

MANDARIN-DOMINANT INSTRUCTION WITH MALAY SUPPORT: GEN Z LEARNERS' BELIEFS, PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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Abstract. The role of the first language (L1) in foreign language classrooms remains a contested issue, particularly in multilingual contexts where learners navigate multiple linguistic systems. This study investigates the use of Malay (L1) in a Mandarin-dominant Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) classroom among Generation Z undergraduates in Malaysia. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 111 non-Chinese students enrolled in a beginner-level Mandarin course. The study examines three dimensions: (1) the frequency of Mandarin use in classroom practice, (2) learners' beliefs about the pedagogical roles of Malay and Mandarin, and (3) perceived cognitive and affective outcomes of Mandarin-medium instruction. Descriptive findings show that while Mandarin is consistently used by the teacher, students' use is uneven, with higher engagement in structured responses than in spontaneous interaction. Learners demonstrate a selective orientation toward L1 use, strongly supporting Malay for explaining complex content but rejecting its use in core communicative functions. Perceived learning outcomes are generally positive, particularly in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation development, although comprehension challenges remain for some learners. Correlation analysis reveals that Mandarin use is negatively associated with anxiety, while stronger support for L1 use is linked to higher levels of anxiety. These findings suggest that Malay functions as a cognitive and affective scaffold, particularly for learners experiencing difficulty, rather than as a barrier to learning. Overall, the study challenges rigid "target-language-only" assumptions and argues for a principled, context-sensitive integration of L1 in CFL pedagogy. It contributes empirical evidence from a Malaysian multilingual context and highlights the need to balance exposure, comprehension, and affective support in foreign language instruction.

Keywords: *Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL), first language (L1) use, translanguaging, multilingual pedagogy, Generation Z*

Introduction

The role of the first language (L1) in foreign language classrooms remains one of the most debated issues in language pedagogy. Traditional approaches have emphasized exclusive use of the target language, whereas more recent perspectives recognize that learners draw on their full linguistic repertoire during the learning process. This debate is particularly relevant in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) context, where linguistic distance and learner proficiency can make exclusive target language instruction cognitively demanding. In Malaysia, this issue is further shaped by a complex multilingual environment. University students typically operate across at least three languages, namely Malay as the first language (L1), English as the second language (L2), and Mandarin as a third language (L3). Although Mandarin has gained increasing importance due to its economic and global relevance, Malay remains the shared linguistic foundation for most learners. As a result, CFL classrooms in Malaysia represent a unique context in which the use of Malay as a support language is both common and pedagogically contested. Despite increasing attention to multilingual and translanguaging approaches, empirical research on L1 use in CFL classrooms remains

limited, particularly in Southeast Asian settings. Existing studies have often focused either on the benefits of L1 use or on the effectiveness of target language only approaches. Fewer studies have examined how classroom practices, learner beliefs, and learning experiences interact within a single framework. In addition, the role of affective factors such as anxiety in shaping learners' reliance on L1 remains underexplored. To address these gaps, the present study investigates the role of Malay (L1) in a Mandarin dominant CFL classroom among Generation Z learners in Malaysia. Specifically, the study examines (1) the frequency of Mandarin use in classroom practice (RQ1), (2) learners' beliefs about the roles of Malay and Mandarin (RQ2), and (3) perceived cognitive and affective outcomes of Mandarin medium instruction (RQ3). By integrating these three lines of inquiry, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and nuanced account of how Malay functions as a cognitive and affective resource in CFL classrooms, and how this role is perceived by Generation Z learners navigating the competing demands of English and an additional foreign language.

Literature review

Mandarin as a third language and the position of Malay among Generation Z

Mandarin has gained global prominence alongside China's economic expansion, leading to its widespread inclusion in education systems and increasing enrolment among non-native learners. In Malaysia, strong diplomatic and economic ties with China have further elevated Mandarin as a valuable third language that enhances graduates' employability. At the same time, Malay retains a central institutional role as the national language and primary medium of instruction, as stipulated in Article 152 of the Federal Constitution and reinforced by national language and education policies. However, emerging evidence suggests a more complex linguistic landscape among Generation Z. While Malay continues to hold symbolic and institutional significance, existing research has highlighted variations in language attitudes, perceptions, and practices among younger speakers. In particular, some findings indicate increased reliance on English and evolving patterns of language use across different social and educational contexts (Fital and Kasdan, 2020). Within this multilingual ecology, Malaysian undergraduates typically operate across Malay (L1), English (L2), and Mandarin (L3). CFL classrooms therefore provide a critical site for examining how Mandarin, as the target language, interacts with Malay as a shared linguistic resource. This context directly informs the present study's focus on classroom practice, learner beliefs, and perceived cognitive and affective experiences. This multilingual context raises important questions about how learners navigate the use of multiple languages in the classroom, particularly the role of the first language (L1) in supporting foreign language learning.

Bilingualism, translanguaging, and the role of L1 in foreign language classrooms

Traditional monolingual approaches have long positioned L1 as a source of interference to be minimized. In contrast, contemporary research increasingly recognizes L1 as a pedagogical resource when used strategically. Early work by Nation (2003) shows that L1 translation is highly effective for vocabulary acquisition, facilitating rapid form-meaning mapping and retention. In shared-L1 classrooms, learners tend to use L1 for task completion due to its cognitive efficiency and lower affective demands, particularly at lower proficiency levels. From both cognitive and

affective perspectives, L1 use has been shown to play a facilitative role in language learning. More recent studies support the effectiveness of principled L1 use. For instance, De La Fuente and Goldenberg (2022) found that learners exposed to structured L1 support outperformed those in target-language-only conditions in speaking and writing. Similarly, Pun and Macaro (2019) demonstrated that L1 use in instructional settings can promote higher-order questioning and richer classroom interaction. Studies by Badda (2024) and McManus (2023) further highlight the role of L1 in improving comprehension, motivation, and the processing of complex forms. From a cognitive perspective, L1 functions as scaffolding that reduces extraneous cognitive load and supports task comprehension (Zhou, 2024; Bane and Kitila, 2023; Li, 2023; Ma, 2019; Bruen and Kelly, 2017). This aligns with Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988), which suggests that excessive reliance on L2 for complex input may overload learners' working memory. Affective research also highlights the benefits of L1 use. Strategic use of L1 can reduce anxiety, increase confidence, and create a more supportive classroom environment (Altalhab and Said, 2024; García Jiménez, 2024; Bruen and Kelly, 2017). These findings align with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1982), which emphasizes the role of emotional factors in language acquisition. Theoretically, multi-competence (Cook, 1991) and translanguaging (García and Wei, 2014) challenge rigid target-language-only norms by emphasizing learners' integrated linguistic repertoires. Shin et al. (2020) argue that L1 should be used judiciously and intentionally rather than excluded. However, tensions remain between these perspectives and persistent monolingual ideologies, forming the basis for examining learner beliefs in RQ2.

L1 use in Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) classrooms

Research in CFL contexts further supports the mediating role of L1. Bao and Du (2015) found that learners rely extensively on their shared L1 during task-based interaction, primarily for meaning negotiation, error correction, and collaborative problem-solving rather than off-task communication. This highlights L1 as a tool for extending learners' capabilities beyond individual proficiency. In linguistically distant contexts, L1 plays a crucial role in facilitating the explanation of complex aspects of Chinese, including tones, characters, and grammar (Damanhour, 2024). This is particularly relevant for Malay-dominant learners with limited prior exposure to Mandarin. Translanguaging-oriented studies also demonstrate that strategic L1 use enhances engagement and conceptual understanding. Han (2024) as well as Zhang and Wei (2021) shows that flexible language practices can challenge monolingual norms and support learner-centred pedagogy. Similarly, Lu and Tian (2025) as well as Dassanayake (2021) highlight the effectiveness of multilingual approaches in diverse educational contexts; while Wang (2019) reports that many CFL learners prefer multilingual instructional modes. Despite these developments, there remains limited quantitative evidence on how L1 functions in Malaysian university CFL classrooms, particularly in relation to learner beliefs and perceived outcomes.

From literature to the present study

The review of the literature reveals three key gaps. First, Malaysian Generation Z learners operate within a complex multilingual environment where Malay, English, and Mandarin serve competing roles. Second, although research supports strategic L1 use, classroom practices remain influenced by monolingual ideologies. Third, CFL studies

highlight the importance of L1, yet context-specific evidence in Malaysia remains limited. This study addresses these gaps by examining: (1) the frequency of Mandarin use in classroom practice (RQ1); (2) learners' beliefs about the roles of Malay and Mandarin (RQ2); and (3) learners' perceived cognitive and affective outcomes (RQ3).

Conceptual framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework that conceptualizes Malay (L1) as a conditional cognitive and affective resource in the Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) classroom, rather than treating it as either inherently beneficial or detrimental. Drawing on Vivian Cook's multi-competence framework, learners are understood as multilingual users whose linguistic systems are dynamically interconnected. Malay (L1), English (L2), and Mandarin (L3) are not compartmentalized but interact continuously during learning. From this perspective, L1 activation is inevitable and may facilitate meaning-making and problem-solving. However, the extent to which this interaction translates into productive L2 use remains empirically contested. This tension underpins RQ1, which examines actual patterns of Mandarin use in classroom practice. The framework is further informed by translanguaging theory (García and Wei, 2014), which positions L1 as a legitimate pedagogical resource when used strategically. While prior research supports the role of L1 in facilitating comprehension and metalinguistic awareness, it also highlights persistent adherence to monolingual "target language only" ideologies in foreign language classrooms. Rather than assuming a fixed pedagogical stance, this study problematizes the functional boundaries of L1 use. Accordingly, RQ2 investigates how learners negotiate these competing orientations, including their acceptance of Malay for specific instructional functions and their alignment with Mandarin-only expectations.

In addition, the framework incorporates John Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory and Stephen Krashen's affective perspective to account for learner processing and emotional responses. Exclusive reliance on Mandarin may increase cognitive load and hinder comprehension, particularly for lower-proficiency learners, while also elevating affective barriers such as anxiety. Conversely, limited and purposeful use of Malay may reduce processing demands and stabilize comprehension, but risks diminishing exposure to Mandarin. This duality informs RQ3, which examines learners' perceived cognitive outcomes and affective experiences. Conceptually, the framework links three interrelated dimensions: (1) observed classroom practice, reflected in the frequency of Mandarin use; (2) learner beliefs regarding the legitimacy and function of L1 and L2; and (3) perceived cognitive and affective outcomes of Mandarin-dominant instruction. Rather than presupposing linear relationships, the framework allows for potential misalignment between these dimensions. Overall, the study positions L1 use as a pedagogical variable that must be critically examined within specific classroom ecologies. By empirically connecting classroom practices, learner beliefs, and learning experiences, the framework contributes to ongoing debates on multilingual pedagogy and challenges simplified dichotomies between L1 support and target-language immersion in CFL contexts.

Materials and Methods

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine Generation Z undergraduates' classroom language use, beliefs about the roles of Malay (L1) and

Mandarin (L2), and their perceived cognitive and affective experiences in a Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) course. A survey approach was appropriate as the study aimed to capture patterns of self-reported behavior and perceptions at a single point in time rather than evaluate an instructional intervention. The quantitative data were complemented by open-ended responses, allowing for limited qualitative insights into learners' perspectives on the use of Malay as a medium language in CFL classrooms. The study was conducted at a Malaysian public university where Mandarin is offered as an elective CFL course to non-Chinese undergraduates across multiple disciplines. In this context, Malay functions as the shared national language (L1), English as a secondary academic language (L2), and Mandarin as an additional foreign language (L3). Participants were Generation Z undergraduates (approximately aged 20–25) enrolled in a beginner-level Mandarin course. All students were invited to participate voluntarily via an online questionnaire administered at the end of the course. A total of 111 valid responses were retained after data screening.

Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire titled “Malay as Medium Language in Chinese as a Foreign Language Classroom.” The instrument consisted of four sections: (1) Section A: Demographic Information. This section collected background data, including gender, ethnicity, age, and faculty. (2) Section B: Frequency of Mandarin Use. Items 1–6 measured how frequently Mandarin was used by the teacher and students across different classroom activities (e.g., teacher talk, student responses, peer interaction). Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Always). (3) Section C: Beliefs about the Roles of Malay (L1) and Mandarin (L2). Items 7–15 assessed students' beliefs regarding the pedagogical use of Malay, including its role in explaining grammar and vocabulary, giving instructions, classroom management, and interaction. Two items specifically measured attitudes toward Mandarin-only practices. In addition, two open-ended questions were included to capture students' justifications and suggestions regarding the use of Malay in Mandarin lessons. (4) Section D: Perceived Learning Outcomes and Affective Experiences. Items 17–22 measured perceived cognitive outcomes, including comprehension and improvements in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Items 23–27 assessed affective experiences, including discomfort, shyness, fear of negative evaluation, frustration, and perceived teacher-student rapport.

Quantitative data (Items 1–27) were analyzed using Jamovi (version 2.6.44). The analysis proceeded in three stages: (1) data screening and reliability analysis; (2) descriptive statistics (RQ1–RQ3); (3) inferential statistics (relationships between variables). Data screening and reliability analysis: Responses were screened for missing values, and incomplete cases were removed. Internal consistency of each construct was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all scales meeting acceptable reliability thresholds ($\alpha \geq 0.70$). Descriptive statistics (RQ1–RQ3): Means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were calculated to describe: Frequency of Mandarin use (RQ1), Beliefs about L1 and L2 roles (RQ2), Perceived learning outcomes and affective experiences (RQ3). Where appropriate, composite scores were computed to represent overall constructs. Inferential statistics (relationships between variables): Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to examine relationships among key variables, including: Mandarin use and Mandarin-only beliefs; Mandarin use and perceived learning gains; L1-related beliefs and affective experiences. Statistical significance was evaluated at the $p < .05$ level. In qualitative analysis, responses to the open-ended items were analyzed using thematic analysis. Responses were coded inductively to identify

recurring themes related to students' reasons for supporting or limiting the use of Malay. These qualitative findings were used to complement and explain the quantitative results.

Results and Discussion

Participants background

The study involved N = 111 undergraduate students enrolled in a Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) elective course at a public university in Malaysia. The cohort was predominantly composed of female students (81.1%, n = 90), reflecting the typical gender distribution in humanities and social science electives in the local context, while males accounted for 18.9% (n = 21). The participants are representative of Generation Z, with ages ranging from 20 to 25 years (M = 21.8, SD = 1.09). A significant majority of the respondents (71.1%) were aged 21 and 22, indicating that most were in their second or third year of degree studies. In terms of ethnic composition, the sample was primarily Malay (81.1%), followed by Indian (10.8%), and Bumiputra students from Sabah and Sarawak (7.2%). This demographic alignment highlights that for the vast majority of the participants, Malay functions as either a first language (L1) or a primary language of instruction. Academic diversity was a hallmark of the sample, with students drawn from various technical and social science faculties. The largest groups originated from the Faculty of Business, Economics and Social Development (FPEPS, 36.9 %) and the Faculty of Computer Science and Mathematics (FSKM, 33.3%), followed by the Faculty of Science and Marine Environment (FSSM, 25.2%). Analysis of their specific programs revealed that Accounting students formed the largest single discipline (30.6%), with remaining students distributed across Mathematics/Statistics (11.7%), Marine Science/Biology (10.8%), and Computer Science/IT (8.1%). The multidisciplinary nature of the participants suggests that Mandarin is viewed as a valuable cross-functional skill rather than a primary area of specialization for these learners. Detailed demographic data are presented in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Demographic profile of participants.

Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Female	90	81.1
Male	21	18.9
Race		
Malay	90	81.1
Indian	12	10.8
Bumiputra Sabah	6	5.4
Bumiputra Sarawak	2	1.8
Indonesian	1	0.9
Age		
20	5	4.5
21	46	41.4
22	33	29.7
23	20	18
24	3	2.7
25	4	3.6
Faculty		

FPEPS	41	36.9
FSKM	37	33.3
FSSM	28	25.2
Others (FPSM, FTKK, etc.)	5	4.5
Core programs		
Accounting	34	30.6
Mathematics / Statistics	13	11.7
Marine Science / Biology	12	10.8
Computer Science / IT	9	8.1
Other Programs	43	38.7

Cronbach's Alpha (Reliability analysis)

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. As shown in *Table 2*, all constructs exceeded the commonly accepted threshold of 0.70, indicating satisfactory to high reliability. The scale measuring frequency of Mandarin use (RQ1) demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.810$), while beliefs about the roles of Malay (L1) and Mandarin (L2) showed acceptable internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.752$). The perceived learning outcomes scale recorded the highest reliability ($\alpha = 0.885$), indicating strong coherence among items measuring grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation gains. Similarly, the affective experiences scale showed good reliability ($\alpha = 0.803$). Overall, these results confirm that the instrument is sufficiently reliable for examining Generation Z learners' classroom practices, beliefs, and experiences.

Table 2. Internal consistency of the questionnaire.

Variable	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha (α)	Interpretation
Frequency of Mandarin use (RQ1)	1–6	0.810	Good
Beliefs about the Roles of Malay (L1) and Mandarin (L2)	7–15	0.752	Acceptable
Perceived learning outcomes	16–22	0.885	Very Good
Affective experiences	23–27	0.803	Good

RQ1: Frequency of Mandarin use

Based on *Table 3*, the results indicate that Mandarin is used extensively in classroom instruction, particularly by the teacher. Students reported very high levels of teacher use of Mandarin ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.54$), with 98.2% indicating that the teacher often or always uses Mandarin. This reflects a consistently Mandarin-medium instructional approach. Students' own use of Mandarin during lessons is moderately high ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.76$). While a majority reported frequent use (67.6% often/always), a substantial proportion (28.8%) selected "sometimes," suggesting that Mandarin use is not consistently maintained throughout lessons. A lower level of Mandarin use is observed in student-initiated communication. Asking questions in Mandarin recorded a mean of 3.03 ($SD = 0.87$), with more than half of the respondents (52.3%) selecting "sometimes" and 22.5% indicating "rarely" or "never." In contrast, students reported higher levels of Mandarin use when responding to teacher prompts ($M = 4.26$, $SD = 0.83$), with 82.8% indicating frequent use. Peer interaction in Mandarin is moderate ($M = 3.52$, $SD = 0.82$), with responses concentrated in "sometimes" (41.4%) and "often" (39.6%). However, Mandarin use increases in structured activities such as pair or group work ($M = 4.09$, $SD = 0.91$), where 72.0% reported frequent use. Overall, Mandarin use is highest in teacher input and structured interactions, but lower in student-initiated and peer communication.

Table 3. Frequency of Mandarin use.

Item	Statement	N	R	S	O	A	M	SD
1	How often does the teacher speak Mandarin during lessons?	0	0	1.8	43.2	55.0	4.53	0.54
2	How often do you speak Mandarin during lessons?	0	3.6	28.8	50.5	17.1	3.81	0.76
3	When you ask the teacher something, how often do you ask in Mandarin?	4.5	18.0	52.3	20.7	4.5	3.03	0.87
4	How often do you answer the teacher in Mandarin when he/she asks you questions in Mandarin?	0	3.6	13.5	36.0	46.8	4.26	0.83
5	How often do you speak Mandarin with your classmates during lessons?	0.9	7.2	41.4	39.6	10.8	3.52	0.82
6	When you have pair- or group work, how often do you speak Mandarin?	0	4.5	23.4	30.6	41.4	4.09	0.91

Note: N=Never; R=Rarely; S=Sometimes; O=Often; A=Always; M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation.

RQ2: Beliefs about the roles of Malay (L1) and Mandarin (L2)

According to Table 4, students' responses indicate a mixed but generally balanced view of L1 and L2 use in the classroom. Quantitative findings show that the use of Malay for explaining difficult content received the highest level of agreement (M = 3.86, SD = 0.91), with 66.6% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing. In contrast, students expressed lower agreement for using Malay in core interactional functions such as asking questions (M = 2.55, SD = 0.88) and giving feedback (M = 2.77, SD = 0.97). Attitudes toward Mandarin-only practices were divided (M = 2.97, SD = 1.11), while students showed stronger agreement that they themselves should use Mandarin (M = 3.69, SD = 0.98). These quantitative patterns are further supported by qualitative responses, which provide insight into students' reasoning. Three main themes emerged from the open-ended data. First, Malay as a comprehension support for beginners. Many students emphasized that Malay is necessary to facilitate understanding, particularly for those with limited prior knowledge of Mandarin. For example, students noted that Malay helps them "understand difficult vocabulary" and "get a clear idea of what the teacher means," especially when they "do not have any basic" in Mandarin. This supports the quantitative finding that Malay is strongly endorsed for explaining complex content. Second, preference for limited and strategic use of Malay. A dominant theme across responses is that Malay should be used "only when necessary" or "to a certain extent." Students frequently stated that Malay is useful for explaining difficult words, grammar, or instructions, but should not be overused. For instance, some respondents indicated that "too much usage of Malay will not push students to learn Mandarin," while others suggested that teachers should "explain in Malay first and then gradually switch to Mandarin." This reflects a clear preference for selective and controlled L1 use rather than full reliance. Third, importance of maintaining Mandarin exposure. A number of students expressed concern that excessive use of Malay may reduce opportunities for Mandarin practice. Some respondents explicitly disagreed with using Malay as a medium language, arguing that "the best way to learn is through immersion" and that Mandarin should be used "as often as possible." Others suggested minimizing Malay use to encourage greater effort and engagement in learning Mandarin. Overall, the qualitative findings reinforce the quantitative results by showing that students do not adopt a strictly monolingual or bilingual stance. Instead, they demonstrate a functional and conditional orientation, where Malay is valued as a support for comprehension, particularly at lower proficiency levels, while Mandarin remains the preferred medium for interaction and language development.

Table 4. Beliefs about the roles of Malay (L1) and Mandarin (L2).

Item	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	StD
7	I think instructions for assignments should be in Malay.	7.2	9.9	54.1	22.5	6.3	3.11	0.93
8	I think the teacher should use Malay when he/she is explaining something difficult, like grammar or vocabulary.	2.7	0.9	29.7	40.5	26.1	3.86	0.91
9	I think the teacher should use Malay to discipline students.	5.4	10.8	54.1	21.6	8.1	3.16	0.92
10	I think the teacher should use Malay when he/she is discussing with students about something that is not class related.	1.8	9.9	39.6	39.6	9.0	3.44	0.86
11	I think the teacher should use Malay when he/she is assigning homework.	3.6	22.5	44.1	23.4	6.3	3.06	0.93
12	I think the teacher should use Malay to ask students questions.	9.0	40.5	40.5	6.3	3.6	2.55	0.88
13	I think the teacher should use Malay to praise or correct students.	8.1	31.5	41.4	13.5	5.4	2.77	0.97
14	I think it is important that the teacher speaks only Mandarin during lessons.	9.0	27.0	29.7	26.1	8.1	2.97	1.11
15	I think the students should always speak Mandarin during lessons.	2.7	9.9	21.6	46.8	18.9	3.69	0.98

Note: SD=Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; N=Neutral; A=Agree; SA=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; StD=Standard Deviation.

RQ3: Perceived learning outcomes and affective experiences

Based on Table 5, students generally report positive perceptions of their learning outcomes in a Mandarin-dominant classroom. High mean scores are observed for vocabulary improvement (M = 4.08, SD = 0.70), grammar improvement (M = 4.02, SD = 0.76), and pronunciation improvement (M = 4.15, SD = 0.78), indicating strong perceived benefits of Mandarin use. Students also report agreement that increased Mandarin use leads to better proficiency (M = 4.05, SD = 0.88) and that speaking Mandarin is necessary for learning (M = 4.23, SD = 0.75), which recorded the highest mean score among all items. However, responses regarding comprehension are more mixed. The statement that learning is easier when the teacher only speaks Mandarin shows a moderate mean (M = 3.18, SD = 1.00), with a large proportion of neutral responses (35.1%), suggesting variability in learners' experiences. In terms of affective factors, students report relatively low levels of anxiety. Discomfort when speaking in front of the class (M = 2.62, SD = 0.98), shyness (M = 2.68, SD = 0.96), and fear of being mocked (M = 2.58, SD = 1.16) all fall below the midpoint of the scale. Similarly, difficulty in building rapport with the teacher is low (M = 2.49, SD = 0.92). Moderate levels of frustration due to lack of understanding are observed (M = 2.86, SD = 1.04), with many neutral responses, indicating occasional comprehension challenges. Overall, students perceive clear linguistic benefits from Mandarin use, while affective challenges remain relatively low.

Table 5. Perceived learning outcomes and affective experiences.

Item	Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	M	StD
16	It is easier to learn the language because the teacher only speaks Mandarin.	3.6	22.5	35.1	29.7	9.0	3.18	1.00
17	It is easier for me to speak Mandarin because I get a lot of practice at university.	0.9	2.7	21.6	54.1	20.7	3.91	0.78
18	I think my grammar has improved because the teacher speaks mostly Mandarin.	0.9	2.7	14.4	57.7	24.3	4.02	0.76
19	I think my vocabulary has improved because the teacher speaks mostly Mandarin.	0.9	0.9	12.6	60.4	25.2	4.08	0.70
20	I think my Mandarin accent has improved because I get to practice speaking during Mandarin lessons.	0.9	1.8	12.6	50.5	34.2	4.15	0.78
21	I think the more Mandarin the teacher speaks; the better the students will be in Mandarin.	1.8	1.8	19.8	42.3	34.2	4.05	0.88

22	I think I have to speak Mandarin during lessons to really learn the language.	0.9	1.8	8.1	52.3	36.9	4.23	0.75
23	Sometimes I feel bad or uncomfortable having to speak Mandarin in front of the whole class.	12.6	32.4	38.7	12.6	3.6	2.62	0.98
24	I am shy to speak Mandarin.	9.0	36.0	36.0	15.3	3.6	2.68	0.96
25	I am afraid that other students will make fun of me when I am speaking Mandarin.	19.8	32.4	23.4	18.9	5.4	2.58	1.16
26	I often get frustrated because I do not understand what the teacher is saying in Mandarin.	9.0	27.9	36.9	19.8	6.3	2.86	1.04
27	It is difficult to talk to the teacher and get to know him/her because I mostly have to speak Mandarin with him/her.	12.6	41.4	32.4	11.7	1.8	2.49	0.92

Note: SD=Strongly Disagree; D=Disagree; N=Neutral; A=Agree; SA=Strongly Agree; M=Mean; StD=Standard Deviation.

Correlation analysis

To examine the relationships among key constructs, Pearson correlation analyses were conducted. The results is as shown in Table 6.

Table 6. Inferential statistics: Relationship between constructs.

Relationship Tested	Statistical Result (Pearson's r)	Significance (p)
Usage ↔ Beliefs	-0.068	0.479
Usage ↔ Gains	0.168	0.078
Beliefs ↔ Anxiety	0.205	.031*
Usage ↔ Anxiety	-0.314	< .001***

Mandarin use and beliefs about Mandarin-only instruction

The analysis revealed a negligible and non-significant negative correlation between Mandarin use and pro-Mandarin-only beliefs ($r = -0.068$, $p = .479$). This indicates that frequent use of Mandarin in the classroom does not necessarily lead to stronger support for excluding Malay. This finding suggests a disconnect between practice and belief, where students may actively use Mandarin but still value the availability of L1 support.

Mandarin use and perceived learning gains

A weak positive correlation was found between Mandarin use and perceived learning gains ($r = 0.168$, $p = .078$). Although not statistically significant, the positive trend aligns with the high mean scores reported for vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation improvement. This suggests that increased exposure to Mandarin is associated with perceived learning benefits, but the relationship is not strong enough to indicate a direct or consistent effect.

Beliefs about L1 use and affective experiences

A significant positive correlation was observed between pro-L1 pedagogical beliefs and anxiety ($r = 0.205$, $p = .031$). This indicates that students who more strongly support the use of Malay particularly for explanations and instructions also tend to report higher levels of anxiety. This finding suggests that L1 may function as a psychological support mechanism, with more anxious learners showing greater reliance on Malay to manage cognitive and emotional challenges.

Mandarin use and affective experiences

The strongest relationship identified was a significant negative correlation between Mandarin use and anxiety ($r = -0.314$, $p < .001$). This indicates that higher levels of Mandarin use are associated with lower levels of anxiety and frustration. This result provides strong evidence that increased engagement with the target language, when supported by appropriate pedagogy, can reduce affective barriers and promote learner confidence.

Mandarin-dominant practice and uneven L2 engagement

This study examined the role of Malay (L1) in a Mandarin-dominant CFL classroom by analyzing classroom practices, learner beliefs, and perceived learning outcomes among Generation Z learners. By integrating descriptive and inferential findings, the results reveal a complex, non-linear relationship between L2 exposure, L1 support, and learner experience, consistent with patterns identified in prior multilingual and CFL research. The findings confirm that Mandarin is consistently maintained as the primary instructional language, particularly by the teacher, reflecting the persistence of monolingual “target language only” norms highlighted in the literature (Shin et al., 2020). However, students' Mandarin use is uneven: while they respond actively in structured interactions, their spontaneous use especially when initiating questions remains limited. This gap supports Vivian Cook's multi-competence perspective, which conceptualizes learners as drawing on an integrated linguistic system rather than operating solely in the target language. It also aligns with Nation (2003), who argues that learners naturally revert to L1 for efficiency, particularly in cognitively demanding or less structured tasks. Importantly, the correlation results reinforce this interpretation. The non-significant relationship between Mandarin use and Mandarin-only beliefs ($r = -0.068$, $p = .479$) suggests that frequent L2 use does not necessarily translate into ideological support for monolingual instruction, echoing findings that classroom practice and learner beliefs do not always align (Shin et al., 2020).

Selective acceptance of Malay: A functional orientation

Learners' beliefs reflect a nuanced and context-dependent stance. Malay is accepted for explaining complex grammar and vocabulary but rejected for core communicative functions such as questioning and feedback. This pattern closely aligns with previous research showing that learners favour strategic rather than unrestricted L1 use (De La Fuente and Goldenberg, 2022; Pun and Macaro, 2019). From a theoretical perspective, this supports translanguaging frameworks (García and Wei, 2014), which argue that learners flexibly deploy linguistic resources based on communicative needs. Rather than adhering strictly to monolingual or bilingual ideologies, students appear to adopt a functional orientation, consistent with Shin et al. (2020), who advocate for “judicious and intentional” L1 use. The correlation findings further extend this interpretation. The significant positive relationship between pro-L1 beliefs and anxiety ($r = 0.205$, $p = .031$) suggests that support for Malay is partly driven by affective needs, supporting findings by Altalhab and Said (2024) as well as Bruen and Kelly (2017) which highlight the role of L1 in reducing learner anxiety.

Cognitive benefits and the limits of Mandarin-only input

Students reported strong perceived gains in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, supporting previous CFL studies that emphasize the importance of sustained L2

exposure (Zhang and Wei, 2021; Bao and Du, 2015). However, the weak and non-significant correlation between Mandarin use and perceived gains ($r = 0.168$, $p = .078$) suggests that exposure alone does not fully account for learning outcomes. This finding aligns with research on L1 as cognitive scaffolding (Bane and Kitila, 2023; Li, 2023; Bruen and Kelly, 2017), which shows that comprehension support plays a crucial role in learning. It also supports John Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory, which predicts that excessive reliance on L2 for complex input may overload learners' processing capacity. In the CFL context, this is particularly relevant given the linguistic distance between Malay and Mandarin (Damanhour, 2024). The findings therefore reinforce the argument that effective learning depends not only on input quantity, but also on input accessibility, and that strategic L1 use can facilitate comprehension without undermining L2 development.

Affective dynamics: Anxiety as a mediating factor

Although descriptive results suggest generally low anxiety, the correlation analysis reveals more nuanced affective dynamics. The significant negative relationship between Mandarin use and anxiety ($r = -0.314$, $p < .001$) indicates that greater L2 engagement is associated with reduced anxiety, supporting Stephen Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis. At the same time, the positive correlation between anxiety and pro-L1 beliefs suggests that learners experiencing greater difficulty are more likely to rely on Malay. This dual pattern is consistent with previous findings that L1 can both reduce affective barriers and support participation (García Jiménez, 2024; Bane and Kitila, 2023). Taken together, the results indicate that anxiety functions as a mediating variable linking L1 preference and L2 engagement. This extends prior research by demonstrating that affective and cognitive factors operate interactively rather than independently in CFL learning.

Reframing the role of L1 in CFL pedagogy

Overall, the findings support a shift away from rigid monolingual approaches toward a more flexible and context-sensitive model of language use. Consistent with previous CFL research (Lu and Tian, 2025; Dassanayake, 2021; Wang, 2019), Malay (L1) emerges as a conditional pedagogical resource rather than a source of interference. Specifically, L1 supports comprehension and reduces cognitive load, while also lowering anxiety and enhancing learner confidence. However, excessive reliance on L1 may limit opportunities for active L2 use. The observed misalignment between classroom practice, learner beliefs, and learner experience further suggests that strictly Mandarin-dominant approaches may not fully optimize learning conditions. These findings echo broader critiques of monolingual ideology in multilingual education.

Contributions of the study, limitations and future research

This study makes three key contributions. First, it provides context-specific empirical evidence from a Malaysian university CFL classroom, addressing a gap in the literature on L1 use in Southeast Asian contexts. Second, it integrates classroom practice, learner beliefs, and affective experiences within a single analytical framework, offering a more holistic understanding of multilingual learning. Third, it extends existing research by demonstrating that the relationship between L1 use, L2 exposure, and learning outcomes is dynamic and mediated by affective factors, rather than linear. Several

limitations should be acknowledged. The study relies on self-reported data, which may not fully capture actual classroom behavior. Future research could incorporate classroom observations or interaction analysis to provide more direct evidence of language use. In addition, the study focuses on a single institutional context and a specific group of learners. Further research across different universities, proficiency levels, and instructional settings would enhance generalizability. Finally, while this study identifies correlations among key variables, it does not establish causal relationships. Future studies could employ experimental or longitudinal designs to examine how different configurations of L1 and L2 use impact learning outcomes over time.

Conclusion

This study investigated the role of Malay (L1) in a Mandarin-dominant CFL classroom among Generation Z learners in Malaysia, focusing on classroom practices, learner beliefs, and perceived cognitive and affective outcomes. By integrating descriptive and inferential findings, the study provides empirical evidence that challenges simplified assumptions about L1 use in foreign language learning. First, the findings confirm that Mandarin is strongly maintained as the primary instructional language. However, consistent with multilingual and translanguaging perspectives, high levels of exposure do not automatically lead to active or spontaneous L2 use. Students demonstrated greater engagement in structured responses than in self-initiated communication, highlighting a gap between input and productive use. Second, learners' beliefs reflect a functional and context-dependent orientation toward language use. Malay is not rejected, but selectively accepted as a support for comprehension, particularly in cognitively demanding contexts. This aligns with previous research suggesting that L1 serves as a strategic pedagogical resource rather than a source of interference.

Third, while Mandarin-dominant instruction is associated with strong perceived gains in vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, the relationship between L2 use and learning outcomes is not straightforward. The findings indicate that comprehension and cognitive accessibility play a critical role, supporting arguments from Cognitive Load Theory that excessive reliance on L2 input may hinder processing for some learners. Most importantly, the study highlights the central role of affective factors. Increased use of Mandarin is associated with lower levels of anxiety, while learners who experience higher anxiety show stronger preferences for L1 support. This suggests that Malay functions as a psychological and cognitive scaffold, particularly for learners facing difficulty. Taken together, the findings position L1 not as a problem to be eliminated, but as a conditional resource that must be managed strategically. Effective CFL pedagogy should therefore move beyond rigid monolingual approaches toward a more balanced model that integrates sustained L2 exposure with principled L1 support.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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