

Mandarin Learning in Multilingual East Malaysia: Language Choice, Locally Situated Communication, and Institutional Learning at a Confucius Institute

Asmaa AlSaqqaf¹, Ke Hu^{2*}, Sabariah Abd Rahim^{1*}, Rasyiqah
Edora Rudie Adie¹, Nor Dawirah Rahman¹, Nur Shafieka Binti
Sapan¹

¹Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia
Sabah (UMS), Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia, ²Hunan University, School of Foreign Languages,

Hunan Province, China

Email: sab@ums.edu.my

*Corresponding Authors Email: ke_hu96@outlook.com

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Abstract

Malaysia's multilingual ecology gives Mandarin a distinctive position as a community and educational language and, for some learners, an additional resource with local and transnational value. This article presents an in-depth analysis of three contrasting student accounts from a Confucius Institute (CI) in East Malaysia. The data form part of a broader qualitative interview study involving two management staff members, one Mandarin teacher, and three students; here, student accounts provide the principal evidence, while staff accounts are used only to contextualize selected classroom and institutional arrangements. The analysis identifies heterogeneous forms of investment in Mandarin, two illustrative episodes of locally situated communication, and a shared emphasis on teacher mediation. HSK-linked provision is treated as contextual institutional evidence rather than as a student theme. Because complete linguistic biographies were not systematically elicited, linguistic repertoire is used as a sensitising interpretive lens rather than as a fully mapped biographical construct. The study therefore makes a bounded contribution: it shows how Mandarin can acquire value simultaneously as a future-oriented investment and as a selectively useful local communicative resource within multilingual East Malaysia, without claiming prevalence, general cross-ethnic use, or cultural-diplomacy effects.

Keywords: Mandarin Learning, Multilingualism, Language Choice, Linguistic Repertoire, Investment, Locally Situated Communication, Malaysia

Introduction

Malaysia is a multilingual society in which language practices are shaped by the coexistence of Malay, English, Mandarin and other Chinese varieties, Tamil, and numerous Indigenous languages. This complexity is particularly visible in Sabah, where national, community,

educational, and Indigenous language environments overlap. Recent work on Sabah schoolscapes documents the visible presence of Malay, English, and Mandarin in educational space (Leong et al., 2025), while research on rural interculturality in Sabah illustrates how local language practices can diverge from simple assumptions about a single dominant language (Loo & Atin, 2026). At Malaysian universities, multilingual learners likewise draw on more than one linguistic resource according to communicative need, learning context, and identity (Kärchner-Ober, 2012; Mohammad Sauffi et al., 2026). This context raises a more specific question: how do learners assign value to an additional language across formal education and everyday multilingual encounters?

Within this ecology, Mandarin offers a useful case for examining how a language can serve different social and educational purposes. For many Malaysian Chinese, it is connected with community life and education, while for learners from other backgrounds it may be acquired as an additional language. Non-Chinese participation in Chinese national-type primary schools has increased, showing that Chinese-medium education and Mandarin are not confined to a single ethnic constituency (Chin et al., 2021; Wong, 2024). In East Malaysia, therefore, Mandarin cannot be understood solely as a foreign language associated with China; its perceived value may also arise from local workplaces, friendship networks, educational pathways, customer interactions, and encounters with Mandarin-speaking interlocutors.

These overlapping local and transnational roles are especially relevant to Confucius Institutes (CIs), which provide an institutional route for learning Mandarin. Research on CIs in Malaysia and elsewhere has frequently emphasized soft power, cultural diplomacy, and geopolitical controversy (Ngu & Ngeow, 2021; Repnikova, 2022; Shuto, 2018). These perspectives are important for understanding the institutional background, but they do not fully explain why individual learners choose Mandarin, how they use it within a multilingual host society, or how standardized provision interacts with local communicative needs. The resulting research problem is how learners at a CI in multilingual East Malaysia connect their reasons for studying Mandarin with locally situated communication and the classroom and institutional opportunities available to them.

To address this problem, the present study examines the CI as a bounded site of additional-language learning in multilingual East Malaysia. The analytical centre is three student accounts: why these learners invested in Mandarin, where they reported using or expecting to use it, and how selected classroom and institutional arrangements entered their learning experiences. Management and teacher accounts are used selectively to clarify the learning environment rather than to analyse the CI's bilateral or cultural-diplomacy role. The aim is not to generalize across UMS learners, but to use a small set of contrasting accounts to examine Mandarin's possible local as well as transnational value in a multilingual setting. Because the ethnicity of interlocutors was not systematically elicited, reported encounters are interpreted as locally situated communication rather than necessarily as cross-ethnic communication.

The study's novelty lies in bringing learner investment, reported local communication, and teacher-mediated institutional learning into a single analysis of Mandarin at a Confucius Institute. It contributes to social-science scholarship on multilingualism by illustrating, through three contrasting learner accounts, how an institutionally taught language can

acquire different kinds of local and future-oriented value without assuming that these experiences represent a wider population.

Literature Review

Multilingual Ecologies and Linguistic Repertoires in Malaysia

Multilingualism is more than the numerical coexistence of separate named languages. A repertoire perspective focuses on the linguistic resources speakers accumulate and mobilize across situations, relationships, and stages of life. Busch (2012) argues that linguistic repertoires are biographically and socially shaped rather than fixed inventories of autonomous languages. This perspective is useful in Malaysia because speakers commonly navigate educational, familial, occupational, and public domains in which different linguistic resources carry different functions and values.

Malaysia's institutional language environment has long included Malay, English, Chinese languages, Tamil, and Indigenous languages through different educational and community arrangements (Smith, 2003). At university level, Kärchner-Ober (2012) found that multilingual Malaysian students' language preferences and attitudes varied across skills, programmes, and communicative purposes. More recent research similarly shows that Malaysian university students mobilize multiple linguistic resources strategically in learning and identity work (Mohammad Sauffi et al., 2026). These studies caution against interpreting additional-language learning as a simple transition from one language to another; learners may instead expand, reorganize, or selectively activate existing repertoires.

Sabah adds further complexity because national languages and international languages coexist with longstanding Indigenous and community language practices. Leong et al. (2025) show that the political and physical dimensions of Sabah schoolscapes are intertwined, while Loo and Atin (2026) demonstrate that local intercultural language practice may not mirror formal hierarchies of language dominance. These observations make East Malaysia a productive setting for asking what locally situated value Mandarin acquires when learners already operate in multilingual environments.

Language Choice, Investment, and Repertoire Expansion

This study uses linguistic repertoire and investment as its primary conceptual frame. A repertoire perspective treats speakers' linguistic resources as biographically and socially accumulated rather than as separate, fixed language systems (Busch, 2012). Investment complements this perspective by asking how access to material and symbolic resources, identity, and social positioning shape commitment to particular language practices (Darvin & Norton, 2015, 2023). Together, these concepts allow Mandarin learning to be examined as the acquisition and selective use of an additional resource whose value may differ across classroom, social, occupational, and future-oriented domains.

Motivational terms such as interest, enjoyment, challenge, obligation, and perceived utility remain descriptively useful when participants themselves invoke them, but they are not treated as separate theoretical systems in the analysis. Likewise, the study does not assume that learning Mandarin necessarily produces an ideal multilingual identity. The central analytical question is more modest: what forms of value do these three learners attach to Mandarin, and how do those values relate to reported opportunities for use?

Instrumental considerations are therefore treated as one form of learner investment rather than as a pre-specified explanation. Employment, credentials, study, mobility, and practical communication can coexist with personal challenge, social connection, curricular obligation, and enjoyment. This framing avoids reducing heterogeneous accounts to a single instrumental/integrative opposition and keeps the interpretation close to the learners' own descriptions.

Malaysian research supports such a plural interpretation. Kärchner-Ober (2012) reports variation in language preference, motivation, and learning strategies among multilingual university students, while the growing participation of non-Chinese families in Chinese-medium schooling has been linked to mixed educational, linguistic, and practical considerations (Chin et al., 2021; Wong, 2024). The conceptual contribution of the present case is therefore not merely geographic: it examines Mandarin simultaneously as a transnationally associated language and as a resource that may acquire locally situated value inside Malaysian multilingual life.

Locally Situated Communication and Use Beyond the Classroom

A repertoire perspective directs attention to the domains and interlocutors for which a linguistic resource becomes usable. The same learner may mobilize different resources with lecturers, friends, customers, family members, or strangers, and the value of an additional language may be concentrated in specific social niches (Busch, 2012). For this reason, the present paper uses the term locally situated communication rather than cross-ethnic communication: the interview data describe concrete encounters, but the ethnic identities of interlocutors were not systematically elicited.

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is used only as a secondary sensitising concept for two reported episodes involving hesitation, communicative breakdown, and increased confidence. MacIntyre et al. (1998) conceptualize WTC as situational readiness to enter L2 communication, shaped partly by perceived competence and context. The present study does not measure WTC and does not treat the two episodes as evidence of stable learner dispositions; they are illustrative examples of how successful or unsuccessful encounters may alter perceived communicative capability.

Institutional Language Learning, Standardisation, and Teacher Mediation

Institutions shape language learning by determining curriculum, assessment, credentials, staffing, learning resources, and access to mobility opportunities. CIs combine Mandarin instruction with Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi (HSK)-related provision, cultural activities, and institutional links. Previous research has identified localisation, curriculum design, teacher availability, and institutional flexibility as recurring conditions affecting CI provision (AlSaqqaf et al., 2026; Qiao et al., 2021; Repnikova, 2022; Yang, 2025). Standardisation can provide clear progression and portable credentials, yet it can also produce tension when local learners' communicative purposes do not align closely with a centrally structured syllabus.

Institutional pathways may also influence learners' investment because language credentials can connect to future study or mobility. Lien and Miao (2023), for example, link CI presence and government scholarship provision to international student mobility to China.

Such macro-level associations do not establish individual motives, but they illustrate how institutions can make particular futures more imaginable and materially accessible.

Teacher mediation is equally important. Language engagement is shaped not only by curricula but by classroom relationships, task design, perceived support, and opportunities to participate. Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) emphasize the role of teachers and classroom conditions in facilitating learner engagement. In multilingual settings, a teacher's familiarity with local communicative norms and learner repertoires may be especially relevant because institutional content is interpreted through already established linguistic experiences rather than learned in isolation.

CIs are often discussed as cultural-diplomacy or soft-power institutions (Ngu & Ngeow, 2021; Shuto, 2018). However, Nye's (2005) notion of soft power concerns attraction and preference-shaping, not simply the practical usefulness of a language. For this reason, the present study separates positive experiences of Mandarin learning from broader attraction toward China unless participants' data directly support that inference.

Research Gap and Research Questions

Existing scholarship provides valuable accounts of Malaysian multilingualism, additional-language investment, and institutional Mandarin provision, yet less attention has been given to the analytical tension between Mandarin's transnational associations and its possible locally situated value within Malaysian multilingual life. The present study addresses this issue through three questions framed around the three participating students rather than a wider learner population:

RQ1. How do three Malaysian university students describe their reasons for investing in Mandarin as an additional linguistic resource?

RQ2. How do these students describe using, or expecting to use, Mandarin in locally situated social, occupational, and everyday communication?

RQ3. How do selected classroom and institutional arrangements enter these students' accounts of Mandarin learning opportunities?

Methodology

Research Design and Setting

The study used an interpretivist qualitative case-study design focused on the CI at Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) as a bounded institutional setting. Interpretivism was appropriate because the aim was to understand how participants interpreted Mandarin learning and use in context rather than to estimate the prevalence of motives across a population (Myers, 2008). Data were collected between December 2024 and June 2025. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional review body, and all participants provided informed consent. The data form part of a broader qualitative interview study of Mandarin education at the UMS CI. The present manuscript is a distinct student-centred secondary analysis. Importantly, the original interviews were not designed as complete language-biography interviews; linguistic repertoire is therefore used as a sensitising lens for reported language value and use, not as a claim that each learner's repertoire was exhaustively mapped.

Participant Recruitment, Role Coverage, and Sample Adequacy

Six participants took part: two CI management-level staff members, one Mandarin teacher, and three students. The distribution across roles reflects the actual recruitment conditions rather than a pre-set quota. At the time of recruitment, there were only two management-level staff members in the focal CI who were relevant to the study, and both agreed to participate. Two target Mandarin teachers who met the study criteria were approached; one agreed to participate and the other declined. Student participation was voluntary, and three students consented to be interviewed. The resulting sample therefore includes complete participation from the relevant management level, one consenting teacher from the two targeted teachers, and three volunteer learners.

The participant categories were not designed as statistically comparable sub-samples. For this manuscript, the three students constitute the principal experiential group because the research questions concern learner investment, reported communication, and learning opportunities. The teacher and management participants are contextual informants only where their accounts clarify curriculum, certification, or institutional arrangements. The Results identify whether evidence derives from all three students, two students, a single student, or contextual staff data so that evidential breadth remains visible.

Sample adequacy was considered in relation to the narrow, exploratory purpose of the case rather than a fixed numerical threshold (Malterud et al., 2016). The study does not claim population representativeness or subgroup saturation. Its empirical contribution lies in three contrasting learner accounts and a small number of concrete episodes. Findings are therefore presented idiographically and comparatively: commonality is stated only when more than one account supports it, while single-participant evidence is explicitly labelled as illustrative.

The study does not claim thematic saturation. Saturation is context-dependent and contingent on design, sample composition, and analytic goals (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022), and rigid sample-size criteria are inappropriate for qualitative inquiry (Vasileiou et al., 2018). With three volunteer students and one participating teacher, the study can identify case-specific contrasts and convergences but cannot establish the range or prevalence of experiences in the wider UMS learner population.

All six participants were female. Gender was not an analytical focus. For the three students, the study records available for this analysis include nationality, role, interview mode, and evidence that they were beginner or lower-intermediate Mandarin learners, but they do not consistently document first/home language(s), other routinely used languages, ethnicity or self-identification, prior schooling in Chinese-medium education, prior exposure to Chinese varieties, duration of Mandarin study, or complete domain-by-domain language use. These missing linguistic-biography data are not reconstructed retrospectively and constitute an important limitation for a repertoire-based analysis.

Table 1

Participant profiles

Informant ID	Gender	Nationality	Role	Interview mode
CICM	Female	Chinese	CI management	In person; detailed notes
CIMM	Female	Malaysian	CI management	WhatsApp; extended written responses
CIT	Female	Malaysian	Mandarin teacher	In person; audio-recorded
CIS-1	Female	Malaysian	Student	Virtual; audio-recorded
CIS-2	Female	Malaysian	Student	Virtual; audio-recorded
CIS-3	Female	Malaysian	Student	Virtual; audio-recorded

Note. CICM = Confucius Institute Chinese management; CIMM = Confucius Institute Malaysian management; CIT = Confucius Institute teacher; CIS = Confucius Institute student. The WhatsApp interview consisted of extended open-ended written responses. Note-taking was used for CICM at the participant's request because audio recording was declined.

Data Collection

The semi-structured interview protocol was adapted from Rimkus (2018) and Cai (2021). Student-relevant questions and follow-up prompts addressed reasons for learning Mandarin, perceived benefits and difficulties, examples of classroom and real-life language use, occasions when Mandarin was useful or difficult, cultural learning, and desired improvements. The protocol did not systematically elicit full home-language histories, all languages used across domains, interlocutor ethnicity, code choice, or identity positioning. Consequently, RQ1 and RQ2 are answered from reported reasons and concrete use episodes, while repertoire functions as a secondary interpretive lens rather than a fully elicited language-biography method.

Participants were interviewed individually either in person or online through Microsoft Teams or WhatsApp according to accessibility and preference. Four interviews were audio-recorded, one consisted of extended written WhatsApp responses, and one was documented via detailed notes as the participant declined audio recording. Interview duration averaged approximately 30 minutes, except for the WhatsApp-based interview, where interaction unfolded discontinuously between interviewer and participant. The written interview followed the same broad topic guide. Audio recordings and note-based records were transcribed or prepared for analysis and returned to participants for member checking (Rowlands, 2021). Where participants used Malay expressions within English responses, English glosses are provided in square brackets while the original wording is retained as far as possible. Different interview modes may influence spontaneity and detail, and this is acknowledged as a limitation (Tomás & Bidet, 2024).

Thematic Analysis and Reflexivity

The dataset was analysed thematically, informed by Braun and Clarke (2013). First-cycle coding was primarily inductive and stayed close to participant wording. Student-relevant codes included job opportunities, future options, self-challenge, degree requirement, local shop interaction, pronunciation breakdown, friendship practice, teacher support, and repeated oral practice. Staff segments were coded only where they clarified institutional arrangements encountered by students. In a second, theoretically sensitised stage, these codes were compared through the primary concepts of repertoire and investment; WTC and

classroom engagement were used only where they illuminated specific episodes rather than as parallel explanatory frameworks.

Candidate themes were reviewed against the complete interview records to check whether each interpretation captured the relevant excerpt in context and whether divergent evidence was being suppressed. Negative and contrasting cases were retained: for example, CIS-2's self-challenge account prevents an exclusively employment-based interpretation of investment, while CIS-1's failed giving-directions episode contrasts with CIS-3's successful shop interaction. A worked analytic example is: CIS-3's report of completing a shop transaction in Mandarin -> initial code 'successful local Mandarin use' -> interpretive category 'situated communicative usefulness/confidence' -> theme 'locally situated communication and confidence'. All authors compared interpretations and discussed disagreements as reflexive analytic scrutiny rather than as a statistical test of coder reliability.

The research team includes scholars affiliated with Malaysian and Chinese institutions. This provides contextual familiarity but may also shape interpretation. The analysis therefore distinguishes student experience from staff description, avoids inferring unreported linguistic identities or interlocutor ethnicity, and does not translate practical appreciation of Mandarin into cultural or geopolitical attitudes. The same broader dataset supports companion analyses with different research questions; the present manuscript intentionally allocates evidence to multilingual learning and local communication only.

Results

Table 2.

Evidential basis of the student-centred themes

Note. Breadth refers only to the six-person case and is not a prevalence estimate.

Analytical area	Primary evidence	Breadth	Interpretive status
Reasons / investment	CIS-1, CIS-2, CIS-3; teacher contextual	3 students, heterogeneous	Contrasting learner accounts; no dominant motive inferred
Locally situated communication	CIS-1 and CIS-3	2 students	Illustrative episodes; no interlocutor ethnicity inferred
Institutional pathway	Teacher management contextual /	Staff-led	Programme context, not a student theme
Teacher mediation	CIS-1, CIS-2, CIS-3	3 students	Strongest learner-side convergence
Cultural learning	Selected student comments	Peripheral	Excluded from substantive analysis here

Reasons for Adding Mandarin to Multilingual Repertoires

The three students did not share a single reason for learning Mandarin. Instead, their accounts provide contrasting forms of investment: CIS-3 foregrounded employment and social connection, CIS-1 emphasized future options, and CIS-2 described personal cognitive

challenge. The teacher's observation about degree requirements is used only as contextual evidence about voluntary versus compulsory participation.

CIS-3: "mm, I think.. first... the peluang pekerjaan [(job opportunities)]. Saya pernah part-time [I have worked part-time before]. So most of the time diorang akan tanya language [they will ask about language]. And my sister also, dia selalu cakap [she always says] if you take Mandarin, you punya peluang tu lagi besar [your opportunities are much bigger.] ... Yes, Sangat banyak kebaikan la [there are really many benefits]. It benefits us to connect with friends from this language. Also give good benefit to me as a part time worker."

CIS-1: "Yes. True. More choices and options as well. Maybe in the future if you want to work in China it can help you to communicate there."

CIS-2: "Personally, I don't like Mandarin that much, but I tried my best to learn the hard language like Mandarin so I can make my brain to practice more. Yeah, something like that is not because I like Mandarin or like movie Mandarin. No, but I just want to challenge myself. I just want to learn more and more to fill my free time."

Across these three accounts, no single motive can be treated as dominant. Rather, the case illustrates how practical, future-oriented, social, and self-developmental value can coexist within one institutional setting. The evidence supports heterogeneity of investment, not a population-level profile of Mandarin learners at UMS.

Locally Situated Communication and Confidence

Two of the three students provided concrete out-of-class episodes. These accounts locate Mandarin's value in specific Malaysian encounters rather than demonstrating a general social pattern.

CIS-1: "Yes. I encountered to that when I tried to give directions but they could not understand. That I had to call my Chinese friend to explain then they understand. My friend said my pronunciation was wrong."

CIS-3: "Haritu [That day] I go Sarawak and I go to Chinese shop. I try to speak in Mandarin about the price and how the total is and the aunty can understand me. ... Sekarang [Now] I lagi [more] confident cakap [speak] Mandarin with my friends. I suka [like] practice my Mandarin dengan [with] my friends."

The first episode made a pronunciation problem visible, whereas the second gave one learner evidence that she could complete a transaction and subsequently encouraged more practice with friends. The ethnic identities of the interlocutors were not systematically elicited; therefore, the evidence supports only the bounded claim that Mandarin was selectively useful in locally situated interactions, not that the episodes necessarily constituted cross-ethnic communication or that Mandarin functions as a general lingua franca across Sabah.

Institutional Pathways as Learning Context

Contextual staff data indicate that the CI provided HSK-aligned instruction, assessment, certification, and an examination venue. These are programme features described by staff rather than independently observed student experiences. They help explain the institutional

structure within which the three learners studied, but they are not treated as a student theme in their own right.

Staff also described limits on curricular flexibility and institutional resources. The student interviews did not provide equivalent detail on programme governance, so these claims remain contextual. The analytical relevance for RQ3 is limited to a plausible tension between a standardized proficiency pathway and locally specific communicative purposes; detailed infrastructure and technology implications are outside the scope of this paper.

Teacher Mediation and the Classroom Learning Environment

All three students placed the teacher prominently in their classroom accounts, although they emphasized different aspects: local familiarity and comprehensibility (CIS-1), relational safety (CIS-2), and repeated pronunciation practice (CIS-3). This is the clearest point of convergence across the three learner interviews.

CIS-1: “My teacher was a local Sabahan from PPIB. I really enjoyed her classes and I really understood what was learning. And her class sections always full because everyone likes her. So if you manage to get in, you are really lucky.”

CIS-2: “The teacher is someone who connect to the soul. People say not only teach but she understands us very much. She is nice and we are also in a small circle so you will not be shy.”

CIS-3: “I think repetition la. Like you want to remember things. So like she will say the word and tell us to repeat again. So we can remember how to pronounce the numbers and words correctly. And to pronounce the words in the right tone especially.”

Taken together, the three accounts indicate that institutional language learning was experienced through a particular classroom ecology rather than curriculum alone. This commonality is stronger than the evidence for HSK pathways or out-of-class use because all three students independently described a valued aspect of teacher mediation.

Cultural Learning as Peripheral Context

Students referred to some cultural content, particularly food, celebrations, and family practices, but these data are not developed as a theme because cultural learning is not central to the present research questions. Its cultural-diplomacy implications are analysed separately in the broader research programme. This separation also reduces redundant publication from the shared dataset.

Discussion

Discussion of RQ1

RQ1 asked how the three students described their reasons for investing in Mandarin. The accounts show heterogeneous investment rather than a single instrumental profile. Employment and future options appear in two accounts, while a third foregrounds personal challenge; social connection and curricular obligation appear in selected accounts or contextual teacher evidence. Darvin and Norton’s (2015, 2023) investment framework is useful because it accommodates material and symbolic value without assuming that all learners pursue the same outcome. Because complete linguistic biographies were not collected, the discussion does not claim to reconstruct each learner’s full repertoire or multilingual identity.

The conceptual significance is that Mandarin's value need not be exclusively transnational. Even in a language strongly associated with China, learners may attach value to local work, friendship, study, or personal development within Malaysia. With three volunteer students, the study cannot establish how common these orientations are; it instead demonstrates why locally situated value should remain analytically separate from assumptions about international mobility or geopolitical attraction.

Discussion of RQ2

RQ2 concerned locally situated communication. Two students described concrete episodes, while the third did not provide a comparable out-of-class example. The evidence therefore supports selective rather than general use. From a repertoire perspective, these episodes show how an additional linguistic resource can become salient for particular tasks and interlocutors without displacing other languages in a multilingual environment (Busch, 2012). Because interlocutor ethnicity was not systematically collected, no stronger cross-ethnic claim is made.

WTC offers a secondary interpretive vocabulary for the contrast between communicative breakdown and growing confidence (MacIntyre et al., 1998), but the study neither measures WTC nor infers stable dispositions. The value of the two episodes is evidentially modest but analytically useful: they show how a specific encounter can reveal a pronunciation problem or provide confidence that Mandarin is usable in a local situation.

Discussion of RQ3

RQ3 concerns selected classroom and institutional arrangements. Here, the evidence sources differ. All three students directly described teacher mediation, producing the strongest convergence in the learner data. HSK structure, certification, and curricular flexibility were described mainly by staff and are therefore treated as contextual programme features rather than merged with student experience. The study can consequently identify a classroom-level convergence and an institution-level context, but it cannot show how every learner experiences HSK governance or programme constraints.

This distinction sharpens the paper's central contribution. Mandarin appears in the case both as an institutionally structured additional language and as a selectively useful local resource. Teacher mediation connects these levels by translating programme content into classroom participation, whereas locally situated encounters show how value may emerge beyond formal certification. Cultural exposure remains peripheral in this analysis and is not treated as evidence of soft power.

Limitations and Implications

Limitations

The first limitation concerns evidential scale. The principal analysis rests on three volunteer student interviews, with contextual information from two management participants and one teacher. The paper therefore offers an idiographic comparison of three learner accounts, not a saturated learner typology or a basis for prevalence claims. Evidence breadth varies by theme: all three students discussed teacher mediation; two supplied concrete local-use episodes; and institutional-pathway claims rely mainly on staff descriptions.

Second, the linguistic biographies required for a strong repertoire analysis were not systematically collected. The study cannot reliably report each student's first/home language(s), complete set of routinely used languages, ethnicity or self-identification, prior Chinese-medium schooling, prior exposure to Chinese varieties, duration of Mandarin study, or detailed domain-by-domain code choices. Accordingly, repertoire is used as a sensitising framework for reported language value and use, and future research should collect language biographies or repertoire maps explicitly.

Third, all participants were female and the student participants were beginner or lower-intermediate learners. Gender was not examined analytically, and the small sample cannot illuminate gender variation. Beginner proficiency may also have restricted opportunities for extended out-of-class use and the complexity of reported interaction.

Fourth, interviews were conducted through different modes and relied on self-report. The study did not include classroom observation, interactional recordings, learner diaries, or longitudinal tracking. Nor did the protocol systematically identify the ethnicity of interlocutors in reported encounters. The analysis therefore concerns perceived reasons, uses, and institutional experiences rather than measured language behaviour or verified cross-group interaction.

Research and Pedagogical Implications

For research, the case points to a more precise agenda: future studies should combine learner language biographies or repertoire maps with interview and interactional data so that claims about repertoire expansion can be demonstrated rather than inferred. Multi-site studies could then compare how Mandarin acquires locally situated value across different Malaysian language ecologies. Longitudinal diaries or recordings could also test whether successful and unsuccessful encounters alter confidence, investment, and subsequent language choice.

For pedagogy, the findings support connecting standardized progression with locally recognizable communicative tasks, but the recommendation is grounded mainly in the two reported local-use episodes and the broader institutional context rather than in evidence of programme effectiveness. Malaysian workplace, campus, service, and community scenarios could be piloted and evaluated. The convergence around teacher mediation also suggests that local contextual knowledge, relational support, and corrective oral practice should remain central when adapting materials for Sabah's multilingual environment.

Conclusion

This study presented an in-depth comparison of three student accounts of Mandarin learning at a CI in East Malaysia. The learners attached different forms of value to Mandarin, including employment, future options, personal challenge, social connection, and curricular participation. Two students described locally situated communicative encounters in which Mandarin exposed pronunciation difficulties or strengthened confidence, while all three emphasized aspects of teacher mediation. Staff descriptions of HSK-linked provision supplied institutional context rather than a co-equal learner theme.

The study's central contribution is analytical rather than demographic: it distinguishes Mandarin's transnational associations from the locally situated value it may acquire within

Malaysian multilingual life. Because full linguistic biographies were not collected, the paper does not claim to map complete repertoires or generalize beyond the three learner accounts. Instead, it shows how investment, selective local use, and classroom mediation can intersect within one bounded institutional case, while keeping cultural-diplomacy and technology questions analytically separate.

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Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

This study was conducted in accordance with relevant institutional ethical guidelines. Ethical approval was obtained from Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (Approval Number: UMS/PPIB6.4/800-3/1/1; Project Code: GSM3443; November 2024). All participants provided informed consent.

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