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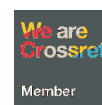
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Article

A comparative study of individualized and group-based instruction in mandarin learning for beginner students

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ABSTRACT

Beginner learners of Mandarin often struggle with pronunciation, pinyin, and complex vocabulary, especially when instructional materials are not adapted to their proficiency levels. This study aims to compare the effectiveness of individualized instruction (one-to-one tutoring) and group-based instruction (one-to-many teaching) in supporting beginner students' Mandarin learning. Using a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design, the research involved 35 middle school students at Charles Wesley Methodist Private Middle School. Five students with the lowest pretest scores received one-to-one instruction, while the remaining thirty participated in group-based learning. Data were collected through participatory observation, documentation of learning outcomes, and student reflections, and analyzed using Miles and Huberman's framework, including reduction, categorization, and thematic analysis. Results show that one-to-one instruction was particularly effective in improving pronunciation accuracy and comprehension for low-achieving and less confident students, while group-based instruction fostered motivation, peer collaboration, and vocabulary mastery, especially among active learners. The findings emphasize that teaching effectiveness depends on aligning instructional methods with learner characteristics. This study contributes to second language acquisition research by highlighting the importance of differentiated instruction. Limitations include the small sample size, single-site context, and the dual role of the researcher. Future research should expand the participant pool and explore hybrid models combining the strengths of both approaches.

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Introduction

In the past two decades, China's rapid progress in the fields of economy, technology, education, and infrastructure has significantly increased the global use of Mandarin Chinese (Herdiansyah & Adji, 2022; Issa, 2022; Saputra, 2025). Today, Mandarin has become one of the most widely studied international languages, including in Indonesia (Hasel, 2022; Muhammad Iqbal Latansa & Komarudin Sassi, 2025; Zein, 2020). The strengthening of bilateral relations between Indonesia and China in trade, investment, and education further underscores the urgency for young Indonesians to acquire Mandarin proficiency (Lubis et al., 2024; Murtadhoh & Arini, 2023; Yotes, 2024). This is reflected in the growing number of schools and educational institutions in Indonesia that include Mandarin as either a compulsory or elective subject.

Nevertheless, Mandarin remains a particularly challenging language for native Indonesian speakers to master (Hidayadi et al., 2025; Zahra et al., 2021). The fundamental differences between

the logographic writing system of hanzi and the Latin alphabet, as well as the divergence between the phonetic system of pinyin and actual pronunciation, are major obstacles (Gil, 2020; Kuzuoğlu, 2022). Recent studies have highlighted phonological complexity and the cognitive demands of learning Chinese characters as key factors that hinder the acquisition of Mandarin by non-native learners (Hao & Li, 2024; Nel & Krog, 2021). These difficulties call for effective instructional strategies that can support learners in overcoming these barriers.

A concrete case of this challenge can be observed at Charles Wesley Methodist Private Middle School in Indonesia, which has designated Mandarin as compulsory local content. However, the majority of students enter with no prior background in Mandarin, and some have never been exposed to the language at all. This lack of foundational knowledge often leads to difficulties in following the regular curriculum. To address this, the school has implemented an additional learning program with two distinct approaches: one-to-one instruction (one teacher, one student) and one-to-many instruction (one teacher, multiple students).

The one-to-one method provides individualized attention, tailored input, and greater opportunities for personalized feedback, which can accelerate mastery and build learner confidence (Ji & He, 2020; Liu, 2023; Pan et al., 2022; White et al., 2021; Zhai et al., 2024). On the other hand, the one-to-many method offers greater efficiency in terms of time and resources and fosters peer interaction, which has been shown in recent studies to enhance engagement and collaborative learning in foreign language (Rajaram, 2020; Xu et al., 2023). In line with this, Li et al. (2024) found that individualized instruction can help learners overcome phonological difficulties in Mandarin through personalized strategies, while ChengChiang Chen & Kent (2020) emphasized that group interaction plays a crucial role in sustaining learner motivation in foreign language acquisition. Similarly, Jiang (2020) reported that foreign learners of Mandarin benefit from peer correction in pronunciation when studying in group settings. However, to date, limited research in the Indonesian context has compared the effectiveness of these two instructional approaches in Mandarin teaching.

Based on the above discussion, the research problem can be formulated as follows: which instructional method, one-to-one or one-to-many, is more effective in improving students' Mandarin competence within the context of a private secondary school in Indonesia? To address this question, the study seeks to compare the effectiveness of the two methods in enhancing students' learning outcomes in Mandarin. Beyond this practical focus, the study also aims to make a theoretical contribution to the academic discourse on foreign language pedagogy, particularly in relation to individual versus group instructional models. Furthermore, it intends to provide practical insights for teachers and educational institutions in Indonesia, helping them design Mandarin teaching strategies that are both adaptive to learner needs and responsive to the local educational context.

Methods

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the primary aim of this research is not only to measure learning outcomes but also to understand the experiences, challenges, and dynamics of students when learning Mandarin using two different instructional methods. Qualitative research is suitable for addressing the research question, as it allows for a rich exploration of learner perspectives and classroom interactions that quantitative methods alone may not fully capture. The case study design was considered appropriate because it provides an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within a bounded system, namely, Mandarin learning at Charles Wesley Methodist Private Middle School. By focusing on this particular school, the study aims to generate insights into how instructional methods influence Mandarin learning in a specific educational and cultural context.

The researcher's role in this study was as a teacher directly involved in the instructional process. This dual role as practitioner and researcher offered a unique opportunity to observe classroom interactions naturally and continuously. However, such involvement carries the risk of bias in data collection and interpretation. To mitigate this, the researcher maintained field notes, engaged in

critical reflection after each session, and employed method triangulation by combining observations, documents, and test results. These steps were taken to reduce subjectivity and enhance the trustworthiness of the findings.

The participants in this study were 35 beginner-level students enrolled in the school's supplementary Mandarin program. The students were between the ages of 12 and 14, all attending the same grade level. Most had no prior experience learning Mandarin, while a few had minimal exposure through extracurricular activities. This diversity in prior knowledge was important for understanding differences in learning needs. Following a pretest, the five students with the lowest scores are Dean, Lionel, Matthews, Petra, and Unggul, were assigned to the one-to-one method, while the other 30 students participated in the one-to-many method. This purposive sampling was used to ensure that students with different baseline abilities were placed into the instructional methods most relevant to their needs.

Participation in the study was approved by the school administration. Written informed consent was obtained from both the students' parents and the students themselves. Participants were assured that their involvement was voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that their identities would remain confidential through pseudonyms used in reporting. All data were stored securely and accessible only to the researcher, ensuring compliance with academic ethical standards.

Data collection was conducted over six months (September 2024–March 2025). Two main techniques were used: (1) Participatory observation, where the researcher actively taught the classes while systematically recording classroom dynamics, student interactions, and learner responses. Field notes were complemented by weekly audio recordings of classroom sessions and reflective journals written by the researcher; (2) Documentation studies, including both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data included observations of participation, enthusiasm, and progress in pronunciation. Quantitative data included pretest scores, monthly evaluations, and posttests. This combination provided both breadth and depth in understanding the effectiveness of the instructional methods.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles and Huberman (1994), consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Mutiani et al., 2022; Wahyu Nuraeni & Pahamzah, 2021). In practice, this involved several stages: (1) coding, where observation notes and documents were labeled according to recurring patterns; (2) categorization, where codes were grouped into broader themes such as motivation, pronunciation progress, or peer interaction; and (3) theme development, where patterns were interpreted in relation to the research questions. Quantitative test results were analyzed descriptively and compared between the two groups to support the qualitative findings. To maintain consistency, coding and categorization were reviewed iteratively over multiple cycles.

To enhance the validity of findings, the study employed several strategies. Triangulation was used by comparing data from different sources (observations, documents, and test results). Member checking was carried out by discussing interpretations with selected students to confirm accuracy. An audit trail was maintained, consisting of field notes, coded transcripts, and analytic memos, to provide transparency in the research process. These strategies ensured that findings were credible and dependable.

Finally, the study also clarified the tools used for data management. Field notes and documents were organized manually, while audio recordings were transcribed and coded using NVivo 14 qualitative analysis software, which facilitated systematic coding and theme development. Quantitative test results were managed and analyzed using Microsoft Excel, ensuring accuracy and consistency in data handling.

Results and Discussion

Results

During the six months of implementation, it was observed that the use of the *Hello Huayu* book as the main source created difficulties for some students because the vocabulary was immediately complex. To address this issue, the teacher used *Hanyu Jiaocheng 1A* in supplementary classes. This book was easier to understand as it started with the basics of pinyin and simple Hanzi characters. In addition, the use of media such as presentation slides (PPT), flashcards, and games proved effective in reducing boredom caused by the lecture method. Students became more enthusiastic when the material was delivered through vocabulary games or simple group competitions. The following are the results of the students' pretest to posttest using the one-to-many method. As for the analysis of learning methods.

Table 1. Students' Pretest to Posttest

	September (Pretest)	October	November	December	January	February	March (Posttest)
Abraham	10	15	25	40	55	65	75
Angelica	20	30	45	50	60	65	75
Annabel	15	25	35	50	65	75	90
Axel	25	30	45	50	60	65	75
Benedict	10	20	35	45	60	70	80
Caleb	10	15	25	35	50	60	65
Cedric	15	25	35	45	55	65	70
Edward	10	15	25	40	55	65	75
Ethan	15	20	30	35	45	55	60
Florinda	20	30	45	45	55	65	70
Geraldo	20	25	35	40	55	65	65
Gwen	10	15	25	40	50	60	70
Javerson	15	25	30	45	55	65	75
Jelvkice	15	20	30	45	55	65	65
Jonella	20	30	35	45	55	65	70
Katherine	10	15	20	30	40	45	55
Kenjiro	20	30	40	45	60	65	75
Kevin	15	25	30	40	55	65	70
Lars	10	20	30	35	45	55	65
Laura	20	30	45	50	55	70	75
Marvel	15	25	35	50	60	75	80
Max	10	15	25	30	45	55	65
Michael	15	30	35	45	55	60	65
Paul	10	15	25	35	45	50	55
Regina	20	25	40	50	55	65	75
Risma	15	25	35	45	55	65	70
Ruth	20	30	45	55	65	70	80
Samuel	15	20	35	45	55	65	65
Trixie	10	15	25	30	45	60	70
Viola	10	20	25	30	40	45	50

Before learning begins, researchers give a pretest to measure students' initial abilities and determine learning methods. After that, researchers conducted monthly evaluations. The following are the results of the students' pretest to posttest using the one-to-one method.

The quantitative results from the pretest to the posttest indicate that the one-to-one method provided more stable improvement for students with lower initial abilities. For instance, Dean's score increased from 0 in the pretest to 80 in the posttest. In contrast, the one-to-many method proved more effective for students with intermediate to higher abilities, such as Annabel, whose score

rose from 15 to 90. These findings suggest that one-to-one instruction is well-suited for remedial purposes, while one-to-many instruction is more appropriate for fostering social interaction and enriching understanding through collaboration.

Table 2. The Students' Pretest to Posttest Using the One-to-one Method

	September (Pretest)	October	November	December	January	February	March (Posttest)
Dean	0	25	35	50	60	70	80
Lionel	0	15	30	40	55	65	75
Matthews	5	20	25	35	45	50	55
Petra	0	15	25	35	45	55	60
Unggul	5	20	35	45	55	70	80

Based on the observations, several important themes emerged. First, motivation increased among the one-to-one group, as students felt they received full attention from the teacher. Second, in terms of participation and interaction, students in the one-to-many group were more actively engaged in group discussions and frequently helped each other correct pronunciation errors. Third, regarding pronunciation, the one-to-one group demonstrated faster mastery of pinyin because the teacher was able to immediately correct their mistakes. Finally, the main learning challenge faced by students was the complex vocabulary presented in *Hello Huayu*, which required supplementary materials and the use of creative media to support their understanding.

Several student comments and teacher notes reinforced these findings. Lionel, a one-to-one student, stated: "*When I study alone with laoshi, I feel braver to ask questions. In a large group, I am afraid of making mistakes.*" Meanwhile, Annabel, a one-to-many student, mentioned: "*Studying together with friends is fun; if I make a mistake, I can be corrected. It makes me more enthusiastic.*" Teacher notes from December also recorded: "*Students in the one-to-one group began to speak spontaneously without waiting for instructions, indicating an increase in self-confidence.*"

Effectiveness of the One-to-One Method
The one-to-one method demonstrated clear effectiveness in developing pronunciation and vocabulary comprehension, particularly for beginner students. Individualized attention enabled teachers to provide direct and specific feedback, accelerating error correction and facilitating deeper internalization of knowledge. For example, Unggul, a quiet student, felt more comfortable asking questions and practicing pronunciation without fear of peer judgment, reflecting the method's ability to create a psychologically safe environment for shy learners. Similarly, Dean and Lionel, although extroverted, maintained high engagement levels when learning through interactive activities such as flashcard games. Their willingness to repeatedly ask questions until mastering the material shows how this method nurtures persistence and confidence.

However, not all students benefited equally. Matthews remained relatively inactive, making it difficult to evaluate his comprehension. Petra, an extrovert, experienced boredom due to the lack of social interaction typically found in group learning, although her learning outcomes still improved. These cases highlight that the effectiveness of one-to-one instruction depends not only on the format but also on student personality, communication openness, and the teacher's adaptability. This resonates with SLA theories emphasizing the importance of learner affective variables F. Zhang & Du (2023) and Zhao et al. (2020) concept of scaffolding, where teacher mediation must be adjusted to the learner's zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Effectiveness of the One-to-Many Method
The one-to-many method fostered motivation, collaboration, and active participation. Group activities such as pronunciation drills, vocabulary games, and peer-correction created a dynamic and enjoyable classroom environment. Students like Annabel thrived in this setting, reaching exceptional progress, which illustrates how social interaction can enhance language learning through cooperative scaffolding.

Nevertheless, this method had limitations in addressing individual needs. Shy students such as Katherine and Viola hesitated to ask questions, slowing their progress. Paul, though socially active, became distracted by excessive peer interactions. Teachers also faced challenges providing sufficient corrective feedback due to time constraints and class size, especially in pronunciation practice. These findings reinforce Doherty (2021) and Li et al. (2024) argument that cooperative learning requires careful classroom management and structured peer collaboration. They also align with Vygotsky (2020) theory of learning through social interaction, yet reveal its boundaries when individual attention is insufficient.

Interpretation of Results

Taken together, both methods positively impacted Mandarin learning but excelled in different dimensions. The one-to-one method is more effective for personalized skill-building particularly pronunciation and confidence, while the one-to-many method promotes motivation, peer learning, and vocabulary expansion. This duality highlights the necessity of differentiated instruction in foreign language teaching.

From a theoretical perspective, the results strengthen social constructivist views Vygotsky (2020), where learning is supported through both individual scaffolding and peer-mediated interaction. They also contribute to SLA research by showing how learner characteristics (introvert vs. extrovert, high vs. low initial ability) mediate the effectiveness of different methods. Practically, the findings suggest that teachers should integrate one-to-one support as a remedial strategy while maximizing one-to-many activities for collaborative enrichment.

Comparison with previous researchers

These findings align with Aydin & Tütüniş (2021) and Xue (2021), who found that one-to-one tutoring accelerates second language mastery through personalized feedback. They also resonate with S. Zhang (2020), who reported that pronunciation and Hanzi recognition are easier to master in individualized settings. However, unlike Zhang's context of Chinese heritage learners, this study was conducted with Indonesian students who lacked prior exposure to Mandarin. This contextual difference underscores the importance of cultural and linguistic background in shaping learning outcomes.

Similarly, the one-to-many results echo Namaziandost et al. (2020), who highlighted the role of collaborative learning in vocabulary and speaking improvement. However, this study shows more pronounced challenges for shy students, perhaps because Indonesian classroom culture tends to emphasize respect and avoidance of mistakes in public. This cultural factor may explain why peer-based correction was beneficial for some but intimidating for others. Thus, while broadly consistent with prior studies, the contextual nuances in this research refine our understanding of how different teaching methods operate across diverse learning environments.

Contextual Factors and Reflection

The outcomes of both methods were shaped by several contextual factors. First, student background played a role: those with zero exposure to Mandarin struggled more with *Hello Huayu*, requiring supplementary materials. Second, teacher expertise and the dual role of researcher-teacher may have influenced classroom dynamics, creating both opportunities for immediate adaptation and risks of bias. Third, classroom conditions such as time limitations and large group sizes constrained individualized feedback in the one-to-many method. Recognizing these factors is crucial for interpreting the findings objectively and avoiding overgeneralization.

Limitations and Recommendations

This study has several limitations. It was conducted at a single private school with a relatively small sample size, limiting the generalizability of the results. The duration of six months may not capture long-term language development. Furthermore, the teacher–researcher role may have introduced bias in both instruction and data interpretation. Finally, the reliance on *Hello Huayu* as the primary textbook created additional difficulty for students without a foundation in Mandarin. Future studies should include larger, more diverse samples, extend the duration, and compare multiple institutions to strengthen external validity.

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be proposed. For teachers, it is important to combine the strengths of both methods by integrating one-to-one tutoring as remedial support while also designing engaging group activities that foster vocabulary expansion. The use of digital tools, such as pronunciation applications, can further supplement classroom time and provide students with additional feedback opportunities. For schools, allocating resources to support flexible learning models, such as remedial tutoring hours alongside group classes would maximize student outcomes. Schools should also provide professional development programs to help teachers effectively balance interactive group management with individualized support. At the policy level, strengthening Mandarin language programs requires the development of teacher training modules that emphasize differentiated instruction, as well as investment in digital learning media to complement traditional textbooks. Integrating Mandarin into broader foreign language education policy would further ensure the sustainability and scalability of such programs.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this research highlights that both one-to-one and one-to-many methods have distinct advantages in teaching Mandarin to beginner students at Charles Wesley Methodist Private Middle School. The one-to-one method proved more effective in improving individual pronunciation and comprehension, as it allows for personalized, responsive instruction tailored to each student's pace. This method is particularly beneficial for students who are quiet, require special attention, or face difficulties studying in groups. In contrast, the one-to-many method was more effective in fostering learning motivation, enriching vocabulary, and creating an interactive classroom atmosphere. It suits active students who are able to adapt to group dynamics and engage in peer collaboration, though its limitation lies in the lack of personalized feedback, especially in pronunciation and comprehension. Ultimately, the selection of an appropriate method should consider student characteristics, school resources, and specific learning objectives.

This study, however, is not without limitations. The small sample size, the focus on a single private school, and the relatively short research duration of six months restrict the generalizability of the findings to broader educational contexts. In addition, the dual role of the researcher as both teacher and data collector may have introduced bias in interpreting the results. These factors should be taken into account when considering the applicability of the findings. Future research could expand the scope by involving larger and more diverse student populations, extending the study period, and incorporating multiple sites to validate and enrich the results. The suggestions that emerge from this research include: (1) selecting learning methods based on student characteristics, directing shy students to one-to-one approaches and active learners to group methods; (2) combining one-to-one and one-to-many strategies to balance individual and collective needs; (3) diversifying media and activities through interactive games, videos, and group exercises to maintain student motivation; (4) conducting periodic evaluations to monitor progress and adjust teaching strategies; and (5) providing psychological support to create a safe, non-intimidating learning environment that encourages all students to participate actively.

This research makes scientific contributions in three main aspects: (1) Contribution Theoretical: Adding empirical evidence regarding the application of Vygotsky's theory in the context of foreign language learning at the junior high school level in Indonesia, primarily through a scaffolding approach adapted to student characteristics; (2) Practical Contribution: This paper provides a direct comparison model between one-to-one and one-to-many methods in the context of learning Mandarin for beginners, which is still rarely studied in depth in educational literature in Indonesia; (3) Education Policy Contribution: Offers basic considerations for schools or educational institutions in choosing foreign language teaching methods that are more effective and efficient, especially amid limited teaching staff who are competent in Mandarin.

It is hoped that this research will become a reference for foreign language teachers in designing learning strategies that are more structured, measurable, and oriented toward student characteristics.

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