

# TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING INVOLVING AUTHENTIC SITUATIONS AT A MALAYSIAN INSTITUTION OF HIGHER LEARNING

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## ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, many non-native Mandarin learners lack confidence when communicating with native Mandarin speakers, despite completing a Mandarin as a Foreign Language course at the university. To overcome this predicament, non-native Mandarin learners need to see a concrete connection between the classroom language and authentic situations where the role of the instructor is seen as pivotal in the effective outcome of the process and endeavor. With this percept in mind, this study was designed as a task-based language teaching (TBLT) activity, in which 75 non-native Mandarin learners at a Malaysian institution of higher learning stepped out of the classroom to engage in simple communication tasks with native Mandarin speakers. Through questionnaire survey and introspection records, this study analyses and identifies the situation and problems non-native Mandarin learners face when communicating with native Mandarin speakers, including psychological barriers and operational difficulties when engaging in authentic situations. The paper also explores the influence and effect of task-based language teaching on learners' communication readiness and anxiety. The study found that in this framework, learners began to realize the importance of language practice, experienced reduced communicative anxiety, and increased confidence; thus TBLT proves to be a viable avenue for learning a foreign language at the university, where the seed of interaction with the Chinese society is sowed for successful germination through authentic learning contexts.

**Keywords:** TBLT; Mandarin; authentic situations, communication anxiety; communication readiness

## **Introduction**

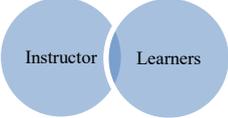
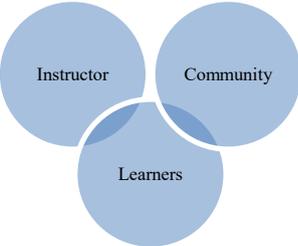
Among the many foreign languages offered by institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, many tertiary students opt to learn Mandarin not only because of its commercial value and wide practicality but also due to its influence in improving learning ability and lending added value in a job hunt (See & Ching, 2018). Therefore, using Mandarin to communicate in authentic situations should be the main goal of non-native Mandarin learners at the university. However, despite learning conversational forms of Mandarin, many learners continue to lack the confidence to communicate with native Mandarin speakers (Lew & Kaur, 2021).

Most effectively, learners need to use the language in the target language environment and culture (Lew et al., 2021). Listening and speaking skills can only be practiced in authentic situations to achieve commendable progress. It is important to note that language learning does not occur in the minds of learners in an isolated or detached process (Kaur, 2017). Instead, it is intertwined with the social context or milieu with which the learner operates and communicates with. However, what generally bothers Mandarin learners is that the activities of the course, such as simulation, listening test, writing test, and role-play, are all completed in the classroom, in simulated or contrived situations, where the opportunity to communicate with native speakers (the Chinese community) is starkly absent. Outside the classroom, they simply lack the will to experiment with the language and communicate with native Mandarin speakers.

Learners at institutions of higher learning should be more independent learners than middle school students. They need to embrace the concept of self-regulated learning (Van Eekelen et al., 2005) and master lifelong learning skills to become independent learners. However, Malaysian second or third language learners seem unable to apply what they have learned in the classroom (Kaur, 2013; Yong et al., 2016). It is a common phenomenon in Malaysian higher education where learners who have completed introductory Mandarin courses at university can barely communicate in the target language in their daily life, not even for rudimentary purposes. Lackluster contact hours of language classes and limited naturalistic environment suggest their inability to convey intended meaning or communicate in complete sentences (Yong et al., 2016). Most think that Mandarin-speaking skills are difficult to acquire (See & Ching, 2013), resulting in communication apprehension about Mandarin. Just as how Malaysian learners negatively perceive English (see Arulchelvan & Yunus, 2020; Kaur, 2017; Kaur, 2013), learning Mandarin is likewise perceived to be an academic subject whose importance is not placed on the purpose of real communication. This prevailing learning phenomenon is quite unhealthy as a lack of real-life situations reduces learners' performance and motivation to learn (Lan & Lin, 2016). Some learners may even perceive themselves in perpetual practice mode, not transcending to real meaning-making (Whitehead, 2021). Most learners learn in a non-target language environment. They are unfamiliar with the target language and have few opportunities to interact with native Mandarin speakers, resulting in communication apprehension. A previous study has shown that non-native Mandarin learners experience a certain degree of Mandarin-speaking anxiety, especially in situations that require them to speak spontaneously (Ting & Rijeng,

2018). Another study, however, found that using tasks could reduce learner anxiety to some degree and build confidence in the learning process (Bao & Du, 2015). As such, design tasks for learners cannot be confined to the classroom but need to involve tasks outside the classroom, involving authentic situations. In encouraging learners to improve Mandarin communication, establishing a firm connection between language learned in the classroom with authentic situations outside the classroom is the key, and instructors play an important role in this initiative. Table 1 compares TBLT between in-class and in authentic situations.

**Table 1: TBLT Comparison of In-Class and Authentic Situations**

	<b>In class</b>	<b>Inauthentic situations</b>
<b>Aim</b>	Promotes language learning	
<b>Standard</b>	The instructor needs to define the criteria for evaluating tasks clearly	
<b>Method</b>	Use the target language to communicate, focusing on the meaning of language, not form	
<b>Evaluation</b>	The instructor needs to evaluate tasks completed by learners	
<b>Area</b>	Classroom activities limited to classroom or university	Extracurricular activities, unlimited
<b>Subject</b>	Learners complete tasks with classmates/peers	Learners complete tasks with the community (native speakers)
<b>Interaction</b>	No interaction with the community	Have an interactive relationship with the community
<b>Role of instructor</b>	The instructor can observe and has control during the task	The instructor has no control during the task; students need to complete tasks independently
<b>Challenge and fun</b>	Relatively conservative and easy, the fun will decrease with repetition of the task	More unknown and challenging, more interesting
<b>Task situation</b>	Resembles real-word tasks	Integrates directly with authentic situations
<b>Relation with the community</b>		

### Literature Review

There is a linear relationship between foreign language learning and communication. In learning a foreign language, learners generally need to improve proficiency by using the target language. In a survey carried out on 24 multilingual experts by Middlebury Interactive Languages (n. d.) to probe the most useful skills in learning a new language, the common theme revealed that it is necessary to start using the language as soon as possible. It doesn't matter whether one is facing difficulty in learning or understands everything and speaks with perfect pronunciation and enunciation. Instead, it is important to use the language as much as possible and create as many opportunities to speak it. This means learners should speak

to learn. In teaching Mandarin as a foreign language, the discussion of the relationship between foreign language learning and communication can make instructors and learners pay more attention to the function of communication in foreign language learning.

### **Task-based Language Teaching**

Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) has been implemented for some time and has been recognized as an effective method to improve language communication skills (Edwards & Willis, 2005; Skehan, 2003) as it can offer learners real-time communication with the outside world. TBLT allows language instructors to create more opportunities and context for learners who lack environmental support. This is because a task as a tool can guide learners to engage in certain types of information processing activities that are essential for effective language use and/or for language acquisition from a theoretical perspective (Ellis, 2003). Ellis also provides a comprehensive and succinct definition for this since “a task is a work-plan that requires the learners to process language pragmatically to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed” (p. 4).

In China, where Mandarin is the first language (L1) for the mass population, research on TBLT methods in the field of Mandarin as a Foreign Language began later than in the domain of English language teaching. The earlier studies focused primarily on the theoretical aspects of TBLT. At the same time, research on the specific application of TBLT was relatively limited, but in recent years, research on TBLT application in the learning of Mandarin has seen gradual relevance. Research reports show that the practice of TBLT in Mandarin as a Foreign Language in China emphasizes a student-centered approach, combining classroom teaching and extracurricular tasks. (Ma, 2017; Peng, 2018; Wang, 2019). A study by Li (2017) showed that many foreigners are learning Mandarin in China, but few can speak it. Therefore, the main objective is to enable learners to transform the acquired Mandarin language knowledge into verbal communication skills. Compared with traditional teaching methods, situational teaching methods such as TBLT can better promote learners' Mandarin communicative ability. Several studies have affirmed the role of TBLT methods in the field. For example, it can link learners' real-life experiences and help reduce beginners' perception of Mandarin language difficulty (Peng, 2018). It can also create a relaxed learning atmosphere for learners and reduce learning anxiety (Liu, 2018). It is also viable in improving oral and communication skills (Song, 2019).

Outside China, research on TBLT methods with a focus on the learning of Mandarin as a second or foreign language has also gradually attracted attention, and the feasibility of TBLT methods has been explored through country-specific surveys (Du et al., 2017; Jiang, 2017; Tang, 2020; Yang, 2019). In Malaysia, the current literature on the TBLT method has generally focused more on English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. It is found that there is limited research on the practice of TBLT in the learning of Mandarin. However, it is acknowledged as one of the five most commonly used teaching methods in Mandarin university classrooms (Liu, 2017).

In summary, the TBLT approach in Mandarin teaching and learning contexts encourages learners to combine classroom learning with authentic situations in real life, promote language skills in completing tasks, and emphasize learning in use. TBLT approach allows learners to transform from passive to active learners and makes them more confident to move from classroom to society. Its positive effect is hence, worth further exploring.

### **Authentic Situations**

Although TBLT emphasizes the combination of classroom learning and authentic situations in real life, it only simulates authentic situations, and activities are still limited to the classroom. Ellis (2003) defines it as situationally authentic, which provides interactional authenticity. She believes it is a form of investment in the real world that creates a relationship with the real world. Earlier, Long (1985) defined a task as "... the hundred and one things people do in everyday life, at work, at play, and in between" (p. 89). Long emphasized that a task must involve real-world activities, for example, borrowing a library book, taking the driving test, typing a letter, or filling out forms. However, the consensus of TBLT is that tasks simulate communication in the real world, and many of them still stay in the stage of simulating the real situation. They regard TBLT as a classroom activity or exercise (Lee, 2000). As such, most TBLT studies have focused on the stage of interactional authenticity than being situationally authentic. Nonetheless, situationally authentic contexts emphasizing authentic situations in the TBLT should be in focus due to their positive effect.

Based on previous studies, this study considers the importance of TBLT in authentic situations. Language serves as a carrier of culture in authentic situations without real context. The language loses the value of communication. Language teaching is, thus, not only the transmission of language knowledge but also the transmission of the thinking mode, customs, culture, and values of a nation. The teaching materials of authentic situations allow learners to directly immerse in the target language and feel its cultural connotation through acculturation experiences, helping learners use the target language to express ideas and communicate real feelings. In this way, language learning is not only the stacking and display of grammar or vocabulary knowledge but also the process of understanding and feeling others. (Yan, Fu, & Wang, 2018). Secondly, authentic situations can improve the learning effect of learners. This is because authentic learning focuses on students' engagement in language tasks that involve real-world meaning. A large body of research has shown that real language learning (AULL) has positive learning effects, such as improvement of motivation, attitude, and language proficiency. (Shadiev et al., 2017).

In addition, TBLT in authentic situations can balance the relationship between the classroom and extracurricular activities. Nowadays, foreign language teaching is based on classroom teaching. When we bring foreign languages into our classroom, we sometimes get lost in the "modernist tenets of our profession" (Kramsch, 2014, p. 297), which entice us to rely on structures that are easy to classify, such as accuracy, standardization, and grammar (Kramsch, 2014). Research also shows that the language in and outside the classroom is distinctively different, and learners may confuse whether the language used outside the

classroom or in the classroom is real. In this context, TBLT in authentic situations can bridge the gap between the language acquired in the classroom and real life (Herrington et al., 2014; Ozverir et al., 2017). Finally, learners can experience authenticity. Due to the contrived nature of foreign language classrooms, learners often feel unreal. Studies have shown that the foreign language classroom becomes a game through the suspension of normal behavioral codes in exchange for an opportunity to practice, perform or prepare for real foreign language use. Whitehead (2021) and Harmer (2007) find the form-centered language teaching method inadequate and argue that it prevents students from obtaining natural input that will help them acquire language because it fails to give them opportunities to activate language knowledge. Studies have also shown that in a context where the target language is not used outside the school, using the guiding characteristics of authentic activities will allow learners to use the target language in a specific context. This, in turn, will facilitate the internalization of newly acquired language structures (Ozverir et al., 2017). Authentic situations of TBLT are important and deserve further attention.

### **Communication Apprehension**

The theory of foreign language learning anxiety was first propounded by Horwitz and Coped in 1986 and divided into communication apprehension or speaking anxiety, test anxiety, and a fear of negative evaluation. Communication apprehension occurs when learners' language vocabulary is far from their communication needs (Kaur, 2013), and they feel depressed and afraid in the communication process. However, when learners doubt their ability to express themselves and worry about their self-image, they experience fear of negative evaluation anxiety (Kaur, 2015). Studies have also shown that speaking a second language foreign language is an anxiety-laden experience for most learners (Kaur, 2015; 2013). In China, Qian (1999) adopted the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Level Model designed by Horwitz in 1999 to investigate and analyze the emotional anxiety of international students in learning Mandarin. The results showed that these foreign learners had a certain degree of anxiety due to their nationality and self-evaluation. In Malaysia, Mandarin learning anxiety is also evident among students in higher education. Compared with other studies, Malaysian tertiary students have a higher degree of Mandarin learning anxiety (Zhang, 2016). According to the FLCAS questionnaire survey conducted by Ting et al. (2016) on 210 learners at Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia, non-native Mandarin learners contended to have experienced moderate anxiety levels while learning Mandarin; the main factor that contributed to this anxiety was communication apprehension.

Similarly, Ting and Rijeng's (2018) study also revealed the leading cause of Mandarin-speaking anxiety is speaking Mandarin spontaneously. The study proposed that instructors give learners sufficient time for speaking preparation and create a relaxed Mandarin learning environment to decrease anxiety levels among non-native Mandarin learners. It also suggests further investigation through qualitative data. An earlier study by Chan et al. (2012) indicated the more familiar a learner is with the native speaker's manner of speech, the more confident they will be in being able to understand native speakers' speech, therefore, can respond confidently. Hence, the learning mode of more touch and feel familiar can

effectively alleviate the communicative anxiety that Mandarin learners experience. Recent research revealed that the more anxious learners are, the lower their performance would be, and the application of TBLT in the whole intervention process positively impacts learners' performance (Ramamurthy, 2019). When learners make positive statements, work in pairs or groups, complete tasks relevant to real-life contexts, and be treated equally, they experience less pressure (Ramamurthy, 2019).

The above studies indicate that the researchers have focused on learners' speaking anxiety and have provided some feasible suggestions for the problem, hoping to improve learners' confidence in speaking Mandarin by reducing their speaking anxiety. However, there has been no feedback or research on various suggestions and practices to reduce the speaking anxiety of non-native Mandarin learners. There is still a need for more guidance frameworks and discussions on the preparation of learners before speaking and creating a conducive and friendly Mandarin learning environment. Therefore, it is a worthy effort to explore further the application of TBLT in the real world and its influence on reducing non-native Mandarin learners' speaking anxiety. Hence, this paper discusses the relationship between communication apprehension and a fear of negative evaluation with TBLT. The TBLT activity described in this study is a specific case where learners interact with native Mandarin speakers in the real world and presents a guiding framework for non-native Mandarin learners to reduce communication apprehension. This study believes that this is the first step to integrating Mandarin as a foreign language into the community and applying the principle of learning by drawing up the following research objectives.

## **Research Objectives**

Based on the discussion on TBLT and its implementation, the following objectives guided the research.

1. To identify the feelings and perceptions of non-native Mandarin learners when communicating with native Mandarin speakers.
2. To identify the problems, non-native Mandarin learners face when communicating with native Mandarin speakers.
3. To analyze the causes of the psychological barriers and operational difficulties encountered by non-native Mandarin learners when communicating with native Mandarin speakers.
4. To investigate the functional role of TBLT in overcoming communicative anxiety and encourage non-native Mandarin learners to seek more opportunities to communicate with native Mandarin speakers.

## **Research Questions**

The study sought to probe the following questions:

1. What are the affective states of non-native Mandarin learners when using Mandarin to complete tasks with native Mandarin speakers?

2. What psychological/mental barriers and operational difficulties do non-native Mandarin learners face when doing communication tasks with native Mandarin speakers?
3. What are the causes of the psychological barriers and operational difficulties faced by non-native Mandarin learners when doing communication tasks with native Mandarin speakers?
4. What is the influence and effect of TBLT on non-native Mandarin learners in reducing their communicative anxiety?

## **Methodology**

### **Research Population**

The sample was chosen from an accessible population of 75 students (n=75) who registered for a third-level basic Mandarin course at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. These learners had been learning Mandarin for one and a half years and could manage basic Mandarin skills. They were students from three different faculties - Faculty of Business and Management (33), Faculty of Applied Science (22), and Faculty of Computer and Mathematical Sciences (20). All learners were given the communication task for the first time. Since the task was to be completed during the semester break and all participants were back in their hometowns. Thus, learners' interactions were not geographically limited but included all states in Malaysia (for example, Kedah, Penang, Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur, and Johor).

### **Operational Mode**

According to Richards (2006), speaking activities have three primary functions: to talk as interaction, to talk as a transaction, and to talk as performance. Interaction can occur in a formal or informal setting and focuses on the participants and their social needs. Generally, when people meet, they greet each other, do the opening and closing conversations, make small talk, recount past experiences, and extend compliments to each other. The second type of activity is a transaction that focuses on messages. Examples of these activities are classroom group discussions, making a telephone call to obtain information, buying something in a shop, taking an order from a restaurant menu, and other problem-solving activities, as well as activities that focus on giving and receiving information. On the other hand, the third type of oral activity focuses on performance which requires participants to have a general structure and formal language in delivering information. After considering these various factors, this study emphasized the connection with authentic situations and opted for the first type of activity, interaction as the scope of TBLT activity, and the influence and effect of TBLT on learner communication.

Since the TBLT design in this study assumes that TBLT in authentic situations can reduce learner anxiety in communication and enhance self-confidence and enjoyment in learning, the design of the model adheres to the following principles:

1. Principle of authenticity: The task is not to simulate reality. Instead, it is a situation that happens in the real world.
2. Principle of communicativeness: The task allows learners to interact with native speakers, observe each other's language and life, and understand each other's culture.
3. Principle of fun: The topic of the task is familiar for learners and can increase their interest in participating in the activity.
4. Principle of gradual progress: The task should provide learners with a relaxed and stress-free atmosphere. The task begins as a manageable activity and gradually increases in difficulty, making it more challenging and fun for learners.
5. Principle of diverse assessment: Evaluation should be more comprehensive and diverse, focusing not only on the performance of the activity but also on learners' self-reflection and learning progress.

To operationalize the study, first, the instructor designed a task for learners to be completed during a week-long holiday; learners were required to find a native Mandarin speaker for a simple conversational interview, ask at least three questions using Mandarin and listen to their answers. Examples of questions are: i) What's your name? ii) How old are you? iii) Where are you from? iv) Are you studying or working? v) What's your job?

Specifically, this task was carried out in three stages - pre-task, during a task, and post-task. Before the task, the instructor introduced the topic to pique the learner's interest by activating topic-related words and phrases. Clear explanations and guidelines of the task were offered to learners. The instructor reminded and drove home the point amongst learners that mistakes and errors are a natural part of the foreign language learning process. In performing the task, learners were also required to record the interview. Upon completing the task, the instructor and learners discussed and summarised the task together in a debriefing session. Learners were requested to answer a questionnaire of multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions to understand their background, the process, and the performance of the task.

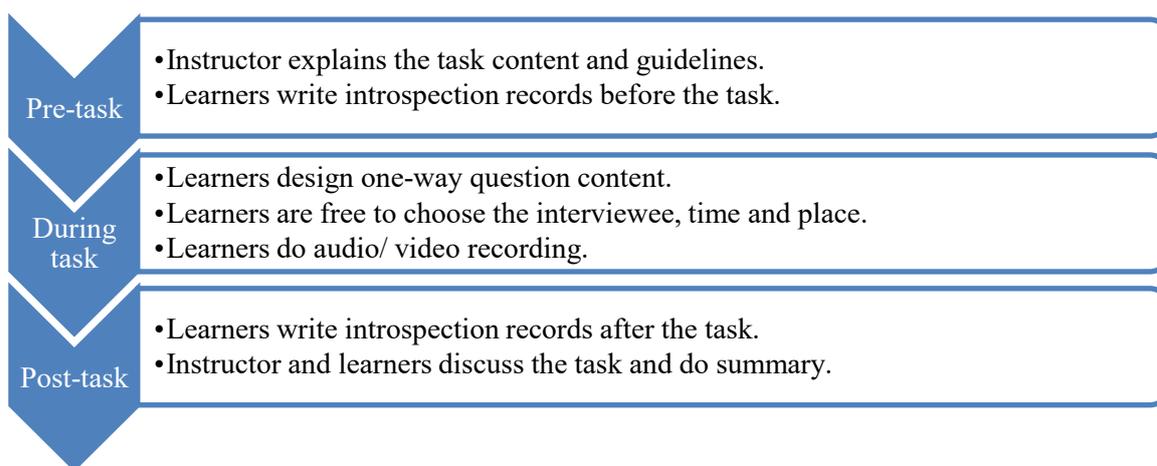


Figure 1: TBLT Model in Authentic Situations

### Data Collection Procedures

This study combines qualitative and quantitative procedures. This hybrid study design was used to obtain more detailed and reliable research results.

As questionnaires are unable to reflect learners' emotions and experiences entirely after a clear operational framework were established, the instructor requested learners to complete at least two introspection records - before and after the task, where they had to record their feelings, mental states, perceptions and experiences before and after the task. The study required learners to take notes and record sentiments relevant to the specific research questions. Examples of related questions and requirements were i) How did you feel when you received the task; ii) What feelings and thoughts did you experience during the task; iii) How did you feel after the task; iv) Please describe the steps and circumstances of your task; v) What problems did you encounter in the task; vi) How did you solve the problems you faced; vii) How do you feel about this task. The instructor collected the introspective records and coded and analyzed them accordingly. These introspection records formed part of the analysis of the problems and mental states that learners experienced while completing the task.

### Findings

This study revealed that more than 80% of learners experienced using Mandarin to communicate with native Mandarin speakers for the first time. About 13% had previous interactions in Mandarin with native speakers.

### Selection of Interviewees

Firstly, we analyzed the interviewees selected by learners and the types of situations/conversations they engaged in. Based on the questionnaire and introspection records, the interviewees that learners sought can be categorized as three types: a) random strangers, b) native Mandarin speakers working in different fields (such as supermarket clerks, drivers, owners of grocery and convenience stores, electrical store employees), c) Chinese individuals known to them (namely friends, ex-classmates, neighbors).

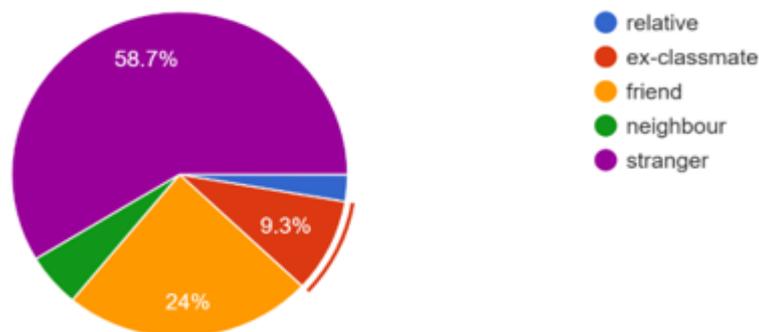


Figure 2: Types of Interviewees

Is this the first time you communicated with the Chinese community in Mandarin?  
(excluding your Mandarin Teacher)

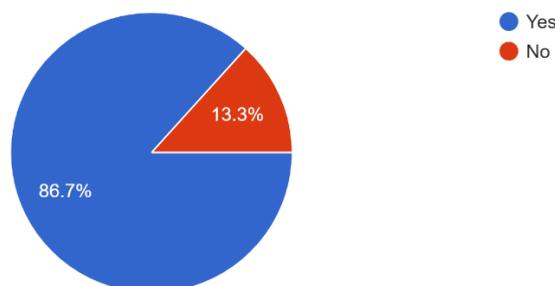


Figure 3: Communication with Chinese

Interestingly, it was found that more than half the learners (58.7%) opted to interview strangers. Most of the learners said in class that they had never communicated with the Chinese community before. The questionnaire results also showed that 86.7% of learners indicated that this was the first time they communicated with the Chinese community in Mandarin. This is commendable as it shows the ability to pluck courage, be forthcoming in completing tasks, and demonstrate an interest in seeking out Chinese (native speakers) interlocutors. Some learners took the initiative to look for interviewees from different shops or specific places, some learners waited and looked for the Chinese on the streets. The native speakers working in the different fields were, on the whole, willing to join the tasks, although there were admissions by learners (S46) about having to “wait patiently due to their busy schedule”, which did not stop them. These learners who sought out strangers also needed more luck because there were remote instances of being declined to be interviewed (S52, S37).

The rest (41.3%) have known their Chinese associates, for example, ex-classmates, friends, and neighbors, and selected people known to them for interviews. According to learners’ introspection records, there was no problem encountered when communicating with the Chinese they already knew, and the task went smoothly. One of the learners (S23) said: “I went to my neighbor's house, and she was a hairdresser. Whenever I go home, I ask her to trim my hair; I am her loyal customer. We often gossip and share stories.” The learner said they usually communicate in Malay, but this is the first time she attempted Mandarin in her conversation with the hairdresser.

### **Pre, During, Post Task Affective States**

Next, we analyzed the interaction between learners and interviewees before, during, and after the task and its effect on learners’ affective states.

The respondents noted they were generally happy to take on the task. This is supported by their reports which showed they initiated the conversation and always made a typical opening remark to the interviewee before the task, such as introducing themselves, informing the purpose of the task, asking whether the interviewee was free to join the task, and soliciting basic information of the interviewee. This indicates a good level of preparedness and positivity among learners in embracing the task. It was also reported that some interviewees took the initiative to correct learners' sentences and pronunciation. For example, "he corrects my pronunciation after we have completed the tasks" (S16), and "he gives me tips to speak in Chinese" (S33), which the learner well appreciated in the spirit of learning and self-improvement. Other interviewees solicited personal information or opinions to create a warm atmosphere, such as "where are you studying?", "how many years you have learned Chinese?", "is it fun to learn Mandarin?" (S08, S22, S45), all of which created a positive rapport at the start of the task, making it a lot more manageable and a happy experience for learners?

Responses from interviewees after the task were more diverse than expected. In addition to the most basic of praise, blessing, and encouragement, such as "she wishes that I can get A in my Mandarin language exam" (S28), "he encourages me to work hard in learning to speak Chinese" (S45). Some learners were also delighted with the unexpected gifts from the interviewees, such as face creams (S36, visited a beauty product shop) and free drinks. Many learners indicated that the attitude of interviewees affected their mood in the reflection records. Three of them (S04, S17, and S67) recorded this: "I was worried that interviewees were unwilling to cooperate with me before I started. After the interview, I found that she cooperated very well", "When I undertook this task, I was afraid and had no confidence. The process was easy and smooth, thanks to Ashley being nice and open. I felt relieved and happy that Ashley understood my every question" "When I began to speak, I trembled. Thankfully, the Grab driver was patient and smiled, which made me feel better. After finishing the task, I felt honored because I began to have the courage to talk in Chinese." Responses from interviewees made learners feel that their questions had been answered and that they were valued. Overall, interviewees gave positive responses to learners. Hence their first experience of using Mandarin to communicate with the Chinese community came to a successful end.

### Psychological Barriers, Operational Difficulties, and the Causes

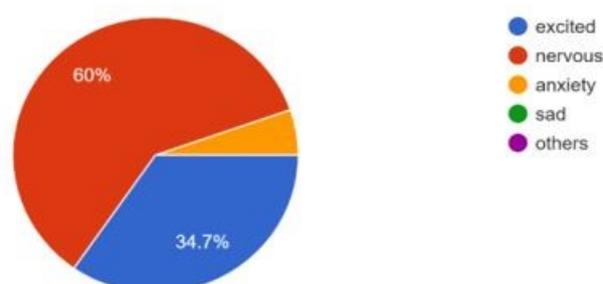


Figure 3: The affective States during the Task

Kaur (2015; 2013) has indicated that anxiety in foreign or second language learning is related to language contexts such as speaking, listening, and learning, as well as anxiety-specific situations. According to the results of this study, more than 60% of learners experienced tension and anxiety, while 34% said they were excited. From learners' introspection records before performing the task, learners' emotions can be divided into three types: one is a positive emotion, such as happiness, excitement, and fun; the second is a negative emotion, such as anxiety, tension, fear, shyness, confusion, no confidence, and sadness; the third is a mixed feeling and complex emotions. When receiving the task, those with positive emotions assumed that the task would provide them with the opportunity to use Mandarin in public places, practice what they had learned, and have the opportunity to communicate with other ethnic groups. This shows that learners look forward to the opportunity to “activate language knowledge” (Harmer, 2007, p. 49) and “internalization of newly acquired language structures” (Ozverir et al., 2017, p. 272).

Learners' anxiety was triggered by two aspects - language ability and personality problems. The psychological barriers of learners were: a) some were worried about the poor effect when communicating with the Chinese community because they still hadn't mastered the Mandarin language; b) some felt they might not be able to complete the task well because they had no experience; c) some thought their introverted personality would affect the result of the task; d) some felt they were shy, so they didn't feel confident when they need to communicate with the Chinese in Mandarin. MacIntyre (1999) developed the idea that learners' personality characteristics cause foreign language anxiety, among which risk awareness and tolerance of ambiguity are the two most important influencing factors. This indicates that learners who are cowardly, lack self-confidence, and lack a risk-taking spirit are more likely to be in fear than ordinary learners. This can be seen through learners' introspection records. One of the learners (S19) wrote:

I am nervous and a little scared when I am given this task. I worry about my Mandarin pronunciation. I am also worried that if the pronunciation is incorrect, it will cause misunderstanding between the interviewee and me. I am scared and shy because I'm an introvert, and it's hard for me to start a conversation with someone I don't know.

Another learner (S54) also mentioned her anxiety, saying, “I can't speak Mandarin fluently. I am shy, and I am afraid of making mistakes. I am going to deal with real Chinese.” The learners' feedback, for example, the words “shy” and “introverted”, can be explained as they are self-conscious that their personality affects their communication with others in Mandarin. Thus, they face social anxiety and anxiety of negative evaluation. They feel nervous and anxious because they are unable to pronounce words correctly and can't speak Mandarin fluently, which will lead to less desirable results, such as misunderstanding between the two sides. Learners are also worried because they assume that others would have a negative evaluation of them. For example, S54 especially emphasized that they are dealing with the actual Chinese community, and the fear is that they would certainly know if she made a mistake. Of course, there are learners (S28) who are more willing to accept new things; she had mixed feelings when receiving the task: “I am very nervous and don't have the

confidence to interview others. But on the other hand, it's exciting because I can practice what I've learned.”

In practical operation, reports showed learners were faced with the problems of the interviewee, traffic, the surroundings (environment), and recording. However, their continuous attempts and efforts resolved all these problems and challenges. For example, S17 wrote:

I am worried about finding suitable interviewees. I went to Tesco Kota Bharu to look for it, but many people turned me down. I didn't give up, so finally, I changed my approach, went to Matrikulasi, and found a learner willing to accept my interview.

Similarly, when the environment was too noisy for an interview, S68 chose to change their location: “The playground was too noisy for an interview, so we moved to another place.” Others chose to continue their interview in the same places, such as restaurants or trains, but they had to increase their volume (S22, S54). Some learners were dissatisfied with their recording effect, so they had to rerecord. S57 said: “I feel nervous about asking questions and recording simultaneously until I forgot to record the conversation.”

#### TBLT Effect on Reducing Communicative Anxiety

When probed if learners would find the courage to communicate with the Chinese community in Mandarin in the future, the following results emerged.

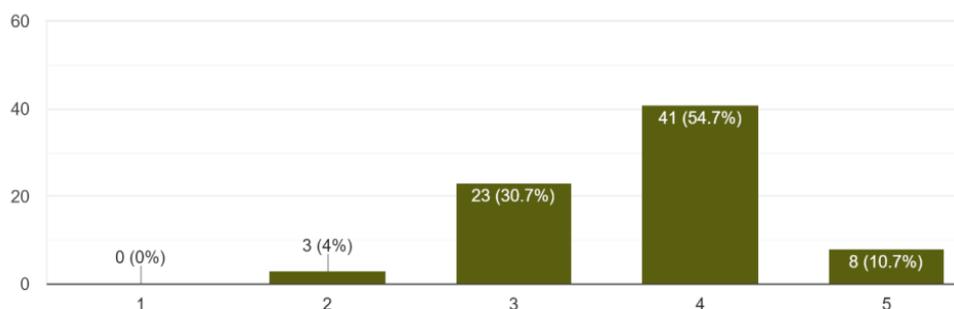


Figure 4: Learners Who Would Communicate with Native Speakers Again

According to the questionnaire, about 65% of learners became more inspired to communicate with the Chinese community after this task. Learners' feedback in their introspection records showed 100% positive responses. Most learners believed the task provided them with many opportunities, such as the opportunity to practice what they had learned and to communicate further with others. Examples of learners' introspection records were “I felt very excited during the whole process, because I had the experience of speaking Mandarin outside, and before that, I only used Mandarin in the classroom” (S28); “I feel my Mandarin has improved and feel more confident in using it in public” (S17); “I feel very happy. I feel more confident to speak Chinese with native Chinese speaker” (S42). Many learners also reported positive transitions after the task, significantly when it helped them build confidence in communication. This improvement is in line with other research on

outdoor environment and oral English skills through interview analysis. It has also shown that learners believed the authentic outdoor environment increased their confidence and intrinsic motivation to develop verbal English skills. Learners are usually more willing to communicate in the target language due to increased confidence, authentic language use, and interesting learning styles (Myhre & Fiskum, 2020). As one of the learners reflected introspectively: “I approach the task as a challenge. But after completing the task, it inspired me, and I hope to use Mandarin often or try to use it in society in the future” (S42). Another learner (S17) said: “I felt nervous and shy before I started because I had to talk to someone else; But after completing the task, I feel very excited. An interviewee is not enough!” This renewed confidence and excitement in communicating with native Mandarin speakers (Chinese learners) undoubtedly surpassed all cultural barriers and preconceived prejudices that learners may have held about the Chinese community. None of the respondents recorded or expressed sentiments of cultural inhibitions, prejudice, or uncomfortable racial sentiments when conducting the interviews with their Chinese interlocutors. This dispels the notion (if any) that the learners feared the Chinese community, as evidently, heightened confidence implies the notion of cultural differences did not impose a hindrance to communication in any way.

## **Discussion**

The results of this study have revealed four significant advantages of TBLT, which follow five principles to help learners reduce communication apprehension and encourage them to communicate with native Mandarin speakers more confidently. First, the task provided learners with participatory topic choices. Learners needed to carry out the most basic and simple interaction content of self-introduction when meeting people for the first time. Research shows that if the topic chosen by the instructor is beyond the scope of the learner’s knowledge or ability, the learner will have a certain degree of anxiety (Qi, 2008). Secondly, learners were free to choose the time, place, and suitable interviewee. The more elements they mastered before communication, the more confident they would be. For example, the learners could start the interview with their familiar old classmates, friends, and neighbors and have the alternative of choosing a suitable place. Thirdly, in this task, learners as interviewers were active participants who prepared and practiced in advance to reduce the pressure and anxiety of immediate response during conversations. If learners have enough preparation before speaking, their anxiety will also be reduced (Ting & Rijeng, 2018). For language learners, proper repetition and mechanical practice are necessary because constant repetition of unfamiliar topics can also help to organize and formulate speech content (Qiu, 2020). Even learners with weak abilities could rely on some fixed phrases to strengthen their confidence in communication. Fourthly, the dialogue was stored in the form of recording, not on-site performance and evaluation. Even if the learner made a mistake, as long as the interviewee was willing, the learners could rerecord the conversation, so learners had the opportunity to learn through mistakes. In addition, the form of recording is also convenient for learners to listen, self-evaluate, modify, note positive reinforcement and error correction (Lai & Zhao, 2006).

Next, we will further discuss details on the influence and function of this TBLT from three aspects, namely, the response of interviewees, negative assumptions of interviewers, and authentic situations for learning.

1. ***Responses of interviewees.*** This study found that interviewees' attitudes affect the psychological state of learners' communication, and friendly interviewees can reduce learner anxiety in completing the task. Rejection, unfriendliness, and distrust of interviewees will affect learner confidence, and they will feel frustrated even before they begin. One learner (S52) recorded: "The problem I have is that it is complicated to meet Chinese in XX city, and some of them are very proud, which makes me feel bad." Here, we need to pay attention to the psychological changes of learners in communication. They would hope to get the interviewees' approval in communication. When the situation is not as expected, learners feel pain, anger, self-pity, indecisiveness, and finally quit (Qi, 2008). Conversely, if learners feel that their words can be understood, they will feel that they can speak or even want to speak more (Yan, Fu, & Wang, 2018). Hence, socially friendly responses are essential as they help reduce learners' anxiety levels.
2. ***Negative assumptions of interviewers.*** Although many participants in this study had negative emotions and thoughts, such as worry and lack of confidence when they received the task, while more than 60% still felt nervous and anxious during the task, this situation changed after the task was completed. At the end of the task, all the learners in this study gave 100% positive comments on the task assigned to them. They did not think that it would not work, although some of them had encountered operational difficulties. Instead, they thought it was interesting to communicate with native Chinese speakers in Mandarin. The reason for learners' nervousness before and during the task was because most of their communication exercises had previously been conducted in class, and they had only communicated with non-native Mandarin speakers they were familiar with. Most of them had never communicated with native Mandarin speakers before. When they accepted the task of communicating with native Mandarin speakers, they had many uncertainties in their minds. They were uncertain whether their Mandarin proficiency, pronunciation, or sentences were up to the mark for the task. All this stemmed from the situation where learners were unaware of the reality, therefore, were not confident in facing the situation. Several studies have found that low confidence leads to fear of public communication (. But once the learners completed the task, a positive change was experienced in their minds. This is because, in authentic situations, most interviewees provided friendly responses when learners spoke, such as giving hints, keywords, and smiles, which made the interviewers feel the warmth. Such personal experience made learners aware that real-world practice is not as daunting as they had thought. Although their language is non-standard, it is still acceptable in practical, social communication, as most respondents were willing to reach out for more support and help. From this study, it was found that experiencing and practicing situations in person can help eliminate negative assumptions, improve self-confidence, and reduce communication apprehension. This also reflects the vital function of TBLT in

authentic situations, which can cement the gap between language acquired in the classroom and real-life (Herrington et al., 2014; Ozverir et al., 2017).

3. ***Fun learning in a real environment.*** This study found that all learners gave an affirmative evaluation of TBLT. Many learners were nervous and anxious before performing the task, but they felt satisfied and experienced much satisfaction after completing the task. According to research, real-life activities of authentic situations create a fun learning environment that allows learners to move around freely and without anxiety. The more they engage in these activities, the less anxious they will be (Ramamurthy, 2019). Interestingly, compared to communicating in class, learners may not be as anxious as we think when they practice speaking outside the classroom, which is the actual (authentic) situation. According to research in China, some international students feel a higher degree of anxiety in the classroom because the teacher would correct their mistakes, so they are psychologically nervous and afraid of making mistakes. After class, because of the wide range of subjects to speak, including the Chinese community, classmates, and language partners, international students are more relaxed. Hence, the anxiety about speaking Mandarin is reduced (Yu, 2013). Being authentic can reduce learners' retreat from being tied up by the "accuracy, standardization, and grammar" (Kramsch, 2014, p. 297) of foreign language learning in the classroom. Mandarin classes should encourage more TBLT methods involving authentic situations. Von Worde (2003) suggests that teachers create a relaxed atmosphere for beginners and include topics of interest to learners. TBLT method improves learners' participation, provides new experiences and opportunities for authentic communication, meets learners' immediate needs, and enhances confidence in communication. This study believes that if learners are given similar tasks several times or repeatedly, they would be more confident communicating with native Mandarin speakers.

This TBLT is the first step for learners to practice the language in an authentic situation, allowing them to understand that using the third language in authentic situations is not as difficult as they may perceive it to be. Mandarin instructors should encourage learners to integrate language into their lives. For example, when they go to a Chinese store or meet a Chinese salesman or sales assistant, they can try to greet them and ask about the price of items in Mandarin. They can also try reading and understanding simple Chinese characters on signboards and menus. They can use Mandarin online, even if it is only a short sentence daily. Only by integrating language into life, the language will belong to the learners. Hence, the first step is the most crucial as it instills awareness, confidence, and belief that it is not daunting, and there is a lot of attainment value in integrating the use of a third language in real-life situations.

This study proves that TBLT in authentic situations positively influences and reduces learners' communication anxiety, enhancing communicative confidence and learning enjoyment. When learners' communicative skills improve, they will be more willing and courageous to participate in TBLT involving authentic situations, thus forming a virtuous circle.

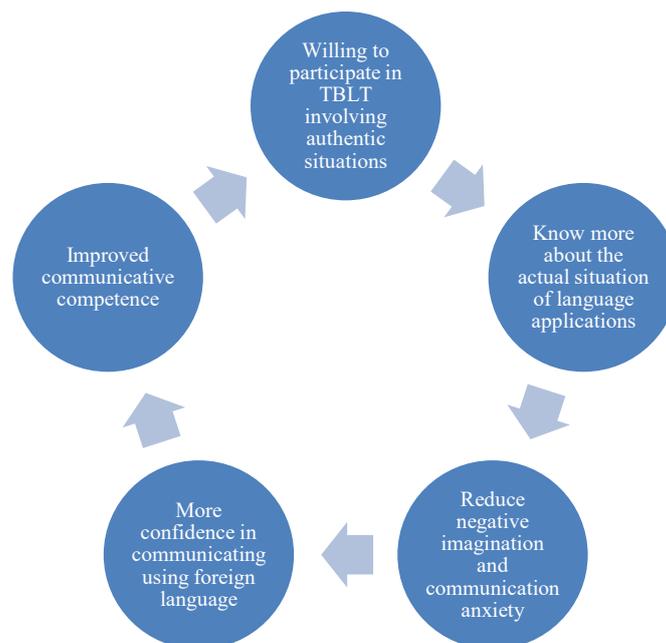


Figure 5: TBLT Involving Authentic Situations and Improving Communication Skills

## Conclusions and Recommendations

There have been many studies on the need for learners to use the target language in real life. After many years of learning Mandarin, we hope to see that learners can conduct essential communication in their daily lives. However, many cannot initiate the first step of communication in daily activities due to passive personality and lack of opportunities to communicate with native Mandarin speakers. Therefore, TBLT in authentic situations plays an important role in this context.

In addressing the objectives of the study, the study has found that most learners felt excited, yet some were nervous and anxious during the TBLT tasks. The anxiety was mainly caused by their limited language ability, compounded by introverted personality traits. These learners felt worried that their performance was not ideal and that respondents (the native Mandarin community) would negatively evaluate them. In overcoming these, learners rose to the challenge. They could overcome and solve all the operational difficulties easily, even though many of these operational difficulties occurred during unprecedented situations. This study found that after communicating with native Mandarin speakers, learners' feelings and perceptions began to change, from worry and anxiety to excitement and relaxation. The experience of internal “combat” or conflicts could eliminate many of their negative assumptions, cement the gap between classroom language acquisition and real-life practical language experience, and learners find renewed confidence in communicating with native Mandarin speakers.

This TBLT method is not the mainstream approach to teaching. Nevertheless, it needs to be integrated into the curriculum, lest learners will only learn the classroom language rather than the language that can be used in real life. Therefore, instructors must offer essential

opportunities and platforms for learners to experiment with classroom learning in authentic situations beyond the classroom walls. Some learners may need support or some form of trigger or stimulant to help them engage with target speakers. In this regard, instructors are crucial in providing as many opportunities as possible for learners to communicate with native Mandarin speakers. The more familiar learners are with the way native Mandarin speakers communicate, the more confident they will be in understanding and responding to the conversation (Chan et al., 2012). In this framework of TBLT, learners begin to realize the importance of language practice, reduce communication apprehension, and build self-confidence. Thus the seed of interaction with the Chinese society is sowed for successful germination in the future.

Additionally, this study did not incorporate the entire cycle of long-term observation of the TBLT model. The full TBLT model involves multiple tasks at different stages, which require learners to complete three stages of tasks involving authentic situations in one semester. The tasks of the second and third stages in the entire cycle will gradually increase in challenge and difficulty for learners' interview questions. However, due to the sudden outbreak of the pandemic, the first task has been completed thus far. Therefore, this study reports the results of the first stage task. In this way, future research can obtain more observations from the long-term process. Due to the positive results of the first stage task, this study infers that the second and third stage tasks will also develop and yield positive outcomes.

Future research on TBLT in authentic situations can also explore and integrate other theoretical frameworks such as experiential learning, learner autonomy, socio-cultural perspectives in learning, and metacognition in learning with TBLT to obtain a comprehensive and varied perspective on the implementation of TBLT at higher learning institutions.

Although many TBLT forms involve authentic situations using technology-assisted communication such as media platforms to communicate, the researchers believe it is still necessary for learners to integrate with the community. This is because language exists to close the gap and narrow the perceived distance among people. Learners cannot always stay in the virtual world with computers and the Internet. At this stage, we cannot physically go into the community with ease, but we can do the necessary preparation and hope when the time is right. We can encourage learners to integrate with the community again and experience the relevance and need for communicating with people through authentic communicative language.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that no conflict of interest was recorded in carrying out and reporting this study.

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