


THE ROLE OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE IN MANDARIN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: AN INTERLANGUAGE STUDY OF MULTILINGUAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the role of the first language in the Mandarin language acquisition process of 2024 cohort students in the Mandarin Language Education Study Program at the State University of Surabaya. The main problem in the study is the students' difficulties in aspects of pronunciation (phonology), tone system (tonology), and grammar (syntax) of the Mandarin language, which are influenced by their first language. The research method used is a descriptive quantitative approach with data collection techniques through questionnaires to 80 respondents who have diverse first-language backgrounds (Indonesian, local language, and English). The results show that the first language is highly influential and serves as the primary source of interference for students, particularly in phonology; difficulties were found in pronouncing sounds such as "zh," "ch," "sh," "r," and "ü," which do not exist in the first language. In tones, respondents faced challenges in distinguishing tones 1 to 4 due to the absence of a tonal system in their first language. In grammar, a tendency toward direct translation was identified, which triggers sentence structure errors. In addition to linguistic factors, external factors such as the learning environment, lack of practice, and dependence on pinyin also affect the process of mastering the target language. Overall, this study concludes that the first language plays a significant role both as a source of interference and as a supporting factor in Mandarin language acquisition.

Keywords: *first language; Mandarin language acquisition; language interference; phonology; grammar.*

INTRODUCTION

Studies in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics position the first language (L1) as one of the most crucial determinants of success in acquiring a second language (L2) or a foreign language. This phenomenon becomes particularly complex in the context of learning Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language, where its distinctive typological characteristics often conflict with the cognitive system of the learners' native language that has already been firmly established. In the process of foreign language learning, the first language mastered by learners frequently influences the acquisition of the second language. This influence may facilitate comprehension of learning materials or,

conversely, create difficulties due to differences between linguistic systems. Every language possesses distinct phonological, syntactic, and semantic systems (Hidayati & Thamrin, 2025; Tanaka & Sutandi, 2022). These differences give rise to first-language interference during the process of second-language learning. Such interference may occur either consciously or unconsciously in language use. Therefore, the first language constitutes an important factor in the study of foreign language acquisition. In the context of Mandarin language learning, this influence becomes even more significant because of the substantial structural differences between Mandarin and Indonesian (Holic & Budiando, 2022). Furthermore, learners often transfer patterns from their first language into the target language. This transfer can affect pronunciation accuracy, grammatical performance, and semantic comprehension (Novita & Muyassaroh, 2025). Although previous studies have widely confirmed the existence of such interference, research specifically mapping how these obstacles simultaneously emerge across phonological, tonal, and syntactic dimensions among first-year university students remains limited. Therefore, investigating the influence of the first language is relevant for addressing this theoretical gap.

Meanwhile, Chaer explains that language acquisition refers to the process occurring within an individual's mind when acquiring a first language or mother tongue (Chaer, 2009). This process develops naturally through everyday interactions without structured formal instruction. Language acquisition differs from language learning, which is a conscious process typically conducted within educational settings (Lianisyah et al., 2022). In first-language acquisition, children gradually absorb language through environmental exposure. In contrast, second-language learners already possess an established linguistic system. This pre-existing system subsequently influences the learning of a new language. Such influence may be either positive or negative, depending on the degree of structural similarity between the languages involved. When similarities exist, positive transfer occurs, facilitating language learning (Mery et al., 2025; Nursalam & Nurhikmah, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2025). However, when significant differences are present, negative transfer or interference may emerge. This often results in errors in the use of the target language. Therefore, an understanding of language acquisition theory is essential for the present study, as it provides a framework for explaining how the first language influences second-language acquisition.

In the context of Mandarin language learning among university students, the influence of the first language is evident in various linguistic aspects, including pronunciation, tonal systems, grammar, and accent. Indonesian and many regional languages spoken in Indonesia do not possess lexical tone systems comparable to those found in Mandarin Chinese (Autar & Nurhaliza, 2025). Consequently, learners often experience difficulties distinguishing among the four Mandarin tones. In addition, several Mandarin sounds are absent from the learners' first language. These differences frequently lead to pronunciation errors during communication (Hidayati, 2025; Rahim et al., 2024; Nursalam, 2018). At the grammatical level, learners also tend to rely on structures derived from their first language. Errors involving word order in Mandarin sentences reflect this tendency. Such phenomena indicate the presence of a strong language transfer process (Anggraini & Octavia, 2026). Within interlanguage theory, this condition is described as a temporary linguistic system developed by learners, situated between their first language and the target language. Therefore, this study is important for providing a deeper understanding of first-language influence while offering a specific contribution through

the mapping of linguistic obstacles that occur simultaneously among first-year learners, an area that has received limited integrative attention in previous research.

Based on the foregoing discussion, this study focuses on the influence of the first language on Mandarin language acquisition among students of the 2024 cohort in the Mandarin Language Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The study examines this influence in terms of pronunciation, tonal systems, and grammar. In addition, it identifies supporting factors and other obstacles encountered in Mandarin language learning. The findings are expected to provide a clearer understanding of the role of the first language in second-language acquisition. Theoretically, this research contributes to the enrichment of sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic scholarship concerning the interlanguage phase among beginning-level university learners. Practically, the results may serve as a reference for educators in designing contrastive-analysis-based instructional strategies and adaptive teaching materials aimed at minimizing language errors among first-year students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language Acquisition

Language acquisition refers to the natural process through which individuals develop linguistic competence through interaction with their environment (Chaer, 2009). It occurs largely unconsciously through exposure, imitation, reinforcement, and social interaction (Saptadi et al., 2024), particularly in first-language development. In Mandarin acquisition, imitation and auditory exposure are crucial for mastering tonal accuracy, as learners depend heavily on listening practice to distinguish meaning (Wong, 2021). Unlike formal learning, language acquisition is not driven by explicit grammar instruction but by environmental input from family and community, as well as cognitive capacity (Wibowo, 2026). This process reflects a dynamic interaction between cognition and social communication (Syofiyanti et al., 2025). Empirical evidence shows that rich visual and interactive exposure can reduce cognitive load in learning logographic systems such as Hanzi (Zhang & Li, 2023). Moreover, frequent language exposure accelerates acquisition and supports vocabulary and pronunciation development (Anggeli & Subandi, 2024). Language acquisition is therefore progressive, adaptive, and shaped by age, environment, and cognitive development. Learners construct internal linguistic systems through interaction, where errors represent natural hypothesis testing refined through feedback (Ratnah et al., 2026).

Second Language Learning

Second language learning refers to the process of acquiring a language apart from the first language after it has been established, typically in formal educational contexts such as schools or universities. This process involves conscious learning of linguistic rules and structures, unlike first language acquisition, which is more natural. Learners already possess an existing linguistic system that interacts with the new language, influencing the learning process (Intan, 2024). Motivation, learning environment, and learning strategies play important roles in determining learning success, while structural differences between languages may become obstacles (Saleh et al., 2023). In addition to internal factors, external factors such as social interaction, learning resources, and exposure to the target language significantly affect learning outcomes. Frequent use of the target language accelerates development, whereas limited exposure slows progress (Muhamad, 2023). Age, prior learning experience, and emotional factors such as self-

confidence also contribute to learning effectiveness (Bakhtiar, 2025). Therefore, second language learning is a complex, multidimensional process influenced by cognitive, social, emotional, and environmental factors.

Language Interference (Language Transfer)

Language interference refers to the influence of a learner's first language (L1) on second language (L2) acquisition, where linguistic structures from L1 are transferred into L2 usage. This transfer may be positive or negative depending on language similarity. Positive transfer facilitates comprehension and production, while negative transfer leads to errors (Zakarya et al., 2022). Interference commonly appears in pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary (Widiyanto, 2025), often without learners' awareness. Its occurrence is strongly influenced by L2 proficiency; lower proficiency increases the likelihood of interference (Vianney & Ginting, 2023), alongside habitual language use in daily communication. Language interference can also be understood as an adaptive strategy in early language learning, where learners rely on L1 structures as a cognitive framework. This phenomenon may manifest as phonological, grammatical, or lexical errors (Habibah et al., 2023). The extent of interference is shaped by exposure intensity and structural differences between languages, where greater linguistic distance increases interference (Andari et al., 2025). Therefore, language interference is a dynamic and continuous process within second language acquisition.

Interlanguage

Interlanguage refers to the transitional linguistic system developed by learners during the process of acquiring a second language. This system exists between the learner's first language and the target language. Interlanguage reflects a developmental stage in which linguistic competence has not yet reached stability. It is inherently dynamic, continuously evolving as learners' proficiency increases. Within an interlanguage system, learners frequently combine elements of both their first language and the target language. Errors that emerge within this system are regarded as a natural and necessary part of the language development process. Interlanguage demonstrates that language learning is gradual and developmental in nature. Learners' linguistic input influences the system (Tyas et al., 2022). In addition, communication strategies employed by learners contribute to shaping the form of their interlanguage. Over time, interlanguage gradually becomes more similar to the target language as learners gain greater proficiency. This process reflects the adaptive nature of second-language acquisition and highlights the importance of interlanguage as a key concept in foreign language acquisition studies. Interlanguage develops through processes of trial and error during language use. Feedback and correction from teachers, peers, and the surrounding environment have a major impact on developing and refining this system (Warih et al., 2024).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a quantitative approach with a descriptive research design. The descriptive design was chosen because the primary objective of the study was to systematically and objectively describe learners' perceptions and the characteristics of the obstacles they encounter in learning Mandarin Chinese. A quantitative approach was used since the data consisted of numerical responses obtained through Likert-scale questionnaires. Therefore, this study is classified as a quantitative descriptive study aimed

at mapping the tendencies of first language influence in Mandarin language acquisition among beginner-level learners.

The research data consisted of both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected through questionnaires distributed to students in the 2024 cohort of the Mandarin Language Education Study Programme at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The sample consisted of 80 respondents selected through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included active enrolment in the 2024 cohort, completion of at least one semester of Mandarin language courses, and relatively homogeneous first-language backgrounds aligned with the research objectives. With these criteria fulfilled, the sample was considered representative for describing initial linguistic obstacles in Mandarin learning. Secondary data were obtained from academic journals, linguistics textbooks, and previous studies related to language transfer and interlanguage.

Data collection was conducted using both closed-ended and open-ended questionnaires. The closed-ended questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree to measure learners' perceptions regarding the influence of their first language on pronunciation, tonal system, grammar, and accent. The open-ended questionnaire was designed to collect qualitative data in the form of learners' explanations and personal learning experiences. The instruments were distributed online using Google Forms due to its efficiency in reaching a large number of respondents. The research instrument was developed based on indicators of first language influence, including phonological, tonal, grammatical, and accent-related aspects. Content validity was evaluated through expert judgement by two academic supervisors specialising in linguistics and language teaching. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's alpha with a minimum threshold of 0.60. The detailed results of the reliability analysis using Cronbach's alpha are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Reliability Test Results for the First Language Influence Variable (X)

Research Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha	Minimum Threshold
First Language Influence (X)	5	0,750	0,60

The results showed a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.750 for the first language influence variable, indicating that the instrument was reliable and suitable for further analysis. The research procedure began with instrument development, followed by a pilot test conducted on a small group of respondents to ensure clarity and readability of the questionnaire items. After revision, the final questionnaire was distributed to 80 respondents. The collected data were screened to remove incomplete or invalid responses and then coded for analysis.

Data analysis employed descriptive statistical techniques for quantitative data and thematic descriptive analysis for qualitative data. The analysis followed the framework of [Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña \(2014\)](#), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Data reduction involved organizing Likert-scale responses into frequency distributions and categorizing open-ended responses into linguistic difficulty themes such as phonological, tonal, and grammatical problems. Data display was presented through frequency tables, percentages, and narrative descriptions. Finally, conclusions were drawn by integrating quantitative and qualitative findings. The results

were interpreted using the theoretical frameworks of interlanguage and language transfer, allowing a comprehensive explanation of the role of the first language in Mandarin Chinese acquisition.

DISCUSSION

Respondent Profile

This study involved 80 respondents from the 2024 cohort of the Mandarin Language Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The respondents were selected to represent the actual conditions of Mandarin language acquisition among beginning-level learners in an academic environment. In general, all respondents came from multilingual backgrounds and possessed diverse first-language profiles. These linguistic differences constitute an important factor in understanding variations in phonological, tonal, and syntactic performance in Mandarin Chinese.

Furthermore, the majority of respondents had learned Mandarin as a third or fourth language, indicating that they already possessed one or more established linguistic systems prior to studying Mandarin. This condition facilitates language transfer during the learning process, as learners may utilize the linguistic knowledge and structures from previously acquired languages while striving to understand and produce the target language [Hidayati \(2025\)](#). Consequently, respondents' multilingual backgrounds provide an important context for examining the influence of their first language on the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese.

Table 2
Distribution of Respondents' First Languages (n = 80)

First Language	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Indonesian	52	65%
Regional Languages (Javanese, etc.)	23	28,75%
English	5	6,25%
Total	80	100%

The distribution presented in Table 2 indicates that the majority of respondents identified Indonesian as their first language. This finding reflects the dominant use of the national language within respondents' family environments and early educational experiences. The second-largest group consisted of speakers of regional languages, particularly Javanese, highlighting the linguistic diversity of Indonesia. Meanwhile, respondents whose first language was English represented only a small proportion of the sample.

These findings suggest that the Mandarin learners examined in this study originated from relatively heterogeneous linguistic backgrounds. Such diversity has the potential to influence variations in learners' difficulties related to Mandarin pronunciation and intonation. Furthermore, the predominance of Indonesian as a first language indicates a substantial likelihood of interference from the Indonesian phonological system ([Rahim et al., 2024](#)). Regional languages, particularly Javanese, also appear to contribute significantly to the emergence of distinctive accents in Mandarin pronunciation.

This contribution is empirically manifested through phonetic interference, particularly in the form of strengthened voiced stop articulation (*heavy voicing* or *murmured stops*), which is a characteristic feature of Javanese phonology. As a result, the articulatory habits and muscle memory developed through the use of Javanese are often

unconsciously transferred when learners produce Mandarin consonants. This transfer may create a pronunciation pattern commonly perceived as *medok* (strongly Javanese-accented), thereby reducing the accuracy of target-language sounds. Consequently, first-language background constitutes an important variable for understanding the phonological error patterns observed among the respondents.

Table 3
Mandarin Chinese as the Nth Language Learned (n = 80)

Position of Mandarin in Language Acquisition Sequence	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Second Language	6	7,5%
Third Language	24	30%
Fourth Language or Beyond	50	62,5%
Total	80	100%

The distribution shown in Table 3 demonstrates that the majority of respondents learned Mandarin Chinese as their fourth language or beyond in their sequence of language acquisition. This finding indicates that most students had prior experience learning multiple languages before studying Mandarin. Consequently, Mandarin learning among these respondents does not occur within a simple bilingual context but rather within a multilingual environment.

A considerable proportion of respondents reported learning Mandarin as their third language, suggesting variation in the extent of prior multilingual exposure. Only a small number of respondents identified Mandarin as their second language. These findings imply that the complexity of learning Mandarin is relatively high, given that learners already possess multiple established linguistic systems (Nursalam & Nurhikmah, 2020). The greater the number of languages previously acquired, the higher the potential for interaction and interference among linguistic systems. Therefore, respondents' linguistic backgrounds are highly relevant for analyzing language transfer phenomena. Overall, the data indicate that the respondents are situated within a multilingual language-learning context, which provides a rich environment for examining the influence of previously acquired languages on Mandarin acquisition.

Table 4
Summary of Perceptions Regarding the Role of the First Language in Mandarin Learning (n = 80)

Level of Agreement	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Strongly Agree	34	42,5%
Agree	38	47,5%
Neutral	6	7,5%
Disagree	2	2,5%
Total	80	100%

The findings indicate that the majority of respondents perceive a strong influence of their first language on Mandarin Chinese learning. As shown in Table 4, 90% of participants selected "agree" or "strongly agree," demonstrating a dominant belief that first language plays a significant role in second language acquisition. Only a small proportion of respondents chose the neutral option, reflecting uncertainty or variation in

individual learning experiences, while a very limited number disagreed. This distribution confirms that language transfer is a widely experienced phenomenon in Mandarin learning. It also supports previous research that indicates learners primarily struggle with the phonological and tonal aspects of the target language.

The high level of agreement also reflects learners' metalinguistic awareness. Respondents appear capable of recognizing how their first language influences Mandarin acquisition, particularly in pronunciation and meaning construction. This suggests that first language interference is not merely a theoretical concept but an experienced cognitive process that affects language production. Therefore, the findings provide a strong basis for further analysis of phonological, tonal, and grammatical difficulties in Mandarin learning. In terms of linguistic background, respondents come from diverse first-language systems, including Indonesian, regional languages such as Javanese, and English. Most participants reported Mandarin as their third or fourth language, indicating prior multilingual experience (Nursalam & Nurhikmah, 2020; Muhammad et al., 2025). This shows that Mandarin acquisition does not occur in isolation but develops through interaction with previously acquired linguistic systems. In this context, the first language functions both as a cognitive foundation and a potential source of transfer.

The diversity of linguistic backgrounds also implies differences in cognitive learning strategies among students. From a contrastive linguistics perspective, multilingual exposure produces varied error patterns that differ from those of monolingual learners. Thus, Mandarin learning can be understood as a complex process involving continuous interaction between multiple language systems (Lianisyah et al., 2022). Overall, the results show that first language influence is most evident in pronunciation, tonal production, and grammar. Pronunciation difficulties were found in Mandarin phonemes such as *zh*, *ch*, *sh*, *r*, and *ü*, which do not exist in Indonesian or most regional languages. In tonal production, respondents struggled to distinguish Mandarin tones due to the absence of lexical tone systems in their first languages, often leading to meaning changes (e.g., *mā* vs. *mǎ*). At the grammatical level, learners frequently transferred first-language sentence structures, particularly word order patterns, into Mandarin. Some also relied on direct translation strategies when forming sentences. These findings confirm that first-language interference consistently affects core dimensions of Mandarin acquisition.

The Role of the First Language in Pronunciation (Phonology)

The findings of this study indicate that the influence of the first language is most prominent in the domain of phonology, particularly pronunciation. This is evident from the large number of respondents who reported difficulties in producing Mandarin sounds. These difficulties primarily arise when learners encounter sounds that are absent from the phonological systems of their first languages (Novita & Muyassaroh, 2025). Indonesian and most regional languages spoken in Indonesia generally do not contain aspirated and retroflex sounds comparable to those found in Mandarin Chinese. Consequently, students are required to make relatively complex articulatory adjustments in order to produce these sounds accurately. Such adjustments often require considerable time and sustained practice. This condition demonstrates the existence of significant phonological obstacles in the process of Mandarin language acquisition. Therefore, pronunciation constitutes one of the major challenges faced by beginning learners of Mandarin Chinese.

Most respondents reported difficulties in pronouncing certain Mandarin sounds that do not exist in their first languages. Respondents whose first language was Indonesian

specifically identified sounds such as zh, ch, sh, r, and ü as particularly challenging. One respondent stated that sounds such as zh, ch, and q were frequently mispronounced and often led to misunderstandings because there are no equivalent sounds in Indonesian. In addition, words such as chīfān were often pronounced inaccurately due to learners' unfamiliarity with Mandarin aspiration. These errors reflect limitations in the production of unfamiliar phonetic features that are not present in learners' first-language systems. Such unfamiliarity also affects the clarity of communication in Mandarin. In some cases, pronunciation errors may alter listeners' comprehension of the intended message. Therefore, differences between phonological systems constitute a major factor contributing to phonological difficulties in Mandarin learning.

Data 1

The pronunciation of zh, ch, and q is often incorrect. My Javanese accent frequently appears, and Indonesian grammar is used in Mandarin.

Data 1 indicates clear evidence of first-language interference in Mandarin pronunciation, particularly in the misarticulation of sounds such as *zh*, *ch*, and *q*, which do not exist in Indonesian and most regional phonological systems. This absence leads learners to substitute unfamiliar Mandarin phonemes with closest L1 equivalents, resulting in persistent pronunciation difficulties. The emergence of a Javanese accent further reflects unconscious phonological transfer from learners' regional language background, often producing a strongly Javanese-accented (medok) Mandarin speech style (Novita & Muyassaroh, 2025). Beyond phonology, interference is also evident at the grammatical level, where learners apply Indonesian syntactic structures in Mandarin sentence construction. This transfer results in non-standard grammatical forms, indicating reliance on L1 rules during L2 production. Such patterns confirm that first-language structures continue to dominate both spoken and written Mandarin among beginner learners. These findings align with Language Transfer Theory, which explains that L1 sound and structural systems significantly shape L2 production. Therefore, first-language interference in this study is not incidental but systematic, affecting pronunciation, grammar, and overall Mandarin language acquisition.

The Role of the First Language in the Acquisition of Mandarin Tones

One of the aspects most frequently mentioned by respondents was the difficulty of mastering the Mandarin tonal system. This challenge arises because Mandarin Chinese employs a tonal system in which pitch variations serve to distinguish lexical meanings. In contrast, Indonesian and most regional languages spoken in Indonesia do not use tone as a lexical meaning differentiator (Hidayati & Thamrin, 2025; Tanaka & Sutandi, 2022). Consequently, students are generally unaccustomed to systematically controlling pitch variation in spoken communication. As a result, adapting to the Mandarin tonal system becomes a considerably complex process. Many respondents reported requiring a substantial amount of time to become familiar with the four primary Mandarin tones. These findings indicate that the tonal system represents one of the most challenging aspects of Mandarin language acquisition. The fundamental cause of this difficulty lies in the differences between the phonological systems of learners' first languages and that of Mandarin Chinese.

Data 2

Tones are difficult because our language is not a tonal language. Therefore, when learning Mandarin, our ears are somewhat ‘deaf’ to the differences between tones 1–4. The main obstacle is tone pronunciation; for example, when trying to say mā, it is often mispronounced as mǎ.”

Data 2 shows that the Mandarin tonal system is one of the main difficulties faced by learners. Respondents reported that Indonesian does not have a tonal system comparable to Mandarin, which makes them unfamiliar with distinguishing meaningful pitch variations. As a result, their auditory sensitivity to tonal differences is limited, and some respondents even described their condition as having “less sensitive ears” when it comes to the four Mandarin tones. This indicates a clear phonological gap between the first language and the target language. Pronunciation errors such as using *mǎ* instead of *mā* demonstrate that tonal differences can entirely change word meaning. Because learners’ first language does not use lexical tone, such errors often occur unconsciously. Many respondents also struggled to differentiate Tone 1 from Tone 4, for example, confusing *mā* (mother) with *mǎ* (horse), or *mǎi* (buy) with *mài* (sell). These findings confirm that even a single tonal change can significantly alter meaning.

In addition, Indonesian intonation patterns, such as rising pitch in questions, may interfere with Mandarin tone production. Since Mandarin tones are phonemic and semantically distinctive, such interference leads to deviations from standard pronunciation and may cause misunderstandings in spoken communication. Several respondents also stated that tone errors occur because they are accustomed to languages that do not rely on lexical pitch distinctions. This suggests low sensitivity to tonal systems, which are essential in constructing meaning in Mandarin. Overall, the findings indicate a strong form of negative transfer from the first language to Mandarin. The differences in phonological systems require learners to make significant cognitive and articulatory adjustments. Thus, the Mandarin tonal system represents a major obstacle in language acquisition and a clear manifestation of first-language interference among beginner learners.

The Role of the First Language in Grammar

In addition to phonology, the influence of the first language is also evident in the syntactic or grammatical aspects of Mandarin Chinese. This influence can be observed in respondents’ tendency to transfer first-language structures when constructing Mandarin sentences. Indonesian, which generally allows greater flexibility in word order, often affects the way students formulate sentences in Mandarin. As a result, the sentence structures produced by learners do not always conform to Mandarin syntactic rules (Tanaka & Sutandi, 2022). Several respondents acknowledged that they still rely on Indonesian grammatical patterns when speaking or writing in Mandarin. This finding indicates the transfer of first-language structures into the target language. Such interference frequently occurs unconsciously during language production. Consequently, grammar constitutes another linguistic domain that is significantly influenced by learners’ first language, particularly Indonesian. For example, one respondent reported the following grammatical error:

Data 3

My Javanese accent often appears, and sometimes Indonesian grammar is used in Mandarin. For example: Correct grammar: 我在学校学习 (Wǒ zài xuéxiào xuéxí; 'I study at school') Incorrect grammar: 我学习在学校 (Wǒ xuéxí zài xuéxiào).

Data 3 shows an error in the incorrect placement of a locative phrase in a Mandarin sentence, which reflects the influence of the learner's first language. In Indonesian, sentence structure is relatively flexible, allowing adverbial and locative elements to appear in different positions without significantly changing meaning. In contrast, Mandarin has a more rigid syntactic system, where locative and temporal expressions must follow specific structural rules. This difference often leads learners to transfer Indonesian sentence patterns directly into Mandarin, resulting in grammatical inaccuracies and unnatural expressions that may reduce clarity for native speakers. This phenomenon illustrates negative language transfer, where structural differences between L1 and L2 generate errors in second language production. However, respondents also identified structural similarities between Indonesian and Mandarin, particularly in the basic Subject–Predicate–Object (S–P–O) pattern. This similarity functions as a form of positive transfer, as it facilitates early comprehension and sentence construction in Mandarin.

Positive transfer reduces cognitive load during initial learning stages, enabling learners to grasp fundamental sentence structures more easily and build confidence in language production. Nevertheless, its beneficial effect is limited when learners encounter more complex syntactic constructions, where differences between the two languages become more prominent (Hidayati & Thamrin, 2025). Overall, first language influence in grammar operates in a dual manner. It may hinder learning through structural interference, yet it may also support acquisition through shared syntactic patterns. Therefore, language transfer should be understood as a dynamic process that includes both facilitative and obstructive effects in second language acquisition.

Supporting Factors and Other Obstacles

In addition to linguistic aspects, respondents also identified several external factors that hinder the process of learning Mandarin Chinese. These external factors include the learning environment, language-use habits, and the intensity of exposure to Mandarin. One of the most prominent factors is the limited use of Mandarin in everyday communication. This condition leads students to rely more frequently on their first language in social interactions. Consequently, opportunities for active practice in Mandarin become restricted (Lianisyah et al., 2022). As a result, the acquisition of Mandarin does not develop optimally outside the classroom setting. An environment dominated by Indonesian or regional languages further reinforces the dominance of the first language. Therefore, the social environment plays a crucial role in determining the success of second-language learning. Limited exposure to Mandarin constitutes a significant external obstacle that directly affects students' fluency and confidence in using the language.

Data 4

In my opinion, the main obstacle is an external one, namely the lack of communication among individuals in Mandarin and the continued frequent use of the first language.

Data 4 indicates that external factors constitute a significant barrier to learning Mandarin Chinese. The respondent highlighted the limited opportunity to use Mandarin in daily communication as the main challenge, leading students to rely heavily on their first language. This condition reduces opportunities for active language practice, resulting in underdeveloped productive skills. A less supportive linguistic environment further reinforces dependence on the first language.

This finding emphasizes that language acquisition is influenced not only by linguistic factors but also by social context. Limited interaction in Mandarin makes the learning process less natural and less immersive, causing students to focus more on theoretical knowledge rather than practical communication. Therefore, the learning environment plays an important role in developing learners' confidence and speaking ability.

Another factor identified is the use of the Pinyin system. On one hand, Pinyin assists students in reading and pronouncing new vocabulary and serves as an initial bridge before mastering Chinese characters (Hanzi). However, excessive reliance on Pinyin may hinder independent character acquisition, as learners remain dependent on Latin-based transliteration.

Some respondents also reported slower comprehension of spoken Mandarin because they must first translate utterances into Indonesian. This indicates that the first language still functions as the main mediator in understanding, resulting in slower and less spontaneous responses. Limited vocabulary knowledge further increases cognitive load in oral communication (Lianisyah et al., 2022). Overall, both external and internal factors significantly influence Mandarin acquisition. A less supportive environment, strong dependence on the first language, and limited vocabulary are the main obstacles. Therefore, more intensive and consistent exposure to Mandarin is necessary to reduce first language interference and improve communicative fluency.

General Evaluation of the Role of the First Language

The findings of this study indicate that the first language plays a significant role in the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese among students of the 2024 cohort in the Mandarin Language Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. Its influence was observed across several linguistic dimensions, particularly pronunciation and tonal production, which emerged as the most affected areas. Respondents showed relatively similar error patterns despite variations in their linguistic backgrounds, suggesting that first-language interference contributes substantially to learners' difficulties in producing Mandarin sounds and tones. The influence was also evident in grammar and accent, indicating that the first language shapes both linguistic errors and learners' adaptation strategies during the learning process.

The persistence of these errors across different communicative contexts shows that first-language influence is not merely temporary but may become a recurring pattern in second-language acquisition. This condition reflects the interaction between learners' existing linguistic system and the target language. Therefore, the first language should be regarded as an important factor in understanding Mandarin learning difficulties, especially among beginner-level learners (Muhammad et al., 2025). These findings are consistent with Selinker's Interlanguage Theory, which explains that second-language learners develop an intermediate linguistic system between their first language and the target language. This study reflects interlanguage through the transfer of first-language

phonological and syntactic patterns into Mandarin Chinese. This appears in pronunciation errors, tonal inaccuracies, and sentence structures that do not fully follow Mandarin grammatical rules. The repeated occurrence of similar errors among respondents suggests that many learners are still in the early stages of interlanguage development, where first-language influence remains strong. The findings also support the concept of language transfer. Negative transfer was more dominant, especially in pronunciation, tonal accuracy, and sentence construction. Learners often tended to translate directly from Indonesian into Mandarin, resulting in grammatical deviations. However, positive transfer was also found, particularly in the shared Subject–Predicate–Object (S–P–O) structure between Indonesian and Mandarin, which helped learners understand basic sentence patterns. Overall, the study confirms that first-language influence is complex, persistent, and pedagogically important. Mandarin instruction should therefore consider learners' linguistic backgrounds to reduce negative interference while maximizing the benefits of positive transfer.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that the first language plays a significant role in the acquisition of Mandarin Chinese among students of the 2024 cohort in the Mandarin Language Education Study Program at Universitas Negeri Surabaya. The influence of the first language appears consistently across phonological, tonal, and syntactic domains. In phonology, students face difficulties in pronouncing Mandarin-specific sounds such as zh, ch, sh, r, and ü, which do not exist in their first language. In tonology, learners struggle to distinguish the four Mandarin tones due to the absence of tonal distinctions in Indonesian and most local languages. In syntax, learners frequently apply first-language structures directly to Mandarin, leading to errors in word order and sentence construction. Beyond linguistic factors, several external conditions also contribute to learning difficulties, including limited Mandarin exposure in daily communication, reliance on Pinyin, and habitual mental translation from the first language. These factors collectively slow down fluency development and language acquisition progress. Theoretically, this study supports the concepts of interlanguage and language transfer, confirming that first-language interference operates across multiple linguistic levels simultaneously, especially among beginner learners. It also highlights that second language acquisition is shaped by continuous interaction between previously acquired linguistic systems and the target language. From a pedagogical perspective, these findings suggest the need for more responsive teaching strategies that explicitly address phonological, tonal, and syntactic differences between Mandarin and learners' first languages to minimize negative transfer effects. However, the study is limited to students from a single cohort and relies on self-reported questionnaire data, which may not fully reflect actual language performance. Future research is recommended to involve broader samples from multiple institutions and proficiency levels to enhance generalizability and provide deeper insights into first-language influence in Mandarin acquisition..

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