



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal Homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Everyday Tasks in Mandarin Volunteer Services: A Case Study from Jingxi and Napo, China

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ABSTRACT

University volunteer teams promoting Mandarin in border communities need teaching content that addresses the different communicative purposes of local residents. This study examines the 2026 summer activities of a Guilin University of Electronic Technology volunteer team in Jingxi and Napo, Guangxi, China. Activity records, teaching documents, photographs and team reflections are compared across three settings: commercial exchanges, everyday services for older adults, and children's classroom expression. The comparison considers communicative purpose, essential information, language support and task completion. Commercial exchanges place particular demands on checking quantities, units and delivery times; older adults' service encounters connect requests and comprehension with the next practical step; children's lessons connect pronunciation practice with explaining ideas and reasons. These distinctions inform a service design organized around everyday tasks. Each task specifies a communicative outcome, selects relevant words and sentence patterns, and moves from demonstration and supported interaction towards independent expression. Suggested observation criteria address information accuracy, prompting needs and responses to a partner. Reusable task materials and collaboration with schools, families and community service personnel provide a basis for continued practice. The study contributes a practical way to connect local language needs, lesson design and continuity in short-term Mandarin volunteer services.

Keywords: Mandarin promotion; everyday communicative tasks; border communities; language services; university volunteering

1. Introduction

The need to use Mandarin in a border community becomes concrete when a trader checks an order, an older resident asks where to obtain a service, or a child explains an idea to a classmate. These activities share a language but differ in purpose, essential information and expectations of a successful exchange. For university volunteer teams delivering short lessons, choosing among these demands is a central curriculum decision. A lesson becomes more useful when its content corresponds to an exchange that participants have a reason to complete.

China's policy on strengthening language work calls for improvements in the quality of Mandarin promotion and differentiated support for rural areas, ethnic minority areas and priority groups (General Office of the State Council, 2021). Research on rural language services similarly connects language needs with particular social settings. Li et al. (2020) examine the relationship between rural language ecology and language services, while Huang and Yang (2023) emphasize locally situated experience in the contribution of language to rural revitalization. These perspectives direct attention to what residents need to communicate in specific situations.

The instructional question is how to translate such needs into manageable lessons. Broad topics such as pronunciation or daily expressions identify useful material, yet provide little guidance on what a learner should do with it. Reading a product name and confirming an order require different combinations of information and interaction. Repeating a request after a volunteer and initiating that request at a service counter likewise involve different demands. Task-based language teaching connects meaningful activity, interaction and language use beyond the classroom (Nunan, 2004). It provides a basis for organizing volunteer teaching around purposeful exchanges.

This study examines three service settings documented in a Mandarin promotion project in Jingxi and Napo, Guangxi. It asks how their communicative demands differ and how these differences can guide task selection, instructional support and continued practice. Its contribution is an everyday-task approach that gives needs identification, lesson organization and local follow-up a common unit of work.

2. Case materials and analytical approach

During the summer of 2026, the Tuipu Qiangguo Xing Mandarin promotion team from Guilin University of Electronic Technology undertook community visits and volunteer teaching in Jingxi City and Napo County, Baise, Guangxi, China. The project included visits to Longbang Port and Hulong Village, activities in Renzhuang Township, and exchanges at other local sites. Commercial communication, everyday services for older residents and children's expression were selected for analysis because they represented distinct purposes within the project's language service activities.

The case materials comprise the team's existing visit and activity records, lesson documents, photographs and written reflections. Activity records describe service settings and teaching arrangements. Children's lesson documents include pronunciation exercises, poem recitation, tongue twisters and a discussion of personal aspirations. Records concerning older residents describe everyday expressions, demonstration and individual assistance, including help with smartphone use. Materials from commercial visits connect pronunciation and common expressions with trading situations. Photographs provide context for the activities; the analysis of communicative requirements draws on the written records and teaching materials.

The analysis first identifies the exchange addressed in each setting and the information needed to carry it out. It then compares four dimensions: communicative purpose, essential information, expression support and completion conditions. An everyday task is defined here as a bounded activity accomplished through language with a particular partner and purpose, such as confirming an order or explaining a need. Comparing the three settings on the same dimensions makes it possible to move from descriptions of activities to decisions about teaching content. The task examples and observation criteria developed below are instructional proposals derived from this comparison.

3. Communicative demands across three service settings

3.1. Commercial exchanges: Checking essential information

Visit records from Longbang Port and surrounding commercial settings distinguish familiar transactions from exchanges involving order details. Greeting customers, naming goods and asking prices draw on recurrent expressions. Quantities, specifications, delivery times and requests for further information require speakers to clarify details and check a partner's understanding. The team's pronunciation demonstrations and teaching of common commercial expressions addressed the immediate language demands of these encounters.

Order confirmation offers a precise focus for lesson design. A short exchange may involve a product, a number, a unit, a price and a time. Successful communication depends on how these items fit together. A number pronounced clearly still leaves uncertainty if the parties interpret the unit differently. Teaching can therefore pair the pronunciation of numbers and units with confirmation, restatement and clarification. Illustrative meanings for Mandarin sentence frames include 'Let me confirm the quantity' and 'Do you mean per item or per box?' Such frames give learners a way to resolve uncertainty while the exchange is still in progress.

An appropriate practice task would use a simplified order with information divided between two partners. Each partner asks for missing details and then restates the completed order. The immediate completion criterion is agreement on essential information. This format gives pronunciation a communicative purpose and draws on traders' existing knowledge of transactions. The volunteer can concentrate on the words or interactional moves that prevent the order from being confirmed.

3.2. Older adults' service encounters: Connecting requests with action

The activities for older residents in Renzhuang Township addressed routine services, shopping, travel and healthcare enquiries through short expressions, repetition and individual guidance. Related materials also concern communication and assistance during smartphone use. Across these situations, the language demand extends through a sequence: understanding a prompt, stating a need and confirming what to do next. The task can therefore be bounded by a practical next step that the learner understands.

A healthcare enquiry illustrates this connection. Explaining a concern, understanding a question, confirming a destination and asking for assistance are linked exchanges. A digital service may add interface text and a sequence of operations. China's implementation plan on older people's difficulties with smart technologies identifies travel, healthcare and consumption as frequent service settings and advocates experiential learning and mutual assistance (General Office of the State Council, 2020). For volunteer teaching, this suggests placing a short expression alongside the action or information it refers to.

A lesson can begin with a volunteer explaining one step in brief language. The learner then states the required service or asks a question before confirming the next action. Large-print prompts, pictures and demonstration can support the exchange. Keeping a turn for the learner to ask and confirm is essential: it makes the language practice part of obtaining the service. When a learner encounters difficulty, the volunteer can offer a word or gesture and return the conversational turn, allowing the learner to continue the request.

3.3. Children's expression: Moving from rehearsal to connected speech

Children's lesson materials combine knowledge about Mandarin and standard written Chinese with poem recitation, tongue twisters and the topic 'My dream'. Pronunciation practice and interactive games provide material for speaking. Questions about what a child hopes to become and why offer a clear purpose for using that material in an individual account. The important design decision is how to connect rehearsed words with a message that belongs to the child.

The difficulty of expression can increase gradually. Children can first rehearse relevant words, then use a picture, an object or their own work to organize a short explanation for a partner. Introducing an object, explaining a choice and answering a question each create a reason to use the vocabulary. The listener's response also helps the volunteer identify whether the account is sufficiently clear and where a prompt would be useful.

The 'My dream' topic makes this progression concrete. Occupational vocabulary can lead into prompts concerning an aspiration, a reason for it and a possible way of working towards it. Volunteers can supply a missing word while leaving the content of the explanation to the child. Pronunciation feedback then concerns words that the child is trying to use. A lesson organized this way preserves the participation offered by recitation and games while creating a separate opportunity for connected, self-directed speech.

4. Designing lessons around everyday tasks

4.1. Selecting content through a bounded communicative outcome

The comparison identifies a common design principle: select words and interaction patterns according to the exchange to be completed. Commercial lessons can focus on checking information; lessons for older adults can link requests to service steps; children's lessons can organize description and explanation. Age and occupation help identify relevant settings, while the task determines the content and sequence of a particular lesson.

The size of a task should fit the available service time. Confirming a quantity, asking for a destination or introducing an object gives a short lesson a manageable outcome and allows a complete cycle of expression, feedback and another attempt. Selection can consider how often the exchange occurs, the consequences of misunderstanding and whether meaningful practice can be arranged. Table 1 sets out proposed task designs and completion criteria for the three settings.

Table 1. Proposed everyday tasks, language support and completion criteria

Service setting	Proposed task	Language support	Completion criteria
Commercial exchange	Confirm an order's quantity, unit and delivery time	Product cards; number models; confirmation and clarification frames	Essential details agree; learner restates the order
Older adults' services	State a service need and confirm the next step	Large-print cues; short request frames; demonstration	Request is understood; learner confirms what to do next
Children's expression	Describe an aspiration or an object and give a reason	Pictures; keywords; sentence openings for giving reasons	Message is connected; learner responds to a question

4.2. Supporting interaction and reducing prompts

Knowing what one wants to say and producing an appropriate utterance are separate demands. The account of tutoring developed by Wood et al. (1976) explains how demonstration, attention to critical features and adjustment of difficulty can support problem solving. Applied to the design of Mandarin volunteer lessons, this perspective suggests combining a small number of sentence frames with pictures, keywords or role cues that help learners continue an exchange.

The support should match the task. An order-confirmation prompt can list product, quantity, unit and time. A service-enquiry card can provide the meanings 'I need...' and 'Please say that again'. A child's explanation can begin with the meanings 'I would like to...' and 'because...'. In each case, the learner supplies information needed by the partner. The volunteer demonstrates the exchange, participates in a supported attempt and then reduces the cues as the learner takes responsibility for the message.

Pronunciation feedback can follow the same communicative priority. An error that obscures a quantity, destination or time calls for an immediate model and a further attempt. Pronunciation points that leave the meaning clear can be revisited after the exchange. Brief instructions, a manageable speaking pace and familiar local explanations can help participants understand what to do. This arrangement places language practice within an intelligible activity and gives the volunteer a clear basis for deciding when to intervene and when to withdraw support.

4.3. Observing task completion and planning the next attempt

Feedback can address three observable features: the accuracy of essential information, the prompting required and the learner's response to a partner. Their application varies with the task. An order exchange requires agreement on quantities and units. A service enquiry requires a stated need and a confirmed next step. A child's account requires a connected message and a response to a listener's question. These criteria give volunteers concrete points for feedback within each setting.

A brief practice record could state the task completed, the support used and the point to revisit. For example, noting that quantity confirmation required a word card or that a learner needed a prompt to add the time would directly inform the next lesson. A final attempt with a different product, destination or speaking partner can reveal whether the learner can reorganize the same language for a nearby situation. The purpose of these records is to connect instructional choices with the next opportunity for practice.

5. Continuing practice through local collaboration

5.1. Preparing reusable task materials

University teams can provide concentrated periods of teaching, while schools, families and community service personnel encounter residents in everyday settings. A shared task gives these participants a concrete basis for continuing practice. Reusable materials can specify the situation, essential expressions, a model exchange and completion criteria. Examples include order-checking cards for traders, large-print request cards for older residents and picture-based speaking prompts for children.

Materials should accommodate the way they will be used. Large print can help older adults read a prompt, and short accompanying audio can offer a model for repeated listening. A card organized around one situation is easier to reuse when people, objects and places can be substituted. Changing a product and quantity in an order task, or a destination in a directions task, retains the language pattern while keeping the exchange relevant to the user.

5.2. Organizing follow-up around familiar activities

Local collaborators can be selected according to their connection with the task. Children's speaking activities can continue through classroom sharing, reading activities and family conversation. Older adults' requests can be practised alongside community services and everyday mutual assistance. Traders can rehearse confirmation during brief intervals in their work. University volunteers can prepare clear models and practice materials; local collaborators can use familiar settings to prompt an exchange and provide feedback.

Follow-up conversations can ask which tasks are used frequently, which expressions need revision and where learners still require help. These questions generate specific changes for the next set of lessons. When a university team returns, it can continue from the materials and exchanges already familiar to residents. The everyday task thus connects initial visits, short lessons, reusable resources and later contact through a consistent piece of communicative work.

6. Conclusion

The Jingxi and Napo case identifies three distinct instructional priorities within Mandarin volunteer services: checking essential information in commercial exchanges, connecting requests with practical steps for older adults, and developing children's connected expression from pronunciation practice. Organizing lessons around everyday tasks turns these priorities into decisions about content, support and completion. A defined exchange selects the language to teach; sentence frames and contextual cues support interaction; independent turns make task completion observable. The same task can then guide reusable materials and local collaboration. This approach gives university volunteer teams a practical basis for matching short periods of teaching to the exchanges residents need to complete and for connecting those lessons with continued practice.

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