

INNOVATING TASK-BASED MANDARIN LEARNING FOR BUDDHIST STUDIES STUDENTS AT NALANDA INSTITUTE

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Abstract:

As Mandarin grows in global importance, this study examines task-based online instruction in Mandarin II, the follow-up course to basic Mandarin I, for Buddhist Studies students at Nalanda Institute. The research explores how distance education can effectively develop Mandarin writing and speaking skills through structured tasks. It specifically examines the role of technology in supporting independent language acquisition. The learning objectives focus on writing and speaking practice, with tasks progressing from copying Chinese characters to constructing sentences and paragraphs, as well as recording spoken phrases and sentences. Ten students participated in this study. Their learning experience was structured using David Merrill's instructional design principles, which shaped an outcome-based curriculum. Data collection included course design documents, learning process journals, student task assessments, and self-evaluations of progress. Key findings reveal that online Mandarin learning requires additional support mechanisms when teachers are not physically present, emphasizing the importance of integrating technology such as recorded audio, modules, and Quizlet to facilitate independent practice. Students faced challenges, particularly with Mandarin tones in speaking exercises, yet remained motivated to persist. Encouragement and constructive feedback were crucial in sustaining their engagement, despite the acknowledged difficulty of learning Mandarin in a distance learning environment. The study highlights the necessity of structured technological and motivational support to enhance task-based language learning outcomes in online settings.

Keywords: Mandarin instruction, online learning, task-based learning

INTRODUCTION

As Mandarin Chinese's global importance grows, so does its importance as a language for international business, diplomacy, and religious communication. Mandarin language is essential for undergraduate Buddhist students to interact with source literature and participate in global religious debates as China's influence grows (Guo, 2024; Yang et al., 2022). Mandarin's grammatical complexity and Buddhist Studies' lexicon present considerable hurdles for learners and instructors (Hong et al., 2023; Tahsildar, 2019; Yang et al., 2022). Developing language skills and cultural awareness through pedagogy is crucial.

New developments in education technology, like AI-powered tools and adaptable learning apps, could help make personalized, task-based learning experiences that keep students interested and motivated (J. Gao, 2024; Sim, 2025; Sim et al., 2023). Studies about real-life situations show that using technology to improve lessons can help students do better in school and be more involved (Chua et al., 2024; Wijaya & Lukas, 2025). Using AI and smart tools in Mandarin classes is important to provide Buddhist Education students the language skills they need to work well with others around the world.

Even while speaking and writing in Mandarin are crucial, research shows that very few students have sufficient reading comprehension of Mandarin structures (Y. Gao et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2023). Morphological awareness improves language skills, making it a must-have in programs (Ke, 2025). Furthermore, educational practices that encourage deeper morphological analysis and metacognitive awareness are required to solve comprehension issues.

Despite the efficacy of task-based learning (TBL) in improving language skills, there is still a deficiency in the application of these principles to online Mandarin learning for Buddhist Education students. By examining how task-based online Mandarin training, informed by evidence-based instructional design frameworks, might assist students in acquiring critical written and spoken skills, this study seeks to close this gap. The present research focuses on Mandarin II at the Nalanda Institute and aims to help improve Mandarin classes that are tailored to the needs of Buddhist Education students.

METHOD

This study examines task-based online instruction in Mandarin II, a Nalanda Institute undergraduate Buddhist Studies subject. The study highlights Mandarin on these students' linguistic challenges, attempting to structure distance education to improve writing and speaking through carefully designed tasks. First, students copy Chinese characters, then write words and paragraphs, and finally record spoken utterances. This scaffolding strategy matches students' Mandarin proficiency and confidence.

Using David Merrill's First Principles of Instruction as a base, the course focuses on problem-based learning, activating previous knowledge, demonstration, application, and integration. Meaningful, real-world exercises in this outcome-based program encourage active engagement and language skill development. Ten students took part in the study, which gave researchers a good chance to see how well this task-based, technology-supported method works in an online setting.

Mixed-methods data collection was used to examine learning processes and outcomes. Course design documents describing the instructional framework, student-maintained learning process notebooks, writing and speaking assignments, and self-assessments were used. This triangulated strategy used qualitative and quantitative ideas to strengthen outcomes. The research used digital technology to improve task execution and feedback, enabling rapid, tailored responses needed to motivate distant learners. This research aims to develop effective Mandarin instruction models for specialized learners to improve their language skills and intercultural readiness for global interaction.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Student data strongly correlates with instructor teaching strategies, demonstrating the efficacy of various learning enables and self-assessment methods in increasing Mandarin skill. Students' use of varied learning materials, language acquisition strategies, and self-evaluation could reveal their learning processes (Sim, 2025; Yang et al., 2022). The findings emphasize the importance of systematic instructional design in improving linguistic proficiency, especially in Buddhist Education, where language and cultural comprehension are essential for participation.

Learning resource usage supports introductory instructional design ideas. Listening to recordings helped 90% of children pronounce words, demonstrating the power of auditory materials. Merrill's principle of demonstration states that pupils learn best by copying skilled models. Although 70% of students utilized Quizlet for vocabulary practice, the levels of agreement suggest spaced repetition for vocabulary recall. Majority students claimed rewatching Zoom recordings helped them learn. Reflective learning is supported by metacognitive theories that emphasize self-monitoring. Finally, the overwhelming consensus that Zoom and non-Zoom sessions are equally valuable illustrates that blended learning may achieve diverse learning goals. Diversity in language learning resources is significant, especially in Buddhist Education, where linguistic and cultural abilities are essential for effective involvement (Hong et al., 2023; Tahsildar, 2019).

Table 1. Students Evaluation of the Learning Resources and Materials

No.	The Use of Learning Resources and Materials	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree
1.	I model and follow along with the pronunciation on the recording during practice.	1 (10%)	9 (90%)	-
2.	I use Quizlet for practice.	2 (20%)	5 (50%)	3 (30%)
3.	I rewatched the Zoom recordings to strengthen my learning during synchronous sessions.	3 (30%)	6 (60%)	10 (10%)
4.	Zoom sessions and non-Zoom sessions are equally important in supporting my learning process.	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	-

Students' learning plans provide greater evidence that they are following what the instructor advice. All students strongly agreed (20%) or agreed (80%) that they break up long words or texts. This supports cognitive-load theory by breaking it down for better comprehension. Additionally, 90% of students noted or wrote down difficult terms to review. They actively learned new words, which consists of spaced repetition and retrieval practice. This strategy allows kids to retain difficult words for a long time and improves their recall of them. Most students (90%) study one line or a few sentences to improve pronunciation. Mandarin relies on tonal distinctions for communication. This step-by-step pronunciation practice supports phonetic learning theories that state learning smaller pieces first builds confidence. Students are implementing the proposed techniques well, which is helping them become more independent and confident in their language learning (J. Gao, 2024; Sim et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2022).

Table 2. Students Evaluation of the Strategies for Learning

No.	Strategies for Learning	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree
1.	I divide long sentences or texts into smaller chunks to make learning easier.	2 (20%)	8 (80%)	
2.	I mark or write down difficult vocabulary for repeated study.	2 (20%)	7 (70%)	1 (10%)
3.	I try to learn pronunciation by studying one sentence or a few sentences at a time.	3 (30%)	6 (60%)	1 (10%)

Based on their work quality ratings, students are devoted to developing their Mandarin skills via focused practice. Note that 90% of students strongly agreed (30%) or agreed (60%) that they practice pronouncing and reading aloud. This active engagement with spoken language is essential for gaining fluency and confidence, emphasizing the significance of oral exercise in language learning. All students indicated they recorded their pronunciation practice numerous times before submitting. In total 40% strongly agreed, 60% agreed. This step-by-step strategy improves pronunciation and allows pupils to self-assess and make modifications. 90% of pupils compared their practice recordings to teacher examples. At least 30% strongly agreed and 60% agreed. Self-correction improves as they learn Mandarin pronunciation nuances and

tones. These findings show that students actively use self-evaluation procedures to improve Mandarin ability (J. Gao, 2024).

Table 3. Students Self-Evaluate Quality of Their Completed Tasks

No.	Self-Evaluate Quality of Completed Tasks	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree
1.	I practice pronouncing and reading aloud.	3 (30%)	6 (60%)	1 (10%)
2.	I recorded my pronunciation practice several times before submitting it to the instructor.	4 (40%)	6 (60%)	
3.	I compare my practice recordings with the example recordings provided by the instructor.	3 (30%)	6 (60%)	1 (10%)

Table 4 presents student opinions on learning problems and progress, which match quantitative data and triangulate the findings. Stroke precision and tonal pronunciation made Hanzi writing difficult for students. These issues are backed by quantitative evidence showing that 90% of students studied pronunciation in smaller parts. Despite these obstacles, students believed the exercises helped them learn Mandarin and write Hanzi. A prior study found that methodical practice and self-assessment help learners. In the previous review of learning resources, students valued the course's cultural insights, underlining the need to teach language with cultural understanding (Alindra & Romy, 2022).

Table 4. Students' View on Learning Challenges and Achievements

No.	Challenges in Learning	Progress in Learning
1.	The difficulty in writing Hanzi is that the strokes, which are upward, downward, long, and short, cannot be precise or straight. Meanwhile, the difficulty in pronouncing Hanzi is the rising and falling tones in pronunciation and the division of words	At least I can begin to understand a little, even though I don't fully understand Mandarin. I can also start to write Hanzi with the exercises provided. ...I may not be able to apply all the Mandarin material yet because I still don't fully understand it, but when I hear someone speaking Mandarin, I remember a little of what I learned in my Mandarin class.
2.	The difficulty in writing is that Mandarin has thousands of characters, most of which cannot be guessed like the Latin alphabet. Meanwhile, pronouncing some sounds such as zh, ch, and sh in Mandarin is often difficult for me.	This class gave me the opportunity to practice pronunciation and intonation with direct guidance from the teacher. Through conversation practice in class, I became more confident in using Mandarin verbally. I also gained a rich understanding of Chinese culture, which was often incorporated into the learning materials. This was very useful because Mandarin is not just about language but is also closely related to cultural values and ethics.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The research shows that students engaged in teaching tactics and were committed to improving their Mandarin skills. Qualitative and quantitative data strongly suggest that diverse learning resources, self-evaluation, and cultural integration promote linguistic competency,

notably in Buddhist education. Future study should examine how these instructional tactics affect language memory and fluency over time. Exploring how integrating more diverse cultural contexts during language instruction improves Mandarin student engagement and motivation could provide additional insights.

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