The Influence of Active Teaching-Learning Methods on Students' Academic Performance in Mandarin Course: Undergraduates in Focus

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effectiveness of using active teaching-learning methods on students' academic performance in Mandarin language proficiency. Questionnaires were distributed to 35 undergraduate students who took Mandarin as third language to analyse the students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the nine active teaching-learning methods accordingly. A Mandarin proficiency test was also administered to the samples twice, as a pre-test and post-test, to examine the effectiveness of the nine active teaching-learning methods. From the t-test analysis conducted, it was found that there was a significant difference in the mean score for pre-test (M=5.77) and post-test group (M=9.40) (t=0, p<0.05). While the mean value of M>4 represent the students' perspectives on the effectiveness of the active teaching-learning methods. Homework and practice are perceived as most effective among all the nine active teaching-learning methods. Hence, it can be concluded that through the implementation of the nine active teaching-learning methods, students have improved their academic performance significantly. It is recommended that a more qualitative approach to be used in order to explore in depth the implementation of the selected active teaching-learning methods in teaching Mandarin for foreign language learners.

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Keywords: Active teaching-learning methods; Academic performance; Effectiveness; Mandarin language.

INTRODUCTION

During the past two decades, the movement towards effective language teaching and learning has shown outpouring interests by many educational experts and researchers. Numerous types of approaches, strategies, methods and practices of teaching and learning have been proposed in the field of education. With regards to this, many educators and teachers are required or expected to employ various teaching methods that are appropriate with their advanced knowledge and skills to further improve the quality of student learning performance. In other word, the quality of student learning and performance is determined by the quality of the teaching methods. Teaching methods can be defined as a series of processes that teachers use or take to achieve the predetermined objectives (Biadgelin, 2010).

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Although teaching methods are significant in ensuring the quality of student learning and academic performance, some teachers still lack the formal knowledge or skills of effective teaching methods. Moreover, some of the teaching methods lack clear instructional objectives and also lack control of the teaching methods which have resulted to less effective teaching and learning process. As we mentioned above, the quality of student learning is affected by the relevant methods of teaching. The students are able to master or achieve in their academic performance if the teacher uses the teaching methods that suit to the content of the instruction and if problems related to quality are solved.

In view of this, advance knowledge through research and disseminating these teaching methods are engaged. As illustrated by Obanya, Shabani and Okebukela (1996), procedures, instructional devices, and direction of instructions are intentionally selected to help the teacher to achieve the intended teaching and learning objectives. Hence, our education is necessary to seek clear instructional objectives of teaching methods to teachers and educators, and it is committed to change from the traditional teaching methods. A better understanding of the origin of teaching methods in the process of L2 learning will help teachers to improve and enhance their teaching quality.

Therefore, this study aimed to underline the importance of active teaching-learning methods as an instrument of change and progress in this modern society. The purpose of this paper is to assess the nine active teaching-learning methods in undergraduates' foreign language learning, and to investigate the influences of those active teaching-learning methods on students' academic performance in Mandarin proficiency at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. Therefore, two research questions are proposed in this paper:

1) Does the combination of nine active teaching-learning methods help to improve the undergraduates' foreign language students' academic performance?
2) What are the students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the combination of nine active teaching-learning methods introduced in Mandarin language classroom?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Definition of Teaching Methods

Previous studies have defined numerous terms for 'teaching methods' (Biadgelign, 2010; Ellis, 1995; Obanya et. al., 1996; Tewodros & Admasu, 2000). Ellis (1995) defines it as teaching process that encompasses course design, course management and methods of face-to-face teaching, provision of other learning opportunities, assessment and feedback to students. Obanya et. al., (1996) define teaching methods as procedures, learning materials, and direction of instructions, which are selected to help the teaching and learning objectives. In another view, teaching methods are both traditional and modern depending on how much students and the teacher are involved in the process, how the teaching objectives are considered for their attainment, and their modernity or time to use (Tewodros & Admasu, 2000). In addition, Biadgelign (2010) stated that teaching methods are general means, ways, procedures, or steps by which a particular order is imposed upon teaching or presentation of activities. In general, teaching methods are pedagogical organization of activities and implementing effective teaching methods would result to effective students learning process and performance.

These numerous definitions of teaching methods indicate that the basic tenets of teaching methods are all similar in which the teaching methods should be able to respond to the learning objectives. Scholars define teaching methods as interaction between teachers and students, providing suitable activities, assessments and feedback to students and the appropriate instructional device used in teaching (Biadgelign, 2010; Obanya et. al., 1996; Tewodros & Admasu, 2000). Similar with Biadgelign (2010) study, teacher and students were engaged in various teaching methods as defined earlier in achieving the required learning objectives. In understanding the implementation of teaching methods in classroom, the following section discusses past studies on the influence of teaching methods to students' performance in an EFL classroom.

2.2 Studies of Teaching-Learning Methods

There have been several studies in relation to teaching methods and its implications on students' performance (Anbessa, 2013; Miressa, 2014; Petronilla, 2011). A study by Petronilla (2011) examined the relationship between instructional strategies/teachers methodologies and students' academic achievement in mathematics on fourth grade students by using the Criterion Referenced Competency Test (CRCT). Her findings revealed that the instructional strategies/teaching methodologies contributed significantly to the students' achievement. The findings of Anbessa (2013) supported Petronilla study when she recommended in her study that various teaching methods should be used to solve the students' learning problem as well as for the betterment of students' learning quality. The findings are further proven by a study done by Miressa (2014) who tried to assess to what extent English language teachers practice vocabulary teaching strategies in EFL classes at Kellem Secondary school. Based on the findings, it was found that the teachers' lack of skills on the implementation of different types of vocabulary teaching strategies in EFL classes according to the students' suitability, therefore it resulted to poor quality of student learning.

Studies in relation to teaching-learning methods agree that there is a relationship between teaching-learning methods and students' academic performance. Effective and variety of teaching-learning methods provide positive outcome to students' performance and less variety of teaching-learning methods signify teachers lack of skill which result to poor students' performance. Miressa (2014) specifically indicate poor students' performance with the poor implementation of vocabulary teaching strategies. This has resulted to this study to explore the teaching-learning methods that would actively involve students in an EFL classroom. The following section discusses the teaching-learning methods that would contribute to positive students' performance. However, a lack in such studies is identified in the Mandarin Classroom. In this regard, most of the scholars mostly focused in English (Anbessa, 2013; Miressa, 2014; Petronilla, 2011). Concerning to the occurrence of these issues, thus, this study would help to bridge the gap in the literature in the area of teaching-learning methods in Mandarin course.

2.3 Active Learning

Past studies indicate that students produced positive outcome when they were actively involved in their learning. According to Zull (2002), active learning involves providing the students with a medium where they can meaningfully talk, listen, write, read and discuss or engage in completing tasks or solving problems while reflecting on the content of the subjects. Active learning strategies is an approach in language classroom based on the principle that students are dynamically, experientially and directly involved in the learning process (Richards, 2002). In a traditional classroom design where teacher-centered learning is implemented, students listen and depend on the teacher as the source of knowledge (Zaidatol Akmaliah, 2005). They however do not learn much as passive learners. The levels of the active learning will vary depending on the students' role and involvement in the activities (Zayapragassarazan & Kumar, 2012). Hence, it is crucial that active learning is introduced in language classroom to increase the students' academic performance particularly in helping them to improve their vocabulary and grammar knowledge which are critical for their overall level of proficiency.

There are variety of practical approaches in active learning such as through the implementation of games, technology-based activities, problem-based learning, theme-based learning, role play, drama, simulations and others (Zayapragassarazan & Kumar, 2012). The underlying foundation of these activities is that they involve active participation of the students in performing the task and experience the knowledge hands-on while simultaneously reflecting on the content of the learning which will further increase their knowledge and promote their skills (Koksal, 2017).

This process will consequently promote higher thinking order such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation among the students (Bloom, 1956). When directly engaged in the knowledge through the activities that promote active learning, students will improve their critical thinking and mastery of the skills and content of the subject (Richards, 2002). As stated by Sweeney (2007), students develop their knowledge by connecting their available mental models with the new information acquired through interactions with

friends and instructor. Through this process, students learn new skills or knowledge more effectively which will be retained in a longer period of time as oppose to passive learning (Sweeney, 2007).

Active learning methodology has been widely adopted in higher education language classroom in Malaysia as it offers many advantages in terms of promoting the students' self-directed learning. Students sufficiently acquire the knowledge, skills and attitude needed to improve their academic achievement particularly in vocabulary and grammar. In brief, by encouraging students to be independent learners who are responsible of their own learning process, the students' mastery of grammar and vocabulary has been effectively promoted. This study intends to investigate students' most preferred active teaching-learning methods to be used in classroom. The nine selected active teaching-learning methods we would like to implement here are comprised of (1) compare and contrast; (2) word wall; (3) note-taking and summarizing; (4) recitation; (5) cues, questions and activating prior knowledge; (6) role play; (7) non-linguistics representation; (8) homework and practice; and (9) analysis of students' work and discussion.

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sample

The samples of the study were collected from 35 undergraduates, who were enrolled in a Mandarin language course as a third language at Universiti Malaysia Kelantan. The samples consisted of 7 males and 28 females with the age ranged from 21 to 23 years old, and comprised 27 Malays and 8 Indians. The students did not have any background knowledge of the target language learning prior attending the course.

3.2 Instrument

Two research instruments were used in the study; a Mandarin language proficiency test and a questionnaire. The Mandarin proficiency test consists of grammar and vocabulary items in Mandarin which was divided into three sections to test the students' proficiency in the language. The question types include fill-in-the-blank and open-ended questions. The test was administered to the samples twice, as a pre-test and a post-test, which comprised before and after the implementation of nine active teaching-learning methods. The purpose is to examine the effectiveness of the nine active teaching-learning methods.

The questionnaire was designed by referring to past studies from Kothari (2004) and Nora (2013) where a number of items were adapted for the development of the questionnaire for the present study. The questions adopted were relevant to the purpose, objectives and research questions of this study. The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section one identifies the demographic background of the students, such as age, gender, ethnic and academic results. Sections two consists of three sections to explore the students' perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the nine active learning teaching methods utilised in this study. The three sections which explore the students' perceptions are 1) helpfulness of the nine active teaching-learning methods, 2) the students' interest on it and 3) its perceived effectiveness. Each section uses Likert-type scale as well as ranking to further investigate the students' perceptions. Likert scale consists of items from 1=the least; 2=less; 3=average; 4=more; 5=the most, while the ranking consists of items from 1= the least until 5=the most.

From the pilot study conducted in this study, it is found that the instrument of the questionnaire is valid and reliable to be used among the sample selected. The test-retest reliability coefficient in Pearson Correlation Coefficient (PMCC) is reported as 0.7 while the validity coefficient value is reported as r=.25.

3.3 Research Procedures and Data Analysis

The Mandarin language proficiency test was administered to the 35 students at week three, followed the academic calendar of semester September, 2017/2018, before they were introduced to the nine active teaching-learning methods in the classroom (pre-test). After the students were exposed to the nine active teaching-learning methods in Mandarin language classroom, the same test which done in the paper was

distributed to the students again (post-test) at week fourteen. Approximately 30 minutes were given to the students for completing the pre-test and post-test.The results from pre-test and post-test were keyed in and analysed. A detailed discussion of the nine active teaching-learning methods is provided in the next section.

Questionnaire was administered to participants at week thirteen, followed the calendar academic, 2017/2018. 35 participants participated in these questionnaires. They were encouraged to give honest responses and they were assured that their responses would not affect their course grades. These questionnaires collected either during or after the class hour by the researcher. These questionnaires survey administration took about 15 to 20 minutes on the whole.

As illustrated by Kruger (2003), "quantitative methods allow us to summarize sources of information and facilitate comparisons across categories and over time" (Kruger, 2003, p.18-19). Therefore, the data gathered from the questionnaire were analyzed by using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 20.0 (SPSS version). T-Test and Descriptive Analysis were used in finding the results of the research questions. T-Test analysis was used to determine significant relationship between two variables in the respective research question, whereas Descriptive Analysis was used to analyse which active teaching-learning methods is most preferred by the students.

3.4 The Implementation of Nine Active Teaching-Learning Methods

As mentioned above, there have nine selected active teaching-learning methods we would like to implement in this study. The nine active teaching-learning methods are comprised of (1) compare and contrast; (2) word wall; (3) note-taking and summarizing; (4) recitation; (5) cues, questions and activating prior knowledge; (6) role play; (7) non-linguistics representation; (8) homework and practice; and (9) analysis of students' work and discussion.

3.4.1 Compare and Contrast

Compare and contrast is used to identify the similarities and differences of two or more items, and requires students to justify their comparisons by using their critical thinking skills. For example, the instructor compares the similarities and differences between the students' native language (Malay) and the target language (Mandarin). For instance, in Malay language, a sentence normally starts with nouns followed by adjective, verb or another noun, like mi goreng (fried mee). Mi is a noun, and goreng is an adjective, which becomes a noun phrase with the word mi. In contrary, the word order in Mandarin is the opposite of Malay language, and always starts with adjective, verb or another noun followed by nouns, like chaomian. Chao (goreng) is an adjective, and mian (mi) is noun. Understanding the sentence structure will help the students to make comparison between their native language and the target language. Hence, the understanding of the sentences structure will help minimise students' errors in language usage.

3.4.2 Word Wall

Word wall is used to organize the collection of familiar words and connect them together. For example, when the instructor teaches the word of wo (I), the first step is by asking the students to remember the word 'wo' as a basis. Then the teacher will slowly expand the word to 'wo de' (my), 'women' (we) and 'women de' (our). The connection of the familiar word in this method may help students to recognize the new words easily, obtain new vocabularies, as well as increase their interest in learning a language.

3.4.3 Note Taking and Summarizing

Note taking is an additional method to support students' learning process. The instructor can always ask students to review and refine the important points from their notes, especially when they need to prepare for their examination, or their on-going assessments. Meanwhile as for summarizing students can learn how to identify key points, define and also analyze information obtained from reading materials also from the

instructor. Therefore, the explicit instruction in the note taking and summarizing would help students to enhance their higher-order thinking skill which will help them to become more effective and successful language learners.

3.4.4 Recitation

Recitation is used as a conscious language input activity. In Mandarin classroom, once the students have read and understand the vocabulary of each chapter, the instructor would ask the students try to read, memorize and recite the vocabulary, and repeat again and again. Through reciting a large number of Mandarin vocabularies, students are able to engage in the target language environment more efficiently. They are able to acquire common vocabulary, sentence patterns and fixed expressions used in authentic situations.

3.4.5 Cues, Question and Activating Prior Knowledge

Cues, question and activating prior knowledge are frequently used by the language instructor in classroom in order to recall information from previous lessons. The method of cues was used to ask the students to find out the answer or vocabulary that they have learned in the previous chapter. The method of question was used to ask the students about the vocabulary or grammar they have already recited or have been teach by the instructors. The method of activating prior knowledge was mostly used in activity or games to recall the students' memory about what they have learned. Therefore, it can say that the methods of cues, questions and activating prior knowledge can strengthen students' memory and understanding of vocabularies learned from previous lessons.

3.4.6 Role Play

Role play is the changing of one's behaviour to assume a role, either unconsciously to fill a social role, or consciously to act out an adopted role. The methods of role play was used to help the students to practice, experience and act out what they have learned from their textbook and also during lesson. When the students know the different ways to apply their knowledge, they would understand the language better. This would result to an increase in their curiosity of the language.

3.4.7 Non-linguistic Representation

Non-linguistic representation refers to the stored information in the memory in the forms of images. The instructor helps the students to create or draw images for example, when teaching the word 'jiaren', the instructor explains the meaning; 'jia' means house/home whereas 'ren' means people/person. Then asks the students to draw a picture of 'people in a house', and asks them to guess who the people are. Lastly the instructor explains the meaning of the word 'jiaren' which means 'family member'. This method will help students to increase their understanding and develop their memory.

3.4.8 Homework and Practice

Homework and practice were also view as one of the active teaching-learning methods because it involving in the active participation of the students in performing the task which will further increase their knowledge. Homework and practice provide the extended learning and reinforcement for students to refine their learning skills. Homework and practice are usually assigned after the students finished a module from the textbook. The given homework mostly include the practice of sentence structures, reorganization of words and phrases, translation of sentences, dialogues, writing tasks and other exercises. Through homework and practices, students could strengthen their understanding and enhance the grammatical knowledge that they have learned.

3.4.9   Analysis of Students' Work and Discussion

Analysis of students' work and discussion were also seen as the active teaching-learning methods because it let the students to experience the knowledge hands-on while simultaneously reflecting on the content of the learning which will further promote their skills. Analysis of students' work is used by the instructor once the students have submitted their homework and practice. This method could help the instructor to identify and examine the students' language errors so as to minimise the occurrences of language errors. Moreover, discussion with the students after analysing their work would further help the students to enhance their language acquisition. Thus, the method of analysing students' work and discussion is important in strengthening the students' foundation for language input as well as language output.

FINDINGS

4.1   Do the Nine Active Teaching-learning Methods Help to Improve the Undergraduates' Academic Performance?

In order to investigate the combination of nine active teaching-learning methods help to improve the undergraduates' foreign language students' academic performance, we performed the analysis of one sample T-Test. The results were shown in Table 1.

Table 1. One-sample test between pre-test and post-test.

	t	Df	Sig. (2-Tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of The differences	
					Lower	Upper
Pre-test	13.604	34	.000	5.77143	4.9093	6.6336
Post-test	24.841	34	.000	9.40000	8.6310	10.1690

Based from the t-test analysis conducted in Table 1, the result found that there was a significant difference in the mean score for pre-test (M=5.77) and post-test group (M=9.40) (t=0, p<0.05). This significant increase in mean score in Table 1 indicates that the students have effectively improved their academic performance specifically pertaining to vocabulary and grammar after they were exposed to the combination of nine teaching methods in the language classroom.

4.2   What are Students' Perceptions on the Effectiveness of the Nine Active Teaching-learning Methods?

To examine the students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the combination of nine active teaching-learning methods introduced in Mandarin language classroom, Descriptive statistics were conducted in the analysis of this study. The results were shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the effectiveness of the nine active teaching-learning methods

	Mean	Std. Deviation
CC	4.0286	.82197
WW	4.1429	.80961
TNS	4.2857	.78857
R	4.2286	.77024
CQA	4.2000	.79705
RP	4.0571	.68354
NR	3.9714	.85700
HP	4.3143	.75815
AD	4.1143	.79600

The table shows the mean value based on a survey conducted to measure the students' perceptions on the effectiveness of the nine active teaching-learning methods. It is evident that majority of the students feel that the nine active teaching-learning methods were very effective in helping them to improve their vocabulary and grammatical knowledge (M>4.0). It also highlighted the potential for accelerated development of students' language skills. Moreover, based from the analysis it is also evident that the students perceived that homework and practice have helped them the most due to the higher mean value of 4.3 as compared to other activities. And next followed by note-taking and summarizing (4.28), recitation (4.23), cues, question and activating prior knowledge (4.2), word wall (4.14), analysis of students' work and discussion (4.11), role play (4.05) and compare and contrast (4.03). The method of non-linguistic representation was found as the least effective to students due to the lowest mean value of 3.9.

DISCUSSION

Introducing the students with the nine active teaching-learning methods has encouraged them to be independent learners who are actively involved in the learning process. By participating in activities such as role play, compare and contrast, recitation, word wall and others, the students engage in discussing, reading, listening, and writing in solving problems and completing the tasks. Through these active participations, the students' critical thinking and problem solving skills were enhanced (Feden & Vogel, 2003).

The students who are introduced to nine active teaching-learning methods are also given the medium to acquire the knowledge by making connection of the available mental model to the new knowledge received. Hence, this will increase their acquisition of new vocabulary items and grammatical knowledge that can further promote their language proficiency (Zull, 2002). This is also supported by Koksal (2017) where it is stated that the fundamental theory underlying active learning is to encourage active participation of the students in performing the task and experience the knowledge hands-on while simultaneously reflecting on the content of the learning which will further increase their knowledge and promote their skills.

This is in line with the purpose of this study where students are introduced and exposed to nine active teaching-learning methods in which they are actively engaged in the learning process, develop their cognitive skill as well as learn independently but with support and assistance from the teachers. In this study we can see that students perceive the activities as highly effective in helping them to improve their proficiency in Mandarin language as evident from the result obtained (M>4.0). By actively involving the

students in the learning process, they can see the relevance of the lessons to improve their competency in grammar and vocabulary. The students also perceive that homework and practice activity to be the most effective among other active teaching-learning methods (M=4.3) and this might be due to the fact that this activity gives them the opportunity for self-learning session where they can explore the language independently. As adult learners, sufficient opportunities should be given to the students to take control of their own learning process (Zayapragassarazan & Kumar, 2012).

Furthermore, based from the pre-test and post-test conducted through Mandarin Proficiency Test, it is found that the nine active teaching-learning methods are effective in helping the students to improve their grammatical and vocabulary proficiency in the language and this is evident from the significant difference in the mean score for pre-test (M=5.77) and post-test group (M=9.40) (t=0, p<0.05). This is due to the fact that students are given sufficient opportunity for exposure and practice of the target language using the nine active teaching-learning methods. Besides that, as evident from the result of the students' perceived effectiveness of the nine active teaching-learning methods (M>4.0), it is deducted that students' interest and positive perceptions on the nine active teaching-learning methods have further contributed to the effective immersion of the activities and acceptance of the students during the classroom sessions which further increases the success of these approaches in improving their grammatical and vocabulary knowledge.

Most importantly, by engaging the students in the learning process and exposing them to meaningful learning activities which require them to think actively and critically, the students are found to significantly improve their grammar and vocabulary knowledge. Many past studies have also discussed on the benefits and importance of adopting suitable strategies to improve the students' learning. Past study conducted by Petronilla (2011) stated that through the adoption of appropriate instructional strategies, students' academic achievement in mathematics is found to have improved significantly. Anbessa (2013) has also suggested that various teaching methods should be adopted to solve the students' learning challenges as well as to ensure the improvement of the learning environment. Miressa (2014) study has also proven that the teachers' lack of vocabulary teaching strategies in EFL classroom has affected the quality of learning among the students.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The critical need for sufficient knowledge in grammar and vocabulary among foreign language learners in Malaysia has resulted in the introduction of variety learning approaches in classroom. One of the approaches found to be effective in helping the students to improve their vocabulary and grammar knowledge in foreign language is active teaching-learning methods. In the context of this study, nine active teaching-learning methods are implemented among foreign language students in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan through the nine approaches in classroom and as a result it was found that the students had improved their grammatical and vocabulary knowledge significantly. Moreover, through a survey conducted it was also found that the students had favourable perception on the usefulness of the nine approaches that promote active teaching-learning methods as most of the students perceived the activities as very effective in helping them to learn grammar and vocabulary efficiently. In all, this study has proven the effectiveness of nine active teaching-learning methods in improving the students' grammatical and vocabulary knowledge besides confirming the students' positive perceptions regarding the implementation of this approach in their foreign language classroom.

It is recommended that these activities are adopted in foreign language classroom in Malaysian tertiary institutions to help the students to acquire knowledge on grammar and vocabulary more effectively which will further help to improve their proficiency level in general. Foreign language instructors have to focus more on providing a medium for students to participate actively in their learning environment, to be independent learners as well as to be in charge of their own learning process as oppose to becoming passive learners in a teacher-centred classroom design.

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