

Language Activities as a Platform for Second/Foreign Language Learning: Its Relevance and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This study seeks to identify the relevance and challenges faced in conducting language activities to help foster second/foreign language learning at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Terengganu. This is also aimed at assisting the organization to review practices of having language activities, hoping this may further cultivate and generate enthusiasm among students to learn second/foreign languages. This research also offers some possible ways to improve students' activities so as to help enhance their second/foreign language learning. In other words, this research may serve as a preliminary attempt aiming at providing reflections and insights on how students' participation in language activities conducted may be useful for them in learning second/foreign languages. The research employs quantitative methodology in which random stratified sampling technique is used. Samples consist of Bumiputera students taking English (as a second language) and Mandarin, French, and Arabic classes (as foreign languages). Generally, students are of the opinion that language activities can become a significant platform to project and show their language skills and competency during presentations/performances. Nevertheless, as one of many recommendations suggested in the findings of this research, we found that there is still a need for evaluation and follow-up work after having participated in the language activities.

Keywords: *language activities, sampling technique, foreign language learners*

Introduction

Students enthusiastically participate in language activities through dramas, songs and poem recitation etc. In line with applying suitable strategies for developmentally appropriate creative and aesthetic experiences of teaching and learning environment in UiTM, this research hence discusses the practicality of having language activities to enhance the acquisition of second/foreign language in UiTM.

A great way to motivate student creativity, reduce inhibitions, encourage natural language use and build self-confidence is by using presentations in language activities to stimulate second/foreign language learning. Considering the benefits second/foreign language learners derive from this activity, the task of adequately training teachers as well as the students in presentations is a challenge that should not be ignored.

Helen Periera (2003) discusses her honest appraisal which highlights three points:-

1. Only a few classes can afford the time to be involved in the production of 'theatre night'.
2. The dramas were becoming stereotype.
3. In our zeal to stage dramas, it is very easy to get carried away by the logistics of staging dramas rather than focusing on the quality of the students' performance.

Through organizing the language activities, it is hoped that students can engage themselves in creative learning and participate in cooperative projects that foster communication with peers within and outside their classrooms. Are the genuine objectives achieved all the way through the presentations? Are they relevant to the language learning? Is it a platform to prop up language learning? Or all the efforts put in were just to have the sake of having students' activities? Consequently, this research focuses on the evaluation of having language activities as a helping tool for second/foreign language learning.

It is hoped that there will be more research conducted in this area to further develop a more effective way of using language activities to facilitate second/foreign language acquisition. Furthermore, it is also anticipated that the findings will serve as sharing research-based knowledge.

The most important aspect in the application of the knowledge in developing research and action initiatives in teaching second/foreign languages as well as becoming the resource for professional development of the faculties.

The finding of this research may assist the evaluative process in using language activities in language education. This will lend a hand to the Academy of Language Studies in generating research-based thoughts and evaluative efforts of having language activities widely in all UiTM branches in Malaysia.

Problem Statement

Considering the multitude of benefits second/foreign language learners draw from language activities, the task of adequately preparing our lecturers in this practice is something that we should take into account.

However, the important subsequent issue is to determine the target audience, that is our students' perspective in having students' activities to enhance their language learning. They might have their own thoughts on this matter. On the other hand, the language activities held might be inappropriate for our learners in terms of language proficiencies, interest, relevance to language learning, etc. Thus, this research aids as a preliminary step to probe this concern.

Hypotheses for the Study

The study is designed to elicit answers to the following hypotheses:-

- H1: There is a positive perception among students on the relevance of language activities and language learning of English learners.
- H2: There is a positive perception among students on the relevance of language activities and language learning of foreign language learners.
- H3: There is a difference in students' perceptions on the relevance of language activities and language learning among students from various language courses.
- H4: There is a difference in the students' perceptions on the relevance of language activities and language learning between the English language learners and foreign language learners.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study are:-

- A. To identify the relevance of having language activities in fostering second/foreign language learning in UiTM.
- B. To review the effectiveness of language activities in enhancing second/foreign languages learning.
- C. To suggest some possible ways to improve these students' activities in enhancing second/foreign language learning.

Significance of the Research

The findings of this research will help the faculties to reflect on the effectiveness of having language activities every semester in enhancing second/foreign language learning in UiTM. The significant benefits derived from this research include the following:-

- A. Assisting the faculties to discover the helpfulness of having language activities in enhancing the learning and teaching process.
- B. Assisting the faculties to be aware of the problems and difficulties faced in having language activities during each semester and how to enhance second/foreign language learning by overcoming the said problems.

Research Limitation

The obvious limitation of this research is that it is done only in one branch campus of UiTM although there are 14 branches in the whole of Malaysia.

Therefore the findings of this research cannot be generalized to every branch campus, as each branch will have their own particular approach in teaching second/foreign languages. Thus, the finding of this research will serve as a reference to improve the quality of teaching second/foreign languages.

Further more, this research focuses on the respondents who are taking certain language courses offered at UiTM Terengganu, Dungun Campus only. These courses are English, Mandarin, French and Arabic. On the other hand, there are many other foreign language courses offered at UiTM campuses such as Italian, German, Korean, Japanese, Thai language and others. Thus, this research serves as a preliminary attempt in the reflection on having language activities during every semester in enhancing second/foreign language learning.

Research Design, Data Collection Strategies and Procedures

This research used quantitative methodology. A random stratified sampling technique was used to gain information on Bumiputera students who were taking English, Mandarin, French, and Arabic courses in UiTM Terengganu, Dungun Campus. The information was gathered through a self-developed questionnaire and analyzed by using SPSS. Table 1 below shows the samples involved in this research.

Table 1: Language Type vs. Proficiency Level

Language	Proficiency level				Total
	Beginner	Pre-intermediate	Intermediate	Advanced	
English	10	60	21	36	127
French	25	0	45	0	70
Mandarin	7	0	39	24	70
Arabic	50	0	11	9	70
Total	92	60	116	69	337

Basically, this was a non-experimental method using self-reports. Self-reports were the replies given by subjects in response to the distributed questionnaires. In this self-developed questionnaire, “5-point scale” or Likert scales were used to enable the investigators to measure degrees of agreement with the statements/items.

A pilot test using ‘test and retesting’ technique was held to check the reliability indices for the items in this self-developed questionnaire. This pilot test was conducted on 40 subjects. Thus, the researchers were able to learn whether the planned procedures really work before efforts were expended on a full-blown experiment. This pilot test revealed that most subjects understood the instructions, the items and so forth.

According to Mohd. Majid Konting (1994), items with reliability indices that are more than 0.60 are normally used. While according to Nunnally (1978), items with Cronbach’s alpha coefficient 0.7 and above are acceptable. In this instrument, all the values of Cronbach’s alpha coefficient values of the items are more than 0.6.

The items of the questionnaire were grouped in the following eight categories:-

1. Understanding meaning and knowledge of language
2. Participation
3. Language skills
4. Quality of presentation
5. Relevance to language learning
6. Preparation
7. Reward
8. Evaluation and follow-up activities

In order to get an overview of the findings for each category, the items for each category were transformed and computed in calculating the overall conclusion for each category. All the negative items were to be reversed and recoded by using SPSS.

Data Analysis

Information gathered through the self-reported questionnaires was analyzed by using SPSS.

Findings and Summary

The results of this research are discussed according to the following categories:-

1. Understanding meaning and knowledge of language

The students agree (mean = 1.90) that their lecturers/instructors do guide them in the understanding and appreciation of the meaning of their presentations (item 1). However, they disagree with the suggestion (suggestion 3) of having more guidance given by lecturers/instructors (mean = 4.09).

They agree that they could appreciate and understand the contents of their presentations, e.g., drama, poem, etc. (item 27, with mean = 2.36).

Whilst for item 2, the students are neutral on their perceptions that they would have enough knowledge about the culture of the language through language activities (mean = 3.25). Nevertheless, they agree that there should be with a need for more exposure on learning the culture of the target language (Suggestion 1, mean = 2.01).

Overall, the students are quite positive on their perceptions on the meaning and knowledge of language through language activities (mean = 2.18). In other words, they are quite sure about the meaning of their presentations and the contents of their presentations are comprehensible.

2. Participation

The students are quite neutral that only few classes involved (item 2, mean = 2.94). Nevertheless, the students do enjoy and love to participate again in the future (item 4, mean = 2.10). The students also agree that they are free to decide on what to present (item 20, mean = 2.42). It means that they are free to make choices of what they want to present. They agree that they have the opportunity to show their abilities and talents (item 23, mean = 1.82). Since they enjoy the participation so much, they agree that the language activities should be held every semester (suggestion 2, mean = 1.90).

Overall, the students do perceive that the participations of students in the language activities are quite good, with mean equals to 2.24.

3. Language skills

The students agree that their language skills are potentially developed during their participations in the language activities (item 3, mean = 2.28). They also

agree that the language activities they have participated in are appropriate to their proficiency levels (item 15, mean = 2.18).

Overall, the students' perceptions on the language skills are positive, with mean equals to 2.23. It means that the students also agree that the language activities are suitable which are in accordance to their levels of language proficiency.

4. Quality of presentation

The students to some extent agree that the presentations do not have quality (item 6, mean = 2.23). For instance, the students are indifferent that the dramas are stereotypical (item 5, mean = 2.74). Therefore, they suggest that there should be a variety in the presentations (item 10, mean = 2.17). They are of the opinion that the too much noise contribute to lower the quality of the performances (item 17, mean = 2.37).

Despite all these, they still agree that the presentations are interesting (item 7, mean = 2.17). They claim that language activities have motivated them in away, to learn the target language (item 21, mean = 1.96). They also assert that the language activities are very entertaining (item 26, mean = 2.01). To them, as long as they enjoy the shows, hence, they really do not care of any need to improve the quality of the presentations.

Nonetheless, the students are neutral that the presentations are well prepared and presented (item 13, mean = 2.60). They are also indifferent that all the performances are excellent (item 16, mean = 2.58). It is neither positive nor negative that the presentations are too dull and they are the same presentations in every semester (item 18, mean = 2.72). Furthermore, they are also neutral that the presentations are a little too long and dragging (item 22, mean = 0.767).

Overall, the students' perceptions on the quality of presentations are neutral with mean equals to 2.68. In other words, the positive general impression of language activities in relation to the quality of presentations can be associated with the benefits they have gained through their participations.

Conversely, the negative general impression of participating in language activities are chiefly interconnected with the time limitation, overall participation, variety of language activities, as well as supervision of lecturers.

5. Relevance to language learning

The students do perceive that language activities could assist language learning (item 8, mean = 1.80). They allege that language activities are very good for language learning (item 9, mean = 1.69). This may due to the fact that they have gained a lot of knowledge about the language (item 12, mean = 2.06). To them, language activities are useful for language learning (item 14, mean = 1.81). Apart from that, the language activities they have participated in are appropriate for their proficiency levels (item 15, mean = 2.18). For that reason, they disagree

that language activities do not give any values in language learning (item 19, mean = 4.85). They believe that language activities do motivate them to learn a second/foreign language (item 21, mean = 1.96). Moreover, they agree that language activities are an informal way of learning language (item 25, mean = 2.22). They are also affirmative that language activities could promote maturity, teamwork, cooperation and dependability (item 28, mean = 1.69).

Overall, the students do have a positive view on the relevance of language activities to language learning with a mean equals to 1.6986.

The conclusions for the hypotheses are: there is a positive students' perception on the relevance of language activities and language learning among English learners; there is also an affirmative students' perception on the relevance of language activities and language learning among foreign language learners; the difference in students' perceptions on the relevance of language activities and language learning among students from various language courses is significant. Nonetheless, the difference in the students' perceptions on the relevance of language activities and language learning between the English language learners and foreign language learners is not significant.

6. Preparation

The students agree that they need more time for preparations (item 11, mean = 1.95). This might be due to the fact that they have been informed quite late by their respective lecturers. Therefore, they view that there is a need to have more guidance by their respective lecturers/instructors (suggestion 3, mean = 2.09). They feel neutral that the preparations are well prepared and presented (item 13, mean = 2.60).

Overall, they disagree that they are well prepared for their presentations with a mean equals to 3.5480. It means, in terms of preparation, they need more time to get prepared. They opine that their respective lecturers should have informed them earlier. If this could be done, they would then be quite sure of the quality of their presentations.

7. Reward

The students agree that they should be given certificates for having participated in language activities (suggestion 4, mean = 2.45). This is due to the fact that they are given the certificates late. They normally only receive their certificates after one semester. They suggest that they should get the certificates as a form of reward earlier. They also agree that the good presentations should be presented in other campuses (suggestion 7, mean = 2.05). This would then give them more satisfactions and exposures. Overall, they agree that in terms of rewards, there should be better rewards with a mean equals to 2.2507. This may include certificates, given the chance to perform elsewhere like at other branches, etc.

8. Evaluation and follow-up activities

The students agree that they should have an evaluation for every language activity (suggestion 5, mean = 2.10). The success or failure of certain language activities have never been discussed or reviewed in this campus. The students also agree that students from other campuses should be invited to present their presentations as well (suggestion 6, mean = 2.00). This has never been a practice at UiTM Dungun Campus.

Overall, the students suggest that there should be a need for evaluation and follow-up after the presentations with a mean equals to 2.0491. Subsequent actions should be taken after the language activities.

Discussion, Implication and Suggestions

In the case of UiTM Dungun Campus where language activities are being actively carried out, it is hoped that students will be able to get full benefits through these language activities. It is the duty and responsible for every language lecturer/teacher/instructor to help inculcate students' positive responses towards language activities. The relevance of language activities and language learning should be carefully nurtured to ensure the effectiveness of language learning.

1. Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this research favor and confirm the relevance of language activities and language learning. The findings are significantly concordant with the ideas of Maley (1987), especially on why we should have poetry and songs in language classes. These language activities remain pivotal aspects as discussed by Maley (1987):-

Memorability	: Some vocabularies picked-up can remain in the pool of memory for a longer time.
Rhythmicality	: Facilitates acquisition faster.
Performance/recitability	: Group performance masks individual error adds to self-confidence.
Ambiguity	: Infinite fund of interactive discussion is possible.
Non-triviality	: They have a content (affective or cognitive), which may help develop language learning faster.
Universality	: The themes they deal with are common to all cultures: love, death, nature, children, etc, thus they can relate to them.
Playfulness	: The ability and opportunity to play with and have interactions with others.

- Reaction language : Triggers people react personally to another person's verbal sensibility.
Motivation : Exerts a motivational force.
Interaction : For both teacher-student and student-student interactions.

Since many students enjoy language activities, as enjoyment or pleasure plays an important factor in any learning process, language activities are a potentially useful aid to language instructors. This would then lead us to the areas of activity proposed by Maley (1987), which are drawn from the pedagogical perspective. According to him, there are four aspects relevant to language activities:-

- Preparation : Get students thinking about the main issues of their presentation
Comprehension : Make sure that the students understand what they are going to perform, e.g., use picture for introduction to poetry.
Expression : The students should be encouraged to express themselves through their presentations, e.g., hear a good model to start with, excellent speech recordings of poems, as well as a plethora of recorded songs.
Reaction : These would then lead them to their presentations in forms of role-play, project-work, and writing poems, etc.

2. Responses to the Advantages and Disadvantages of the Use of Language Activities

The value of language activities and its uses discussed earlier can also be considered as advantages. The more specific advantages of the use of language activities are talked about in details by Wan (1990). These advantages should be manipulated in ensuring an effective usage of language activities and at the same time to eliminate the disadvantages yielded as well.

- i. Making Full Use of the Advantages.
 - a. Stimulates authentic conversations
 - b. Is a fluency activity
 - c. Is suitable for consolidation
 - d. Creates sensitivity and a sense of awareness
 - e. Increases motivation
 - f. A break from routine
 - g. Prepare students for real life and unpredictability

- ii. Eliminating Disadvantages
 - a. Limited activity
 - b. Activities are difficult to monitor
 - c. Causes embarrassment
 - d. Encourages incorrect forms
 - e. Has cultural bias
 - f. Lecturers do not monitor
 - g. Spontaneity is lost
 - h. Time constraint
 - i. Activities may not be suitable for all levels
3. How do we know that students may think that language activities enhance language learning?

Since students' perceptions are quite vital in determining the successful use of language activities, the lecturers have to find out finding the students' thoughts about enhancing language learning through the planned language activities. There are several important aspects that a lecturer must keep uppermost in his mind (Verriour, 1990):-

- a. Monitoring the students' level of interest, belief, and commitment to the work.
- b. Finding ways to protecting students so that they are prepared to take risks in expressing their ideas.
- c. Creating opportunities for different kinds of language use.
- d. Taking time for reflection so that students are encouraged to think about language.
- e. Enabling students to assume responsibility for their learning.
- f. Maintaining group consensus.

4. The Role of the Lecturer

In language learning, students should have more responsibility for their own learning. However, this does not diminish the importance of the lecturer in the instructional process. For the most part in relating to language activities, it is the responsibility of the lecturer to guide the language learning process by (Gasparro, Marie and Falletta, Bernadette, 1994). They further outline various tasks a lecturer can do:-

- Modeling pronunciation, intonation, stress, rhythm, and oral expression;
- Facilitating comprehension of vocabulary, idioms, cultural aspects, and plot;
- Stimulating interest and conversation, and interacting with the students;
- Establishing an acting workshop atmosphere;
- Creating a student-participatory language learning experience.

5. Changing the Mind Set to Support the Use of Language Activities as a Platform for Second/Foreign Language Learning

Some lecturers are afraid they will appear unprofessional if they deem that language activities are more on 'playing' instead of serious study. Some language teachers feel comfortable only when using the course textbooks and feel that drama activities could take away their position as the language "role model". It is also interesting to note how drama may bring great impacts in the second/foreign language learning as observed by Wessels (1987: 4):-

"If drama can really enrich the language class in all these ways, why are so many teachers reluctant to use it? Many still think of drama as 'theatricals', because this is their only experience of it. Often the fault lies not with the individual teacher, but with the training that he or she has received; a training that presents education as the one-way transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student, rather than the creation of a learning situation in which the student is also the teacher."

Evaluating an activity that incorporates drama techniques can be another trigger that sets teachers off using them (Royka, 2002). The two main objectives when including these types of materials in a class should overcome fear of learning the second and foreign languages and it should also create a need for communicative skills.

Since English learners are more occupied in preparing a drama, the changing of the mind sets of the English lecturers appear to be more acute. More students have the chance to engage in some forms of language use and interact in drama. These kinds of group drama activities should have developed better language use and the lecturers should provide more guidance, assistance and encouragement.

6. Preparation of Language Activities, Presentation, Evaluation and Follow-Up in Language Classroom

Now we would move to the part on the authentic implication of language classroom in preparation of language activities, presentation, evaluation and follow-up.

A suitable model of step-by-step guide in preparing for language activities is proposed by Kodotchigova (2002). This would be a more general model that can be utilized by various language activities. Steps involved are:-

- Step 1 : A Situation for a Language Activity
- Step 2 : Language Activity Design
- Step 3 : Linguistic Preparation
- Step 4 : Factual Preparation
- Step 5 : Assigning the Roles
- Step 6 : Follow-up

A few final thoughts by Frost (2004) would be benefiting for the lecturers to reflect positively on language activities:-

- Overall, the whole process from writing, practicing and performing does not actually take up that much time and the rewards make it very worthwhile.
- Some students will not want a speaking part, so ensure that the lecturers have extra roles so they have some input. Do not feel worried about them not getting as much from the experience, the lecturers will find that they learn the lines as well. The lectures can even ask them to be prompters.
- If the lectures want to extend the whole experience they can even spend time making props and costumes.
- With higher level students the planning process can also be done in English.

As an overall conclusion, the phases of language activities can be divided into three phases:-

- i. Pre-presentation activities – preparation
 - Provide outline/idea/information
 - Motivate/encourage participation, develop desirable attitudes and values, etc. (Cantoni-Harvey, 1987)
 - Make it interesting
 - Activate prior knowledge
 - Provide background knowledge : poem, drama, etc.
 - Check understanding : oral discussion
- ii. Actual language activities – presentation
- iii. Post-presentation activities – follow-up

7. Developing Various Activities

Some language lecturers might complain that the language activities held are too dull, boring or childish. Some might even say that the language activities are not up to the university level. It is then an issue of how to maintain challenging, yet interesting language activities.

Language teachers should have developed an endless variety of language activity for encouraging students to use languages communicatively. For the self-directed learner it may be better to have a small number of flexible and productive methods. The Cambridge Handbooks for Language Teachers published by Cambridge University Press is a supportive tool. The series includes books on the use of drama, games, stories, and pictures in language learning.

There are various websites that may give a good list of ideas, materials and tips for language activities that can be used in language classroom, e.g., using poems, plays, songs etc.

The primary core of the language activities for language learning is that it provides students with a realistic environment in which they can develop a range of communicative and interactive skills. Learners need to use the linguistic system creatively and appropriately if they are to obtain proficiency in their second/foreign language, and as a result language activities are particularly useful in contexts where students have few opportunities for contact with native speakers (Hyland, 1993). However, this might not be an easy task as bring around the native speakers from outside of the campus. Nevertheless, the discussions tended to focus on developing variety of language activities to guarantee the use of language activities with significant relevance to second/foreign language learning.

As a guiding principle, the language activities should be able to cultivate the following items:-

1. Culture learning
2. Literariness
3. Social aspects of the target language

To sum up, the variety of language developed has to fit into a few criteria:-

- | | | |
|-------|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| When | ▶ | suitability of time involved for preparation, earlier notification, etc. |
| Where | ▶ | suitability of the venue, facilities available, etc. |
| What | ▶ | in accordance to the level of students' language proficiencies; forms: poster, singing, etc.; content: poems, drama, etc. |
| How | ▶ | intra/inter-class; individual/group work |

Conclusion

This study has illustrated the perceptions of UiTM Dungun Campus students about second/foreign language learning through language activities. These are beginners of especially foreign languages who perhaps have limited language skills as well as limited motivation and performance. The students' perceptions regarding the relevance of language activities on their learning of second/foreign languages require follow-up study, above all, on the aspects of promoting cooperation among branch campuses.

Creative involvement circumvents inhibitions about speaking a second/foreign language and allows the free flow of previously studied vocabulary, grammatical structure and correct pronunciation. The greatest barrier to a student's progress in a second/foreign language is self-consciousness. As a consequence, language activities should be designed to enthusiastically involve our students, so that the use of the language is more important and the self-

withdrawal is minimized. The language activities should be applicable to all levels of language learning.

On the other hand, this study has several limitations. The information is a mere self-report, and factors that may influence students' perceptions such as students' specific language skills, prior experience with language activities, prior background in foreign languages, and personality type, are not considered. Also, due to the collection of data that only comes from one branch campus, results might not be able to be generalized to other branch campuses. Furthermore, there might be lecturers' factors implicated, e.g., their perspectives, their attitudes, etc. Nevertheless, since little research is available on students' perceptions about language learning through language activities, this study may provide insights to universities that are currently employing language activities in relation to second/foreign language learning.

More empirical studies should be conducted concerning the effective ways of developing creativity in language classrooms through the use of drama, etc. and on students' perceptions and the relationship between such perceptions and the actual achievement of specific language skills. For instance, study can be conducted on language activities by affording a special attention to a particular language skill, e.g., reading.

In addition, studies should be conducted to compare various foreign language learning. Studies should also be concerning the role of the instructor in promoting creative language activities, in order to identify those lecturers' behaviours and interactions most favourable to students' second/foreign language acquisition. Such studies may contribute to a future knowledge base that will shape and improve the nifty use of language activities. These may function as practical considerations and guidelines for the incessant use of language activities, besides instilling creativity and encouraging good performance so as to smoothen the process of learning the second/foreign languages.

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