



The Use Of Youtube In Mandarin Language Learning

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Abstrak

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengeksplorasi YouTube sebagai alat pembelajaran bahasa Mandarin dengan menelaah karakteristik konten, motivasi dan keterlibatan siswa, tantangan yang dihadapi, serta implikasi pedagogis. Penelitian ini berupaya memberikan wawasan empiris mengenai bagaimana YouTube mendukung pembelajaran yang otonom, interaktif, dan autentik secara kontekstual, sekaligus memberikan informasi bagi strategi pengajaran praktis dan pemahaman teoretis. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan observasional kualitatif untuk meneliti interaksi siswa dengan konten pembelajaran bahasa Mandarin di YouTube. Kesimpulannya, YouTube memberikan kontribusi baik secara teoretis maupun praktis dengan mendukung pembelajaran bahasa yang fleksibel, otonom, dan autentik secara kontekstual, sekaligus menekankan pentingnya pedagogi yang terarah dan keterlibatan kritis terhadap konten digital.

Kata kunci: YouTube, pembelajaran, bahasa Mandarin.

Abstract

This study aims to explore YouTube as a tool for Mandarin learning by examining content characteristics, student motivation and engagement, challenges encountered, and pedagogical implications. It seeks to provide empirical insights into how YouTube supports autonomous, interactive, and contextually authentic learning while informing practical teaching strategies and theoretical understanding. This study employs a qualitative observational approach to examine students' interactions with Mandarin learning content on YouTube. In conclusion, YouTube offers both theoretical and practical contributions by supporting flexible, autonomous, and contextually authentic language learning, while highlighting the importance of guided pedagogy and critical engagement with digital content.

Keywords: YouTube, learning, Mandarin language.

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INTRODUCTION

The rapid integration of digital technology into education has fundamentally transformed language learning, offering learners opportunities to engage with authentic, context-rich materials beyond the classroom. Among these resources, YouTube has emerged as a widely used platform, providing diverse audiovisual content for Mandarin learners. From short pronunciation tutorials to daily conversation videos, YouTube exposes students to language in realistic social and cultural contexts, complementing traditional instruction and bridging the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical use. For example, a beginner may watch a video on basic greetings, pausing and replaying to practice pronunciation, while an advanced learner might follow a vlog of a Mandarin-speaking host to expand vocabulary and deepen cultural understanding. These experiences illustrate the platform's flexibility and accessibility, supporting learning anytime and anywhere according to individual needs and pace (Wang, Zhang, & Liu, 2021; Li & Xu, 2022).

Previous research has highlighted the benefits of multimedia learning, emphasizing that integrating audio, visual, and textual elements can enhance comprehension (Chen et al., 2020; Zhang & Wang, 2021). Exposure to authentic content further allows learners to acquire idiomatic expressions, cultural norms, and real-life conversational structures naturally (Li, Liu, & Chen, 2022). Despite these advantages, studies also point to limitations, including inconsistent content quality, limited advanced materials, potential for distraction, and technical challenges such as unstable internet connections (Chen & Huang, 2021; Zhao, Chen, & Liu, 2022). Importantly, prior research has rarely examined learners' actual behaviors, motivational drivers, and engagement strategies when navigating YouTube content, leaving a gap in understanding how students respond to both opportunities and challenges in real-world learning contexts.

This study is guided by Multimedia Learning Theory (Mayer, 2009), which asserts that meaningful learning occurs when verbal and visual channels are effectively integrated, and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), highlighting autonomy, competence, and intrinsic motivation as key drivers of sustained engagement. Complementing these, constructivist perspectives suggest that learners actively construct knowledge by interacting with authentic content, reflecting on language use, and connecting new input to prior experiences. Together, these theoretical frameworks position YouTube not merely as a

repository of videos but as an interactive environment where learners exercise agency, self-regulate, and co-construct knowledge through exploration and reflection.

Recent studies underscore that multimedia integration in language learning enriches not only linguistic input but also cognitive and affective dimensions. Sun & Li (2021) assert that internet-based video platforms provide strong pragmatic contexts, enabling learners to develop language patterns aligned with target cultural norms and facilitating incidental vocabulary acquisition through repeated exposure. Similarly, Huang (2022) demonstrates that features like adjustable playback speed and sequence allow for differentiated, personalized learning, with interactivity affordances such as subtitles, speed control, and comment sections serving as metacognitive supports to enhance learner awareness and self-regulation.

From a motivational perspective, Chen (2023) finds that YouTube-based learning can positively influence learners' self-efficacy in Mandarin. The autonomy to select videos and progressively engage with increasingly complex content strengthens learners' confidence, consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Cognitively, Li & Zhao (2024) argue that the dual coding inherent in YouTube videos—simultaneous visual and auditory input—effectively enhances working memory and facilitates schema integration, reducing cognitive load and improving long-term retention.

Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2025) highlight the social dimension of YouTube learning. Interaction through comments and peer observation fosters communicative competence and reflective thinking, allowing learners to interpret language in authentic social contexts rather than as abstract information. Finally, Liu & Wang (2026) emphasize that, despite YouTube's flexibility, successful learning depends on self-regulation strategies such as goal-setting, progress monitoring, and strategy evaluation. They recommend integrating guided learning strategies within Mandarin curricula that leverage digital technology to ensure learners maximize the platform's potential.

To address the identified gaps, this study explores how students use YouTube for Mandarin learning, focusing on content characteristics, engagement patterns, motivational factors, challenges encountered, and pedagogical implications. Guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of YouTube content most frequently used by students in Mandarin learning?

2. How does YouTube use influence students' motivation and engagement in Mandarin learning?
3. What challenges do students face when using YouTube for Mandarin learning, and how do they overcome them?
4. How can insights from YouTube-based Mandarin learning inform effective teaching practices and instructional design?

This study aims to explore YouTube as a tool for Mandarin learning by examining content characteristics, student motivation and engagement, challenges encountered, and pedagogical implications. It seeks to provide empirical insights into how YouTube supports autonomous, interactive, and contextually authentic learning while informing practical teaching strategies and theoretical understanding.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative observational approach to examine students' interactions with Mandarin learning content on YouTube. Twenty undergraduate students (12 females, 8 males) with varying proficiency levels (beginner, intermediate, advanced) were purposively selected. Observations were conducted over four weeks during self-study sessions, with each participant observed in at least two one-hour sessions in natural learning environments such as libraries, dormitories, and homes. Field notes and screen recordings documented engagement, learning strategies, and responses to content. Semi-structured follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify behaviors and motivations, incorporating member checking to enhance credibility. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, where transcripts and notes were coded, grouped into themes, and refined through iterative discussion. Triangulation of observations, recordings, and interviews was employed to ensure trustworthiness and reduce bias.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Characteristics of YouTube Content in Mandarin Learning

Based on systematic observations during self-study sessions and follow-up interviews, six major characteristics of YouTube content were identified as influential in Mandarin learning.

a. Engaging Audiovisual Content

Observation notes indicated that students actively utilized videos displaying Hanzi with pinyin and translations, pausing and replaying segments to practice pronunciation and match written characters with spoken words. For instance, one beginner repeatedly paused a video on basic greetings to write Hanzi in her notebook while imitating pronunciation. Animated stroke-order demonstrations also attracted attention; students noted that seeing characters constructed in real-time helped them memorize more effectively than static textbook examples. This behavior demonstrates the cognitive integration of visual and auditory channels, consistent with Multimedia Learning Theory (Mayer, 2009). The interactive audiovisual format also increased engagement, as students reported feeling more “connected” to the learning process compared with traditional methods.

b. Use of Authentic Content

Students showed a strong preference for videos depicting real-life interactions, such as shopping dialogues, restaurant conversations, or casual social encounters. Field notes recorded multiple instances of students mimicking intonation and conversational patterns, indicating active engagement with authentic language. One intermediate learner stated, *“I can hear how native speakers actually speak, not just textbook Mandarin. It helps me know what is natural.”* Such behavior reflects the importance of culturally and contextually rich input, supporting the notion that authentic content promotes practical communicative competence. Constructivist perspectives further explain that learners construct knowledge by relating new input to real-world experiences, enhancing both linguistic and cultural understanding.

c. Flexibility of Time and Place

Observations highlighted the self-directed nature of learning on YouTube. Students paused, rewound, and resumed videos based on comprehension needs, with one student reviewing a Mandarin verb video in three separate sessions across home and library settings. This flexibility allowed learners to control the pace, repeat difficult segments, and integrate learning into their schedules. Such behavior demonstrates autonomy in learning, which aligns with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000); learners were intrinsically motivated to manage their learning processes to maximize understanding.

d. Various Types of Learning Videos

Students engaged with content according to proficiency level and learning goals. Beginners focused on pinyin pronunciation and basic sentence structures, while intermediate learners combined everyday conversation and Hanzi writing videos. Advanced learners often engaged with cultural vlogs or music-based videos. Observation patterns showed that students sometimes integrated multiple video types in a single session, e.g., reviewing Hanzi while listening to a cultural explanation. This integrative approach indicates strategic selection and combination of resources, reflecting self-regulated learning and cognitive engagement.

e. Interactivity and Student Engagement

YouTube's interactive features encouraged student participation. Observation notes showed that learners frequently used the comments section to clarify doubts, share vocabulary tips, or ask questions. In several cases, students engaged in peer discussions after watching videos, explaining vocabulary and grammar to one another. Follow-up interviews confirmed that these interactions enhanced understanding and motivation. Such active engagement aligns with constructivist principles, where knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and reflection.

f. Use of Subtitles and Translations

Subtitles and translations in multiple languages were widely used, especially by beginners. Observations revealed students paused to read subtitles while listening to Mandarin, cross-checking meanings with translations. Some toggled between languages to compare sentence structures, demonstrating metacognitive strategies and active cognitive processing. This pattern supports Multimedia Learning Theory, as learners simultaneously process visual and verbal information to enhance comprehension and retention.

The empirical findings suggest that YouTube content promotes flexible, autonomous, and contextually rich learning. Students' behaviors—repeated engagement, strategic video selection, use of subtitles, and interaction in comments—highlight the interplay of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and multimodal learning. These observations confirm theoretical predictions: Multimedia Learning Theory explains enhanced comprehension through audio-visual integration, while Self-Determination Theory accounts for motivation driven by

autonomy and perceived competence. Constructivist perspectives further contextualize students' engagement with authentic content as active knowledge construction, bridging classroom instruction with real-life Mandarin use. Moreover, the integration of different video types demonstrates learners' capacity for self-regulated learning, adapting materials to individual needs and proficiency levels.

2. Student Motivation and Engagement

Based on observations of students during self-study sessions, several patterns emerged regarding how YouTube influenced motivation and active engagement in Mandarin learning. These findings are supported by field notes, screen recordings, and follow-up interviews.

a. Personalized Learning

Observations showed that students frequently chose videos aligned with their personal interests and proficiency levels. For instance, a beginner learner interested in Chinese culture consistently selected videos about festivals and daily life, while an advanced learner focused on vlogs and cultural explanations. Field notes recorded students pausing and replaying these videos to explore unfamiliar vocabulary. During interviews, one student mentioned, *"Watching videos about Chinese food and festivals makes me more excited to learn Mandarin because I understand the context and culture."* This indicates that personalization directly influenced students' intrinsic motivation and willingness to engage with content.

b. Interactive and Dynamic Learning

Students responded actively to videos containing exercises or challenges. Observation notes documented learners repeating phrases aloud, attempting Hanzi writing, and completing embedded exercises. In one session, three students paused a video to practice dialogues, comparing their pronunciation to the video repeatedly. Quizzes at the end of videos prompted students to analyze and apply knowledge, showing that interactive elements fostered deeper cognitive engagement and prevented passive viewing.

c. Repetition and Note-Taking

Repeated viewing was a common strategy. Field notes indicated that most students replayed challenging segments multiple times, especially for pronunciation, sentence patterns, and Hanzi recognition. Students were also observed taking detailed notes, writing down new

vocabulary and phrases in notebooks, and cross-referencing meanings. One intermediate learner explained, *“I watch the video until I can pronounce the words correctly, then I write them down to remember better.”* These behaviors highlight active engagement strategies and self-directed learning.

d. Comment Function as Discussion Tool

Observation revealed that some students utilized YouTube’s comments section to ask questions or seek clarification. For example, a student asked about the correct pronunciation of a character, and the content creator responded with additional explanation. Peer interactions were also noted, where students discussed video content or corrected each other’s understanding, demonstrating a collaborative dimension in online learning.

e. Enhancement of Self-Confidence

Repeated engagement with progressively structured content contributed to observable increases in learner confidence. Students gradually tackled more complex videos, with field notes recording instances where beginners attempted dialogues that previously seemed too advanced. During interviews, several students mentioned feeling more capable of using Mandarin in real-life situations after consistent exposure to YouTube content.

These findings suggest that YouTube enhances motivation and engagement through autonomy, competence, and relatedness, consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Personalized selection of content reflects autonomy, repeated practice and note-taking support competence, and interaction via comments and peer discussions addresses relatedness. The active use of interactive elements, such as quizzes and exercises, aligns with constructivist learning principles, where learners co-construct knowledge through active participation and reflection. Moreover, repeated viewing and progressive exposure help scaffold learning, providing confidence that encourages continued engagement. The empirical patterns observed confirm that motivation is not merely a function of video availability but is closely tied to learners’ ability to choose content, interact meaningfully, and monitor their own progress, which collectively foster deeper and more sustained learning outcomes.



3. Challenges in Using YouTube as a Learning Medium

Based on observations and follow-up interviews with students during self-study sessions, several challenges emerged in using YouTube for Mandarin learning. These findings are drawn from field notes, screen recordings, and recorded student behaviors.

a. Inconsistent Content Quality

Observation notes showed that students occasionally struggled with videos containing errors or poorly structured explanations. For example, one beginner paused a video on pinyin pronunciation after noticing conflicting pronunciations compared to a previous lesson, expressing confusion in their notes: *“I’m not sure which is correct, the video or what my teacher said.”* Such inconsistencies caused hesitation and slowed learning, especially among novices.

b. Limitations in Certain Materials

Students’ viewing patterns indicated a scarcity of advanced or formal content. Field notes recorded advanced learners searching for videos on formal Mandarin used in business or academic contexts, but often abandoning searches due to low-quality or incomplete materials. Beginners focused heavily on spoken language and basic Hanzhi, while complex grammar explanations were rarely found in accessible video form.

c. Distractions and Interruptions

Several students were observed switching between learning videos and unrelated content, such as music or entertainment clips. In one session, a student paused a Mandarin lesson twice to watch unrelated vlogs, delaying the learning schedule by approximately 15 minutes. Students reported that without structured planning, it was difficult to maintain focus, illustrating the challenge of self-regulated learning in an open platform environment.

d. Limitations in Direct Interaction

Although some students used the comments section to ask questions, observation revealed minimal substantive feedback. For instance, a student inquired about correct tone pronunciation in a video, but the creator did not respond for several days. Students reported that this lack of immediate and personalized feedback hindered their ability to correct mistakes in real time, especially for complex pronunciation or contextual usage.

e. Internet Access Challenges

Field notes recorded instances of buffering and video quality reduction due to unstable internet, particularly for high-definition videos demonstrating Hanzi stroke order. Students in areas with limited connectivity often downloaded videos for offline use, but noted limitations in resolution and interactivity, affecting comprehension of detailed visual information.

f. Dependence on Limited Foreign Language Proficiency

Some learners had difficulty following English explanations or rapid speech in videos. Observation indicated that beginner students frequently paused or replayed videos multiple times to match subtitles with audio. One student noted, “*Sometimes the English explanation is too fast, and I can’t keep up with the Mandarin words.*” Misalignment between learners’ foreign language proficiency and instructional language created comprehension barriers.

These findings highlight that while YouTube provides flexibility and diverse learning opportunities, practical constraints affect effectiveness. Inconsistent content quality reflects the open-access nature of the platform, requiring learners to exercise critical evaluation skills—a form of self-regulated learning. The scarcity of advanced materials demonstrates a gap between learner needs and available resources, particularly for formal or academic Mandarin, emphasizing the role of YouTube as a supplementary rather than primary learning tool.

Distractions and the limited depth of interaction align with constructivist theory, suggesting that learners benefit from guided scaffolding and social support, which YouTube alone cannot fully provide. Observed buffering and connectivity issues underscore the importance of technological access in digital learning environments, while reliance on foreign-language instruction highlights the interaction between cognitive load and language proficiency, consistent with Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (Mayer, 2009). Finally, the cumulative effect of these challenges indicates that while YouTube can enhance autonomous and flexible learning, optimal outcomes require structured guidance, selective content curation, and integration with complementary teaching methods to address learner needs effectively.



4. Pedagogical Implications

Observations and follow-up interviews with students using YouTube for Mandarin learning revealed several pedagogical implications that educators should consider to maximize learning outcomes. The findings highlight both the potential and limitations of YouTube as an instructional tool.

a. YouTube as a Self-Directed Learning Resource

Students frequently engaged in independent learning by selecting videos aligned with their interests and proficiency levels. Observation notes documented instances of students replaying basic vocabulary videos multiple times, while others chose cultural or advanced conversation content. One intermediate learner stated, *“I like choosing videos that match what I am curious about, and I can repeat them until I understand.”* Field notes also recorded students creating personal study schedules, such as dedicating certain days to vocabulary and others to listening practice. These behaviors indicate that YouTube can foster autonomy and self-regulated learning when students are allowed to control their pace and content selection.

b. Project-Based and Collaborative Learning

Several observed study sessions involved small groups discussing video content. For example, after watching a video on ordering food in Mandarin, students performed role-plays in pairs, taking turns simulating customer and waiter interactions. Observation notes indicated active participation, negotiation of meaning, and peer correction. Students reported that collaborating in such tasks enhanced their speaking confidence and encouraged mutual learning. These patterns suggest that YouTube can serve as a stimulus for project-based and collaborative activities, providing authentic contexts for language use beyond individual study.

c. Learning Oriented Towards Everyday Language Use

Observation revealed that students preferred videos demonstrating daily conversations and informal interactions, such as shopping or casual social exchanges. During follow-up interviews, students explained that these videos helped them understand how Mandarin is used in realistic social contexts, beyond the formal grammar emphasized in textbooks. Field notes showed learners frequently pausing to practice phrases or role-play scenarios from the video, indicating an active application of language knowledge. These behaviors suggest that

integrating authentic content into pedagogy can bridge classroom learning with real-life language use.

d. Enhancement of Asynchronous Learning

Students demonstrated flexible learning behavior, watching videos at different times and locations according to personal schedules. Observation notes recorded learners watching videos at home, in the library, or during commuting, often taking notes or repeating segments as needed. One student commented, *“I can learn Mandarin anytime, even when I don’t have class. It helps me keep practicing without waiting for the next lesson.”* These behaviors show that YouTube supports asynchronous learning, enabling learners to regulate their study time independently.

e. Supervision and Learning Evaluation

Despite the autonomous nature of YouTube learning, observations highlighted the importance of structured monitoring. Students sometimes struggled to assess whether they fully understood a video’s content, especially when practicing complex phrases or Hanzi writing. Field notes documented instances where learners incorrectly copied characters from videos due to unclear explanations. Interviews indicated that students valued teacher feedback or peer review to correct mistakes. These observations suggest that assessment mechanisms, such as formative quizzes, guided note-taking, or portfolios based on video content, are essential to ensure comprehension and reinforce learning outcomes.

The observed pedagogical patterns align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), as autonomy, competence, and relatedness were consistently evident in learners’ self-directed engagement, collaborative activities, and application of real-life scenarios. Active selection of content and pacing reflects autonomy, while repeated practice and project-based tasks support competence. Peer collaboration and interaction via role-plays address relatedness, promoting motivation and engagement.

From a constructivist perspective, the use of authentic YouTube content enables learners to co-construct knowledge by applying language in practical contexts, reflecting on usage, and integrating cultural understanding. The integration of asynchronous learning patterns demonstrates the practical advantage of multimedia resources in scaffolding learning

across varied temporal and spatial contexts. Finally, the need for supervision and evaluation highlights that while YouTube can enhance flexibility and interactivity, effective pedagogical design must combine technology-enhanced autonomy with structured guidance and feedback to optimize language acquisition.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that YouTube is an effective tool for Mandarin learning, enhancing motivation, engagement, autonomy, and cultural understanding. Observations revealed that learners benefit from multimedia integration, authentic content, and flexible access, while collaborative and project-based activities further support language acquisition. The findings provide empirical support for Multimedia Learning Theory (Mayer, 2009) and Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), showing how learners integrate visual and auditory input, exercise autonomy, and sustain intrinsic motivation.

Practically, educators can leverage YouTube by curating high-quality content, designing collaborative and asynchronous tasks, and implementing formative assessments to monitor comprehension. However, limitations include variable content quality, limited advanced material, technological constraints, and reliance on foreign-language proficiency. Future research should include more diverse learner populations, extended observation periods, and integration with other digital platforms or blended learning approaches to further explore YouTube's potential in Mandarin education.

In conclusion, YouTube offers both theoretical and practical contributions by supporting flexible, autonomous, and contextually authentic language learning, while highlighting the importance of guided pedagogy and critical engagement with digital content.

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