

# Exploring Mandarin Chinese Vocabulary that Children in Kindergarten Should Learn in Indonesia

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This study aimed to explore what Mandarin Chinese vocabulary should be designed and delivered for young second language learners in kindergarten when they learn Mandarin Chinese language in Indonesia. A Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list designed by language teachers at a trilingual kindergarten (Indonesian, Mandarin, and English) in Indonesia was examined and revised by the researcher, and then the new revised Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list was examined by the Committee of the Kindergarten. The study found: (1) The Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list designed by language kindergarten teachers was lack of some concepts that children should have from perspectives of child development. For example, Mandarin direction words were not included in the list. (2) From the perspectives of parts of speech, the original vocabulary list focused mainly on nouns, partly on adjectives and verbs. Other parts of speech were not in the list. For example, pronouns (e.g., “我 [I]”, “你 [you]”, “他 [he/she]”) was not in it. (3) Some Mandarin words of the vocabulary list were categorized mistakenly or confusedly. For example, “浇花 (watering flowers)”, was categorized as plants. (4) The Mandarin meanings of “公公” (pronounced as [gōng-gōng]) and “婆婆” (pronounced as [pó-po]) in the vocabulary list were different from the general meanings in China. (5) Some objects may have different Mandarin names and may confuse children to learn Mandarin. For example, pineapple can be called as “凤梨” (pronounced as [fèng-lí]), “菠萝” (pronounced as [bō-luó]), or “黄梨” (pronounced as [huáng-lí]). The study suggests: (1) Mandarin vocabulary should be delivered to children in kindergarten based on principles of child development and linguistics. (2) Mandarin vocabulary list should be designed based on children’s daily life and their local environment. (3) Mandarin vocabulary list should be categorized based not only on children’s development of language skills, but also on their cognitive, physical, social-emotional skills. (4) Based on child development, the trilingual kindergarten may define a standard vocabulary list from all languages they teach, including Indonesian language, English language, and Mandarin language.

*Keywords:* Mandarin Chinese teaching, Mandarin vocabulary list, kindergarten

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## Background

With the strong economic growth of China, learning Mandarin Chinese has become a trend all around the world. The trend has also influenced Indonesians. After the Indonesian government abolished the ban on learning Mandarin Chinese and recognized Chinese culture in 1998, learning Mandarin Chinese is popular not only among Chinese Indonesians, but also has been mandated by regents of local government in Indonesia in the post-Suharto era (1998-present) (“Post-Suharto era”, 2017; Setijadi, 2016; Wong, 2010).

A trilingual kindergarten located in the South Sumatra province in Indonesia has started to teach Mandarin Chinese since 2008. Currently, there are 11 classes, around 300 young children in the kindergarten. These young children take a-half-hour Mandarin Chinese class every day. The Mandarin Chinese language teachers of the kindergarten are Chinese Indonesians who ever took a-half-year Mandarin Chinese language training class before their Mandarin Chinese teaching. The Mandarin Chinese language curriculums, including a vocabulary list, were discussed and provided by the Mandarin Chinese language teachers, and then examined and decided by the Committee of the Kindergarten.

The researcher, who has a doctoral degree in early childhood education and a master’s degree in bilingual education, has been a member of faculty of Early Child Care and Education Department of a university for over 12 years. The researcher has been interacting with teachers and children of the kindergarten during the summer period since 2012 as a visiting professor. Due to the above reason, the Committee of the Kindergarten asked assistance from the researcher for revising their Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list. Therefore, the purpose of the study mainly explored what Mandarin Chinese vocabulary should be designed and delivered for children in kindergarten when they learned Mandarin Chinese language in Indonesia. The Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list designed by Mandarin Chinese language teachers at the trilingual kindergarten in Indonesia was examined and revised by the researcher, and then the new revised Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list was examined by the Committee of the Kindergarten.

## Literature Review

Children’s language development and the importance and complexity of vocabulary were reviewed. In addition, how adults assist young second language learners to learn was discussed.

### Children’s Language Development

Children’s language development is amazing and needs to be explored. Noam Chomsky (1965; 1986), recognized as “the father of modern linguistics”, stated that all children had universal grammar (UG) in their mental mind to obtain language via language acquisition device (LAD). The grammar is an innate constrained structure with different subsystems of principles and the device is an inherent mental capacity for children to receive and produce language. In other words, children acquire language “naturally”.

However, some scholars (Bruner, 1983; Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Roche, 2001; Hockett, 1968; MacWhinney, 2007) possessed empiricism theories of language acquisition, which language is attained through sensory experience. For example, Hockett (1968) criticized Chomsky’s theories that “the grammar of a language is a well-defined system by definition not more powerful than a universal Turing machine” (p. 40). Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1983) emphasized child language development was deeply influenced by the social interaction between children and adults. Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, and Roche (2001) stated that children obtained language mainly through interacting with the environment based on behaviorism. MacWhinney (2007)

posited that children's language was emerged from the interaction of pressures and the environment. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory of Development (1979) stressed child development was influenced by people and things in their surrounding environment. In other words, children are "nurtured" to acquire language.

### **The Importance and Complexity of Vocabulary**

Among language acquisition theories, vocabulary seems to play an important and basic role to acquire language no matter linguists assume children "naturally" or "is nurtured to" acquire language (Alqagtani, 2015; Cameron, 2001; Schmitt, 2010). Children must learn about the meanings of words in order to build vocabularies. In addition, children cannot deliver their own ideas and cannot communicate with each other without sufficient vocabulary (Wilkins, 1972). Whitehurst and Lonigan (1998) proposed that vocabulary knowledge was an important inside-out skill for children's emergent literacy. Stanovich (1986) stated children who had a big vocabulary in kindergarten would perform better in reading, and vice versa. In other words, vocabulary is the core to learn a language and is essential for successful second language learning (Lewis, 1993; Nation & Webb, 2011). The vocabulary knowledge of a reader is highly related to his language comprehension (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003; Saeed, 2015). Especially, vocabulary is academically related with reading and writing skills (Cummins, 2003).

However, vocabulary is not as easy as it seems to be (Brown, 2011). On the contrary, it is complicated, especially between two languages.

First, a "word" may represent various concepts (Baumann, Kame'enui, & Ash, 2003). For example, "banana", according to Merriam-Webster's web definition for English language learners (Banana, 2017), means "a long curved fruit with a thick peel that is yellow when it is ripe". In other words, banana is a kind of fruit. However, the concept of "go bananas", meaning "to become very excited or angry", which has no relation to "fruit". Different concepts of a "word" usually confuse second language learners.

Secondly, the relationship between a "word" and a "word" in two different languages is as complicated as mathematical set theory (Intersection). For example, the English word "ball" is usually translated as "球 (qiú)" on the English-Chinese dictionary websites (e.g., Google Translate). Furthermore, the English word "ball" also means "party". However, the Mandarin Chinese word "球 (qiú)" is translated as "ball", "sphere", or "globe" on the Chinese-English dictionary websites (e.g., Google Translate). In other words, the Mandarin Chinese word "球 (qiú)" does not have the meaning of "party" as the English word "ball" does. Consequently, the relationship between "ball" and "球 (qiú)" is not equal, but is more like the intersection  $A \cap B$  of two sets A (English language) and B (Mandarin Chinese language). The English word "ball" and the Mandarin word "球 (qiú)" have their own (different) concepts although they share a same concept.

### **Principles of Language Development for Second Language Learners**

How adults provide much guidance on selecting words to assist young children to learn second language words is important (Barker, 2007; Brown, 2011; Webb, 2016). Konishi, Kanero, Freeman, Golinkoff, and Hirsh-Pasek (2014, p. 406) suggested the following six principles for adults to help young children to learn a language:

1. Children learn what they hear most.
2. Children learn words for things and events that interest them.
3. Interactive and responsive rather than passive contexts promote language learning.

4. Children learn words best in meaningful contexts.
5. Children need to hear diverse examples of words and language structures.
6. Vocabulary and grammatical development are reciprocal processes.

In addition to language development of young children, other aspects of development (i.e., cognitive, social-emotional, and physical areas of development) and development principles (i.e., cephalocaudal principle, proximodistal principle, and maturation principle) need to be taken into consideration when adults assist young children to learn language (Herr, 2012).

In short, adults play an important role to assist children to acquire language although children have talents to do it. Learning vocabulary is important and obvious for children to have better language development. In order to assist children to develop their vocabulary, aspects and principles of child development should be taken into consideration. However, because of complexity of vocabulary, it is not easy to learn it, especially for a second language learner. Therefore, what vocabulary should be taught based on language learner's ability and comprehension seems to become an important issue to be explored.

### **Research Method**

The study focused on what Mandarin Chinese vocabulary should be designed and delivered for children in kindergarten when they learned Mandarin Chinese language in Indonesia. In addition, how words should be categorized and what words should be assigned to appropriate categories were explored.

The original Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list (Table 1) designed by language teachers at a trilingual kindergarten (Indonesian, Mandarin, and English) in Indonesia was examined by the researcher. According to literature review and observation from the researcher, the researcher examined the vocabulary list designed by language teachers of the kindergarten based on the following principles:

1. Vocabulary fits the aspects and stages of child development, including cognitive, social-emotional, and physical areas of development.
2. Vocabulary emerges in child's daily life.
3. Vocabulary includes appropriate parts of speech, such as nouns, adjectives, verb, and so on.
4. Vocabulary is generally used by most Mandarin-Chinese speakers.

Finally, the new vocabulary list was recommended by the researcher. In order to enhance dependability and confirmability of the study (Creswell, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the processes and results were examined by the Committee of the Kindergarten. The Committee was comprised of the principal of the kindergarten, the principal of the tri-language elementary school (Indonesian, English, and Mandarin), the school foundation manager, an Indonesian language teacher, an English teacher, and a Mandarin teacher. They listened to the report of the researcher and checked the revised vocabulary list.

Table 1

*The Original Mandarin Chinese Vocabulary List*

分类 (Category)	内容 (Content)
我 (I)	男、女、红色、白色、黑色、粉红色、蓝色、青色、黄色、头、手、手指、脚、头发、牙齿、肚子、脸、膝盖、口、眼睛、鼻子、耳朵、舌头
环境 (Environment)	爸爸、妈妈、哥哥、姊姊、弟弟、妹妹、公公、婆婆、爷爷、奶奶、家、厕所、房间、厨房、学校、课室、游戏场、朋友、白板、桌子、椅子、书包、垃圾桶、市场、公园
日常用品 (Daily Supplies)	白饭、面包、饼干、蛋糕、巧克力、糖果、牛奶、咖啡、雪糕、白开水、衣服、裤子、袜子、鞋子、帽子、抹布、纸巾
动物 (Animal)	猪、老鼠、狗、兔子、猴子、大象、蚂蚁、鱼、乌龟、青蛙、螃蟹、鸟、蝴蝶、蜜蜂、苍蝇、老虎、鳄鱼、蛇、鸡、鸭、马、羊、牛、猪
植物 (Plant)	叶子、花、树、萝卜、番茄、马铃薯、辣椒、苹果、橘子、西瓜、香蕉、木瓜、葡萄、草莓、草、茉莉花、莲花
农历新年 (Chinese New Year)	灯笼、红包、梅花、鞭炮
交通工具 (Transportation)	山、海边、动物园、帽子、雨伞、泳衣、汽车、火车、三轮车、自行车、巴士、船、飞机
职业 (Occupation)	警察、老师、医生、护士、厨师、飞行员、消防员、农夫、司机
水、空气、火 (Water, Air, Fire)	水、洗手、洗脚、洗脸、刷牙、洗澡 火、空气、风、呼吸、风车、风筝、气球
通讯工具 (Communication Tool)	电视、电话、手机、计算机、报纸
国家 (Nation)	国家、印度尼西亚、国旗、升旗礼
大自然 (Nature)	地球、土、木、彩虹、太阳、月亮、星星、白云、打雷、水灾、下雨、早上、中午、晚上

**Results**

The study found:

1. The original Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list designed by language kindergarten teachers was lack of some concepts that children should have from perspectives and principles of child development or child's daily life. For example, Mandarin direction words (e.g., “右边 [right side]”, “左边 [left side]”) which are often used in the classroom, were not included in the original list. For another example, animals were all in the category of animal and were not subcategorized as water animals and land animals. Also, feelings (e.g., “高兴 [happy]”, “生气 [angry]”), sports (e.g., “打篮球 [play basketball]”), shape (e.g., “三角形 [triangle]”, “正方形 [square]”), comparison (e.g., “大和小 [big and small]”, “高和矮 [tall and short]”), mathematics (e.g., numbers), and geographic concepts (e.g., “亚洲 [Asia]”, “印度尼西亚 [Indonesia]”), which are usually taught in kindergarten, were not included in the original vocabulary list.

2. From the perspectives of parts of speech, the original vocabulary list focused mainly on nouns, partly on adjectives and verbs. Other parts of speech were not in the list. For example, pronouns (e.g., “我 [I]”, “你 [you]”, “他 [he/she]”) and adverbs (e.g., “快 [fast]”, “慢 [slowly]”) were not included.

3. Some Mandarin words of the original vocabulary list were categorized mistakenly or confusedly. For example, “浇花 (watering flowers)”, which meaning is to water flowers, was categorized as “植物 (plants)”. “帽子 (hat)”, “雨伞 (umbrella)”, “泳衣 (swimsuit)” were classified as “交通工具 (交通工具)”. “洗脸 (washing face)”, “刷牙 (brushing teeth)” were sorted as “水 (water)”. Colors, such as “白色 (white)”, “红色 (red)”, were in the category of “我 (I)”.

4. The Mandarin meanings of “公公” (pronounced as [gōng-gōng]) and “婆婆” (pronounced as [pó-pó]) in the original vocabulary list were different from the general meanings in China. “公公” was recognized as grandfather and “婆婆” was recognized as grandmother in the original list. After interviewing the committee members and the researcher’s Malaysian Chinese students, the researcher found “公公” and “婆婆” were recognized as grandfather and grandmother in Southeast Asia. However, in Mandarin Chinese, grandfather is normally called as “祖父” (pronounced as [zǔ-fù]) and grandmother is normally called as “祖母” (pronounced as [zǔ-mǔ]). The meaning of “公公” mainly is recognized as “father-in-law”. “公公” also can mean “eunuch” or can be a respectful form to address “an old man”. The meaning of “婆婆” mainly is recognized as “mother-in-law”. “婆婆” also can be a respectful form to address “an old woman”. According to “公公 (gōng gong)” (2017) in Baidu Encyclopedia website, the main meanings of “公公” and “婆婆” are father-in-law and mother-in-law. However, “公公” and “婆婆” are recognized as grandfather and grandmother on father’s side in the Hokkien language (福建话) spoken area or part of the Wu language (吴语) spoken area. Besides, “公公” and “婆婆” are recognized as grandfather and grandmother on mother’s side in the Cantonese spoken area. The ancestors of Southeast Asian Chinese were mainly from the above areas and it may be the reason why “公公” and “婆婆” in the original vocabulary list were recognized as grandfather and grandmother.

5. Some objects may have different Mandarin names and may confuse children to learn Mandarin. For example, pineapple can be called as “凤梨” (pronounced as [fèng-lí]), “菠萝” (pronounced as [bō-luó]), or “黄梨” (pronounced as [huáng-lí]). Potato can be called as “土豆” (pronounced as [tǔ-dòu]) or “马铃薯” (pronounced as [mǎ-líng-shǔ]). Bicycle can be called as “自行车” (pronounced as [zì-xíng-chē]) or “脚踏车” (pronounced as [jiǎo-tà-chē]). Hence, the formal or generally-used Mandarin names of objects are recommended to be in the list.

Therefore, based on aspects and principles of child development, child’s daily life, and the above findings, the study suggested the new vocabulary list could be revised as Table 2:

Table 2

*The Revised Mandarin Chinese Vocabulary List*

分类 (Category)	内容 (Content)
性别 (Sex)	男生、女生
身体 (Body)	头: 头发
	脸: 眼睛、耳朵、鼻子、嘴巴 (口)、舌头、牙齿、眉毛、脸颊、额头
	身体: 胸部、肚子、背部、骨头、脖子、肩膀、肚脐
	四肢: 手: 手指 (大拇指、小指)、手掌、手臂 脚: 脚趾、大腿、膝盖、小腿
身体动作 (Body Movement)	口: 喝水、吃饭、说、咬、吹 (气)
	眼睛: 看东西、读书
	鼻子: 呼吸、闻
	耳朵: 听
	手: 抓、握、拿、写、举起、放下
	脚: 站、走、跑、跳 身体: 爬、旋转、摇摆

(table 2 continued)

分类 (Category)	内容 (Content)
性别 (Sex)	男生、女生
身体感觉 (Feeling)	舌头: 酸、甜、苦、辣、咸
	皮肤: 冷、凉、温、热、烫
	耳朵: 大声、小声
	鼻子: 香的、臭的
生活行为 (Behavior in Life)	起床、刷牙、洗脸、洗澡、洗衣服、读书、打球、玩游戏、看电视、睡觉
情绪 (Emotion)	高兴、生气、哭、快乐、悲伤、痛苦
关系 (Relationship)	自己、爸爸、妈妈、哥哥、姊姊、弟弟、妹妹、祖父、祖母、伯伯、叔叔、姑姑、舅舅、阿姨、伯母、婶婶、姑丈、姨丈、朋友、同学
关系代名词 (Pronoun)	我、你、他、我们、你们、他们
职业 (Occupation)	老师、校长、医生、护士、军人、商人、司机、厨师、农夫、工人、歌星、演员、球员、送货员
食物 (Food)	饭、肉、面、面包
	蔬菜: 白菜、西红柿、马铃薯
	水果: 苹果、橘子、西瓜、香蕉、芒果、菠萝
	饮料: 豆浆、果汁、茶、汽水、牛奶
	甜点: 饼干、糖果、蛋糕、巧克力
颜色 (Color)	白、灰、黑、红、橘、橙、黄、绿、蓝、靛、紫、彩色
形状 (Shape)	点、线、面
	正方形、圆形、长方形、三角形、星形、菱形、椭圆形、平行四边形、五角形(五边形)
	正方体、长方体、球体、圆柱体
玩具 (Toy)	球、风筝、象棋、西洋棋、气球、积木
交通工具 (Transportation)	陆上工具: 车子、轿车、巴士、卡车、公交车、自行车、火车、摩托车
	水上工具: 船、渡轮
	飞行工具: 飞机、直升机、喷射机、火箭
人类环境 (Human Environment)	家、学校、公园、马路、寺庙、清真寺、教堂、商店、动物园、餐厅、旅馆、购物中心
	家里: 客厅、厨房、卧房、浴室、厕所、餐厅、花园
	学校: 课室(教室)、厕所、校长室、图书室、办公室、游戏室、电影室、操场
运动 (Sport)	跑步、打球(篮球、羽毛球、排球、桌球、棒球)、游泳
数字 (Number)	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 十、百、千、万、亿、兆
时间 (Time)	星期: 星期一、星期二、星期三、星期四、星期五、星期六、星期天
	一日: 早上、白天、下午、晚上
	时间: 点几分几秒
	节日: 新年、国庆节、中秋节、母亲节、父亲节、圣诞节、斋戒节
动物 (Animal)	陆上动物: 狗、猫、牛、马、羊、猪
	飞行动物: 鸟、鸡、鸭、鹅
	昆虫: 蝴蝶、蜜蜂、苍蝇、蚊子、蟑螂、毛毛虫、蚂蚁
	水里动物: 鱼、螃蟹、虾子

(table 2 continued)

分类 (Category)	内容 (Content)
性别 (Sex)	男生、女生
植物 (Plant)	草、树 植物器官：根、茎、树干、树枝、树叶、花、果实、种子
生活物品 (Essential Products)	个人物品：衣服、帽子、袜子、鞋子、裤子、泳衣、泳裤、雨伞、雨衣
	电器物品：手机、计算机、收音机、电视、电风扇、电吹风（吹风机）、电灯、空调机（冷气机）、洗衣机、电线、插座、插头
	家里常见物品：床、棉被、衣橱、垃圾桶、拖把、碗、盘子、筷子、汤匙、叉子
	学校常见物品：书、笔、桌子、椅子、玩具、铅笔、彩色笔、蜡笔、白板、白板笔、白板擦、橡皮擦、尺、地图
	洗澡物品：牙刷、牙膏、肥皂、洗发水（洗发精）、沐浴乳
	调味料：盐、糖、酱油、辣椒酱
自然环境 (Natural Environment)	大地、山、海、湖、河、溪、森林、树林、平原、草原、沙漠、火山
自然现象 (Natural Phenomenon)	天气：晴天、雨天、阴天、下雪天
	自然灾害：水灾、旱灾、地震、台风、海啸、泥石流
	风、火、水、土、雨、云、雾、雪、闪电
方位 (Direction)	前面、后面、上面、下面 左边、右边 东方、西方、南方、北方
各种测量比较 (Comparison)	速度：快、慢 温度：高、低 重量：重、轻 面积：大、小 高度：高、矮 距离：长、短 宽度：宽、窄
地理 (Geography-Continents and Nations)	各洲：亚洲、欧洲、非洲、美洲、大洋洲
	国家：印度尼西亚、新加坡、马来西亚、中国、美国、英国、德国、俄国、阿拉伯、澳大利亚
宇宙 (Universe)	太阳、星星、月亮、地球

### Discussion

After the study, it is found it is not easy to make a Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list for young second language learners. Based on the results of the study, the following principles to make a Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list for young second language learners are recommended:

1. Explore aspects and principles of child development first before making a Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list from the perspective of early childhood education. The list should be made not only from child's development of language skills, but also from their cognitive, physical, social-emotional skills.

2. Consider parts of speech (i.e., nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, etc.) from the perspective of linguistics when designing a Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list.

3. Design a Mandarin Chinese vocabulary based on child's daily life. Choose Mandarin words appearing in the life of children.

4. Classify Mandarin vocabulary words into appropriate categories. Teaching a language is not only for communication, but also is related to logics/cognition and other aspects of child development.



5. Discuss and choose words with other members or outside experts. Especially, the same words that have different meanings or different names of the same object should be discussed and chosen carefully.

Finally, it is also recommended that a bilingual or trilingual kindergarten may define a standard vocabulary list from the languages they teach in order to connect the relationship between languages they teach to young children. For the trilingual kindergarten in the study, it is recommended there should be a standard vocabulary list commonly used for Indonesian language, English language, and Mandarin language.

### Conclusion

This paper explored the relationship between vocabulary and child development first in order to examine a Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list designed by a trilingual kindergarten in Indonesia. Then, the Mandarin Chinese vocabulary was examined and revised based on the perspectives of linguistics, Mandarin word usages, the daily life and environment of child, and aspects and principles of child development. Finally, principles of making a Mandarin Chinese vocabulary list for young second language learners are recommended based on the findings of the study.

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