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PUBLIC SPEAKING TO ENHANCE ORAL MANDARIN PROFICIENCY

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to shed some light on the use of Speaking Contest as an Activity to support the learning of Mandarin among non-native Chinese learners. Speaking Contest as an Activity can be a useful tool to motivate the learning of Mandarin among learners. This study was carried out during a Mandarin speaking competition held at UiTM (Perlis). A self-developed questionnaire was distributed to gain understanding and the views of the participants on the use of Mandarin in the speaking contest as an activity to support the learning of a Chinese language among the non-native Chinese learners. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The findings revealed that students agreed that Mandarin speaking competition as an activity was useful to enhance their learning. Thus, activities such as Mandarin speaking contest can be used as creative practices in particular when teaching Mandarin as a foreign language and also for other foreign languages.

Keywords: *teaching Chinese as a foreign language, speaking, learning, speaking contest activity.*

INTRODUCTION

Speaking contest as an activity can be an effective tool for foreign language teaching (Dang, 2008a). Generally, students enjoy participating in competition (Dang, 2008b). Hence, Mandarin speaking competition can be used to support Mandarin teaching outside the classroom environment.

The Academy of Language Studies from all the branch campuses of Universiti Teknologi MARA will take turn in organizing the annual Mandarin speaking contest. However, the effectiveness of this contest has not been studied. Therefore, the objective of this study is to validate the use of public speaking to enhance Mandarin oral proficiency in supporting Chinese language learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several previous studies supporting the notion that speaking competition as an activity can be used as an effective tool to enhance language learning. Their findings support the use of speaking contest activity outside the Mandarin teaching classrooms.

Students generally enjoy speaking competition (Dang, 2008a; 2008b). They love to get involved in a competitive kind of language learning activity. It acts as a platform for self attainment and individual performance. Viewing the positive attitude towards speaking contest as an activity, instructors can use it as a supplementary channel to enrich the learning of Mandarin as a foreign language.

The notion of left and right brain and its tendency for foreign language memory strategy has been widely studied (Jia, 2003). The purpose is to use various methods which include speaking contest as an activity to enhance the effectiveness of foreign language learning such as Mandarin. Students are able to use scripts in Mandarin speaking contest to help them in memorising Chinese vocabulary, sentences and etc. It assists in the use of their right brain in participating in informal learning and contributes to the enhancement of Mandarin learning.

Multiple intelligence plays a vital role in improving the effectiveness of foreign language instruction, (Cui, 2004). Multiple intelligence influences language effectiveness which utilizes speaking intelligence. This allows students to display their speaking intelligence. Hence, speaking contest

activity which is strongly related to language intelligence should be utilized to formulate structured Mandarin learning and acts as an additional effective Chinese teaching approach.

Goh, Nasirin, Noor Aileen and Raja Mariam (2006) reported that language activities are relevant for second and foreign language learning. Various language activities are involved in public speaking. The challenges are placed on the approaches and methods used by the instructors in making these language activities effective for foreign language learning. This is especially true for the use of Mandarin speaking contest in the teaching of Chinese as a foreign language. The process in preparing the students for competition is vital.

Interest and motivation is the key to the success of foreign language learning (Duan, 2008). Various research findings acknowledge the motivational aspect of foreign language learning. The use of learning activities would heighten learning motivation and interest among the learners (Goh, 2004). Learners with higher learning motivation are able to perform better compared to learners with lower motivation (Goh & Ng, 2004). For this reason, giving students the opportunity to participate in Mandarin speaking contest can motivate them to learn Mandarin. Thus, the elevation of Mandarin learning motivation can yield the betterment of Mandarin learning and in consequence depicts the importance of public speaking on enhancing Mandarin proficiency.

At the same time, there are many factors that will affect the effectiveness of the use of language activities such as Mandarin speaking contest on language learning (Goh, Nasirin, Noor Aileen & Raja Mariam, 2006). Among them, the level of students' attainment of language, the preparedness of students, the winning factors, gender, and etc, would have affected students' perceptions of the relevance of the use of the language activity such as Mandarin speaking contest to support their Mandarin learning.

Additionally, for academic language learning purpose, speaking texts can be offered as supplementary learning materials to enhance grammar learning (Liu, 2011). Instructors may allow representatives for Mandarin speaking contest to practise in front of the class. After the practice, instructors may subsequently use the texts prepared for Mandarin speaking contest as supplementary learning materials to explain lexical cohesion to the class. This helps to enhance Mandarin learning.

In sum, instructors are called to use speaking contest to boost up the learning motivation in the language learning classroom. As Mandarin speaking contest does have the element of strengthening speaking skill, it could be utilized in a good way in the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was carried out during a Mandarin speaking contest held at UiTM (Perlis). The research procedure was summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Research Procedure

Stage	Research procedure
1	Students and instructors prepared themselves for the Mandarin speaking contest
2	Mandarin speaking contest was held
3	All participants were given a self developed questionnaire (see appendix 1, derived from Dang, 2008a 2008b) to gather their perceptions on the use of Mandarin speaking contest activity for Mandarin learning. 20 students (audience) were also used as samples for comparison on their views.

All the participants in this Mandarin speaking contest were the respondents in this study. They have been taught Mandarin both at primary, secondary and post secondary school levels. Another 20 students (audience) were used as samples for comparison. The samples of this study were shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Research Samples

Group		Number of samples
1	Participants	15
2	Non-participants – audience students	20
	Total	35

There were altogether 15 participating students in this competition coming from various campuses. All the participants and 20 students (audience) filled up the questionnaires. The data was analyzed utilizing

the SPSS software in order to obtain information on the descriptive and inferential statistics. The findings were shown in the next section.

There were two hypotheses made for this study. They were shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Hypotheses for this Study

Number	Hypothesis
H ₁	Students were positive on the use of Mandarin speaking contest activity for Mandarin learning
H ₂	There wasn't any significant difference between the participants and the non-participants on the use of Mandarin speaking contest activity for Mandarin learning

FINDINGS

The questionnaire consists of ten statements. A scale of 5 was used in which 1 indicated strongly disagreed and 5 indicated strongly agreed. The perceptions of the students according to the two groups (participants and non-participants of the contest) were shown in Table 4.

Table 4: Perceptions of Students according to Groups

Group	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10	Overall view
1	4.73	4.6	4.67	4.53	4.53	4.53	4.47	4.53	4.53	4.6	4.57
2	4	3.95	4	3.5	3.65	3.65	3.7	4.1	4.1	3.7	3.84
Overall	4.37	4.28	4.34	4.02	4.09	4.09	4.09	4.32	4.32	4.15	4.21

For all the items, students indicated positive perceptions (with overall mean=4.21 > 4.0). It showed that the students were affirmative that Mandarin speaking contest activity aided their Mandarin learning (testing hypothesis 1, H₁ was accepted).

However, there seemed to be differences in perceptions between the participating and non-participating groups. The mean for the participating group (4.57) was higher than the mean of non-participating group (3.84). T test was used to validate its significance. The result is shown in Table 5.

Table 5: T test – Comparing Perceptions of Students between Participating and Non-participating Groups

Groups comparison	t value
Participating group with non-participating group	2.329 (p = .000)

Note, N = 35, ** p < .005, *** p < .001

The result showed that there was a significant difference between the participating group and non-participating group ($t(2 \text{ groups}) = 2.329, p = .000 < .005$). It showed that the participating students were differing and more positive about the perceptions on the usefulness of Mandarin speaking contest activity to support their Mandarin learning (testing hypothesis 2, H_2 was rejected).

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has shown that by and large the students were positive on the use of Mandarin speaking contest activity to support their Mandarin learning. It implies that instructors are encouraged to utilise language activities such as speaking contest activity to engage students in the learning of Chinese as a foreign language.

There was a significant difference between the participating and non-participating group on the use of Mandarin speaking contest activity for Mandarin learning. Participating students were significantly more positive compared to non-participating students. This indicates that direct involvement may have affected the use of language activities such as speaking contest activity to support their Mandarin learning. The eagerness in the use of all kinds of activities has to be balanced with the students' experience as a result of involvement in these activities. If not, the efforts in engaging students in all kinds of language activities will be in vain without any substantial benefits and only benefit the participating students only.

Hence, in helping students to participate in the speaking contest activity, active involvement of students is vital. Students must not be made to passively memorize their speaking scripts without any form of active learning activities. For instance, instructor may engage students to use dictionary, such as desktop dictionary (Goh, 2009), web-based dictionary (Goh, 2011), online Malay dictionary (Goh & Saiful, 2013), and etc. to

understand the scripts they are going to present. Students with hands on experience in understanding their speaking texts giving them different kinds of active learning knowledge and thus enhance their Mandarin learning. Instructors may then discuss the scripts together with their students in making sure that supplementary learning occurs.

In order to strengthen the mastery of Chinese pronunciation as to prepare students in participating in Mandarin speaking contest, instructors may use various educational technology to assist them. One of the approaches suggested is the use of Pinyin text to teach speech system (Goh, Saiful Nizam, Aileen & Mohd Suhaimi, 2013). The speaking contest activities should not just benefit students with prior Mandarin language knowledge in either Chinese primary or secondary school level. Encouragement has to be given to non-native learners with no knowledge of Mandarin to start speaking in Mandarin. Typically, instructors would prefer to select students with some Mandarin learning background. Priorities are given to students with Mandarin background as representatives in Mandarin speaking contest. However, all students should be proficient in their public speaking skills (Luo & Zhang, 2010) regardless of their Mandarin learning background. Students with non-Mandarin background have to be involved more to make Mandarin speaking contest activity meaningful. Therefore, it is suggested that special prizes should be given to students with no knowledge of Mandarin in the aspect of Mandarin pronunciation performance. This would give Mandarin learners the confidence to start in participating in Mandarin speaking contest and at the same time, make this activity more meaningful.

In addition, impromptu public speaking method can be engaged (Zhu, 2010). This method can be used for students with knowledge of Mandarin. Hence, it is suggested that there can be two categories in the Mandarin speaking contest. The first category is impromptu public speaking contest for students with Mandarin background while second category which is prepared structured speaking contest for students with non-Mandarin background. This would make speaking contest activity more meaningful for these two categories of students.

There could be issues pertaining to the scripts used for speaking contest. One of the issues pertains to the cultural aspects in the scripts (Qiao, 2011). As non-native learners, the participants might not be able to appreciate cultural-bound contests. Hence, instructors have to address this. Another related issue pertaining to the scripts for speaking contest is the discourse function of the scripts (Wu, 2013). In ensuring the usefulness of

the support of speaking contest on the learning of Mandarin, instructors have to make certain that the sentences used in the speaking contests are associated with daily discourse function. In relation to this, the lexical aspect of the public speaking has to be given attention (Li, 2011). The vocabulary used in speaking contest tends to be more academic. The suitability of the vocabulary used in the speaking contest activity for daily conversation is questionable. Hence, the organizers have to decide on the appropriate themes for the speaking contest that relates to daily conversation in order to achieve practical support for Mandarin learning. By attending to these two aspects, the participants may then gain positive reinforcement in applying the scripts memorized for daily conversational purpose.

There are other aspects of speaking contest which is not covered in this study. One aspect is to compare students with background in Mandarin and without any background in Mandarin language, on their views on the use of speaking contest as a Mandarin learning support and reduce anxiety of public speaking (Zhang, 2010) that allows the use of speaking contest as an activity to support Mandarin learning among non-native Mandarin learners. This opens door for further studies in this area.

The use of Mandarin speaking contest as an activity to support Mandarin learning is definitely beneficial. The hindrance is on how the process of preparing students' involvement makes the whole process more meaningful and enriching.

CONCLUSION

Public speaking contest undeniably is a creative practice for language learning (Zhao & Ren, 2009). In conclusion, Mandarin speaking contest offers a creative practice in supporting Mandarin language learning. This contest is encouraged to be used in the teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language.

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Appendix 1

Questionnaire

Circle which suits you

Level of Chinese course taken: 1 / 2 / 3

Background of Chinese learning: Yes / No

If yes, until: kindergarten / primary / secondary school / above secondary level

Purpose:

The purpose of this survey is to understand the use of using Mandarin Public Speaking to support Chinese learning. Your sincere response may assist us in this matter.

Direction:

You may tick at the appropriate columns that can represent your views.
1 - strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – neutral, 4 – agree, 5 – strongly agree

No	Item	1	2	3	4	5
	By participating in Mandarin Public Speaking , I can ...					
1	Improve my Chinese speaking skill.					
2	Learn to convey myself better in Chinese.					
3	Learn more Chinese vocabulary.					
4	Learn Chinese vocabulary faster and easier.					
5	Learn more of Chinese expression such as Chinese idiom, and etc.					
6	Learn more complex Chinese sentence.					
7	Learn to appreciate the beauty of Chinese philosophy.					
8	Increase my interest in learning Chinese.					
9	Motivate me to learn Chinese more.					
10	Apply the script learned in my daily use for Chinese communication.					

Thank you for your sincere response.