

Types of Linguistic Error on Mandarin Time Phrase Construction among Malay Learners

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Abstract

Aligned with the economic development in China, Mandarin has been made popular worldwide. The ninth Malaysian plan (2006-2010) has strongly substantiated the need of Mandarin to be introduced as a foreign language elective course in public institutions of higher learning. Due to the fact that numerical phrases play a prominent role in daily lives, the main aim of this study is to explore the construction of Mandarin time phrase among Malay learners. A total of 40 Malay students who registered in Mandarin for Beginners course took part in this study. A test which consisted of 10 questions covering construction of time phrase was administered to the students. Grammatical description and frequency analysis were employed, and the results showed five types of linguistic error committed by the students in constructing Mandarin time phrase: (1) error in words usage, (2) confusion of numbers, (3) *Hanyu Pinyin* errors, (4) structural errors and (5) omissions of words. The factors influencing students in the construction of Mandarin time phrase include students' attitude, different structures between Mandarin and Malay, language transfer from native language and lack of learning time. Accordingly, this study sheds light on Mandarin teachers in improving academic performances of Malay students in conceptualizing and mastering Mandarin time phrase.

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Keywords: Mandarin time phrase; Numeral phrase construction

INTRODUCTION

With a strong economy, which has been increasing quickly in the 21st millennium, China holds a big influence in the international economy. Therefore, Mandarin becomes one of the most popular languages in the world to be learnt. More than 50 million people worldwide learn Mandarin as a foreign language (Sin Chew Daily, 2010, December 18), and as a consequence, the Malaysian government has substantiated the need for Mandarin to be introduced as a foreign language elective course in public institutions of higher learning in the Ninth Malaysian Plan (2006-2010) (Jabatan Perdana Menteri, 2006).

Mandarin is a tonal language; it has four tones. Mandarin is written in Chinese characters and *Hanyu Pinyin*. Chinese characters are words with strokes, where the words must be recognized in order to understand the pronunciation and meaning. On the other hand, *Hanyu Pinyin* is Mandarin alphabet phonetic system, where the alphabets have different tones. Different tones of *Hanyu Pinyin* have different meanings. Even one tone has different Chinese character, and each Chinese character has different meaning. Learning Mandarin through Chinese characters takes a long time to practice; therefore, some non-native speakers learn Mandarin through *Hanyu Pinyin*. This is because *Hanyu Pinyin* is the spelling system, where the words can be pronounced in alphabets. It has assisted learners to speak Mandarin within a short time.

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Numbers have a high frequency use in daily lives. Many Mandarin for Beginners books (e.g. Ang & Ooi, 2004; Chong, 2007; Chong, Yong & Zhang, 2013; Li, Luo, Liu, Wang & Xuan, 2010; Liu, 2011; Ma & Li, 2007) include numbers as the basic topic in learning Mandarin. Although number is a basic topic in Mandarin learning, generally foreign language learners, and specifically Malay students have been facing predicaments in constructing Mandarin time phrase. From observations and teaching experiences of researchers of this study, the constraints include (i) confusion between using a.m./p.m. words in Mandarin, (ii) literal inverse translation from Malay structure to time phrase in Mandarin, and (iii) confusion of number 2 in Mandarin which has two *Hanyu Pinyin*, i.e. 二 [èr] and 两 [liǎng]. This is similar with the findings reported by Saw (1997), Lee, C.C. (2007) and Cheun, Ho & Hoe (2009) where they stated that Malay learners made errors in grammar of time in Mandarin.

The objective of this study is, therefore, to explore the construction of Mandarin time phrase among Malay students. This study also aims to: (i) identify the types of linguistic error in Mandarin time phrase, and (ii) identify the frequency of linguistic error in Mandarin time phrase among Malay learners.

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Mandarin as a Foreign Language

Mandarin as a foreign language has a long history in Western countries, such as England, United States of America and France, while it only has fifty years of history in China (Zhao, 2013). Since the 1980s, Mandarin taught as a foreign language has entered into the development stage, and particularly after 1992, it is gaining popularity in China. The learners include foreigners and minority of China races (Zhao, 2013). In Malaysia, learning Mandarin as a foreign language has become popular among non-Chinese since 1960s and 1970s, and especially because learners learn with the aim to communicate and do business with Malaysian Chinese (Hoe, 2012). These are among the reasons that prompted the Malaysian Ministry of Education to include Mandarin courses in the language education curriculum at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels. Nowadays, Mandarin as a foreign language has been introduced not only in universities, but also in *Sekolah Rendah Kebangsaan* (SJK) (primary schools) and *Sekolah Berasrama Penuh* (SBP) (boarding schools) where it is offered as an elective course. Generally, Mandarin as a foreign language course is open for non-native speakers to learn a new language and enhance a person's competitiveness and opportunity in future work field.

2.2 Mandarin Time Phrase

Mandarin numeral is a systematic phrase. Mandarin basic numbers from zero to ten are 零 [líng] 'zero', 一 [yī] 'one', 二 [èr] 'two', 三 [sān] 'three', 四 [sì] 'four', 五 [wǔ] 'five', 六 [liù] 'six', 七 [qī] 'seven', 八 [bā] 'eight', 九 [jiǔ] 'nine' and 十 [shí] 'ten'. All Mandarin basic numbers has one word, except number two, which has two words, namely 二 [èr] and 两 [liǎng].

Mandarin time phrase structure has three components, often portrayed in *time segment + o'clock + minute*. This is a combination of time segment with o'clock and ends with minutes. For example, 8:20 a.m. is 早上八点二十分 [zǎoshang bā diǎn èrshí fēn]. The time segment in *a.m* or *p.m* is important in Mandarin time phrase because Mandarin uses twelve hours system in constructing time phrase. The time segment of 早上 [zǎoshang] 'morning' refers to a.m., but the time segment of p.m. includes 中午 [zhōngwǔ] 'noon', 下午 [xiàwǔ] 'afternoon' and 晚上 [wǎn shang] 'night'. The word of o'clock is 点 [diǎn] in Mandarin. The structure of hour in Mandarin time phrase is *number + o'clock*. For instance, the structure of 八点 [bā diǎn] '8 o'clock' shows that the number is followed by o'clock. The word 分 [fēn] means minute. The construction of minute structure in Mandarin time phrase is *number + minute*. This structure shows that the number must be followed by minute. For example, 二十分 [èrshí fēn] '20 minutes' shows that the number is in front of minute.

Mandarin time phrase is one of the numeral phrases which is a combination of number with noun

(Zhang, 2002). Most Mandarin grammatical books group numbers into noun. However, some books (Luo, 2003; Shao, 2001; Zhang, 2002) categorize Mandarin numeral as numbers, but they do not explain numeral phrases in linguistic. From the literature, it is found that only “*Xiandai hanyu shici*” (现代汉语实词) (Fang, 2000) explains numeral phrases in syntaxes. Furthermore, the literature shows that only “*Hanyu de shumuzi*” (汉语的数目字) (Su, 2007), which is a Mandarin grammatical book, specifies Mandarin numeral. Su (2007) explained the history of Mandarin numbers, number function and culture in numbers, in comparison with other languages. He also explained the structure of Mandarin time phrase.

In addition, there are simple explanations about time phrase found in other references namely “Basic Chinese For Everyone” (Ang & Ooi, 2004), “Basic Chinese: A Grammar and Workbook” (Yip & Don, 1998), “Chinese: An Essential Grammar” (Yip & Don, 2006), “Colloquial Chinese: The Complete Course For Beginners” (Kan, 2007) and “*Kuaile hanyu*” (Li et al., 2010) and “New Practical Chinese Reader” (Liu, 2011).

2.3 Previous Studies in Numeral

From the literature, it is found that studies related to numeral are limited. The previous studies in numeral included Mandarin greeting words with numbers, Mandarin idioms with numbers, culture of Mandarin number, sentence structure of time expressions and semantic of Mandarin numbers.

A Mandarin book “*Hanyu de shumuzi*” (Su, 2007) discovered numeral phrase in Mandarin greeting words for Chinese New Year, such as 一帆风顺 [yì fān fēng shùn], 三羊开泰 [sān yáng kāi tài], 四季平安 [sì jì píng ān] and 五谷丰收 [wǔ gǔ fēng shōu]. Su (2007) expressed that Mandarin greeting words are part of idioms which are constructed with numbers and words.

Further, Zhang (2009) conducted a study entitled “A comparative study of Chinese and English numerals” which explored numeral phrase in some fields, such as the culture of numerals, comparison of Mandarin idioms with numbers, structure of Mandarin idioms with numbers and frequency of Mandarin idioms with numbers. For example, 七零八乱 [qī líng bā luàn] is a Mandarin idiom with numbers adapted from an English idiom ‘at sixes and sevens’. Moreover, Wei (2009) made a contrastive analysis on idiom with numbers between Mandarin and Thai, which compared the structure of idioms with numbers, and the results showed that Mandarin has a systematic structure on idioms with numbers, but Thai idioms with numbers are not consistent with the structure.

A study was conducted by Ang (2006) which explored numeral study in semantic, which analyzed the meaning of SMS messages by using numeral and emotion symbols among Chinese teenagers. The study showed that teenagers prefer to use numbers to deliver the meaning of messages compared to sending messages in Chinese characters. This is because the combination of some numbers has similar pronunciation with Mandarin lexis. For instance, 745 is read as 七四五 [qī sì wǔ], which is similar with 气死我 [qì sǐ wǒ], which means ‘I’m furious’.

Moreover, Lee, W.F. (2007) also investigated the meaning of numbers in an online forum among Chinese students, which studied numbers in semantic. The results showed that Chinese students prefer to use numbers in forum because they save time when numbers are used rather than typing words. For example, number 88 [bā bā] is similar with ‘bye bye’ in English.

From an extensive literature review, time phrase has only been analyzed in some of Mandarin syntax researches. Saw (1997) conducted error analysis in Mandarin sentences among Malay adult learners. One of the errors in Mandarin sentences made by Malay adult learners was the construction of Mandarin time phrases incorrectly in which the arrangement of time is done at the end of a Mandarin sentence which is similar to Malay grammar structure. For example, the sentence 我们上午九点到了那里 [Wǒmen shàngwǔ jiǔ diǎn dào le nàlǐ] ‘We arrived there at 9 a.m.’ is not equal as 我们到了那里上午九点 [Wǒmen dào le nàlǐ shàngwǔ jiǔ diǎn].

Additionally, Lee, C.C. (2007) also found that time phrase mistakes happened among Malay students. For instance, “We will meet at the bank tomorrow morning” 我们明天早上在银行见 [Wǒmen míngtiān zǎoshang zài yínháng jiàn] was answered incorrectly as 我们在银行见明天早上 [Wǒmen zài yínháng jiàn míngtiān zǎoshang]. The Mandarin structure in syntax is *subject + time + verb + object*, but the Malay students answered it as *subject + verb + object + time* in which time is put at the end of sentences. Saw (1997) and Lee, C.C. (2007) agreed that negative transfer from mother language caused the error made by Malay learners.

An error analysis on Mandarin time expression conducted by Li (2005) indicated a few errors made by Korean students who were studying in an elementary Mandarin course in China. They included structure arrangement error and confused time expression. The study included dates as the time expressions. The results showed that the Korean students constructed the sentence ‘My birthday is on 13th of January’ 我的生日是1月13号 [Wǒ de shēngrì shì 1 yuè 13 hào] incorrectly as 我的生日是13号1月 [Wǒ de shēngrì shì 13 hào 1 yuè]. The time expression of date is *month + date*, but the Korean students answered it as *date + month*. The study surveyed the time expression in date, but not in telling time.

In another study, Cheun et al. (2009) observed that Mandarin sentence grammar mistakes were made by non-native speakers by rearranging the sentences to correct sentences. The study showed that Malay students constructed time expressions in their own native grammar structure and sentence patterns. For example, 星期天早上十七区的巴刹很热闹 [Xīngqītiān zǎoshang shíqī qū de bāshā hěn rènao] ‘Market is lively on a Sunday morning’ was answered incorrectly as 早上星期天十七区的巴刹很热闹 [Zǎoshang xīngqītiān shíqī qū de bāshā hěn rènao]. The results showed that the grammar mistake on time expression, which is ‘Sunday morning’ in Mandarin is 星期天早上 [Xīngqītiān zǎoshang], but not 早上星期天 [Zǎoshang xīngqītiān] ‘morning Sunday’. The study only showed one part of time phrase, but did not include the time expression in ‘o’clock’ and ‘minute’.

From the literature, the finding showed that there are lack of grammar books to discuss about the construction of Mandarin time phrase. Besides, previous studies discuss the numeral in semantic, culture and Mandarin time construction. In short, although some researches were conducted on Mandarin time construction, there is no study reported for time construction which discussed *time segment + o’clock + minute*. With this study, the gap in time construction will be able to be addressed.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

A total of 40 Malay students taking Mandarin for Beginners course in a technical university in Malaysia took part in this study. The students learnt Mandarin in *Hanyu Pinyin*, which is a Mandarin alphabet phonetic system. The Mandarin course is a one credit hour course and the students attended twenty-eight hours of lecture per semester. They were selected through convenience sampling from two Mandarin classes. All participants were non-native speakers of Mandarin. Some of the Malay students who graduated from Chinese primary school were not selected to participate in this study.

3.2 Research Instrument

The instrument of the study is a test, which has 10 questions covering construction of numeral phrases in time. Time phrase is one of the topics learnt in Mandarin for Beginners course. The test was given at the end of the course. All participants were required to construct the Mandarin time phrases in *Hanyu Pinyin*, where they needed to write in alphabets with Mandarin tone.

3.3 Research Procedure

The students attended a Mandarin course for twenty hours, and Mandarin numerical and time phrases were taught for four hours during the Mandarin course. The test was administered after the students completed the Mandarin course where they were requested to answer it within thirty minutes in the classroom. The test was then marked and analyzed where the incorrect answers were listed for analysis. Lastly, the frequency of errors in Mandarin time phrase construction was counted and the linguistics errors in grammar were described. The types of linguistics errors on Mandarin time phrase among Malay learners were identified based on the grammatical description.

3.4 Data Analysis

Grammatical description (Fang, 2000) and frequency analysis were employed as the analysis method. All the Mandarin time phrases constructed by participants were listed. This study analyzed the incorrect answers by counting the frequency of error patterns on Mandarin time phrase construction. All the frequency and error patterns on Mandarin time phrase construction were described by Mandarin grammar as shown in the sample in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample of an analysis on Mandarin time phrase construction.

Time	7:36 am	Grammatical description
Correct answer	早上七点三十六分 [Zǎoshàng qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn]	Constructed Mandarin time phrase correctly.
Incorrect answer	[Zhoushàng qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn]	<i>Hanyu Pinyin</i> error on 早上 [Zǎoshàng] was written as [Zhou shàng].

Besides that, frequency analysis was used to analyze incorrect answers in all types of linguistic error in Mandarin. Therefore, the observation was used on student performance in learning Mandarin time phrase. The students were tested on numbers in Mandarin and Mandarin time segment orally in the class. This method was used to find out the factors that influence students in the construction of Mandarin time phrase.

FINDINGS

The overall results showed that 60.5% of the students answered the question correctly, while 39.5% answered wrongly in the construction of Mandarin time phrases. Frequency analysis in Table 2 indicates 20% of the Malay students answered question number 3 incorrectly, which marked the least error made. In contrast, question number 10 is the most wrongly answered (72.5%).

Table 2. Types of linguistic errors in the construction of Mandarin time phrase in each question.

Question no.	Error in word usage	Confusion of numbers	<i>Hanyu Pinyin</i> errors	Structural errors	Omission of words	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	2	3	5	1	1	12	30
2	4	1	4	1	0	10	25
3	0	0	5	1	2	8	20
4	17	2	2	7	0	28	65
5	9	6	0	1	0	16	40
6	11	0	4	1	0	16	37.5
7	12	4	4	1	0	21	40
8	9	1	2	2	0	14	35
9	9	0	2	1	0	12	30
10	9	26	3	1	0	39	72.5
Total	82	43	31	17	3	176	

Table 3 shows five types of linguistic error in time phrase made by the students. The highest frequency of linguistic error in constructing Mandarin time phrases is error in word usage (46.60%). The second highest linguistic error is confusion of numbers (24.43%). This is followed by *Hanyu Pinyin* errors (17.61%) and structural errors (9.66%). Only 1.70% omission of words in Mandarin time phrase construction was made, which is the lowest linguistic error made by the participants.

Table 3. Types of linguistic error in Mandarin time phrase.

No.	Type of linguistic error	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	error in word usage	82	46.60
2	confusion of numbers	43	24.43
3	<i>Hanyu Pinyin</i> errors	31	17.61
4	structural errors	17	9.66
5	omission of words	3	1.70
	Total	176	100

4.1 Error in Word Usage

The analysis shows that students were confused with Mandarin time segment in using a.m. and p.m. For instance, the time 12:00 p.m. was written as 中午十二点 [zhōngwǔ shí'èr diǎn] in Mandarin. Malay students answered 中午 [zhōngwǔ] 'noon' as 下午 [xiàwǔ] 'afternoon' or 早上 [zǎoshang] 'morning'. Besides, participants also failed to differentiate time segments in p.m. It can be 中午 [zhōngwǔ] 'noon', 下午 [xiàwǔ] 'afternoon' and 晚上 [wǎnshang] 'night'. The error in word usage shows that students failed in mastering Mandarin time segment, especially time segment in p.m., which can be illustrated using three different words in Mandarin.

4.2 Confusion of Numbers

The findings show that students were also confused by four pairs of numbers. Students used the former word in each pair to mean the latter and vice versa. They are (i) 六 [liù] which is number 6 and 九 [jiǔ] which is number 9, (ii) 二 [èr] and 两 [liǎng] where both means number 2, (iii) 零 [líng] which

is number 0 and 两 [liǎng] which is number 2 and (iv) 四 [sì] which is number 4 and + [shí] which is number 10.

The Malay students answered incorrectly for 六 [liù], where it was stated as number 6 and 九 [jiǔ] as number 9. For example, the students answered 六点 [liù diǎn] ‘6 o’clock’ incorrectly, and stated it as 九点 [jiǔ diǎn] ‘9 o’clock’. This is probably because both the *Hanyu Pinyin* for number 6 and 9 are similar in Mandarin. They have the same diphthong [iu], but the initials are different, which are [l] and [j]. Therefore, the students were confused with the memorization of Mandarin numbers.

Besides that, the students were confused with number 2. The error pattern shows that they failed to differentiate the usage of 二 [èr] and 两 [liǎng] for number 2 which can be described in two different words in Mandarin. For example, two o’clock is 两点 [liǎng diǎn], but the students answered incorrectly as 二点 [èr diǎn]. On the other hand, they constructed 二十分 [èrshí fēn] ‘twenty minutes’ incorrectly as 两十分 [liǎng shí fēn]. The real usage of 二 [èr] for number 2 is to explain hours and minutes, except for two o’clock, but 两点 [liǎng diǎn] is used instead of 二点 [èr diǎn] (Kan, 2007; Zhang, 2002). The usage is further shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Word use of 二 [èr] and 两 [liǎng] in Mandarin time phrases.

Time	二 [èr]	两 [liǎng]
2 o’clock	(X) 二点 [èr diǎn]	(√) 两点 [liǎng diǎn]
12 o’clock	(√) 十二点 [shí’èr diǎn]	(X) 十两点 [shí liǎng diǎn]
20 minutes	(√) 二十分 [èrshí fēn]	(X) 两十分 [liǎng shí fēn]

Additionally, the students were also confused with 零 [líng], number 0 and 两 [liǎng], number 2. The Malay students wrote 两 [liǎng] number 2 as 零 [líng], which is actually number 0. This is because in *Hanyu Pinyin*, there is a slight similarity between [líng] and [liǎng].

Furthermore, error in constructing 四 [sì] as number 4 and + [shí] as number 10 is observed. For example, they answered 十四分 [shí’èr fēn] ‘fourteen minute’ incorrectly as 四十分 [sìshí fēn] ‘forty minutes’. Table 5 shows the structure of number 14 and number 40 in Mandarin and Malay.

Table 5. Structure of number 14 and number 40 in Mandarin and Malay.

Number	Mandarin	Malay
14	十四 [sìshí]	empat belas
	= 10 + 4	= 4 + 10
	= tens digit + ones digit	= ones digit + tens digit
40	四十 [sìshí]	empat puluh
	= 4 x 10	= 4 x 10
	= ones digit x tens digit	= ones digit x tens digit

The structure of 十四 [sìshí] ‘number 14’ is *tens digits + ones digits* in Mandarin, which is in contrast to Malay structure for “*empat belas*,” number 14 where it is *ones digits + tens digits*. Moreover, both Malay words for tens digit “*belas*” and “*puluh*” are only represented by one word in Mandarin as 十 [shí]. The possible reason is due to time phrase constructions were based on Malay grammar for number 14 as “*empat belas*” which is *empat* [sì] and *belas* [shí] in Mandarin. Therefore, Malay students answered number 14 as [sìshí] which means number 40 in Mandarin. In fact, Mandarin pronunciation is different

between [sì] and [shí], it should be pronounced as number 4 [sɿ] and number 10 [ʃɿ]. There is a slight similarity pronunciation between [sɿ] and [ʃɿ]. Chong and Yong (2014) show that both sounds were also difficult for Malay students to produce correctly. Therefore, the Malay students may be confused with the *Hanyu Pinyin* for [sì] ‘number 4’ and [shí] ‘number 10’.

4.3 *Hanyu Pinyin* Errors

The findings show that the Malay students made *Hanyu Pinyin* errors in the test. *Hanyu Pinyin* was written incorrectly for time, minutes and numbers in Mandarin. For the time segment, the students answered 早上 [zǎoshàng] *a.m.* incorrectly as [zhoushàng], [zhǎoshàng] and [zǎochàng]. Furthermore, 中午 [zhōngwǔ] ‘noon’ were written incorrectly as [zhangwǔ] and [zhungwǔ]. Additionally, 晚上 [wǎnshàng] ‘night’ was answered incorrectly as [wǎngshàng]. In Mandarin time phrases, the participants wrote 分 [fēn] ‘minute’ incorrectly as [fan] and [fer]. Besides that, they made *Hanyu Pinyin* errors for numbers. For instance, 五 [wǔ] ‘number 5’ was answered incorrectly as [wo]; and 十 [shí] was answered incorrectly as [she]. Understandably, the Malay students wrote *Hanyu Pinyin* wrongly in constructing Mandarin time phrases due to their difficulty to pronounce the syllable [shí] (Chong & Yong, 2014).

4.4 Structural Errors

The results show that the Malay students made structural errors in Mandarin time phrases as well. Mandarin time phrase structure is *time segment + o'clock + minute*, but they answered incorrectly as *o'clock + minute + time segment*. For example, 7:36 a.m. 早上七点三十六分 [zǎoshàng qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn] was incorrectly answered as 七点三十六分早上 [qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn zǎoshàng]; 8:30 a.m. 早上八点半 [zǎoshàng bā diǎn bàn] was incorrectly answered as 八点半早上 [bā diǎn bàn zǎoshàng]; 3:20 p.m. 下午三点二十分 [xiàwǔ sān diǎn èrshí fēn] was incorrectly answered as 三点二十分下午 [sān diǎn èrshí fēn xiàwǔ]; 10:18 p.m. 下午十点十八分 [xiàwǔ shí diǎn shíbā fēn] was incorrectly answered as 十点十八分下午 [shí diǎn shíbā fēn xiàwǔ]; 11:45 p.m.; 下午十一分四十五分 [xiàwǔ shíyī diǎn sishíwǔ fēn] was incorrectly answered as 十一分四十五分下午 [shíyī diǎn sishíwǔ fēn xiàwǔ]; 3:14 p.m. 下午三点十四分 [xiàwǔ sān diǎn shísì fēn] was incorrectly answered as 三点十四分下午 [sān diǎn shísì fēn xiàwǔ]; 4:58 p.m. 下午四点五十八分 [xiàwǔ sì diǎn wǔshíbā fēn] was incorrectly answered as 四点五十八分下午 [sì diǎn wǔshíbā fēn xiàwǔ]; 2:24 p.m. 下午两点二十四分 [xiàwǔ liǎng diǎn èrshísì fēn] was incorrectly answered as 两点二十四分下午 [liǎng diǎn èrshísì fēn xiàwǔ]. The results also show structural error in minute, in which 9:05 p.m., 早上九点零五分 [zǎoshàng jiǔ diǎn líng wǔ fēn] was incorrectly answered as 早上九点零分五 [zǎoshàng jiǔ diǎn líng fēn wǔ]. The structural errors show that the students use Malay grammar structure *o'clock + minute + time segment* in Mandarin time phrase constructions.

4.5 Omission of Words

One of the linguistics errors in constructing Mandarin time phrase is omission of words. The results show that three words were missing in the construction of Mandarin time phrase. Omission of words in linguistic analysis will be marked with the symbol Ø. For example, 7:36 a.m. 早上七点三十六分 [zǎoshàng qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn] was incorrectly answered as 早上七点三十六 Ø [zǎoshàng qī diǎn sānshíliù Ø], the 分 [fēn] was missing at the end of the time phrase. The analysis shows that the time segment of 早上 [zǎoshàng] was missing in the question 9:05 a.m. and the students answered incorrectly as Ø九点零五分 [Ø jiǔ diǎn líng wǔ fēn]. Another word was found missing 九点 [jiǔ diǎn], which was incorrectly answered as 早上Ø 零五分 [zǎoshàng Ø líng wǔ fēn]. Mandarin time phrase has three parts in the structure which are time segment, o'clock and minute. The students missed to write one part of the Mandarin time phrase.

DISCUSSION

Observations in teaching Mandarin as a foreign language classes found several factors which influenced Malay students in the construction of Mandarin time phrases. The factors include students' attitude, different structures between Mandarin and Malay, language transfer from native language and lack of learning time.

5.1 Factor 1: Students' Attitude

Linguistic errors were made because the students failed to master the vocabulary of time phrase in Mandarin. The analysis of errors in vocabulary also proves that the Malay students did not memorize the vocabulary in Mandarin time phrase. Students failed to differentiate the time in Mandarin time phrase, especially time of p.m., which can be noon, afternoon or night. Actually, there are only six vocabularies in Mandarin time phrase, which include 点 [diǎn] 'o'clock', 分 [fēn] 'minute', 早上 [zǎoshang] 'morning', 中午 [zhōngwǔ] 'noon', 下午 [xiàwǔ] 'afternoon' and 晚上 [wǎnshang] 'night'. Although six vocabularies were taught in relation to Mandarin time segment, students were unable to master the meaning of these vocabularies. Actually, the construction of a time phrase only involves one vocabulary from the four time segments such as 早上 [zǎoshang] 'morning', 中午 [zhōngwǔ] 'noon', 下午 [xiàwǔ] 'afternoon' and 晚上 [wǎnshang] 'night'.

5.2 Factor 2: Difference of Structure between Mandarin and Malay

This research also highlights the structural differences between number 11 until number 19, and *Hanyu Pinyin* writing in numbers. Since the Malay students frequently made errors in constructing Mandarin numbers, a thorough analysis of the Mandarin number structure was conducted. From the analysis, it was found that the numerical positioning and vocabulary error is largely found between the Mandarin and Malay numerical phrases. For example, the error of numerical structure for 十二点 [shí'èr diǎn] '12 o'clock' was answered incorrectly as 二十点 [èrshí diǎn], which means '20 o'clock'. The structure of 十二 [shí'èr] 'twelve' in Mandarin is *tens digit + ones digits*, which is '10 + 2'; but the Malay structure for [dua belas] 'twelve' is '2 + 10'. Thus, negative transfer of number structure has happened among the students. This analysis shows that the native language has influenced the Malay students in constructing Mandarin time phrase.

Besides that, the students answered the time structure incorrectly when structuring time phrase in Mandarin. For example, the error for time in the construction of time phrase 早上七点三十六分 [zǎoshàng qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn] '7.36 a.m.' was incorrectly answered as 七点三十六分早上 [qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn zǎoshàng] 'a.m. 7.36'. The Mandarin time phrase structure is *time segment + o'clock + minute*, but *o'clock + minute + time segment* in Malay. The time phrase structures differentiating between Mandarin and Malay are as presented in Table 6. It can be seen that the Malay students translated directly the Mandarin time phrase using the Malay time structure of *o'clock + minute + time segment*, therefore, giving incorrect answer as 七点三十六分早上 [qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn zǎoshàng] 'a.m. 7.36'.

Table 6. Structure of time phrase in Mandarin and Malay.

Time	Mandarin	Malay
7:36 a.m.	早上七点三十六分 [zǎoshàng qī diǎn sānshíliù fēn] = time segment + o'clock + minute	Pukul tujuh tiga puluh enam minit pagi = o'clock + minute + time segment

According to Lado (1957), language transfer is a normal situation among non-native speaker in learning a targeted language. This explains the negative transfer from Malay structure to Mandarin time phrase which has taken place among the Malay students. The concept of language transfer was introduced by Selinker (1972). Transfer of native language is inevitable in learning a second language. Transferring the native language brings positive and negative influences in learning a second language. Positive transfer of native language can help students to learn a second language quickly when there is a similarity between the native language and a second language, while the negative transfer of the mother tongue is found to be interfering in learning a second language if there is a difference between the mother tongue and second language. Negative transfer is the negative influence of the native language on the non-native student performance; phenomena derived from the native language result in errors in the use of a second language (Lado, 1957).

Usually, the influence of native language in the negative transfer can be traced through the fault of the students in learning the language. If the teacher has a basic knowledge of the native language of students, it can help him or her to analyze errors and improve the teaching effectively. According to Corder (in Richards 1974), analysis of the patterns of errors can help teachers understand what and how students learn a second language. Indirectly, error pattern analysis can benefit teachers in improving teaching pedagogy.

Table 7 below depicts the position of numbers and vocabularies for time in both Mandarin and Malay. It is found that the units for time segment in both Mandarin and Malay consist of vocabulary only. In Mandarin, the unit for ‘o’clock’ and ‘minute’ consists of similar structure, which is *number + vocabulary*. On the other hand, the Malay structure for ‘o’clock’ and ‘minute’ is different. The construct of ‘o’clock’ unit in Malay is relatively different: *vocabulary + number* while the unit in minutes is presented with *number + vocabulary*. Although there is a difference between the positioning of number and vocabulary for time in Mandarin and Malay, there are no left outs of words in Mandarin. This is because the structure of unit ‘o’clock’ and ‘minute’ for Mandarin time phrase is systematic and coherent with *number + vocabulary*.

Table 7. Positioning of number and vocabulary for time phrase in Mandarin and Malay.

Unit	Mandarin Structure	Malay Structure
o'clock	number + o'clock = number + vocabulary	o'clock + number = vocabulary + number
minute	number + minute = number + vocabulary	number + minute = number + vocabulary

In a nutshell, the position of number and vocabulary in both Mandarin and Malay numerical phrases is depicted in Table 8. It is also found that the position of number and vocabulary in Mandarin and Malay has both similarities and differences. Although there is a difference between the structures of number phrases, this micro difference has never been discussed in any research or publications. It can be deduced that the positioning of number and vocabulary influences the construction of number phrase in Mandarin among the Malay students. This difference in the number phrase construction has caused the Malay students to ignore and leave out some vocabularies when constructing number phrase in Mandarin, which are:

- (i) Failure to differentiate the usage of 二[èr] and 两[liǎng]
- (ii) Failure to differentiate time segment in Mandarin
- (iii) Mistakes in structuring time construct

Table 8. Positioning of numbers and vocabulary in numerical phrase in Mandarin and Malay.

Mandarin Structure	Malay Structure
time segment + o'clock+ minute = time segment + (number + vocabulary) + (number + vocabulary)	o'clock + minute + time segment = (vocabulary + number) + (number + vocabulary) + time segment

5.3 Factor 3: Language Transfer from Native Language

The analysis also shows that language transfer from native language occurred among the Malay students. This finding is similar with previous researches (Cheun, Ho & Hoe, 2005; Lee, C.C. 2007; Toh, 2005) which evidently showed that mother language influences the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language. In Cheun et al.'s (2009) study, it was shown that mother language is the main factor in influencing Malay students of making structure errors in Mandarin through *hanyu pinyin* errors. Malay students used Malay pronunciation in writing *hanyu pinyin*. This has caused them to construct Mandarin time phrases incorrectly. For instance, Malay students answered 中午 [zhōngwǔ] 'noon' incorrectly by using Malay pronunciation as [zhungwǔ].

5.4 Factor 4: Lack of Learning Time

Lack of time in learning Mandarin has caused the students to be weak in constructing Mandarin time phrases. In practice, teachers cannot expect Malay students, who have no basic in Mandarin language to master Mandarin within one semester. According to Leki (in Richardson, 1992: 46), time is essential in learning a new language. Cheun et al. (2009) has shown that time factor has greatly affected Malays in learning grammar. The study stated that about 40% of the teachers agreed that they have almost no time to correct grammatical errors among Malay students. Adequate allocation of time in learning syntax is also found to be prominent (Lee, C.C., 2007). He also stated that conventional classroom learning is not adequate to deliver grammar effectively in such a short stipulated time.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the results show that there are five types of linguistic errors in constructing Mandarin time phrase, and they are (1) errors in word usage, (2) confusion of numbers, (3) *Hanyu Pinyin* errors, (4) structural errors and (5) omission of words. Accordingly, this study shed light on teachers to improve the academic performance of Malay students in conceptualizing and mastering Chinese numerical phrases. The influence for linguistic errors on the construction of Mandarin time phrases among Malay students is largely caused by their mother language and micro differences between Malay and Mandarin grammar. We hope that the finding is useful for teachers in improving their teaching and learning where the construction of time phrases in Mandarin is highlighted.

This study does not look at the construction of 上午 [shàngwǔ] 'a.m.' and 刻 [kè] 'quarter' in Mandarin. The syllabus expresses the word of time segment in 'a.m.' as 早上 [zǎoshàng], therefore another word of time segment in 'a.m.' 上午 [shàngwǔ] is not included in this study. Besides that, the word of 刻 [kè] 'quarter' is not included in the beginner course. The syllabus only focuses on conversational Mandarin in daily lives. Normally, the word 分 [fēn] is used to refer to minute in Mandarin daily conversation. Mandarin itself is a tonal language, but this study does not cover Mandarin tones as Malay students have major problem in marking Mandarin tones in *Hanyu Pinyin* system.

Another limitation of this study is students were not required to write Mandarin Han characters throughout the course of their study. They were purely taught based on *Hanyu Pinyin* system in English alphabets. One noticeable weakness of this *Hanyu Pinyin* pedagogy is that it has caused the confusion in

numbers and *Hanyu Pinyin* errors in constructing Mandarin time phrases. The researchers would like to recommend a study to be conducted on constructing time phrases in Chinese characters among Malay students in the future. Besides that, studies in constructing Mandarin time phrases through oral test are also recommended. Oral test is a good pragmatic approach in assessing Malay students' capability of constructing Mandarin time phrases in practice.

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