

# Alternative Tool to Engage Learners in Comprehending Written Forms in Mandarin

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## ABSTRACT

*In the Malaysian context, Mandarin is taught as a foreign language. Learning the written forms can be challenging, especially for non-native speakers. Furthermore, teachers found this component to be problematic, based on learners' classroom written tasks. In order to assist learners' comprehension of the written form, a board game called 'Catch Me If You Can' was developed. The focus of this study is to find out the effectiveness of the board game in learning the written forms. The study sample consisted of 20 respondents from a local University. Data comprised the responses from questionnaires and interviews. A pre and post test was administered to gauge students' performance in the written tasks. The findings showed the respondents enjoyed learning the written forms in a fun and engaging way. Hence, this game can be used as complementary tool in the teaching and learning of written forms.*

**Keywords:** *Mandarin written form, foreign language, Mandarin, board game, language game, technology.*

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

In view of the fact that student enrolment in Mandarin classes has been increasing rapidly, this subject must be given greater importance in the education system. One of the reasons attributed to this is the fact that China is emerging as one of the world's largest economic entities socially and politically, causing the phrase "Mandarin is becoming common currency" (Lu, 2007), to be coined. Having established that, it is noted that learning Mandarin is not easy as evidenced in a study by Tan (2016), whereby it was found that the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language did not seem to achieve the desired outcomes. One area of difficulty among learners to recognise or write the Chinese characters or forms, which can be challenging especially for foreign learners. This is because Mandarin differs from the mother tongue (i.e. Bahasa Malaysia) of Malaysian learners, where this study is situated.

Mandarin written forms ( 汉字 ) have a very unique form of writing which differs from the syllabic writing, which non-native speakers are familiar with. Writing in Bahasa Malaysia is alphabetical (Lee, 2017), but writing the Mandarin written forms takes the square-shaped character as the basic unit of the Mandarin writing system (Tong, 2015). Hence, the first challenge. Secondly, Mandarin written forms are a combination of different types of strokes, and this can be different and difficult for non-native speakers to learn. Remembering the order of the strokes, is another aspect in the writing process of Mandarin written forms, which is absent in the English and Bahasa Malaysia languages. Written errors stem from the lack of understanding non-syllabic writing and coping with the strokes and the correct order in which the strokes have to be written. Previous studies have confirmed that written errors are more commonly found among learners. Thus, learning and recognising the Mandarin forms is a major hurdle for non-native learners (Wen, 2018).

It is for this reason that the researchers developed a game called 'Catch Me If You Can', to facilitate the teaching and learning process in the Mandarin language class. Games have been proven to increase students' engagement and achievement (Measles, 2015). Technology is added to the game to give the game more currency in terms of what younger learners would easily engage in. The goal of the game is to motivate and captivate students' attention to learn to recognize the Mandarin written forms. The game can be used to introduce different aspects of Mandarin written forms with technology, which can be used via smartphones or tabs. It is an effective and interesting way to learn Mandarin written forms, as the effectiveness of using technological tools on improving learning and teaching of Mandarin written forms has been reported (Wen, 2018).

The main objective of the game ‘Catch Me If You Can’, is to fill the research gap, and to help learners to recognize the Mandarin written forms ( 汉字 ), while injecting and igniting the fun element in this activity, which is present in games. It is also hoped that the overall effect would be to improve the teaching and learning process for both, the teachers and learners. A conducive learning environment, such as through the medium of game and technology, will motivate and captivate students’ attention, to learn to recognise the Mandarin written forms, in a non-threatening way. Games are also learner centered, engaging and enjoyable.

## **2.0 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Mandarin written forms are considered one of the most challenging writing systems to be learnt by non-native learners because of its complex orthographic structure. Unlike alphabetic writing systems, the square - shaped character is the basic unit of the Mandarin writing system [4]. Hence, it is established that non-native learners find Mandarin a difficult language to learn, especially the written forms.

Mandarin follows a non-syllabic type of writing compared to English and Bahasa Malaysia. Mandarin is also a logographic language, which is distinct from English and other alphabetic languages (Wen, 2018). Besides that, Mandarin is also perceived to be one of the most difficult languages to learn as it has ideograms for its orthographic writing systems (Lu, 2007). Lin also (2013) posited that Mandarin is fundamentally different from the western alphabetical system. These factors contribute to the difficulty in comprehending the written forms.

A complementary way to make learning fun among learners is through the medium of language games (Chen, 2010; Metom, 2013). Matas & Natolo (Matas, 2010) explained that traditional teaching and learning methods were not successful in motivating learners to engage actively. This was confirmed by Tan (2016), whereby it was found that the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language did not achieve its objectives. Hence, other ways, such as language games, must be introduced to motivate and engage learners in the classrooms.

One of the reasons to introduce language games in classrooms apart from the fun element, is that games have an element of competitiveness. It is this element that provides valuable impetus to a purposeful reason to do something (Prasad, 2003).

Games are defined by Hadfield (1990) as ‘an activity with rules, a goal and an

element of fun'. The board game, *Catch Me If You Can*, has rules, a goal and the element of fun, as fulfilled by Hadfield's criteria (1990). The rules of the game dictate who starts, how the game is played and how to assess and determine the winner. The goal is to 'fish' out as many correct 'fish-cards' as possible from the 'pond', that fit the specific category (eg. numerals, time, terms of address etc.). The fun element is to act fast - to get the most correct number of 'fish-cards', based on the specific category. Within this activity is the sense of competition among learners, to be the winner. This aspect overrides the actual purpose of the game, causing learning to be incidental.

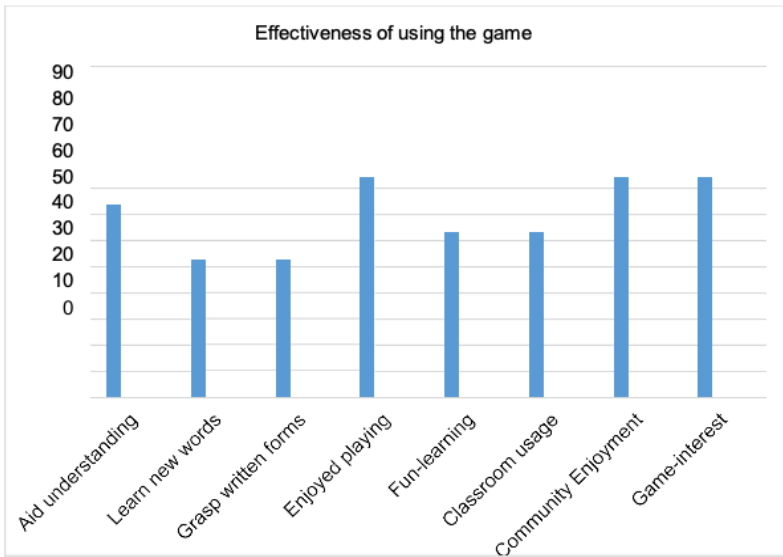
Apart from this, learners also prefer a relaxed learning atmosphere. A study by Hugen and Nga (2003) showed that the learners enjoyed the relaxed ambience of student-centred learning, unlike the traditional, teacher-based and teacher-correction mode of classroom teaching and learning.

### **3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In learning, the use of instructional cues, practice and reinforcement can be attributed to strategies recommended by behaviorists as a means to build and strengthen stimulus- response associations (Peggy & Newby, 2013). Behaviorism and its roots can be traced back to the 1880s and continues to be an ever-evolving theory that was developed by its proponents such as Watson, Pavlov and Skinner (Weeger & Pacis, 2012). Behaviorists are therefore especially concerned with how the association between the stimulus and response is established, reinforced and maintained for the same desired outcome to recur.

Language games for both traditional and digital varieties, in particular, employ positive and negative reinforcements that serve to provoke desired behaviors (Leper-Salazar, 2015). These reinforcements help learners to remain motivated and engaged in the language games that they play. Learners would look out for positive reinforcement and work towards that end.

In the present board game, *Catch Me If You Can*, the players are encouraged to get as many correct 'fish' cards as possible. Hence, they need to recognize the correct Mandarin written forms to get the right card for the specific category. They also need to act fast in order to get as many as possible, to be the winner. It is actions such as these that enable the players to adopt strategies, within the stimulus-response associations, that would help them to realize their objectives - to recognize the Mandarin written forms in order to pick the correct word that fits the given category within the stipulated time. Hence, this study is driven by the



**Table 1: Pre and Post Tests Results**

<b>Respondents (R)</b>	<b>Pre-Test</b>	<b>Post - Test</b>
R1	13	17
R2	15	15
R3	14	16
R4	15	15
R5	16	18
R6	15	15
R7	15	17
R8	16	16
R9	14	17
R10	13	15
R11	15	15
R12	14	16
R13	13	15
R14	16	16
R15	15	13
R16.	14	16
R17.	15	17
R18.	15	15
R19.	13	16
R20.	17	17

Based on Table 1, 20 respondents participated in a pre and post tests. 11 respondents showed an improvement in scores from the pre test to the post test, by 0.5 – 4 marks, out of 20 marks. 8 respondents showed no changes in the scores. However, only 1 respondent showed a down trend of 2 marks. The 8 respondents reported that they were too excited and in their rush to complete the post test, made careless mistakes. These respondents also reported that should they have to do the test again, they would score better.

**Table 2 : Interview Responses**

<b>Question</b>	<b>Responses</b>
Q1	"Game helped me remember Mandarin Written forms"
Q2	"I enjoyed the game"
Q3	"My knowledge about the written forms has increased"
Q4	"The game is interesting, colourful, attractive and enjoyable"
Q5	"It was fun to play, I love it!"
Q6	"I love to play as it encouraged me to learn and participate"
Q7	"Enjoyed bonding with family and friends"
Q8	"Innovative – no need to carry books to class"

Figure 1 shows, 73.7% of the respondents agreed that the game helped them in understanding the usage of Mandarin written forms. This is clearly evident from Table 1, when 19 out of 20 respondents showed an improvement in their post test results. This data is further validated with the interview whereby the students said that "the game helped them to remember the Mandarin written forms with ease (Table 2).

Besides that 52.6 % of the respondents agreed that the game helped them to learn new words. This is evident where 11 respondents out of 20 showed improvement in the post test. The interview data also concurred that the respondents enjoyed the game and hence, it can be concluded that they found learning new words in Mandarin easier.

In grasping the Mandarin written forms, 52.6 % of the respondents agreed that the game helped them. This information concurs with the interview data in Table 2, that shows the total number of respondents strongly agreed that playing the game increased their knowledge. On the other hand, 42.1 % of the respondents chose to be neutral as it is highly probable that they preferred to remain 'on the fence'. This is probably due to the Asian culture of not making a stand.

As for enjoyment, 84.2 % of the respondents agreed that they enjoyed playing the game. The interview data revealed that all the 14 students who were interviewed, found the game to be interesting, colourful, attractive and enjoyable.

63.2 % of the respondents agreed that this game enabled them to learn the Mandarin written forms in a fun way. This information concurs with the interview data, as all 14 respondents agreed that the game was fun.

Furthermore 63.2% of the respondents agreed that this game should be used in the Mandarin language classroom. This information concurs with the interview data (Table 2), as all 14 respondents agreed that this game was 'lots of fun' and engaged the students to participate in the learning process.

Other than that, 84.2% of the respondents agreed that they enjoyed playing the game with their friends and family. They were happy to play the game as it created a sense of bonding and healthy competition among themselves.

Finally, 84.2% of the respondents agreed that playing the game made Mandarin language classes more interesting. Furthermore, 14 interview respondents were pleased that they did not have to carry books to class. In other words, playing this game in the language classroom, was innovative rather than the traditional chalk and talk method.

## **6. Conclusion**

The primary aim of this study was to find out the effectiveness of using the Mandarin board game to engage learners in the comprehension of the written forms in Mandarin. The findings suggest that the board game, as a language game has potential use in the language classroom and is suitable for learners who learn Mandarin as a foreign or a third language. The game also helps non native speakers of Mandarin in writing and identifying the Chinese Characters. The game also develops learners' interest in the process of identifying and writing the correct Chinese Characters. Apart from that, learners learn in a fun and enjoyable way which help them do better and feel better about themselves.

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