



Enhancing Chinese Literacy Skills through Drama Activities: A Case Study of Mandarin Chinese for Beginners' Course at the University of Nottingham

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Abstract

For many English speaking learners studying Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language in the UK—due to its logographic Character writing system, which is very different from the Roman alphabetic system of English writing—it is more challenging to develop Chinese literacy skills. In order to address this challenge, I integrate drama activities in the curriculum of the course Mandarin for Beginners at the University of Nottingham by asking learners to complete a drama project. This assignment includes novel reading and discussion, as well as play scripts writing and performing. This paper discusses how to integrate drama activities in a language curriculum by sharing and reflecting my practice of implementing a drama project in the academic year 2018-19. Details such as specific scaffolding steps, the benefits of adopting a project based learning approach are being discussed. My research follows a teacher action research paradigm, which according to O'Brien consists the cycle of diagnosing (identifying a problem), action planning (considering alternative courses of action), taking action (selecting a course of action), evaluating (studying the consequences of an action) and specifying learning (identifying general findings). Research data is drawn from a wide range of sources: class observations, students' reflective journals, student survey results and individual written feedback, as well as student writing samples all form part of the overall analysis.

Keywords: *Chinese literacy skills, drama activities, project based learning, action research.*

1. Introduction

In the past few years there has been a significant increase of students learning Mandarin Chinese as a foreign language in the UK. A wide range of British schools and universities now offer Chinese language courses (Tinsley and Board, 2014). Though Mandarin Chinese has become increasingly popular as a foreign language, pedagogical research on teaching and learning Chinese in the UK contexts is still in its infancy (Tinsley and Board, 2014 & Li, 2013). Tinsley and Board (2014) furtherly claim that more academic research should be carried out into the acquisition of Chinese characters by non-native language learners. Mastering Chinese writing and reading skills is the first step to develop comprehensive Chinese literacy skills. As a teacher and practitioner teaching Chinese to non-native speakers at a leading Russell-group university, based on my classroom observations over the past decade, I have noticed that for many learners at the beginners' level a big challenge to progress and develop their literacy skills is character acquisition and vocabulary size. This is primarily due to its logographic character writing system, which is very different from the Roman alphabetic system of English writing,

To address this challenge head on, I decided to incorporate drama activities in the curriculum and make it part of my daily teaching practice. Drama has the advantage of providing the context to improve writing skills, to develop realistic dialogue and to extend vocabulary (Farmer, 2012). Drama as an educational tool has been widely applied in school curricular. Studies indicate drama is an effective tool to develop language learners' literacy skills. Scholars such as McNamee, MaLane, Cooper & Kerwin (1985) have pointed out that drama immerses language learners in a meaningful communication process of reading and writing in a holistic way. Furthermore, Rieg & Paquette (2019) mention the benefits of using drama in language classroom, such as increased motivation and self-confidence, reduced anxiety and enhanced language acquisition.

While the benefits of integrating drama in the language classroom has been widely acknowledged by researchers and practitioners alike, most of the current findings are based on the experience of English language learning in schools. It is still a rather novel practice in Chinese classroom as a foreign language. Consequently there are very few articles on how to implement drama activities in



Chinese language learning. This paper aims to bridge the gap by sharing and reflecting on the case of implementing drama activities in my course Mandarin for Beginners at the University of Nottingham.

2. Methodology

My study followed a teacher action research paradigm, which according to O'Brien (2001) should be imagined as an iterative cycle of 1) diagnosing (identifying a problem), 2) action planning (considering alternative courses of action), 3) taking action (selecting a course of action), 4) evaluating (studying the consequences of an action) and 5) specifying learning (identifying general findings).

For the diagnosing stage, I consulted the available academic literature on the subject matters first. I then engaged in extensive classroom observation. In order to help my learners at beginners' level to enhance their Mandarin Chinese literacy skills, my action plan consisted of an integration of drama activities in my curriculum for Mandarin for Beginners course. The drama activities were carefully planned and presented as a reading and writing project to students at the beginning of semester B in the Autumn semester of the 2018-19 academic year. The project lasted throughout the whole semester and students were expected to produce their own play scripts and perform them in front of an audience. In terms of evaluation of the action taken, a survey was conducted to obtain students' feedback. Data had also been collected through class observation and samples of students' work. My analysis of this diverse set of data now informs my action plan for the coming academic year 2019-20.

3. The drama project

At the beginning of the project students had already learned the language for one semester and had built up basic knowledge and understanding in terms of the characteristics of Chinese characters and sentence structures. Students were introduced to the project at the beginning of semester B. They were asked to read a graded Chinese novel Emma (安末). This graded book is written using approximately 300 Chinese characters and intended for learners after one to two years of formal language training. It provides English translation of some of the key words. My students were asked to read one chapter of the book each week at home and complete reading comprehension tasks accordingly. There were in-class opportunities for learners to discuss and share their understandings of the characters from the book and main ideas of the story. After reading the five out of ten chapters of the book, learners were tasked to write their own play scripts based on the characters from the book as a group of two or three. Consequently students not only wrote their own scripts, but also performed them by the end of the semester to their classmates.

In order to assist students in the self-directed writing process of the scripts sufficient amount of scaffolding was provided. First, through novel reading, students' vocabulary gradually expanded. Such reading exercises also provided contexts and characters, which enabled students to build upon when writing their own scripts. In-class discussion helped enhancing their understandings of the main characters as well as consolidating the new words they learned through reading, as they were required to use them actively and repeatedly. Furthermore, students were asked to produce their play scripts collaboratively rather than individually. This process of co-creation allowed them to share their ideas and workload, thus creating stronger bonds among students. Acting out their scripts meant they had to remember their lines by heart. Memorizing key lines helped to reinforce the correct pronunciations of Chinese characters.

The project-based learning approach has the advantage of promoting learning by doing (John Dewey, 1938). Project-based learning is defined as "an instructional approach that contextualizes learning by presenting learners with problems to solve or products to develop" (Moss & Van Duzer, 1998). In this context, the product my learners were expected to produce was their own play scripts. The scripts laid the foundation for their end-of-year performances. The latter plays not only served as a summative test of their language proficiency but also had the additional benefit of taking place in a relaxed setting of an evening of cultural performances of students enrolled in the School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies.

4. Findings

All eight students in the class actively participated in the project from beginning to end. They produced three pieces of eight-minute play scripts. This meant that they achieved the basic goal of the project. The quality of their products were impressive, both in terms of the vocabulary and sentence structures



they used in the scripts. Many words and some sentence structures actually were not taught by the tutor in class and they managed to use them correctly. Based on in my class participation records as well as survey results, students showed great enthusiasm for this project. Just one of the students commented: "The play script has also been very fun as we've worked in a team to create an original piece of work drawing on all our skills we've learnt this year." Another student provided feedback saying "I thoroughly enjoyed reading the book 'Emma' and I believe that it has helped me recognise more characters and has also taught me new sentence structures. The project had clearly boosted learners' motivation to read and write Chinese characters, as script writing was experienced as 'fun, creative' and as a highly collaborative exercise.

Looking at the essay section of the written exam scripts—a two-hour timetabled exam and included reading comprehension, grammar and essay writing that required hand writing Chinese characters—the quality of overall essay performance seemed not to improve noticeably in comparison to students from previous years before implementing the drama project. That said, there was a noticeable improvement in the sections of reading comprehension and grammar. It can thus be concluded that students' writing skill did not enhance as much as their reading skill. However, it needs to be reiterated that this was a two-hour exam assignment, which means that students may not have enough time to do the writing task well. Furthermore, if students were required to produce their writing task by hand writing Chinese characters, their resulting scripts could be rather different as if students were asked to type their essays on a computer. This raises the question that when measuring English-language learners' Mandarin Chinese literacy skills, should the writing skill should be restricted to hand writing? Or would it be acceptable to accept students typing Chinese characters with the help of a computer?

5. Conclusion

This paper is based on the action research I conducted in the academic year 2018-19, which was the first time that I implemented the drama project. Seen in its entirety the drama project was well designed and implementation was smooth. It also gained positive feedback from students. Regardless, there are still areas for future improvement. I would like to briefly reflect on my initial choice of the graded novel "Emma". The reason why I chose this book was that the story would be very interesting to students and able to make association with, as it was a love story set in modern-day Shanghai. I also thought that this short novel would help prepare my students for their year abroad in China. Initially I was slightly concerned whether the level was suitable for my Year 1 learners, since they had only learned one semester of Mandarin Chinese. Throughout the term, however, the good progress in class discussions showed me that most students had understood the gist of the story and managed to answer related comprehension questions. This is why I will continue to use this book. In future iterations of the project, however, I will also provide an audio recording of the book. As the publisher has just published the audio files of the book this will be possible. By listening and going through the book at the same time students can enforce pronunciation of specific Chinese characters. Secondly, as discussed in my findings section, in terms of the writing tasks in the written exam, a further measure to be taken in the future is to see if combining typing skills as well as handing writing skill in the writing tasks are likely to enhance students' writing performance. Finally, this action research should be considered a starting point of a long-term ambition to firmly integrate educational drama into our university's Chinese language curriculum.

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