

Piecing Together Mandarin: Pinpinju a Fun Board Game for Sentence Mastery

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ABSTRACT

Pinpinju is a physical board game created to assist beginners of Mandarin learners in mastering sentence building skills through enjoyable face-to-face gameplay. Pinpinju literally means sentence assembling which refers to the process of putting together words, phrases or sentence components to form a complete sentence. The problem of effectively mastering sentence building is a common issue experienced by Mandarin learners. Traditional language learning methods, such as textbooks and role memorization result in low motivation and limited practical application of the language. The learners struggle with sentence construction, applying grammar rules, and using vocabulary in real-world situations, resulting in slow progress in third language learning. Pinpinju is created to address these problems by providing a hands-on, game-based approach that involves enjoyable sentence construction and interaction between the instructor and learners, it transforms the learning process from passive memorization to active involvement. The use of guided prompts and immediate feedback from instructor or game host encourages learners to construct sentences with more confidence. This approach not only helps learners in comprehending grammatical rules but also enhancing their vocabulary ability in a real-word setting. Pinpinju has been copyrighted (CRDV2024Q06401) with the Intellectual Property Corporation of Malaysia (MyIPO) under the Malaysia Copyright Art 1987. Copyright protection applies to its unique design elements, such as the game mechanics, instructional content, sentence-building system, vocabulary sets, and any original materials like cards, boards and manuals. The main targets of Pinpinju are beginners of any basic Mandarin courses at schools, tutoring centers, colleges and universities or self-study learners.

Keywords: Pinpinju, educational board game, Mandarin, third language, beginners of Mandarin learner

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Learning Mandarin as a third language among non-native speakers is a complicated task. The learners encounter multifaceted challenges in the learning process. The process is full of obstacles that can discourage even the most dedicated learners. These challenges range from linguistic complexities to psychological barrier. The immediate challenges are recognizing the target language vocabulary, and monitoring the grammar and syntax. Furthermore, in the digitalized era, most of the third language courses are hybrid of physical and online learning. This new learning mode often lacks of real-time interaction which cause difficulty for learners to engage in lively situational conversations. The increasing of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) also cause delayed feedback from instructor, might slow down the progress in listening, speaking and writing. The creation of board game Pinpinju provides the opportunity to practice the target language in simulated real-life situations, which allow the learners to use the language naturally.

The most common problem faced by Mandarin non-native learners is the challenge of mastering sentence construction of the target language. Traditional language teacher-centered learning methods, such as textbooks, vocabulary memorization, role simulation, often lead to low motivation and limited practical application of the language. Learners struggle with forming sentences, using vocabulary and applying grammar rules in real-world contexts. Additionally, many existing online learning tools lack interactivity and fail to provide instant feedback,

resulting in slow learning progress. Pinpinju was developed to solve these issues by offering a game-based, hands-on, and communicative environment for learners.

Objectives

Pinpinju is a set of educational board game card to be used as a teaching aid in classroom or students’ activities, it also plays the role as leisure-time board game among learners of all ages. The main objectives of Pinpinju are to enhance the learners’ ability in sentence construction and vocabulary application, while fostering communicative competence through interaction. At the same time, it provides a low-pressure environment that reduces learning anxiety, helps learners overcome the fear of speaking, and increases their motivation and oral confidence.

These objectives are also consistent with established language learning theories, such as Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that lower levels of personal or classroom anxiety are conducive to second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982). Learning in a low-anxiety environment reduces learners’ fear of making mistakes and facilitates language input and acquisition. Swain’s Output Hypothesis emphasizes the importance of language production in second language acquisition, arguing that students often have limited opportunities to practice the target language even when exposed to comprehensible input (Swain, 1995). The hypothesis suggests that the act of producing language—whether speaking or writing—plays a crucial role in the acquisition process. In this regard, the sentence-construction tasks in Pinpinju provide learners with practical opportunities to produce output, thereby helping them to notice gaps in their knowledge and improve their grammatical accuracy.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is best understood as a set of guiding principles for language learning and teaching that can be applied flexibly through content-based instruction, task-based approaches, or competency and text-based frameworks, all with the common goal of enabling learners to use the target language meaningfully in authentic or simulated communicative contexts (Richards, 2006). In line with this, the communicative design of Pinpinju closely reflects the principles of CLT, providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful language use within simulated real-life situations.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

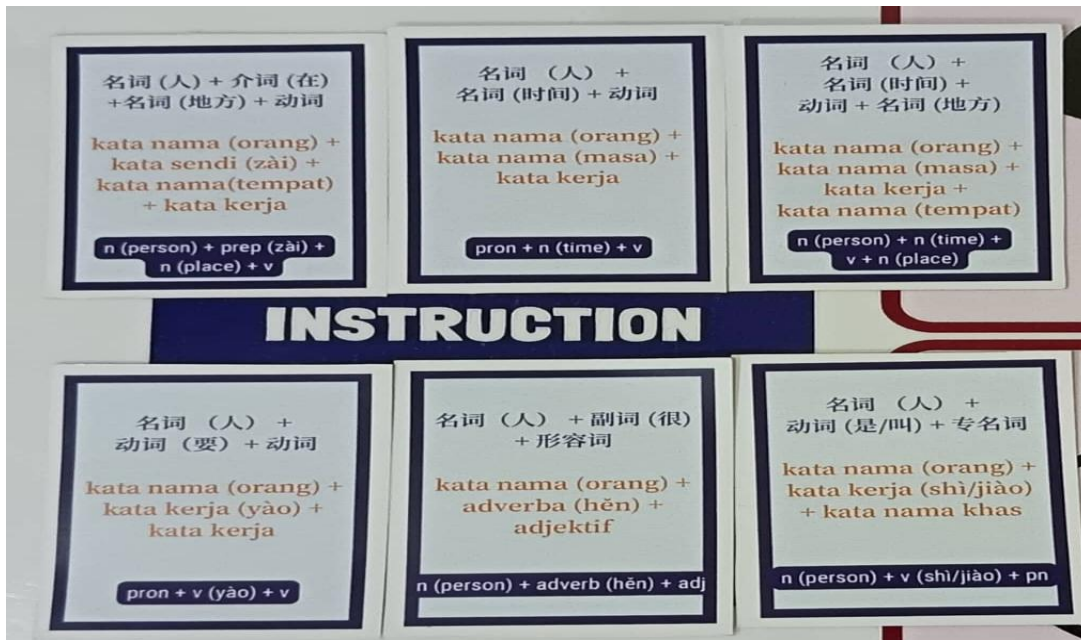
Pinpinju is an educational language board game designed for Mandarin learners, especially non-native speakers. The Pinpinju in Figure 1 below is designed as a set of board game with 150 pieces of vocabulary cards and 6 instruction cards. It is made up of vocabularies and sentence structures retrieved from the UiTM text book, Comprehensive Modern Mandarin 1 (Ho and Lee, 2024) and Daily Conversation Mandarin 1 (Chan and Lee, 2020).

Figure 1. (a) The full set of Pinpinju Board Game and (b) 6 types of sentence structures in the instruction cards.

(a)



(b)



Pinpinju is a language structure acquisition card game which is designed for learning Mandarin as second language, suitable for group language practice sessions with 2 to 5 participants. The game includes 150 vocabulary cards and a series of syntactic structure cards, aiming to enhance participants' sentence construction skill through interactive tasks. Each round lasts approximately 5 to 10 minutes, in line with the principle of time efficiency in high-intensity focused practice.

At the beginning of the game, the instructor distributes 12 vocabulary cards to each participant. The instructor then randomly draws a sentence pattern card from a predefined set and reveals it to all players. Within a specified time limit, participants must construct a grammatically correct sentence using their vocabulary cards according to the displayed syntactic structure. Sentences that are deemed grammatically accurate and semantically complete by the host will earn 2 points; those with grammatical errors or structural flaws receive no points; participants who fail to form a sentence within the time limit are eliminated.

Following the sentence-construction task, participants are required to translate the Chinese sentence they have formed into their native language. Accurate cross-linguistic translation earns an additional 2 points, this is a step designed to enhance metalinguistic awareness and cross-cultural communication skills. After each round, a new sentence pattern card is drawn to begin another cycle of sentence construction until the total allocated time elapses.

The game design integrates the principles of focus on form and task-based language teaching, promoting the automation of grammatical processing and the development of cross-linguistic cognitive abilities through cyclical syntactic practice. Pinpinju was developed by surveying students in Mandarin Level 1 courses in UiTM and then visualizing the vocabulary and grammar they learned on this board game. Early prototypes were tested with a group of 24 students in order to amend the rules and design based on the students' feedback.

Beyond the technical description of our product Pinpinju, it is essential to compare it with other Mandarin learning card games to better highlight its innovative elements and academic value. In this process, we examined existing games in the market, such as the M-Card and Alpha M, to understand more clearly the features and limitations of current products. The M-Card and Alpha M serve as excellent entry aids for beginners, focusing on essential vocabulary and basic sentence construction (Wee, 2023). Building on this foundation, Pinpinju is the next step towards rigorous mastery and deeper academic engagement. It features 150 categorized word cards for sentence creation, with carefully designed scoring rules that enforce grammatical accuracy. The unique bonus phase for translation into Malay or English actively promotes bilingual competency and intercultural awareness.

During the development process, we also identified a similar product on the market, namely Say What? Learn Mandarin Card Game. While both games aim to help learners practice Mandarin sentence construction through interactive play, their approaches differ significantly in depth and structure. Say What? emphasizes casual fun,

using a 52-card deck (24 verbs and 24 nouns) to form simple, flexible sentences for everyday practice (Smart games, 2019). In comparison, Pinpinju is designed for beginners of Mandarin learners in tuition centres or colleges, especially for non-native speakers. It prioritizing accuracy, grammar awareness, and multilingual competence. The structured five round format, host led scoring, and translation bonus created a more competitive and academically oriented experience.

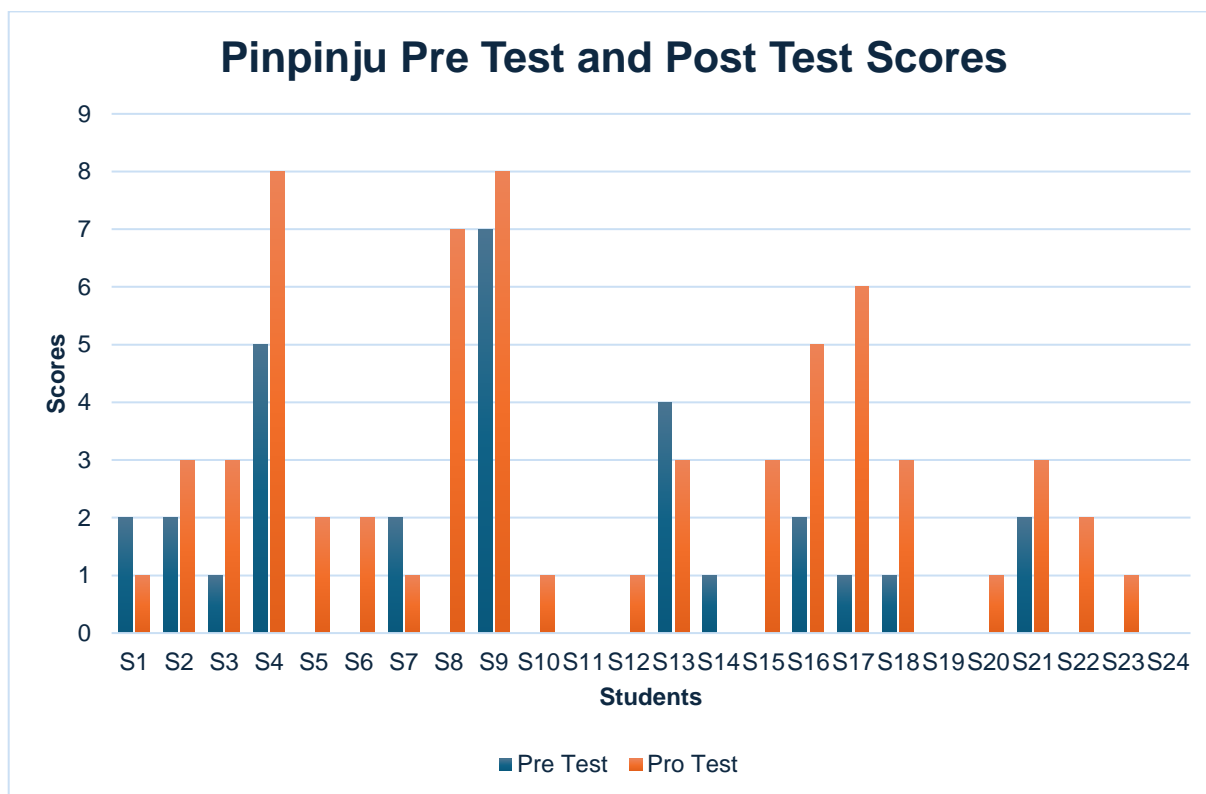
In short, while games like the M-Card, Alpha M and Say What? Learn Mandarin Card Game support beginners through vocabulary practice and simple sentence building, Pinpinju advances learning to a higher academic level. With 150 categorized cards, structured rounds, host-led scoring, and a translation bonus, it emphasizes grammar, accuracy, and bilingual skills.

POTENTIAL FINDINGS AND COMMERCIALISATION

A pre-posttest survey was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of Pinpinju. Referring to the Pre-test and Post-test graph below, the majority of students demonstrated good performance in post-test, with 70.83% positive improvement. This improvement indicates the effectiveness of using the board game as a teaching aid for Mandarin language learners. Following the positive results from the pretest and post-test, it is now commercialized, as seen in Figure 1 above.

Pinpinju is copyrighted (CRDV2024Q06401) with the Intellectual Property Corporation of Malaysia (MyIPO) under the Malaysia Copyright Act 198. It is printed and packed locally, commercially available.

Figure 2. The respondents' pre-test and post-test results



NOVELTY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a game-based learning tool, Pinpinju makes learning Mandarin sentences more engaging and interactive. By integrating sentence pattern instructions and vocabulary sets into a physical board game, Pinpinju transforms the learning process from passive memorization to active participation across various aspects. Learners are encouraged to construct sentences using guided instructions and receiving immediate feedback from an instructor or game host. This board game not only helps learners to understand grammar rules further but also reinforces vocabulary in a practical, real-world context.

Figure 3. Photos of Pinpinju Competition



Pinpinju Competition was conducted among the Mandarin class students to support and demonstrate our innovative initiative, as shown in Figure 3. A total of 41 students actively participated in this competition, it allowed students to engage directly with our innovation in a fun and meaningful way, while also providing valuable feedback and evidence of its effectiveness.

This board game is a valuable tool recommended for Mandarin learners especially non-native speakers, serving as a useful learning tool to classroom teaching or self-study.

ACKNOWLEDGING CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTING SOLUTIONS

The greatest challenge of the physical board game Pinpinju lies within the learners themselves. Mandarin beginners encounter three core difficulties during sentence construction: difficulties in proficiently organizing sentence structures, inability to flexibly apply grammatical rules, and being interfered by language transfer.

As indicated in the research conducted by Chai & Bao (2023), learners engaged in third language acquisition are highly susceptible to the interference of negative transfer from both their mother tongue and second languages. This interference predominantly manifests in three aspects: vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar. For instance, when constructing Chinese sentences, learners may unconsciously apply the grammatical rules of other languages they have mastered, which leads to confused sentence structures.

The solutions for Pinpinju challenges can be developed from three aspects: Firstly, design an interactive link between "instructors or hosts and learners", and strengthen the interactive effect by combining guided prompts

and immediate feedback, helping learners to build confidence in sentence-making. Secondly, to address negative transfer in third language acquisition, the core solution lies in strengthening explicit contrastive awareness and increasing targeted language input and practice, with specific strategies tailored to vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar. Thirdly, the game simulates real-life scenarios to promote scenario implementation. According to Sim, Rahmat, and Khin (2021) task-based and situational learning encourage learners to use Mandarin in authentic communicative contexts, promoting both language fluency and confidence. This allows learners to naturally understand grammatical rules and consolidate vocabulary application while constructing sentences, ultimately solving the core problem of "disconnection between learning and application".

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