

The Transformative Role of E-Readers in Inclusive Online Mandarin Education: A Duo-Ethnographic Study

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Abstract

Many Mandarin programs in Canada rely on prescriptive, textbook-driven curricula that may overlook the diverse learning needs and backgrounds of plurilingual students. This research seeks to challenge and reimagine this traditional curriculum by exploring how Mandarin educators can integrate E-readers as alternative materials to address students' emerging learning needs. In the post-pandemic era, online language education has become the new normal. While extensive insights have emerged from online English language teaching regarding its challenges, benefits, and implications, the specific context of online Mandarin education remains insufficiently explored, particularly in North America. Given the growing demand for Mandarin language learning in North America, this study engaged two Mandarin teachers in Canada in a 12-week series of online sessions utilizing E-readers (i.e., iChineseReader) as core teaching materials. Employing a duo-ethnographic approach, this research collected data: video-recorded weekly critical dialogues, reflective journals, and lesson plans as pedagogical artifacts. Narrative inquiry guided data analysis, focusing on the teachers' evolving ideologies surrounding E-reader integration in online Mandarin classrooms. This study presents key stories in terms of: (1) E-readers as a support for ethics-oriented curricula; (2) E-readers as mediators of learner autonomy; and (3) E-readers as tools for plurilingual, multimodal, and identity-affirming learning. This research invites educators to creatively use E-readers to enhance inclusivity, foster learner agency, and recognize students' linguistic and semiotic resources in online Mandarin learning.

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Keywords: Online Mandarin education, E-readers, inclusive education, learner autonomy, duo-ethnography

Many Mandarin programs in Canada rely on prescriptive, textbook-driven curricula, often neglecting the diverse learning needs of plurilingual students (Du, 2017; Jin & Liu, 2023). With online language teaching becoming increasingly common in the post-pandemic era (Amitabh, 2020), Mandarin educators face the pressing challenge of creating inclusive and responsive online learning environments. Although numerous research endeavors address online English language education (e.g., Liu & Bangou, 2022), research insights on online Mandarin education in North America remain limited (Pan et al., 2023). This study aims to address this gap by examining how the integration of E-readers in online Mandarin classrooms fosters inclusive language teaching practices. Specifically, this study explores: How do Mandarin teachers perceive the role of E-readers in enhancing learner autonomy and addressing the diverse needs of plurilingual students?

Theoretical Framework

This study employs the curriculum paradigm articulated by Heydon and Wang (2006) to analyze Mandarin curricula for plurilingual learners. A prescriptive curriculum paradigm refers to a fixed scope of content, teacher-directed instruction, and standardized expectations for all students. Accordingly, teachers primarily deliver content, and students are expected to follow predetermined materials and goals, often neglecting individual needs and interests. In contrast, an ethics-oriented curriculum paradigm recognizes students' diverse subjectivities and identities. Teachers adapt instruction to students' emerging needs and invite them to co-construct learning goals, thereby promoting educational equity and fostering learner autonomy by drawing on students' linguistic and cultural resources (Cope & Kalantzis, 2023). In this study, teachers engaged in critical dialogues, continuously reflecting on the role of E-readers in promoting inclusive curricula that better address linguistic diversity and learner autonomy.

Methodology

Employing a duo-ethnographic approach (Norris & Sawyer, 2012), this research engaged two Mandarin teachers in Canada in a 12-week series of online sessions. Rather than contrasting cases, the study included teachers

working with different learner populations to facilitate critical dialogue on curriculum practices across varied educational contexts. Teacher V holds a Master of Arts in education and has a decade-long Mandarin teaching experience in diverse contexts. Teacher C is a PhD student in education and has more than 15 years of language teaching experience. Both teachers utilized E-readers (i.e., iChineseReader, n.d.) as core teaching materials for their online classes. The E-Readers provide a wide selection of graded Mandarin lessons on real-life topics and include digital affordances, such as vocabulary translation, grammar notes, audio support, and interactive exercises. V focuses on adult language learners, while C focuses on young language learners. They conducted weekly online critical dialogues that served as reflective and transformative spaces after their teaching. Their dialogues centered around how the use of E-readers will enhance language learning for their students, such as how they planned and delivered their lessons and how students reacted. Data collection included video recordings of weekly online discussions, reflective journals documenting teachers' experiences, and lesson plans as pedagogical artifacts. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) guided the thematic analysis and data presentation, focusing on how curriculum negotiation unfolded (Kalantzis & Cope, 2010) regarding the integration of E-readers in online Mandarin classrooms.

Findings

Three significant themes emerged from this study, illustrating transformative shifts in curriculum practices with the integration of E-readers in online Mandarin classrooms: (1) E-readers as a support for ethics-oriented curricula; (2) E-readers as mediators of learner autonomy; and (3) E-readers as tools for plurilingual, multimodal, and identity-affirming learning.

Theme 1

E-readers enabled a shift toward ethics-oriented curriculum practices by allowing students to select reading materials that matched their language proficiency, interests, and backgrounds. For instance, C observed that two boys in his class were becoming increasingly disengaged with Mandarin learning. Initially, he attributed their reluctance as personal shortcomings: "It's their problem, not mine." However, through critical dialogue with V, C recognized his curriculum's efficiency-oriented nature had marginalized students' unique needs. He critically acknowledged, "It's my fault not to help them gain confidence." By integrating E-readers, C was able to offer a range of texts at different levels and on diverse topics, empowering students to choose readings that resonated with

their own experiences and abilities. As a result, students actively selected reading materials, formulated questions, and collaboratively established learning goals and assessments, thus foregrounding ethical curriculum making.

Theme 2

The integration of E-readers fundamentally changed both instructional planning and classroom dynamics by promoting learner autonomy. For example, V, who initially relied on grammar- and vocabulary-centric textbook materials, shifted to offering students greater autonomy by enabling them to choose texts based on their thematic interests. The built-in features enabled students to navigate texts independently, seek clarification as needed, and engage with content at their own pace. V observed substantial improvements in student confidence and engagement, remarking, “Students with different backgrounds became more confident...they find the things they want to learn as active learners themselves.” By leveraging the affordances of E-readers, teachers were able to foster greater student agency, decrease instructional pressures, and create a more responsive and dynamic learning environment.

Theme 3

Through E-readers, Mandarin classes evolved from traditional monolingual instruction to a more inclusive plurilingual and multimodal curriculum. V and C encouraged students to utilize E-reader features such as translation tools to access content in their home languages, which supported their comprehension and affirmed their linguistic repertoires. E-readers also enabled students to express meaning through a variety of modes, such as personalized picture-books and visual stories, using E-reader images as prompts for multilingual storytelling, and sharing reflections across languages. C observed, “They fluidly shift between languages and modes to make meaning...” demonstrating how E-readers facilitated the development of students’ multilingual identities and diverse semiotic resources.

These findings underscore the transformative impact of E-readers in fostering culturally responsive, inclusive, and empowering Mandarin teaching practices.

Discussion

This study explored how two Mandarin educators developed a critical friendship to examine the role of E-readers in supporting more inclusive language learning and moving beyond textbook-based instruction in online classrooms. The findings demonstrate that, when intentionally implemented, E-readers

served as powerful tools for fostering student choice, learner autonomy, and plurilingual meaning-making. By enabling students to select readings that matched their interests and language levels, access content in their home languages, and engage with multimodal resources, E-readers facilitated a shift toward more equitable and responsive teaching practices. Overall, this research provides valuable guidance for Mandarin educators aiming to leverage digital tools like E-readers to create equitable, inclusive, and plurilingual online language learning environments.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the **Canadian Association of Second Language Teachers (CASLT)**, whose generous grants supported this research.

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