



The Relevance of Culture in Mandarin Reading Materials for Indonesian High School

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Keywords

Mandarin language, local culture, reading skills, cultural relevance, learning motivation.

Abstract

Mandarin language learning is still largely dominated by the use of imported textbooks oriented toward Chinese culture. This condition often causes difficulties for students in understanding reading materials due to differences in cultural background from their daily lives. This article aims to analyze the importance of cultural relevance in Mandarin reading instruction for Indonesian high school students. Based on the results of a study involving 155 high school students, it was found that 64% of students found it easier to understand Mandarin reading texts that incorporated Indonesian culture compared to texts focused on Chinese culture. In addition, around 58% of students admitted that they were less interested in reading materials discussing foreign cultures that were far removed from their experiences, such as winter festivals and traditional Chinese family traditions. These findings indicate that cultural relevance in learning materials has a significant influence on students' reading comprehension and learning motivation in Mandarin language learning. Therefore, the integration of Indonesian local culture into Mandarin learning materials is considered important in creating learning that is more contextual, meaningful, and aligned with the characteristics of Indonesian students.

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INTRODUCTION

Mandarin has become one of the foreign languages increasingly studied in Indonesia along with the growing educational, economic, and cultural relations between Indonesia and China. In Mandarin language learning, reading skills play an important role because they help students understand vocabulary, language structures, and cultural information contained in texts.

However, Mandarin language learning in Indonesia still faces various challenges, particularly regarding the use of imported textbooks that predominantly emphasize Chinese culture. The reading materials in these books often discuss themes such as winter festivals, traditional Chinese family customs, regional Chinese foods, and the social habits of Chinese society (Rahmawati, 2021). This condition frequently creates a cultural gap between the learning materials and Indonesian students' real-life experiences.

According to schema theory proposed by Anderson and Pearson (1984), reading comprehension is strongly influenced by the reader's prior knowledge. When students do not have experience related to the cultural context in a text, the process of understanding the reading material becomes more difficult. As a result, students tend to focus more on translating vocabulary rather than comprehending the text as a whole.

Based on a study involving 155 high school students, it was found that 64% of students stated that they found it easier to understand Mandarin reading texts that incorporated Indonesian culture compared to texts focused on Chinese culture. In addition, around 58% of students admitted that they were less interested in reading materials discussing foreign cultural themes that were far removed from their daily experiences, such as winter festivals and traditional Chinese family traditions (Karimah, 2025).

These findings indicate that cultural relevance in learning materials has a significant influence on students' reading comprehension and learning motivation. In line with the study by Said, Bin Sihes, and Yusof (2018), the use of local cultural content in foreign language learning provides a positive impact of 91.6% on reading comprehension, students' ability to connect text content with real-life experiences, and increased reading motivation.

Moll (1992), through the concept of *Funds of Knowledge*, explains that students' cultural experiences are important learning resources that can be utilized in instruction. Therefore, integrating local culture into Mandarin language learning can help students understand materials in a more contextual and meaningful way.

In addition to improving reading comprehension, the use of local culture can also strengthen students' cultural identity. According to Byram (1997), foreign language learning should not only aim to

develop linguistic competence but also intercultural competence that helps students understand the relationship between their own culture and foreign cultures.

In the Indonesian context, local culture can be integrated through texts about batik, traditional foods, traditional ceremonies, regional tourism, folklore, and Indonesian societal traditions written in Mandarin.

Research by Hidayati (2020) shows that local culture-based materials can increase students' reading motivation because the topics used are closer to their lives. Furthermore, Sari and Kurniawan (2022) found that cultural relevance in Mandarin teaching materials influences student engagement in the learning process.

Johnson (2002), through the Contextual Teaching and Learning approach, explains that learning will be more effective when the material is connected to students' real-life experiences. Therefore, the use of local culture in Mandarin language learning can create a more active and meaningful learning experience.

Moreover, local culture-based learning can also help students preserve their cultural identity amid the currents of globalization. Rahman (2020) states that the integration of local culture into foreign language learning plays an important role in the preservation of national culture.

Based on these various issues, this article aims to analyze the importance of cultural relevance in Mandarin reading materials for Indonesian high school students and to explain how the integration of local culture can improve students' reading comprehension and learning motivation.

METHOD

This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach aimed at identifying the influence of cultural relevance in Mandarin reading materials on students' reading comprehension and learning motivation at Senior High School in Makassar. A quantitative descriptive approach was chosen because this research focused on collecting numerical data through surveys and percentage analysis of the research findings.

1. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a descriptive survey design. According to Creswell (2014), survey research is used to describe attitudes, opinions, and characteristics of a population based on data obtained from research samples. In this study, the survey was conducted to identify students' responses toward the use of Mandarin reading materials based on Chinese culture and Indonesian culture.

2. RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

The participants of this study consisted of 155 high school students who studied Mandarin as a foreign language. The students came from several high schools that offered Mandarin either as an elective or compulsory subject.

The sample was selected using a purposive sampling technique, which is a sampling method based on specific characteristics (Sugiyono, 2019). The sample criteria in this study were as follows:

- a. Active high school students.
- b. Students who had used imported Mandarin textbooks.
- c. Students who had studied Mandarin reading skills.

3. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The instrument used in this study was a closed-ended questionnaire using a Likert scale. According to Arikunto (2018), a questionnaire is an instrument used to obtain information regarding respondents' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions toward a phenomenon.

The questionnaire in this study consisted of several aspects, namely:

- a. The use of imported Mandarin textbooks.
- b. Students' difficulties in understanding Chinese culture-based texts.
- c. Students' level of comprehension of Indonesian culture-based texts.
- d. Students' reading motivation.
- e. Cultural relevance in learning materials.

In addition to the questionnaire, this study also utilized documentation in the form of an analysis of reading materials in the Mandarin language textbook used by students.

4. DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUE RESEARCH DATA WERE COLLECTED THROUGH:

a. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was distributed to 155 high school students to understand their experiences in comprehending Mandarin reading materials.

b. Documentation

Documentation was carried out by analyzing the content of the Mandarin textbook used by students, especially materials containing elements of Chinese culture and local Indonesian culture.

5. DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE THE DATA WERE ANALYZED USING A QUANTITATIVE DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE BY CALCULATING THE PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS' ANSWERS. ACCORDING TO SUGIYONO (2019), DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS IS USED TO DESCRIBE THE DATA WITHOUT MAKING BROADER GENERALIZATIONS.

The percentage formula used is:

$$P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100\%$$

Note:

P = Percentage

f = Frequency of respondents' answers

N = Total number of respondents

The analysis results were then interpreted to determine the level of cultural relevance in Mandarin reading materials with respect to students' reading comprehension and learning motivation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. RESULTS

This study was conducted on 155 high school students learning Mandarin as a foreign language. The study aimed to determine the influence of cultural relevance in Mandarin reading materials on students' reading comprehension, learning motivation, and engagement in learning. Data were obtained through the distribution of questionnaires, learning observations, and students' open-ended responses regarding their experiences in reading Mandarin texts based on Chinese culture and Indonesian culture.

A. Use of Mandarin Textbooks in Learning

Based on the research results, as many as 121 students (78%) stated that the Mandarin learning materials at school still use imported textbooks from China as the main learning resource. Meanwhile, only 34 students (22%) stated that the teacher uses additional teaching materials that contain Indonesian culture.

The textbooks used generally contain themes such as:

- Spring Festival
- Dragon Boat Festival
- The tradition of family dining together in China

- Winter and snow
- School life in China
- Traditional Chinese family system

Most students admitted that they understand the vocabulary in the texts but have understanding the cultural context behind the stories.

One student stated:

'I can read the hanzi and translate the words, but sometimes I don't understand why the characters in the story do things like that.'

This statement indicates that the students' main obstacle is not only in the linguistic aspect but also in cultural understanding.

Another student also explained:

'When reading a text about winter, I find it hard to imagine the atmosphere because I have never seen snow directly.'

Furthermore, several students admitted that they often memorize the content of the text without truly understanding its meaning.

The Mandarin teacher who was part of the research observation also stated that students more frequently ask about the cultural context than the meaning of vocabulary.

The teacher expressed:

'Students usually ask why Chinese people practice certain traditions, not just what the words mean.'

These findings indicate that the use of imported textbooks creates a cultural gap between the content of the materials and the real experiences of Indonesian students.

B. Students' Reading Comprehension Levels Regarding Texts Based on Chinese and Indonesian Cultures

In this study, students were given two types of reading texts:

1. A Chinese text about the Spring Festival in China.
2. A Chinese text about the Eid al-Fitr tradition in Indonesia.

After reading both texts, students were asked to answer reading comprehension questions and provide feedback on the texts' difficulty levels.

The results of the study showed that:

- 99 students (64%) found the text about Indonesian culture easier to understand.
- 56 students (36%) stated there was no significant difference.

Most students stated that the text on Indonesian culture was easier to understand because they had firsthand experience with the topics discussed.

One student stated:

"I immediately understood the text about Eid because I experience it myself every year."

Another student explained:

"When reading about the annual homecoming or Indonesian food, I don't have to imagine things too far."

Conversely, students had difficulty understanding texts about Chinese culture because:

- They lacked similar cultural experiences.
- It was hard to visualize the situations in the texts.
- They did not understand the cultural values embedded in the stories.

Some students commented:

"I'm confused as to why the family members in the text have to perform a certain ritual before dinner."

"I don't know why the color red is so important in the Spring Festival."

This shows that reading comprehension is influenced not only by language skills but also by cultural understanding.

In reading comprehension tests, students also scored higher on Indonesian cultural texts. Most students were able to:

- Identify the main idea.
- Find specific details.
- Summarize the text's content.
- Connect the text's content to personal experiences.

Meanwhile, with Chinese cultural texts, students tended to:

- Understand only literal information.
- Struggle to understand implicit meanings.

- Struggle to explain the cultural purpose of the text.

These findings suggest that cultural experience helps students develop a deeper reading comprehension.

C. The Effect of Cultural Relevance on Reading Motivation

The results of the study indicate that cultural relevance influences students' reading motivation.

A total of 112 students (72%) reported being more motivated to read Chinese texts that highlight Indonesian culture.

Students noted that materials based on Indonesian culture felt:

- Closer to their lives.
- More interesting.
- Easier to understand.
- Made them feel more confident.

One student said:

"I feel more enthusiastic about learning when the text is about my own culture."

Another student remarked:

"Learning Mandarin feels more enjoyable when the topic is about Indonesia."

Conversely, 90 students (58%) admitted they were less interested in reading texts about Chinese culture, which felt too distant from their own experiences.

Some students explained that they often feel:

- Bored reading foreign cultural texts.
- Struggle to understand the context.
- Have to read repeatedly to grasp the text's content.

One student stated:

"Sometimes I give up reading because there are too many things I don't understand."

Additionally, the observation results showed that students were more active when reading Indonesian cultural texts. They:

- Asked more questions.
- Engaged more actively in discussions.
- Were more confident in answering the teacher's questions.
- Were better able to connect the text's content to their daily lives.

When reading texts about Indonesian culture, the classroom atmosphere becomes more lively as students share personal experiences related to the reading material.

In contrast, when reading texts about Chinese culture, students tend to:

- Be passive;
- Wait for the teacher's explanation.;
- Focus on translating vocabulary;
- Rarely offer their opinions.

D. The Relevance of Culture to Learning Engagement and Interaction

The research findings show that 109 students (70%) felt more active in the learning process when the reading material addressed Indonesian culture.

Students reported feeling more confident in discussions because they understood the topics being discussed.

Some students commented:

"If the topic is about Indonesia, I can share my own experiences."

"I've become more confident in answering the teacher's questions."

Teachers also observed that the use of local culture made it easier for students to understand the text content without relying too heavily on translations.

In Indonesian culture-based learning, students appeared:

- More communicative;
- More enthusiastic;
- More active in asking questions;
- Better able to understand vocabulary through context.

These findings indicate that local culture can foster more interactive and contextual learning.

2. DISCUSSION

A. Cultural Discrepancies in Mandarin Textbooks

The research findings indicate that the prevalence of imported textbooks leads to cultural discrepancies in Mandarin language learning.

According to Krashen (1985), language learning is effective when the language input is comprehensible to students (comprehensible input). However, when the text is too far removed from the students' cultural experiences, comprehension is hindered.

Students' statements regarding their difficulty in imagining winter and Chinese cultural rituals indicate that the main obstacle lies in the cultural context, not just the language.

This finding reinforces Anderson and Pearson's (1984) schema theory, which states that reading comprehension is influenced by the reader's prior knowledge.

When students lack cultural schemas regarding the topic being read, they will struggle to understand the text's deeper meaning.

B. Cultural Relevance and Reading Comprehension

The research findings indicate that students find it easier to understand texts that address Indonesian culture because they have firsthand experience with the topics discussed.

This aligns with the research by Carrell and Eisterhold (1983), which states that a reader's cultural background influences their ability to comprehend foreign-language texts.

Student statements such as:

"I understood it right away because I've experienced it myself"

Indicates that cultural experiences help students establish connections between new information and prior experiences.

Furthermore, students are better able to grasp the implicit meanings in Indonesian cultural texts compared to Chinese cultural texts.

These findings also support the research by Said, Bin Sihes, and Yusof (2018), which demonstrates that the use of local culture enhances students' reading comprehension and learning motivation.

C. Cultural Relevance and Learning Motivation

Research findings indicate that the use of local culture enhances students' motivation to read.

According to Deci and Ryan (2000), intrinsic motivation increases when learning is perceived as relevant to students' lives.

Students feel more interested in reading Indonesian cultural texts because:

- The topics feel familiar;
- They are easy to understand;
- They relate to personal experiences.

These findings indicate that cultural relevance creates a sense of comfort in learning, thereby motivating students to read and understand the texts.

D. Local Culture as Contextual Learning

The use of local culture in Mandarin language instruction supports a contextual learning approach.

Johnson (2002) explains that contextual learning helps students understand the material by connecting it to real life.

When students read texts about Indonesian culture, they not only learn Mandarin but also connect the material to their own social and cultural experiences.

Furthermore, the use of local culture also supports the Content-Based Instruction approach (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989), which involves language learning through content that is meaningful to students.

Thus, integrating Indonesian culture into Mandarin reading materials can enhance:

- Reading comprehension;
- Learning motivation;
- Student participation;
- Learning interactions;
- and students' intercultural competence.

CONCLUSION

The dominance of imported Mandarin textbooks oriented toward Chinese culture remains a major challenge in reading instruction for Indonesian high school students. The findings of this study revealed that 64% of students found it easier to understand Mandarin reading texts that incorporated Indonesian cultural content, while 58% admitted that they were less interested in texts discussing foreign cultural themes that were far removed from their daily experiences.

The study also showed that students experienced difficulties understanding texts related to winter festivals and traditional Chinese family systems because they lacked direct cultural experience with those topics. In contrast, students demonstrated better comprehension, higher motivation, and greater classroom participation when reading materials discussed Indonesian culture, such as traditional foods, local traditions, and daily social life.

These findings indicate that cultural relevance plays an important role in improving reading comprehension in foreign language learning. Therefore, integrating Indonesian local culture into Mandarin learning materials is essential to create more contextual, meaningful, and student-centered learning experiences.

The development of Mandarin teaching materials based on Indonesian culture can serve as an effective solution to improve students' reading comprehension, learning motivation, and intercultural competence. Furthermore, integrating local culture into foreign language learning not only supports language acquisition but also contributes to preserving and promoting Indonesian cultural identity in the era of globalization.

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