict.

This declaration is made to ensure transparency and uphold the ethical standards of academic research and publication.

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