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Exploring Task-Based Approach in Learning Mandarin as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) focuses on performing meaningful tasks in a target language. This quantitative study investigates how the TBLT approach can be applied to teaching of Mandarin to Malay students through real-life interactions with native Mandarin speakers. 31 participants were purposely selected from a public university in Malaysia to perform specific tasks such as shopping, dining and bargaining with native Mandarin speakers. The study used a survey adapted from Ellis (2009). The survey has 6 sections. Section A has items on demographic profile, section B has 7 items on natural language use, section C has 8 items on learner-centeredness, section D has 7 items on focus on form, section E has 7 items on communicative tasks and section F has 7 items on rejection of traditional approaches. The findings show that Malay students responded positively to the 5 features of TBLT suggested by Ellis (2009). They used language naturally, were learner-centered, sometimes form-focused and comfortable with real-life, non-traditional context. TBLT can improve learners' communicative competence and increase their knowledge of the target language. The findings also help teachers to improve teaching strategies and materials. Future research could focus on exploring more task-based activities, target groups and conducting experimental study.

Keywords: Task-Based Approach, Learning Mandarin, Foreign Language, Malay Students, Native Speaker

Introduction

Background of Study

The global spread of Mandarin language and Chinese culture has gained momentum in recent years (Zhong et al., 2021). The teaching of Mandarin as a foreign language has become an important profession (Chen et al., 2023). It is essential for the Mandarin teachers to use a variety of teaching methods to achieve the best results of learning the language. There is no doubt that task-based language teaching (TBLT) is one of the powerful approaches to enable students to communicate effectively in Mandarin.

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) began to attract considerable interest to promote the development of communicative skills by the end of the twentieth century. The emphasis on

task-based teaching is also reflected in many contemporary studies, such as studies done by (Long, 1985; Skehan, 1998; Johnson, 2001; Ellis, 2014). TBLT focuses on performing meaningful tasks in the target language, which means that the focus is on using the language to communicate in real situations. Various designed tasks can facilitate real-life communicative situations in which learners become authentic communicators of the target language (Ahmed & Bidin, 2016).

This study aims to investigate the communication skills of Mandarin learner at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia. Currently, UiTM has a large number of Malay students learning Mandarin, most of whom are beginners learning Mandarin as a foreign language (Sim et al., 2019). In order to enable Malay students to communicate effectively in the target language, teachers used simulation as one of the experiential learning models in the Mandarin classroom (Rahmat et al., 2020). However, UiTM students have yet to interact with native Mandarin speakers in real-life situations. Therefore, this study opens up Malay students' exposure to the Chinese community in Malaysia. Students are assigned several specific tasks, such as shopping, dining and bargaining with native Mandarin speakers.

According to Willis (1996), performing communication tasks involves a three-part framework: "pre-task," "task cycle," and "language focus." These components have been carefully designed to create the best conditions for language acquisition. In the pre-task phase of this study, students learn the situational dialogues in the Mandarin textbook in preparation for interacting with the Chinese shopkeepers. During the task cycle, students' main aim is to buy clothes, shoes, watches, fruit, or drinks after asking for product information and haggling over the price. During the conversations, students use language naturally and without paying too much attention to the form of the language. Students are expected to use the TBLT approach to communicate with native Mandarin speakers in order to purchase the items they need.

Statement of Problem

According to Bryfonski & McKay (2019), TBLT is an empirically researched pedagogy that has attracted attention from language programs around the world. TBLT offers an alternative to traditional grammar translation or present-practice-produce pedagogies by emphasizing interaction during authentic tasks. They used meta-analytic techniques to examine the effectiveness of TBLT programs on second language (L2) learning. The findings, based on a sample of 52 studies, revealed an overall positive and strong impact of TBLT implementation on a variety of learning outcomes. The results also revealed positive stakeholder perceptions towards TBLT programs.

The study of Peng & Pyper (2021) revealed the implications of encouraging teachers to incorporate TBLT into the teaching of Chinese as a L2, and the process by which teachers experimented with teaching in Chinese universities. The analysis of their study drew on data from interviews with eight teachers and classroom observations, supplemented by interviews with two directors and 17 students. The study revealed that teachers' teaching practices stemmed from the process of negotiating possible pedagogical tools in the teaching environment to achieve pedagogical goals. In particular, teachers departed from traditional teaching methods and used the task as a personal initiative to address the perceived challenges in achieving their goals. This study argues that teachers' beliefs and knowledge play a more critical role in shaping the extent to which teachers choose to adopt TBLT than the constraints of the local educational context, which directly create tensions between TBLT as a tool and the teachers who use it as a tool.

The challenges of applying TBLT to language teaching were also identified in the study by Abrams (2016), who mentioned that despite the growing body of research on TBLT, there was still little information about the instructional design behind the tasks and how they were implemented. Abrams therefore conducted a case study to critically analyse tasks in a first year German course based on the weekly television series *Rosenheim-Cops* (ZDF). The tasks stemmed from the study of multimodality and provided a framework for understanding how multiple symbol systems worked together to create meaning. The results suggested that challenges in implementing these tasks included variations in learners' engagement with authentic multimedia resources, which may be due to L2 skill levels or levels of interest in the particular resources used.

Hence, this study aims to address the gap by exploring how the TBLT approach could be applied to the teaching of Mandarin. This investigation is done to answer the following questions;

- How is language used naturally in the Mandarin class?
- How are the lessons considered learner-centeredness?
- How do the lesson focus on the use of form?
- How are communicative tasks done in the Mandarin class?
- How are the approaches non-traditional?

Literature Review

Learning Mandarin Definition

China is one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Learning Mandarin will therefore indirectly make us dependent on this broad economy and will also open up a wide range of employment opportunities for us. Furthermore, Chinese civilisation is one of the oldest civilisations in human history. The ability to speak Chinese opens a unique window into one of the world's most fascinating, colourful and ancient societies.

Undoubtedly, learners' attitudes play an important role in the successful learning of Mandarin. In a study conducted by Bulolo et al (2022) on students learning Mandarin as a foreign language at the Confucius Institute, Makerere University and Lu Yanzi College in Uganda, factors influencing attitudes towards learning Mandarin as a foreign language and the students' goals in learning Mandarin were investigated. The study clearly shows that positive attitudes remain the most important factor in learning Mandarin as a foreign language. Learners showed positive attitudes towards learning Mandarin, as most responses indicated that they enjoyed learning Mandarin and that they were learning Mandarin for better job and business opportunities. In their meta-analysis of 40 years of research, Chen et al (2021) emphasised that being open to new experiences is a very important personality trait in learning Mandarin as a foreign language. When a learner enjoys learning a new language and is open to new experiences, he or she has a higher level of language learning achievement. The result of the studies by Bulolo et al (2022); Chen et al (2021) support Wen's (2011) who compared the attitudes and motivation of heritage and non-heritage Mandarin learners in three US universities. She found that "positive learning attitudes and experience" contribute most to the "motivational magnitude (intended learning efforts)" of learning Mandarin as a foreign language learner. Clearly, students' learning experience contribute to their sustained motivation. In addition, the nature of the subjects, teachers and their teaching

methods, peers, tasks, and examinations all play an important role in motivating students to achieve successful learning outcome (Zheng et al., 2023).

Task Based Approach

The task-based approach is one of many foreign language teaching approaches. It focuses on setting a task for students. The definition of task is varied in the literature. Prabhu (1987) was one of the first methodologists to develop an interest in and support for task-based learning, arguing that a task is "an activity that requires learners to derive results from given information through some kind of thought process and allows the teacher to control and regulate this process". He believes that task-based teaching is a good way to teach and practice language because effective learning happens when students are fully engaged in language tasks, not just learning the language. Bygate et al (2001) viewed task as "an activity which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective". Samuda & Bygate (2008) defined task as "A task is a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some nonlinguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both". In other words, TBLT learners need to be actively involved in interactive and communicative activities in order to achieve an outcome.

Although TBLT advocates have different views on the core principles of TBLT, Swan (2005) highlights their general agreement on the following characteristics: 1) guided language learning should primarily involve natural or naturalistic language use, with activities related to meaning rather than language, 2) guidance should support learner-centeredness rather than teacher-centeredness, 3) because fully naturalistic learning does not typically produce goal-like accuracy, engagement is essential to promote the internalization of formal linguistic elements while maintaining the perceived benefits of a natural approach, 4) this can be best achieved by providing opportunities to focus on form, which will draw students' attention to linguistic components as they incidentally appear in lessons that focus primarily on meaning or communication, 5) communicative tasks are especially suitable devices for such an approach, 6) more formal pre- or post-task language study may be beneficial. This may facilitate internalisation by guiding or maximising familiarity with formal features during communication, and 7) traditional methods are ineffective and inappropriate, particularly where they require passive formal instruction and practice isolated from communicative work.

Past Studies

Past Studies for Learning Mandarin Language using Task Based Approach

There have been many studies in the past that have focused on learning Mandarin through a task-based approach. A study done by Sim et al (2021) introduced non-native speakers directly to native speakers in the Chinese community in Malaysia. It aimed to test the application of situated learning theory in an authentic context through task-based activities. Thirty students participated in this qualitative case study. They were purposively selected from five classes of students at a public university who attended a semester-long Mandarin class. Data was collected from learners' conversations. The conversations were recorded in the form of transcripts for qualitative analysis. Codes were used to indicate the types of factors evident in the conversations. The study was derived from Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning. This theory suggests that learning involves social interactions in real and authentic settings that enable learners to create their own knowledge using a

constructivist approach. The three factors from Lave & Wenger's (1991) theory were used by Ellis (2009) to construct items in task-based learning. The findings first demonstrated that authenticity was achieved through a task-based approach using natural language. Next, social interaction was achieved when activities were focused on learner-centeredness through communicative tasks. Finally, learners built their knowledge through constructivism by rejecting traditional teaching and focusing on form in dialogue. The results of the study can help Mandarin teachers to improve their teaching methods, create appropriate tasks, and improve Mandarin materials.

According to Ling et al (2022), many non-native Mandarin learners in Malaysia lack confidence in communicating with native Mandarin speakers, and therefore non-native Mandarin learners need to see concrete connections between classroom language and authentic contexts. In this study, 75 non-native Mandarin learners from Malaysian higher education institutions stepped out of the classroom to engage in a simple communicative task with native Mandarin speakers. The study used questionnaires and self-reflective records to analyse and identify situations and problems faced by non-native Mandarin learners in communicating with native Mandarin speakers, including psychological barriers and operational difficulties in authentic contexts. The study also examined the impact and influence of task-based language teaching on learners' communicative readiness and anxiety. Within the framework of TBLT, learners became aware of the importance of language practice, reduced communicative anxiety and increased self-confidence; thus, TBLT proved to be a viable method for learning a foreign language at university.

Past Studies for Different ways of Learning Mandarin

Mandarin is known to be difficult to learn because it has thousands of characters to remember and four different tones, so a word can have four different pronunciations, each with a different meaning. On top of this, there are homophones, in which words with the same pronunciation have different meanings. These difficulties have not stopped thousands of promising learners of Mandarin as a L2 learners from trying. In the study by Darmowinoto (2019), ZT - an adaptive learning tool designed to help Mandarin L2 learners was presented. The simple algorithm of ZT was based on the Leitner system and spaced repetition. The goal was to create a system that allowed learners to gradually acquire new words and phrases and their use in sentences through daily practice and to track progress. In an initial test using the System Usability Scale (SUS), ZT obtained a score of 76 which means it has a good usability, however, further tests are still needed to check on its effectiveness and robustness.

According to Su et al (2021), the traditional multimedia classroom management model has failed to adapt to the current fast-developing network environment. For this reason, they developed a Web-based multimedia teaching equipment management system based on artificial intelligence and jQuery to achieve centralized control and management of various multimedia teaching equipment. According to their survey on online Mandarin training courses in the Northwest (N=343), they found that 81.6% of the sample were satisfied with the online Mandarin training courses; 21.6% felt that they had learned new teaching methods/teaching ideas from their teachers through the Mandarin training; and 36.2% felt that they had learned theoretical knowledge of Mandarin through the Mandarin training. Gender, age, ethnicity and learning experience were associated with the difficulty of learning Mandarin online courses. Therefore, the researchers can promote quality promotion of

Mandarin by designing different online course models to cater for learners of different ages, learning bases and cultural backgrounds.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the TBLT theory proposed by Ellis (2009), this study explores five characteristics of communication between Malay students and native Mandarin speakers: (1) natural language use, (2) learner-centeredness, (3) focus on form, (4) communicative tasks, and (5) rejection of traditional approaches. Learners' engagement in performing the task is assessed through Crawford's (2001) REACT (Relating, Experiencing, Applying, Cooperating & Transferring) strategy of contextual learning theory. In this context, relating strategy refers to learners learning pre-existing knowledge assigned by the teacher, including the situational dialogues such as shopping, dining and bargaining in Mandarin textbook. The experiencing strategy is used when learners interact with native Mandarin speakers in real-life situations. Learners apply the communication skills they have learnt in class when completing tasks. They also use cooperating strategy by sharing, responding and interacting with others in communication. After all, learners can transfer knowledge in new contexts or new situations.

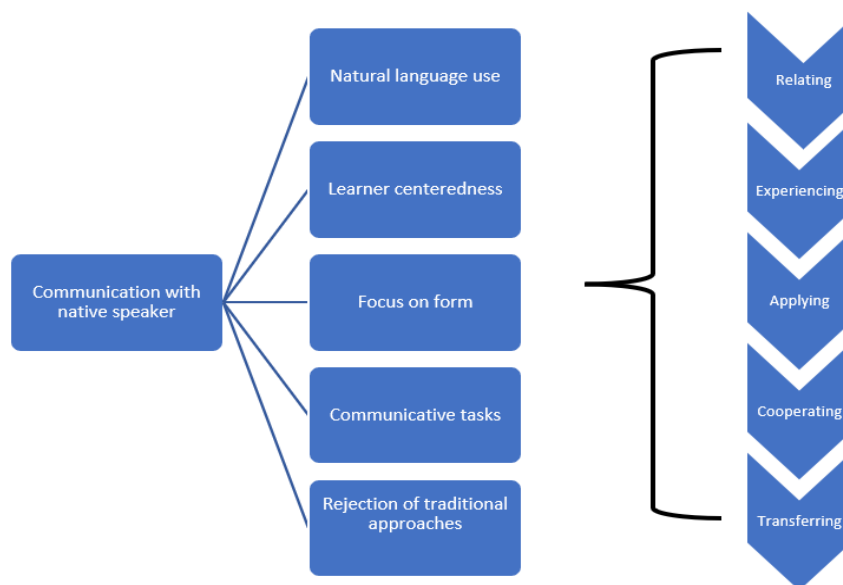


Figure 1 -Conceptual Framework of the Study
(Source: Ellis, 2009 and Crawford, 2001)

Methodology

This quantitative study is done to investigate 31 participants were purposely chosen from a public university in Malaysia. The instrument (refer to table 1) used is a survey adapted from (Ellis, 2009). Apart from the demographic profile in Section A, there are 5 other sections. Section B has 7 items on natural language use, section C has 8 items on learner-centeredness, section D has 7 items on focus on form, section E has 7 items on communicative tasks and section F has 7 items on rejection of traditional approaches.

Table 1

Distribution of Items in Survey

SECTION	FACTOR	NO OF ITEM
B	NATURAL LANGUAGE USE	7
C	LEARNER-CENTEREDNESS	8
D	FOCUS ON FORM	7
E	COMMUNICATIVE TASKS	7
F	REJECTION OF TRADITIONAL APPROACHES	7
		36

Table 2

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	No of Items
.950	36

Data is collected via goggle form and analysed using SPSS version 26. With reference to table 2, the SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach analysis of .950 thus showing high internal reliability for the instrument. Data is presented in terms of percentage for the demographic profile and mean scores to answer the research questions.

Findings

Findings for Demographic Profile

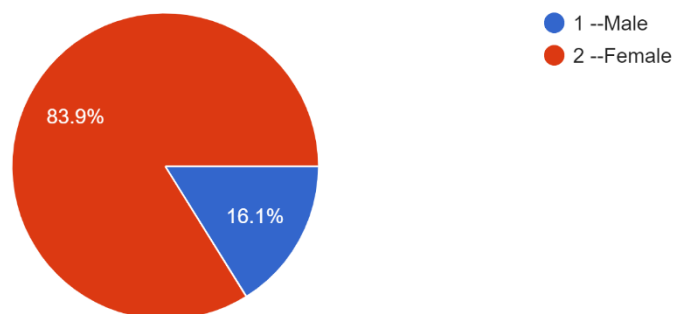


Figure 2-Percentage for Gender

Figure 2 shows the respondents' gender. Data were collected from 31 respondents in the university. The majority of them 26 (83.9%) were females and only 5 (16.1%) of them were male.

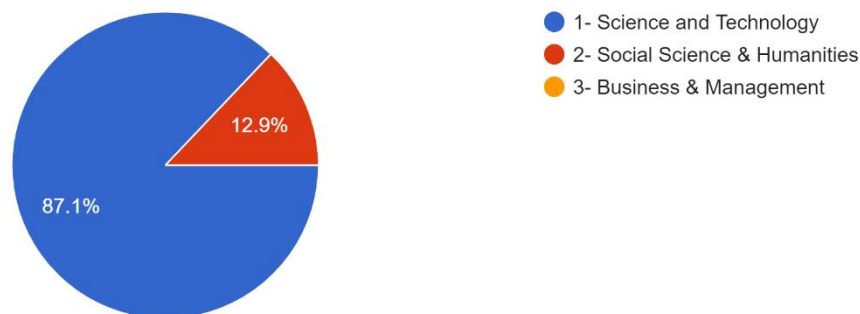


Figure 3- Percentage for Discipline

Figure 3 shows the respondents' discipline. 27 (87.1%) of the respondents were from Science & Technology discipline, only 4 (12.9%) of the respondents were from Social Science & Humanities discipline.

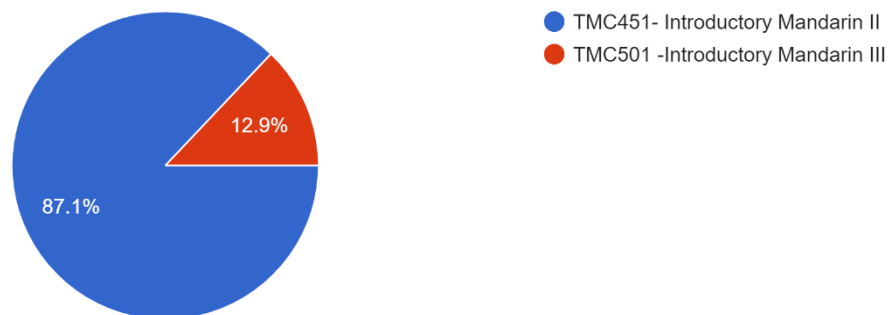


Figure 4-Percentage for Mandarin Course

Figure 4 shows the Mandarin courses in which students were enrolled. The results show that 27 (87.1%) students enrolled in Introductory Mandarin II (TMC451) course, and 4 (12.9%) students enrolled in Introductory Mandarin III (TMC501) course.

Findings for Natural Language Use

This section presents the findings to answer research questions 1 - How is language used naturally in the Mandarin class?

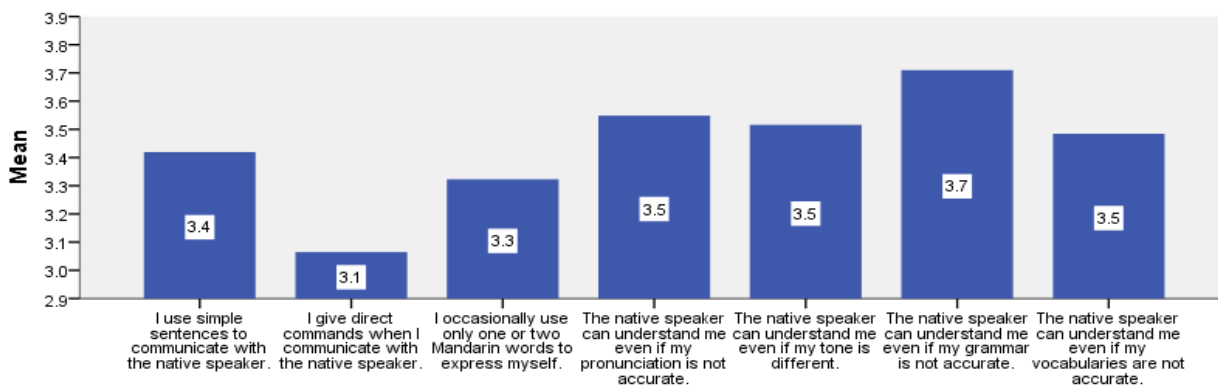


Figure 5- Mean for Natural Language Use

Figure 5 shows the mean scores for natural language use. The highest mean score is 3.7 for item “the native speaker can understand me even if my grammar is not accurate”. The second highest mean score is 3.5 for 3 items, namely “the native speaker can understand me even if my pronunciation is not accurate”, “the native speaker can understand me even if my tone is different” and “the native speaker can understand me even if my vocabularies are not accurate”. Next, mean score 3.4 is for item “I use simple sentences to communicate with the native speaker” while mean score 3.3 is for item “I occasionally use only one or two Mandarin words to express myself”. The lowest mean score of 3.1 was recorded by item “I give direct commands when I communicate with the native speaker”. Overall, respondents naturally used Mandarin when communicating with native speakers of the language without concern for grammar, vocabulary and accuracy of pronunciation. Instead, they used simple words or sentences to give direct commands in their communication.

Findings for Learner-Centeredness

This section presents the findings to answer research questions 2 - How are the lessons considered learner-centeredness?

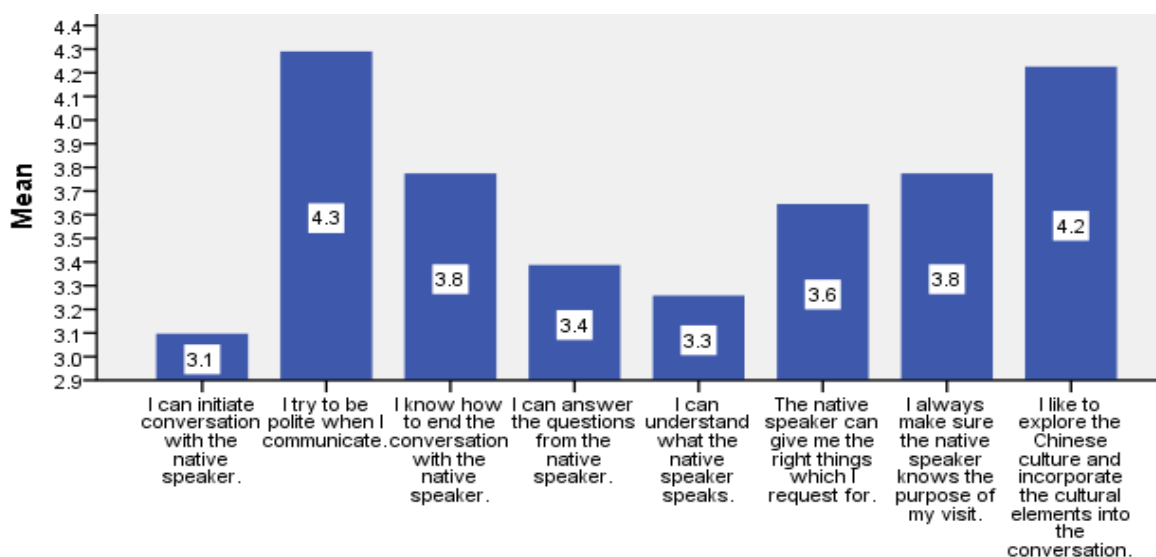


Figure 6- Mean for Learner-Centeredness

Figure 6 indicates the results for learner-centeredness in mean scores. The highest mean score 4.3 is for item “I try to be polite when I communicate”. The second highest mean score 4.2 is for item “I like to explore the Chinese culture and incorporate the cultural elements into the conversation”. The third highest mean score is 3.8 and was recorded by 2 items, namely “I know how to end the conversation with the native speaker” and “I always make sure the native speaker knows the purpose of my visit”. Next, the mean score of 3.6 was recorded by item “the native speaker can give me the right things which I request for”. The remaining mean scores of 3.4, 3.3 and 3.1 were recorded in items “I can answer the questions from the native speaker”, “I can understand what the native speaker speaks” and “I can initiate conversation with the native speaker”, respectively. The average mean score reveals that the respondents very often had learner-centeredness in the communication with native speakers.

Findings for Focus on Form

This section presents the findings to answer research questions 3 - How do the lesson focus on the use of form?

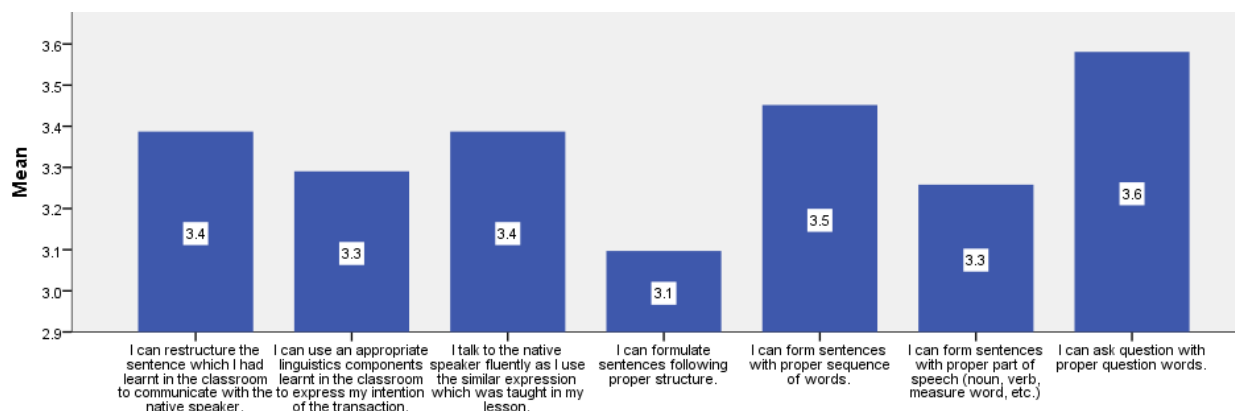


Figure 7- Mean for Focus on Form

Figure 7 shows the mean scores for focus on form. The highest mean score of 3.6 was recorded by item “I can ask question with proper question words”. The second highest mean score of 3.5 is for item “I can form sentences with proper sequence of words”. Next, mean score of 3.4 was recorded for 2 items, namely “I can restructure the sentence which I had learnt in the classroom to communicate with the native speaker” and “I talk to the native speaker fluently as I use the similar expression which was taught in my lesson”. The next mean score of 3.3 is for items “I can use an appropriate linguistics components learnt in the classroom to express my intention of the transaction” and “I can form sentences with proper part of speech (noun, verb, measure word, etc.)”. The lowest mean score of 3.1 is for item “I can formulate sentences following proper structure”. The average mean score shows that the respondents sometimes focus on form in their communication.

Findings for Communicative Tasks

This section presents the findings to answer research questions 4 - How are communicative tasks done in the Mandarin class?

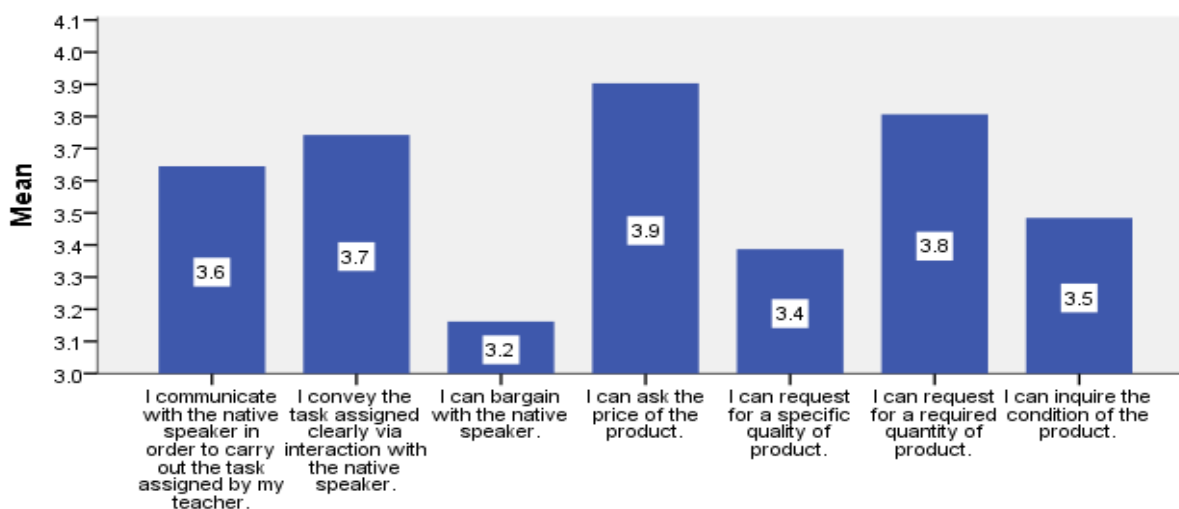


Figure 8- Mean for Communicative Tasks

Figure 8 presents the mean scores for communicative tasks. The highest mean score of 3.9 is for item “I can ask the price of the product”. The second highest mean score of 3.8 was recorded for item “I can request for a required quantity of product”. The third highest mean score of 3.7 is for item “I convey the task assigned clearly via interaction with the native speaker”. The next mean score of 3.6 is for item “I communicate with the native speaker in order to carry out the task assigned by my teacher”. Next, the items “I can inquire the condition of the product” and “I can request for a specific quality of product” recorded mean scores of 3.5 and 3.4 respectively. The lowest mean score is 3.2 and it is recorded by item “I can bargain with the native speaker”. In general, the average mean score of 3.6 indicates that respondents very often completed their communicative tasks.

Findings for Non-Traditional

This section presents the findings to answer research questions 5 - How are the approaches non-traditional?

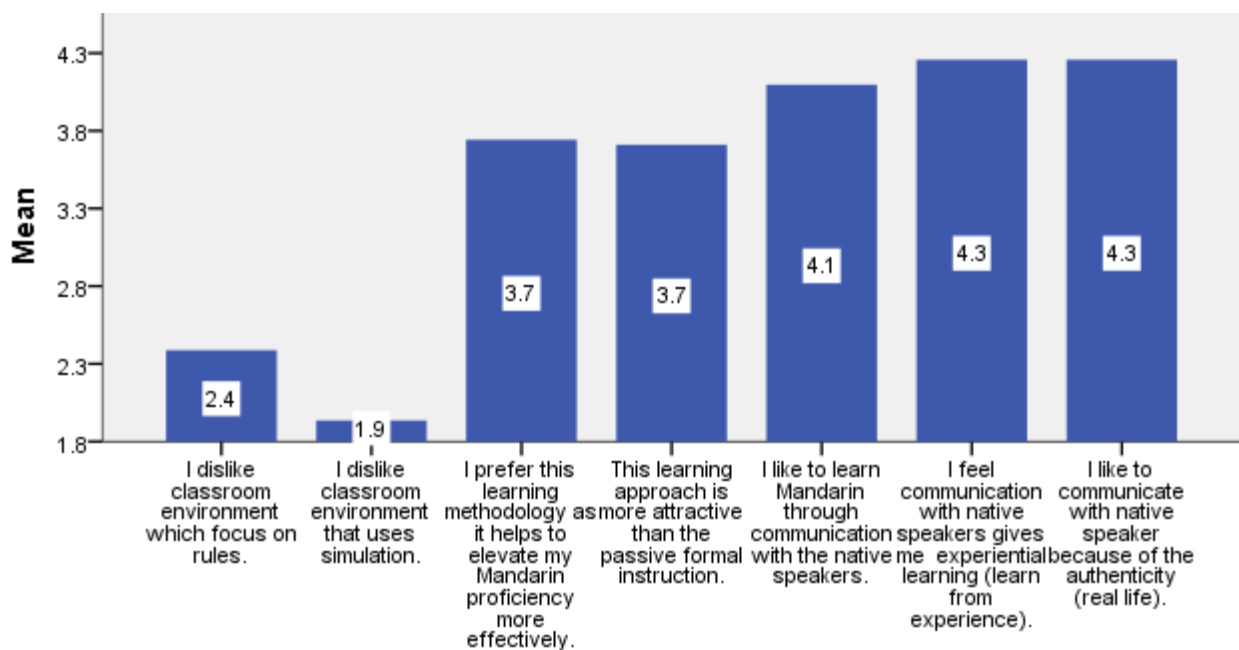


Figure 9- Mean for Non-Traditional

The mean scores for non-traditional are shown in figure 9. 2 items show highest mean scores, they are “I feel communication with native speakers gives me experiential learning (learn from experience)” and “I like to communicate with native speaker because of the authenticity (real life)” (M=4.3). The second highest mean score of 4.1 was recorded for item “I like to learn Mandarin through communication with the native speakers”. The third highest mean score of 3.7 was recorded for items “I prefer this learning methodology as it helps to elevate my Mandarin proficiency more effectively” and “this learning approach is more attractive than the passive formal instruction”. The average mean score for these 5 items reveals the respondents were very often satisfied with a non-traditional environment in real-life. However, they also denied their dislike of the classroom environment in the remaining 2 items, “I dislike classroom environment which focus on rules” (M=2.4) and “I dislike classroom environment that uses simulation” (M=1.9).

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Overall, the findings show the positive application of 5 features of Ellis' (2009) TBLT approach to learning Mandarin as a foreign language: (1) natural language use, (2) learner-centeredness, (3) focus on form, (4) communicative tasks, and (5) rejection of traditional approaches.

In terms of natural language use, Malay students tended to use Mandarin naturally in their communication. They preferred to use simple words or sentences to give direct commands in their communication. The task is seen as creating contexts for the natural use of language (i.e. where language is treated as a tool rather than as an object for study and where, therefore, meaning rather than linguistic form is primary) (Ellis, 2014).

Next, the respondents very often had learner-centeredness in the communication with native speakers. TBLT is generally seen as a learner-centered way of teaching language as it emphasizes the performance of tasks in pair- or group-work. A brief look at both the pedagogic and research literature indicates how central small group-work is to TBLT. This is reflected in the general position of Willis (1996); Long (1985); Skehan (1998), all of whom view tasks as instruments for generating talk between learners.

With regard to the focus on form, the results show that respondents sometimes focused on form in their communication. This is reflected in Willis (1996), where attempts should not be made to focus the learner's attention on form during the main task, as this can reduce 'fluency'. One of the main ways in which attention to form can be achieved is through corrective feedback.

In general, respondents were satisfied with the non-traditional environment in real life. They felt that interacting with native speakers gave them experiential learning (learning from experience). In the task-based activities, respondents' engagement and appreciation of being able to interact with native speakers due to the authenticity (real life) were consistent with the findings of (Rahmat et al., 2020; Sim et al., 2021).

Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research

This is one of the few studies that introduces non-native Mandarin learners directly to native speakers in the Malaysian Chinese community, and it provides a realistic picture of the strengths and weaknesses of non-native Mandarin learners in terms of communication skills. The use of the TBLT approach in the study drew attention to the learners' use of Mandarin as a foreign language, especially when TBLT was implemented in real-life situations. Apart from improving learners' communicative competence in a variety of ways, it increases learners' knowledge of the target language. The results of the study also help teachers to improve teaching strategies and materials. As there is still a lack of information about the instructional design behind the tasks and how they are implemented, future researchers could investigate them by exploring more task-based activities and target groups. Experimental studies can also be conducted to examine in greater depth the factors that affect learning outcomes in the subject.

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