

ANCIENT CHINESE FABLES FOR TEACHING CHINESE AS A THIRD LANGUAGE IN UiTM

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Abstract: Ancient Chinese fables are stories with allegoric or educational significance in ancient China. The length of this literary genre is short, but the language is very refined. The content of ancient Chinese fables is simple but always brings out profound wisdom from the stories. The existing research of ancient Chinese fables on teaching Chinese as a foreign language is quite lacking. In fact, the application of ancient Chinese fables in teaching Chinese as a foreign language has great practical values. Story pedagogy and gamification teaching activities can increase non-Chinese learners' interest, motivation and learning effectiveness. The effective teaching method such as gamification teaching activities using card games, slides and learning sheet (CSLS), visual image and video, word puzzles, word guessing games and theatrical games can boost the learners' concentration, deepen their memory, improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Furthermore, non-Chinese learner will get closer to the extensiveness and profoundness of traditional Chinese culture by through learning ancient Chinese fables. This study will refer to the course syllabus of teaching Chinese as a third language at UiTM as an example to explore the application and effectiveness of ancient Chinese fables in teaching Chinese as a third language in UiTM. The limitations of this teaching method and solutions will also be discussed in this article. The research significance of this article is by giving some suggestions in teaching the ancient Chinese fables. Looking forward to these suggestions can serve to induce contributions in the teaching Chinese as third language in UiTM.

Keywords: Ancient Chinese fable, teaching Chinese as third language, application and effectiveness

1. Introduction

According to the number of students in the third language elective courses of the UiTM Machang campus from September 2020 to January 2021, the total of diploma and degree students who took Mandarin course were 871 students.³¹ Two main reasons that promote students to enrol in a Mandarin class are students have interest to learn Mandarin and mastering Mandarin can provide practicality in the future workplace and life. Both of these responses are a good start, but the students' concentration in learning process are not as good as expected. Even some students have gradually lose their enthusiasm in the Mandarin lesson, and their desire to get fluent in Mandarin is fading away. These phenomena are closely related to the relationship between course syllabus and teaching method. Hence, how to cultivate the non-native students' interest in learning Mandarin? How to stimulate and regain their enthusiasm and confidence? How to make students feel that the Mandarin class is not boring but actually interesting and they are willing to continue learning Mandarin? These are critical issues that educators need to address.

The main purpose of UiTM Mandarin course syllabus is to produce non-native students who are able to utilize the language learnt in their daily engagement with the public or business dealings (Research Gate, 2013). The diploma Mandarin course comprises of 2 levels that run for 14 weeks and 4 credit hours for each week. The degree Mandarin course comprises of 3 levels that run for 14 weeks and 2 credit hours for each week. The contents of these textbooks are mainly based on conversation and vocabularies with various exercises, such as substitution exercises, fill in the blanks exercises, translation exercises, questioning exercises, asking and answering questions exercise and so on. These contents are practical for daily life, but it is easy to be monotonous, or even lack of more interaction between students and instructors if the teaching method for each chapter is similar or dull.

³¹ TMC101 (249 persons), TMC151 (39 persons), TMC401 (180 persons), TMC451 (164 persons) & TMC501 (239 persons)

In this regard, the UiTM Mandarin textbook appendixes of certain levels have provided a few additional teaching materials such as Chinese songs, tongue twisters, snake chess game, picture of items and so on. Besides, students need to write scripts and create their role play video at the end of every semester. Certainly, these teaching materials and activities can make learning more attractive and joyful. Therefore, this article is based on the current Mandarin Course syllabus of UiTM by suggesting the contents of the ancient Chinese fables that can be added into the syllabus. The syllabus and teaching would be diversified, interesting and educational due to the incorporation of language and literature.

Ancient Chinese fables are stories with allegoric or educational significance in ancient China. The length of this literary genre is short, but the language is very refined. The content of ancient Chinese fables is simple but always brings out profound wisdom from the stories. There are many vernacular versions of ancient Chinese fables in the market and the ancient Chinese fables in book are short and concise with pictures, Hanyu Pinyin, translation and explanation. It is absolutely suitable for kids, teens or adults to read, including the non-Chinese students in UiTM.

The existing research of ancient Chinese fables on teaching Chinese as a foreign language is quite lacking. In fact, the application of ancient Chinese fables in teaching Chinese as a foreign language has great practical values. This study will refer to the course syllabus of teaching Chinese as a third language at UiTM as an example to explore the application and effectiveness of ancient Chinese fables in teaching Chinese as a third language in UiTM. The limitations of this teaching method and solutions will also be discussed in this article.

2. Overview of the Teaching Method and Significance of Applying the Ancient Chinese Fables in Teaching Chinese as the Foreign Language (TCFL)

The ancient Chinese fables are full of profound philosophies that embody the wisdom, harmony and filial piety of Chinese traditional cultural values. Bao (1988, pp.404) pointed out that the enlightenment and philosophy of ancient Chinese fables are often compressed into a phrase or became an idioms, and it plays special role in language use. Thus, the integration of ancient Chinese fables into the TCFL has dual educational significance in language and culture. The followings are the overview of the practicability and significance on the teaching method of ancient Chinese fables.

2.1 *Improve students' concentration and memory ability in learning*

The stories of ancient Chinese fables happened thousand years ago; thus, students without relevant cultural background and language may be difficult to comprehend. Non-Chinese students would inevitably feel tedious and lose their concentration in class. Therefore, gamification teaching activities using card games, slides and learning sheets (CSLS) would be useful by applying ancient Chinese fables in the teaching Chinese as the third language in UiTM. CSLS are innovative teaching models developed by Mini Educational Game development group (NTUST MEG) (Koong Lin, Lin, Wang, Su & Huang, 2020, pp.3). Instructor can design cards, slides and learning sheet according to the storyline of ancient Chinese fables.

Card game teaching can be used as an interactive game for non-Chinese students in the enlightenment stage when learning a new language. Teaching ancient Chinese fables with Flash card can help students to learn new vocabularies faster. Teaching with fun-filled ancient Chinese fables storytelling card game helps students to explore the 5W1H of the story. Instructor can encourage the students to take part of competition in class for telling the content of story according to the cards they have. Besides, the slides with instructor's explanation provided scenario important to help students' concentration (Koong Lin et al., 2020, pp.3). Lastly, instructor can create the learning sheets based on what students had learned to help them review the content of the story. Good interaction with instructor and peers in the gamification teaching activities can ameliorate non-Chinese students' anxiety and improve their memory in learning Mandarin.

2.2 *Improve students' understanding of Mandarin*

Teaching by transforming the textual materials of fable stories into animations or videos can reproduce the plot of the story completely and truthfully (Liu, 2017, pp.24). For example learning the

story of “Be there just to make up the number” (滥竽充数, lànyú chōngshù) through animation video in class, the students can understand the beginnings and turns of the storyline, observe the story characters’ emotional facial expressions, mindsets and behaviour action. This teaching method helps the students think more deeply by reflecting on the story. Students will understand the connotation of this story that criticizes someone without real talent who deliberately pretends to be an expert. The people who obtain the real skills with hard work will stand the test. This kind of video usually takes around 4-5 minutes and do not occupy too much time in class, but it is able to mobilize students’ various senses and help students gain deeper understanding.

2.3 Improve students' listening and speaking skills

The ancient Chinese fables will be highly accepted by non-Chinese students due to the strong storytelling content. The reference books of ancient Chinese fables used in TCFL are generally in vernacular of modern Chinese that are simple and easy to understand. Students will expand their vocabularies, idioms and understand how sentences in Chinese are structured which establish a good language foundation.

Chinese Idiom “duì niú tánqín” (对牛弹琴) is derived from an ancient Chinese fable named “Playing the Zither in Front of the Cow” (对牛弹琴, duì niú tánqín) (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.191-194). This story and Chinese idiom means we should be clear about the target when we are talking or taking action (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.194). Instructor can guide the non-Chinese students to apply this Chinese idiom in their daily conversation. Learning to use common Chinese idioms will make the students sound more native. Besides, looking at the way the characters are introduced at the beginning of the story of “Lǚguó yǒu yí ge zhùmíng de yīnyuè jiā, míng jiào Gōngmíngyí, tā fēicháng shànyú tánqín”, this sentence introduces the characters’ living place, name, occupation and talent. Instructor can explain the meaning of this sentence and instruct the students to use it to introduce others in daily conversation.

In addition, the instructor can design the story card or use Powerpoint to show the contents of the story in the form of a comic strip and encourage the students to retell the story which they heard and learned (Xu, 2012, pp.95). It can activate their thinking abilities and improve their listening and speaking skills.

2.4 Improve students' participation in classroom

Some game activities in classroom can help students strengthen their foundation of Mandarin. The crossword game is one of the recommended games in which the instructor hides certain words of fable idioms (Liu, 2017, pp.28), or the words are deleted from a sentence or passage and the students are required to fill in the blanks. Besides, the charades which is a common word guessing game require the students to act scenes out without using any spoken words. It can be a single person acting out the word or phrase of ancient Chinese fable stories while the rest of the students try to guess; or the teams acted scenes out while the others try to guess. These activities can solve the problem of students who remain silent and reluctance to speak Mandarin in class.

Besides, role playing activities in classroom can make the students gain the knowledge with a fun and comfortable learning manner. For example, the story of “Self-contradiction” (自相矛盾, zì xiāng máodùn) tells about a man of the Chu state who sold a spear and a shield in the market. He promotes that his shield is made of the best material, and not even the sharpest spear can penetrate it. On the other hand, he promotes that his spear is sharp to penetrate anything (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.230-233). The story tells us that no matter what we say and do, we cannot contradict ourselves or go to the extreme (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.233). Students can interpret the story through role-play activity; one student plays the role of the contradictory person, one student plays the guest and one student reads the narration and makes the conclusion.

The idiom of “zì xiāng máodùn” (自相矛盾) is derived from this story which means contradictory. The Chinese word of “máodùn” means contradiction, but actually this word is a combination of “máo” (矛, spear) and “dùn” (盾, shield) which are two types of ancient weapons. The instructor can explain the source, meaning and usage of these words. The students will be deeply impressed by the story and scenery because all are performed by their classmates.

2.5 Improve students' understanding of Chinese culture

Xu (1991, pp.1) agreed that language is a unique symbol system of human beings. When it acts on the relationship between human beings, it is an intermediary to express mutual reaction; when it acts on the relationship between human being and objective world, it is a tool to recognize things; when it acts on culture, it is the carrier and container of cultural information. The language and culture have an inseparable relationship.

The ancient Chinese fables stories and fable idioms which are passed down from ancient times carried extremely deep cultural connotations, especially the spirit of the Chinese nation. The story of "Dragon King and the Frog" tells us that everything in the world is different and it is important to know yourself, to do what you like and what you can (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.42-45). "The lesson of an Overturned Carriage" tells us that we should always be prudent, steadfast and humble because life is full of unknown and accidental things (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.87-90). The story of "The Fox Assuming the Majesty of the Tiger" criticized people who bully or frighten others by relying on others' power (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.195-198). "The Frog at the Bottom of a Well" is often used to satirize those narrow-minded and arrogant people (Li & Ke, 2016, pp.140-143). Therefore, the integration of ancient Chinese fables into the TCFL is a good way for non-Chinese learners to understand about traditional Chinese culture and learn to reflect from the stories.

3. Applying the Chinese Classic Fables for Teaching Chinese as a Third Language: Using the Examples of UiTM

There are numerous ancient Chinese fables and these fables have rich and various contents. Learning ancient Chinese fables is a way to learn Chinese language and traditional culture. In this way, non-Chinese students can broaden their reading vision and improve their Chinese comprehension. Therefore, the ancient Chinese fables are very suitable to be enrolled into UiTM textbooks. The examples of ancient Chinese fables in relation to the syllabus or content of Mandarin textbooks will be discussed below.

3.1 Chinese classic fables related with friendship

The Chapter 1 of the Daily Conversation Mandarin Language 1 and Introductory Mandarin Level 1 of UiTM textbook is related to "friendship". The instructor can share some ancient Chinese fables about friendship with students and guide them to understand the importance of friends. Some of the ancient Chinese fables are related with friendship such as "A Good Neighbour" (千万买邻, qiānwàn mǎi lín), "The Sea Bird" (海上沔鸟, hǎishàng ǒu'niǎo) and "High Mountain and Running Water" (高山流水, gāoshān liúshuǐ). "A Good Neighbour" (千万买邻, qiānwàn mǎi lín) shows that people in ancient Chinese cherished the friendship of like-minded people. "The Sea Bird" (海上沔鸟, hǎishàng ǒu'niǎo) tells us that we need to treat our friend sincerely and realize that a friend will leave a person who is dishonest and disloyal.

Moreover, the non-native learners are able to study new vocabulary which is "zhīyīn" (知音) from the story of "High Mountain and Running Water" (高山流水, gāoshān liúshuǐ). The meaning of "zhīyīn" (知音) is bosom friend, and the students will understand the reason why Chinese call a bosom friend as "zhīyīn" (知音) through this story.

3.2 Chinese classic fables related with family

The topic of Chapter 2 of Daily Conversation Mandarin Language 1 and Introductory Mandarin Level 1 is about "my family". The example of Chinese classic fables related to family is "Yugong Wants to Move the Mountain", in which the content of this story is Yugong, an old man nearly 90 years old who decided to move the two mountains in front of his house. All of his family members supported his decision; they united and worked together to dig the stones, rocks and soil of the mountains. The unity and caring of the family members were shown and reflected from their actions.

Although the major purpose or objective of this classic fables is to tell us the importance of determination and perseverance, it also helps the students to understand the importance of family and family relationships. At the same time, students can learn some vocabulary such as “érzi” (儿子, son), “sūnzi” (孙子, grandson), “zǐzǐ sūnsūn” (子子孙孙, descendants) and etc. from this story which are related to the topic of Chapter 2. Instructor can instruct and guide the students to read the texts or sentences after him or her, while more practices on reading can increase the speaking and pronunciation level of non-native learners.

3.3 Chinese classic fables related with learning attitude

Chapter 1 of Gateway Mandarin Chinese 2 is a dialogue between Hana and Lukman. They discussed about their study result. Hana felt sad because she did not perform well in the Mandarin test last semester. Lukman believed the attitude of studying hard and performing more exercises and revisions are the requirements to get a good grade in the examination. The fables related with learning attitude are “Jichang Learned Archery Skills” (纪昌学射, Jìchāng xué shè), “Grind the Pestle into a Needle” (磨杵成针, mó chǔ chéng zhēn) and “Two Monks” (蜀鄙二僧, Shǔ bǐ èr sēng). These three stories have a common theme in which a man who is hardworking and persevering can achieve success in his life. Therefore, the instructor can guide the students to set a goal for Mandarin subject and encourage them to reach the target.

Besides, the instructor can link the current social news with this topic, such as the news recently reported where a pair of siblings at Tanah Merah who are attending online classes faces the problem of poor and slow internet connection. In order to receive the internet signal for online classes and examinations, their father set up a temporary tent in the mountain behind their home, where the siblings studied in the environment surrounded by mosquitoes. Even though their study condition was not good, they had made unremitting efforts to pay, and such people will surely succeed in the end.

3.4 Chinese classic fables related with the value of forgiveness

The students of diploma level 2 and degree level 2 need to learn the vocabularies of “duìbuqǐ” (对不起, I am sorry) and “méiguānxi” (没关系, doesn't matter or that's all right), in which these two vocabularies have a connection with the value of forgiveness. The story of “Duke Qin Lost His Horse” reflects the value of forgiveness. Duke Qin lost his horse during his journey. Unfortunately, some villagers butchered his horse without permission for a meal but Duke Qin chose to forgive them without any punishment. In the next year, Duke Qin was surrounded by the Jin army, and the villagers who appreciated the noble personality of Duke Qin helped him to defeat Jin army and saved his life.

The classic fables above can lead the non-Chinese students to have a deeper understanding of Chinese ancient culture. Besides, forgiveness is also an important value in a multiracial country, and it can contribute to the building of the national unity in Malaysia. Fables are sometimes reflected in the problems of nowadays society, and the instructor should train the students to think independently. In the teaching process, the instructor can ask questions based on the stories and let the students think the questions carefully and independently.

4. The Limitations of Applying the Chinese Classic Fables for Teaching Chinese as a Third Language

There are many teaching methods that can be used in teaching, but none of them is perfect. The method of applying the ancient Chinese fables is no exception in teaching Chinese as a foreign language; thus, some limitations of this pedagogy will be discussed below.

4.1 Ancient and modern Chinese knowledge of lecturers

The lecturers need to simplify the explanation of the ancient Chinese fables in the teaching process because the Mandarin levels of UiTM's students are different. If the lecturer does not explain the ancient Chinese fables properly, the students will find it difficult to understand the meaning.

Besides, although the text is in the vernacular version, it still involves some ancient Chinese words and phrases which are quite different with the modern Chinese. For examples, the meaning of “假” (jiǎ) in modern Chinese is fake but the meaning of “假” (jiǎ) in ancient Chinese is borrow (Xu, 1995, pp.64), the meaning of “亡” (wáng) in modern Chinese is dead but “亡” (wáng) carries out the meaning of escape in ancient Chinese (Xu, 1995, pp.267), “牢” (láo) is jail in modern Chinese but it is bullpen in ancient Chinese (Xu, 1995, pp.29). If the ancient Chinese knowledge of the lecturers is insufficient, especially the non-native lecturers, it will be more difficult to explain the content of the fables. Therefore, the simple and easy ancient Chinese fables can be added in the course to assist the lesson teaching, while the editor of textbook may prepare the teacher's manual which provides notes and additional teaching materials for lecturers.

4.2 The differences between Chinese and Malay cultural

Ancient Chinese fables contain profound cultural information of Chinese values, thinking mode and philosophy. Majority of UiTM students are Malay students, so when they try to learn a new language, they tend to use their mother tongue culture or religious beliefs to understand Chinese knowledge and culture, which will inevitably interfere with students' understanding of Chinese culture. There are actually many contents of dog, wine and pig in ancient Chinese fables, but these kind of contents are religious taboos of the Malay people. For example, the content of a famous ancient Chinese fables with the title “Chained Dog Catch the Rats” (桎狗取鼠, zhì gǒu qǔ shǔ) tells about a man who chained his dog and let it catch the mouse, in which this story carries out the meaning of wasting someone's talent on a petty job.

In the past, Jabatan Mufti of Penang had published a manuscript prohibiting Malays to breed dogs but it was not a problem for Chinese to be a dog breeder. This shows the different values between the Chinese and the Malay people. The Chinese students can easily grasp the gist of the text but the Malay students will face the problem of cultural barrier. As a result, the majority of Malay students can not accurately understand the cultural connotation, or even difficult to accept it.

In addition, if the lecturers have lack of cultural awareness and knowledge of Chinese culture, or they do not understand the cultural background of UiTM students, these will cause a negative impact on teaching since the students have a cultural gap within the lesson. As a lecturer of teaching Chinese as foreign language, the lecturer should have basic sensitivity to the ancient Chinese fables. The sensitivity mentioned above includes the sensitivity of a lecturer who is able to recognize the values of ancient Chinese fables and he or she is able to identify the fables that are not suitable in teaching Chinese as a foreign language lesson. Therefore, the lecturers should try their best to carefully choose and select the suitable fables to assist their teaching, and they should avoid the contents that are likely to cause cultural misunderstanding. Instead, the lecturers need to choose the Chinese fables with distinct themes and positive values which are suitable for students' Chinese level, and select the suitable text or content that can guide UiTM students to establish positive values in their life.

5. Conclusion

Improving teaching efficiency in order to enhance students' interest and level has always been a hot topic for the educators of teaching Chinese as foreign language. The existing research of ancient Chinese fables on teaching Chinese as a foreign language is still lacking. The non-native learners' performance will be more active than usual if the lecturers are willing to share the ancient Chinese fables to them. Therefore, the teaching method of ancient Chinese fables in this article is believed to be applicable and suitable to the students of UiTM to study Chinese. Applying the ancient Chinese fables to assist the teaching Chinese as foreign language lesson can help the students learn relevant idioms and vocabularies, improve their reading skills, expression skills and elevate their study effectiveness. The non-Chinese students are also able to understand the traditional Chinese cultural and values through the ancient Chinese fables.

As a conclusion, sharing the ancient Chinese fables with students is a very interesting activity in the lesson. The limitations of sharing the ancient Chinese fables to assist the lesson have been discussed

and these limitations are inevitable. Hence, future discussions and studies are called for the betterment of applying ancient Chinese fables to assist the teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

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