

# Development of Activity-Based Language Learning of Chinese for a Primary School in Western Sydney: A Participatory Action Research Study

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## Abstract

This paper reports on a study on the use of activity-based learning in the Chinese as a Foreign Language classroom, for young learners (8 - 9 years old) in the western Sydney region. The research question was: How can activity-based learning be used to teach Chinese language to learners who do not have a Chinese language background? This action research involved the teacher-researcher reflecting on her teaching practice. She engaged in activity-based learning of this research for nine weeks in 2019. Data were collected from sources including feedback from the classroom teacher's observations and interviews, teacher-researcher's reflective journal, as well as student's focus groups and checklists. By using various activities such as simple Chinese songs and visual arts activities, students engaged cognitively and emotionally. Activity-based learning had a significant impact on their Chinese language learning.

## Keywords

Activity-Based Learning, Children, Chinese Language

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## 1. Background and Introduction

There are challenges with learning Chinese language in the Australian context. A significant number of students “drop out” of Chinese language classes before the end of secondary or high school (Sturak & Naughten, 2010; Hughson, Hajek, & Slaughter, 2017). This may be a result of the content not being closely related to the learners' everyday lives (Orton & Cui, 2016), and the teaching methods not being innovative enough to attract and sustain the non-native learners' interest

and engagement. Student engagement refers to “how involved or interested students appear to be in their learning and how connected they are to their classes, their institutions, and each other” (Axelson & Flick, 2010: p. 38). Behavioural engagement takes place when students are physically involved in effective learning practices and activities. Emotional engagement is demonstrated when students have a positive attitude and enjoy what they are doing; while cognitive engagement is demonstrated when students invest in learning in a focused and self-regulating way (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). Researchers have done substantial research in students’ engagement but little in Teaching Chinese to Foreign Language area. Disengagement issues arise from schools’ low priority, teachers’ traditional Chinese approach and students’ slow progress existing in TCFL in Australian context (Orton & Cui, 2016). Active learning is strongly correlated to student engagement. As Prince (2004) states, activity-based learning takes place when students experience meaningful classroom activities while thinking about what they are doing. Therefore, the main purpose of this research is to figure out how can activity-based learning be used to teach Chinese language to learners who do not have a Chinese language background. And the sub-objectives focus on the application of song and visual arts activities to engage young learners in learning Chinese in Australian context.

This paper is drawn from a research study in 2019 with a class of primary school children in Western Sydney, Australia. There is very limited literature about Chinese as foreign language learning with activity-based learning with children as young as 8 - 9 years of age (Stage 2 in the NSW primary school). There is substantial literature on task-based language teaching (TBLT) with older students (Butler, 2011; Ellis, 2009; Zhang, 2019). For younger learners, activity-based learning encourages students to actively participate in their own learning, in this instance about a new culture, about words for things that are familiar to them such as colours. For adolescent and adult learners, task-based learning encourages the development of skills through authentic learning using communication that is appropriate to life experiences, such as shopping for food and using public transport (Ellis, 2009). These two ways of learning are related but are adapted to the age and maturity of the learners.

## 2. Literature on Activity-Based Learning: Songs and Visual Arts Activities

Activity-based learning is defined by doing “hands-on” activities (Hansraj, 2017). It enhances participatory learning, improves communication skills with learning and creates an enjoyable learning environment (Harfield et al., 2007). Çelik (2018) has emphasized the contribution that activity-based learning might offer to make the learning permanent. There are many kinds of activities available in a foreign language class. In this research, target language songs activities and visual arts activities are focused for the young learners.

Songs are easy to memorise, engage, and provide practice of a language (Al-

varez, 2019). Each Chinese character is allocated a particular tone to distinguish its meaning (four tones in total) and the musical features of Chinese language make the application of songs especially useful in learning of this language. Millington (2011) reflects that songs are flexible and enjoyable. They can help children improve their listening skills and pronunciation and songs are useful for learning vocabulary and sentence structures or patterns. Besides Chinese songs, visual arts activities are a useful tool in Chinese language learning for young beginners. Visual teaching aids ensure that learners use tangible teaching materials to attach meaning and visual representations to concepts (Curtin, 2006). Hands-on materials and visuals that can be manipulated by students involve a range of senses and help make learning more meaningful, particularly for students who may be tactile, kinesthetic learners (Curtin, 2006).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Teacher Action Research

Action research is designed as the approach to this study as it is grounded in both Chinese and Western philosophy. Action research respects a philosophy from Chinese philosopher, Xunzi (3<sup>rd</sup>-century BC), “不闻不若闻之，闻之不若见之；见之不若知之，知之不若行之；学至于行而止矣。(bú wén bú ruò wén zhī, wén zhī bú ruò jiàn zhī; jiàn zhī bú ruò zhī zhī, zhī zhī bú ruò háng zhī; xué zhì yú háng ér zhǐ yǐ.)” The meaning of this quote is: “I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand.” This is the principle behind action research: action to generate new understanding (McAteer, 2013).

Participatory action research connects three important ideas: research, action, and researcher participation (Lawson et al., 2015). The research was conducted in a Stage 2 (Year 3) class in a public primary school in the Western Sydney region. Observable changes occurred, which made improvements in the process of teaching in the second cycle. The teacher-researcher adopted several methods of data collection, including documenting weekly reflective journals, focus groups and interviews to evaluate the outcomes for students in the process of Chinese learning.

The teacher-researcher planned activities, enacted the activities, observed students' participation and engagement, reflected on the students' response and learning outcomes and then replanned the process to make a new cycle. The teacher-researcher interacted face-to-face with the students and classroom teacher observed their participation within their school learning context. Reflecting on her role (as a teacher and researcher) in the study, she acknowledged that her personal background, culture, and experience shaped her interpretations. The collected data focused on activity-based learning and students' engagement in learning Chinese. Data from three perspectives—students, classroom teacher and herself—were applied to lay a solid foundation for this research.

Ethics issues were considered through the whole process of the research. The

teacher-researcher received approvals from Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University and SERAP (State Education Research Application Process) prior to carrying out this research. To anonymise the school, the name of the research site was given the pseudonym of Rose Public Primary School.

### 3.2. Research Site and Participants

Rose Public Primary School is one of several primary schools voluntarily offering Chinese as a subject, with the time allocated to it rather limited—30 minutes per week. The school is in Western Sydney region. The school community includes Aboriginal students (11%) and students from non-English speaking backgrounds (16%). It currently caters for 475 students from Early Stage 1 (5 years old) to Stage 3 (eleven years old). As for students in Year 3, there are 69 students in total but only three students with a Chinese background. This research was conducted in one class in Year 3 with 24 students. There are no Chinese background students. The reasons for choosing Year 3 students as the participants are because, on the one hand, they can express themselves better than those in kindergarten and Years 1 and 2, and on the other hand, they are easy to engage in simple activities at this age. The research was conducted in Term 3 because by then the teacher-researcher was more familiar with the students after two terms' of collaborative work and more suitable activities could be created according to the teacher-researcher's experience. The participants encompass one class of students in Year 3 and one classroom teacher, as well as the teacher-researcher herself. The classroom teacher acted as an observer supporting the teaching process. Besides this, the teacher-researcher was also an indispensable participant in this action research. She was the means whereby lessons were designed taught and reflected upon, and the research was implemented.

### 3.3. Research Design

This research study was divided into two cycles (over nine weeks). This meant there were nine formal Chinese classes, with four lessons allocated to the first research cycle, five to the second, with each lesson lasting 30 minutes. During each cycle, different activities were conducted, and time allowed to introduce new words and expressions, and to reinforce and review previous learning.

The teacher-researcher conducted the activity-based learning approach and made improvements in accordance with learning arrived at in previous learning cycles. During the first cycle, the teacher-researcher planned activities based on the Chinese syllabus to support students learning Chinese. During the second cycle, the teacher-researcher modified the first cycle based on the data gathered. After considering aspects of the first cycle which could be changed, improvements and progress were made in the planning and implementation of the next cycle.

According to the NSW Chinese K-10 syllabus, the overall aim of studying

Chinese from K-10 is to enable students to “communicate with others in Chinese, and to reflect on and understand the nature and role of language and culture in their own lives and the lives of others” (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2017: p. 13). For Stage 2 (Year 3) students, in the communicating strand, the outcome is that a student is able to interact with others to share information and participate in classroom activities in Chinese. In the understanding strand, the outcome is to recognise pronunciation and intonation patterns of Chinese and recognise how terms and expressions reflect aspects of culture.

### **3.4. Data Collection**

Data was collected through structured classroom observation, the teacher-researcher’s self-reflection journal, classroom teacher’s interviews and students’ focus groups. The classroom teacher observed and recorded the students’ responses to the teaching using some observation checklists prepared by the teacher-researcher.

Central to the concept of action research is the process of self-reflection (McAteer, 2013). The teacher-researcher kept a reflective journal from the beginning through to the end of the research. Self-reflection was conducted after every class to analyse the process and engagement of the activity-based learning, in order to make adjustments for the following teaching cycle. In addition, key points arising from meetings about the research with mentor and supervisor were included. These became the basis of the changes required for the next stage of teaching and learning.

Interviewing the classroom teacher was also a sound way to collect feedback. Interviews aimed to gather information on students’ Chinese language learning experiences and responses to activity-based learning. At the end of each cycle of teaching, the teacher-researcher spent around 25 minutes interviewing the classroom teacher about the class activities. For young students, a focus group rather than interviews was more suitable. The student participants provided the most effective and authentic data, especially in relation to their attitudes, behaviours, thoughts, opinions and feelings during the action research process, through a focus group. A focus group was conducted to interview 4 - 6 students for 15 minutes after each of the two cycles. This meant that the participants could not only communicate with the interviewer but also with other students who were involved in the same focus group, which made the feedback more comprehensive and gave the interviewer more profound insights.

## **4. Findings from Implementing Activity-Based Learning**

### **4.1. Chinese Songs Activities**

The teacher-researcher used songs about body parts using Chinese names and movements to associate with parts like ‘head’. Singing songs helped students because it involved three types of senses: sight, hearing and touch. The teacher-researcher was impressed that students were able to sing the song, touch the right

body parts at the same time without much hesitation. In this case, this singing activity clearly demonstrated that students were able to locate information in text and also respond to the text in a variety of ways. Entries in the teacher-researcher's diary confirmed the students' learning.

Song singing is a good way to associate the words with body movement. It is an effective way to encourage students' participation and involvement. One week later, before the class started, I asked students to sing and dance with the body parts song to warm-up, I found that students remembered this song and corresponding movements very well. (Teacher-researcher's reflective journal 20/08/2019)

During the second cycle, the teacher-researcher instructed students to sing and dance with the music about colours. There were more words and movements involved. When the music was played, the students needed to identify if the colour they were wearing matched the colour with the ball shown in the video and meantime they needed to move their bodies with the music. The song activity helped students achieve the outcomes of locating and classifying information in text as well as responding to texts in a variety of ways. Entries in the teacher-researcher's diary document students' learning.

I was afraid they may not pick up this song quickly, because there were some unfamiliar instructional words (including turn and lift up hands). What surprised me was that they did it better than I anticipated. As soon as they heard the colour word which matched the colour with what they were wearing, they stood up and followed the movements. Looking at their happy faces, I know they enjoyed learning in this way. After three times, students could make the correct response by just following the music without looking at the images of video. I was happy to see that they learned the new words, and they felt happy in singing. (Teacher-researcher's reflective journal 10/09/2019)

This song also used the repetition of the words to make students familiar. The students sang with the music and followed the actions shown in an accompanying video; it was a very pleasant learning environment. Song-based learning proved a beneficial method to reinforce and review words for these young learners.

## **4.2. Visual Arts Activities**

### **4.2.1. Assembling a Paper Panda**

In the activity called *Assembling a Paper Panda*, the teacher-researcher prepared two pieces of paper; one was for a panda's body and the other one had body parts of a panda drawn on it. Students were required to work in pairs to cut out all the body parts, paste them on the body sheet and then present to the class. During the pair work, students needed to use the Chinese names for body parts (learned in the first cycle) in the discussion. Students showed a great passion for

making this paper panda.

In the first cycle, the teacher-researcher invited students to present their paper panda craft to the class, in Chinese. To encourage the students to use the modelling language in their presentation, the teacher-researcher reviewed the structure of simple sentences with the students and demonstrated the examples on the interactive board as a scaffold to assist students during their presentation. The simple sentence that students were expected to make started with the phrase, “This is...”; students were encouraged to add any body parts they had learned the word for and refer to it on the paper panda. They were expected to make several full simple sentences. **Figure 1** shows one of these presentations and this can also be found in the teacher-researcher’s journal.

After students finished assembling their paper panda, I invited a pair of students to introduce their paper panda in front of the class. They started with telling the class that their panda’s name was Bob, and then they started to introduce the body parts of the panda by pointing to them. For example, “这是它的耳朵, 这是它的鼻子, 这是它的嘴巴, 这是... (These are its ears; this is its nose, this is its mouth.)”. When one of them forgot how to say the word “eyes” in Chinese, the other student helped, reminding him that it is “眼睛(eyes)”. I listened carefully and I was also ready to help them whenever it was necessary. Although they had some pauses and hesitations while speaking, others in the classroom could understand what they were saying. I felt good to see their effort to speak in Chinese. (Teacher-researcher’s reflective journal 20/08/2019)

#### 4.2.2. Making a Peking Opera Facial Mask

In the Cycle Two, an activity of making a Peking Opera facial mask was conducted. The reason for the teacher-researcher choosing the Peking Opera facial mask activity was because it not only related to the colour topic, but also represented a very important cultural element. Peking Opera is a national treasure of China with a history of over 200 years. According to **China Highlights (2018)**, Peking Opera is: “a synthesis of stylized action, singing, dialogue and mime, acrobatic fighting and dancing to represent a story or depict different characters and their feelings of gladness, anger, sorrow, happiness, surprise, fear and sadness. The characters may be loyal or treacherous, beautiful or ugly, good or bad...” It is vividly manifested by their facial masks. The teacher-researcher designed this lesson by combining two topics that were taught in one term, body parts and colours as **Figure 2** shows, which requires students to use their prior knowledge to complete the task.

The way that the mask-changing is called “变脸”, which has a literal meaning referring to “face-changing”. In the past, the secretive art of face changing was passed down within families, mainly among males. Even today, not many people understand the trick of this secretive art. When the teacher-researcher showed the video of performance of face changing to the class, the whole class was engrossed, and students were fascinated about how faces changed within a second.

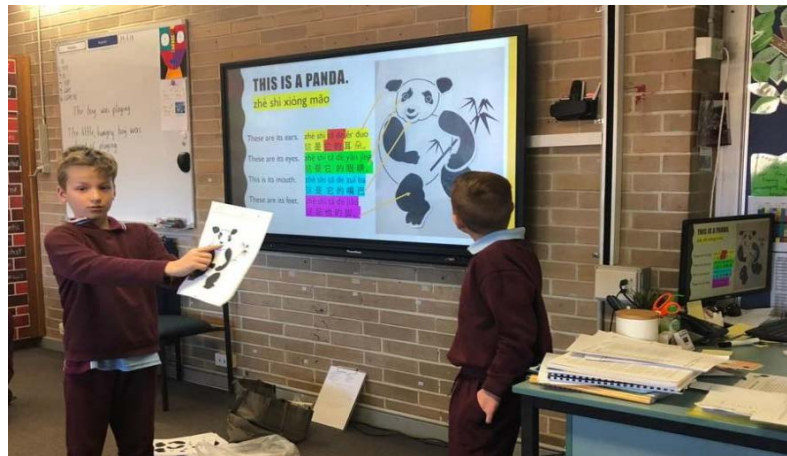


Figure 1. Presenting the paper panda.



Figure 2. Colours of Peking opera facial masks.

This is the first time that I have seen students so amazed at something in the Chinese class. They all stared at the screen of the interactive board, repeatedly saying, “wow, wow”. (Teacher-researcher’s reflective journal 17/09/2019)

The teacher-researcher also focused on introducing the meaning of the colour of the face. A Peking Opera facial mask consists of many different colours; however, the dominant colour on the face represents the personality of a character. For example, red means loyalty and righteousness. The typical character with a red face is Yu Kuan, who is seen as the martial god in Chinese society in the time of Three Kingdoms. The colour green represents violence; yellow means slyness; blue means fierce and insidious; black means straight-minded; purple means steadiness, and white means evil.

Students listened attentively to the introduction of Peking Opera facial masks. Then, the teacher-researcher moved on to instruct students in making facial masks out of paper plates. Some students double-checked with me if the colour they chose matched the characteristic of the character. This activity clearly



showed evidence that students' cognitive engagement and intercultural thinking were fully developed.

One girl told me that "I would like to colour a red mask because it means a good person". Another boy said, "I would like to make a mask that means evil". What colour is that? "White." "Can you say that in Chinese?" "bái sè (白色)." He remembered how to say the colour in Chinese, and he also understood how colours connect to the Chinese cultural connotation. (Teacher-researcher's reflective journal 17/09/2019)

Before each student started to present their own masks, the teacher-researcher presented her mask. This presentation combined the two topics they had learned. The sentence structure involved in the presentation was: xxx (A face-part word) is/are xxx (colour word), for example: "The eyes are blue; the mouth is red; the nose is green; the ear is yellow". As shown in **Figure 3**, below, one student introduced the colour and the other one put up their mask like an opera actor.

During the presentation, I noticed that one student mistook the Chinese word yellow for red. The student's partner who was wearing the mask pointed out the mistake and corrected it. (Teacher-researcher's reflective journal 24/09/2019)

Compared to the presentation of a paper panda, students were much more interested in giving a presentation of their masks. My concern was that the students may have forgotten the body parts; however, they have not. At least five pairs of students had the chances to present in Chinese by using the modelled sentence structure. In fact, the example I provided helped them to compose what they tried to say. This is the last week of the term; I was really proud to see their improvement. (Teacher-researcher's reflective journal 24/09/2019)



**Figure 3.** Modelling the presentation.

According to the teacher-researcher's reflective journal, it was evident that students could use the modelled language to compose spoken texts through the oral presentation in pair work. The visual arts activity provided a good opportunity for students to practise Chinese speaking and actively participate in the presentation in a relaxed environment.

### 4.3. Role of Language and Culture

Culture plays a fundamental role in language learning (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009). The acquisition of a foreign language is also the learning of the culture of the target language. Students learned to recognise how terms and expressions reflect aspects of culture through two visual arts activities—*Assembling a Paper Panda* and *Making a Peking Opera Facial Mask*.

Before assembling a paper panda, the teacher-researcher spent ten minutes to introduce the panda. First, the teacher-researcher showed two pictures, with an image of a panda in one picture and an image of a kangaroo in the other. Then the teacher-researcher led a class discussion on identifying the similarities and differences between these two animals. After that, students were encouraged to ask questions about aspects of the animals that they were fascinated about. For instance, one student asked if pandas can play Kungfu, because he had watched the animated movie in which the main panda character is a master of Kungfu. The question that impressed the teacher the most was, "Are pandas good friends with kangaroos?" This question suggested that students had built a connection between their culture and Chinese culture. Such discussion makes intercultural learning more meaningful than merely knowing about another culture. As Scarino and Liddicoat (2009: p. 19) state:

...learning to be intercultural involves much more than just knowing about another culture: it involves learning to understand how one's own culture shapes perceptions of oneself, of the world, and of our relationship with others.

After this discussion, the teacher-researcher started to introduce the Chinese characters for panda “熊猫” to the class. The teacher-researcher started with the literal meaning of each character. She explained that the literal meaning of the first character “熊” is “bear” and the second character “猫” means “cat”. Then she explained that pandas biologically belong to the family of bears; however, their appearance resembles a cat. To enrich students' intercultural learning experience, the teacher-researcher described the panda's appearance, characteristics, diet habit, natural habitat and their way of living. This activity helped students to achieve the learning objective about recognising how aspects of culture are reflected in language learning.

When students were making the paper panda with their partners, a student asked me “can I colour the panda?”. Then I asked the question to the rest of the class and the other students said “no, pandas are black and white.” I

nodded and told the student who wanted to colour the panda that if she did that, the panda would look more like a colourful cat. At this moment, I realised that the reason why students believe that they should not colour paper pandas was because they understood the significance of pandas in Chinese culture, and they value and respect the Chinese culture. (Teacher-researcher's reflective journal 20/08/2019)

Such an introduction and discussion also happened before the activity of *Making a Peking Opera Facial Mask*. Willis and Willis (2007) also suggested that, with a brief introduction to the topic, teachers could warm up students and then provide them with a vocabulary exercise in preparation for the next stage of the task. That is why the teacher-researcher led in an introduction before doing the visual arts activities, and why the teacher-researcher demonstrates the modelling sentence structure and a pool of vocabulary before the presentation activities.

## 5. Data Analysis and Discussion of Engagement

Content is the main element that needs to be taken into consideration in the process of teaching and learning in a foreign language classroom. If the content is beyond their ability to learn, students are more likely to lose interest in learning and become disengaged, because they are young and learners' prior knowledge about the Chinese language, including vocabulary and expression, is very limited. For this reason, the teacher-researcher focused on cognitive and emotional engagement. Orton & Cui (2016: p. 373) pointed that "in literary development the teacher tends to fall back on techniques that were used to teach them to write characters as children, but foreign learners lack strong language skills" As Chinese character recognition and writing are too difficult for Stage Two (Year 3) students, the teacher-researcher focused on speaking skills. The teaching content was in a sequential flow so that students could make a final presentation combining what they had learnt in the whole term. Harfield and colleagues (2007: p. 62) demonstrated that activity-based learning helped students "engage with the course content so that they perform at a high level".

### 5.1. Cognitive Engagement

Data about cognitive engagement came from the teacher interview, the student focus group and the checklists. The main finding from the interview between the teacher-researcher and the classroom teacher is that activity-based learning promotes high engagement of the students, playing a significant role in Chinese language learning. In the interview, the teacher pointed out that activity-based learning helped increase students' understanding and engagement as well as promoting their involvement. More importantly, the teacher emphasized that activity-based learning helps students to achieve the syllabus learning outcomes. Besides the interview, the evidence could also be noticed in the weekly observation from the classroom teacher when observing the teacher-researcher in the

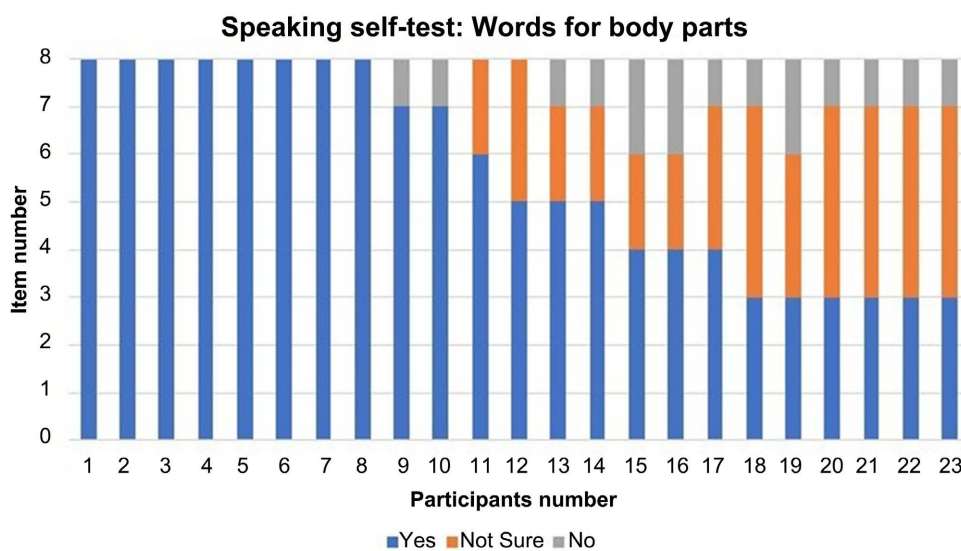
class. The classroom teacher commented, “students showed improved recalling by the end.” She also observed that “students were on-task and engaged.” (Classroom teacher observations, 17/09/19 and 30/07/19).

Data about cognitive engagement came also from the focus group, conducted at the end of the second cycle, when the teacher-researcher asked the six participants to read aloud flashcards, including words of body parts and colours. The result demonstrated that all the students were able to read aloud the words on the flashcards correctly without hesitations. This result is underpinned by the classroom teacher, who stated in her interview that activity-based learning made Chinese memorable.

Cognitive engagement data also came from students’ completion of checklists at the end of each cycle. The student checklists were developed by the teacher-researcher, based on an exercise book named *K-2 Chinese Science and Technology* (NSW Department of Education and Training Curriculum Support Directorate, 1988) to carry out a summative self-assessment of their speaking skills.

The checklist provided students with an opportunity to assess their speaking skills. There were eight items and each item had three different emoji faces representing “Yes, Not sure, and No” next to them. The teacher-researcher read aloud each item for the class, and what the students needed to do was to circle one of the emoji faces to show how confident they were to say the item.

In **Figure 4**, the blue columns represent students feeling they could speak the words. A total number of 23 students took part in the speaking self-test. Many of the students felt they were able to speak most of the words of body parts in Chinese. Eight out of 23 students were able to say all the eight items. Although, there were six students who could only give correct answers to three items, more than half of the students (17/23) were able to say at least half of the items. This was a quite pleasing result.



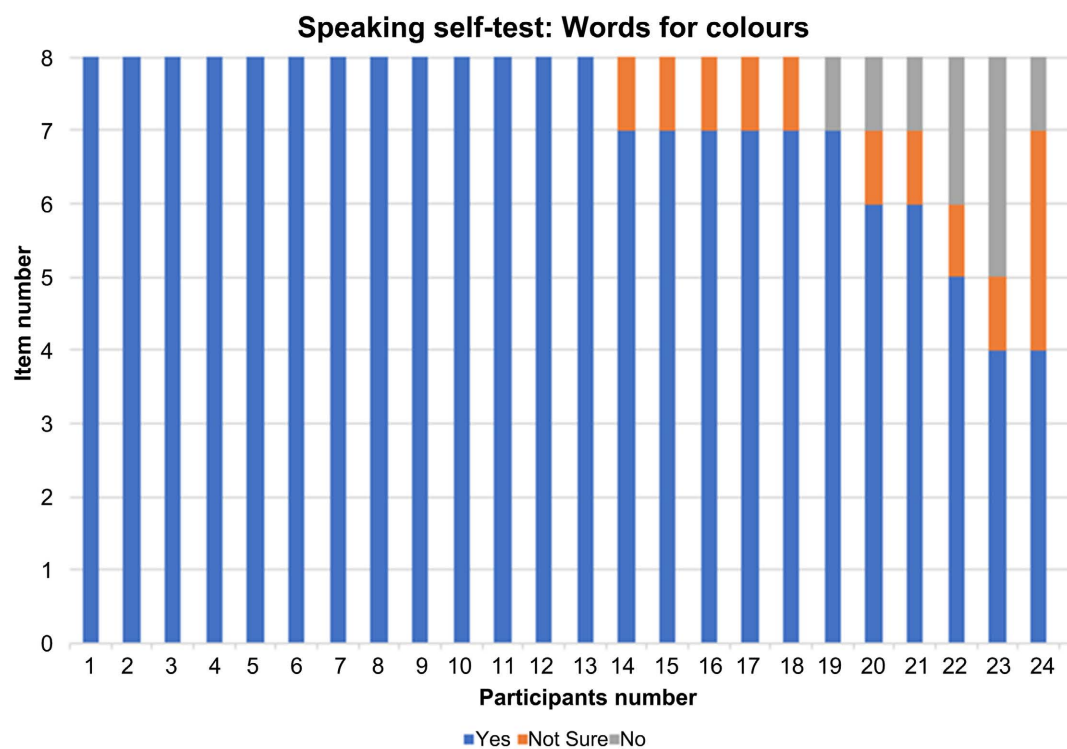
**Figure 4.** Result of speaking self-test: Words for body parts.

At the end of the second cycle, the teacher-researcher used eight colour word items to assess how confident they can speak in Chinese. For each item, there were three choices: Yes, Not sure and No, represented by three emoji faces. The teacher read eight items one by one and students were supposed to tick the emoji. The results are presented in **Figure 5** as follows:

A total number of 24 students participated in the test. It is clearly illustrated that a majority of students were able to speak those colour words. According to the figure, 13 out of 24 students could say all the eight items, six out of 24 students could say seven items, two students could say six items and three students could say four or five items. It can be concluded that all the students could say at least half the items, which is a quite satisfying result. Comparing the results obtained from Cycle One and Cycle Two, it showed that students were more confident in speaking skills when the activity-based learning was implemented in the second cycle.

## 5.2. Emotional Engagement

At the end of each cycle, the teacher-researcher collected feedback from both the classroom teacher and students, and all the participants showed a high level of satisfaction. Emotional engagement is demonstrated when students enjoy doing the classroom activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). According to the first interview, the classroom teacher gave positive feedback about how the students became highly emotional engaged in the learning of Chinese. She commented as below:



**Figure 5.** Result of speaking self-test: Words for colours.

I've noticed that they really engaged, they enjoyed the way you teach them, the way you introduced them to the names for body parts, the use of interactive whiteboard and a variety of activities and songs that you used to teach them the body parts have been really effective and the children really engaged and really enjoying the time during Chinese lessons.

In her 15-minute interview, the classroom teacher frequently used words about engagement. The teacher also commented that “students were keen and enthusiastic” and “students enjoyed participating and answer questions.” In addition, students gave their feedback of several things at in the first focus group, making some interesting comment. They gave positive attitudes towards the Chinese language learning:

“It is cool to learn Chinese because some schools don't (have it). It is good that people, come over and tell us their language, so later if we ever go to China, we know their language, we can talk to people.”

“I think it is good to learn some languages and maybe make some friends if you are going to China. If I go there, I can go to the festivals and stuff.”

“They are fun activities, and people like to learn a different country's type of things. We can learn theirs and they can learn ours.”

“It is fun to learn (songs) because we maybe can sing to our family.”

(Two of them said) “I like the paper panda the best.”

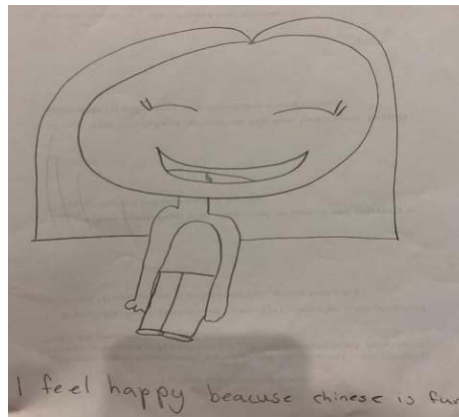
The teacher-researcher encouraged students to learn in a relaxed and enjoyable environment. The students had developed an interest towards the Chinese language and culture, as well as showed their desire to travel or make friends in China. Scarino & Liddicoat (2009: p. 19) stated that culture is not merely “a body of knowledge but rather a framework in which people communicate shared meaning with each other.”

### 5.3. Analysis of Students' Drawings

Data about emotional engagement also came from their drawing a simple picture as an additional task to express their ideas and feeling towards Chinese learning. Ibrahim (2019: p. 27) also acknowledged that visual data such as drawings enhance children's narratives. This data was used to gather a deeper sense of students' experiences of Chinese language learning because some students might feel less comfortable at expressing themselves verbally so that they can use drawings to show their feelings. Students mentioned the fun activity but also mentioned sharing with their families at home in the focus group. They drew smiling faces to demonstrate their feelings towards Chinese language learning. Below are three of the students' drawings.

Student 1 (Figure 6) said: I like Chinese and it is very fun, and the songs are very funny and very cool. (She drew a smiling girl and wrote “I feel happy because Chinese is fun”).

Student 2 (Figure 7) said: I like Chinese because I like learning new things and then share it with my mum and dad. (She drew a girl with a big smiling mouth.)



**Figure 6.** Student 1 drawing.



**Figure 7.** Student 2 drawing.

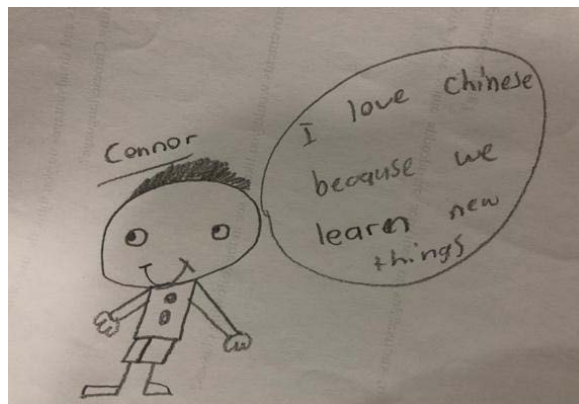
Student 3 (**Figure 8**): I like Chinese because I like new things. (He drew a smiling boy and wrote down “I love Chinese because we learn new things”.)

It can be concluded from the students’ lovely drawings and verbal expressions that there is a high level of enjoyment, motivation to continue learning and a willingness to share the knowledge they had learned in the Chinese language class with their families.

Moreover, there was an additional question below the checklist to give students chances to express their feelings about the Chinese class. When students were asked to choose the part they liked the most, some students gave specific reasons such as:

- Chinese is the best;
- I made cool things;
- It is nice to see Chinese arts;
- I like learning new words.

According to the overall result from the student feedback, it can be summarised that students enjoyed their Chinese class, and most liked the various activities because they were “fun” to them. High emotional engagement could be concluded from classroom teacher and students’ feedback in the focus group. At the



**Figure 8.** Student 3 drawing.

same time, the result of speaking tests showed that students had learnt the words taught and there was a noticeable improvement in their performance from Cycle One to Cycle Two. Çelik (2018: p. 1972) also concluded that “activity-based leaning activities improve students’ academic achievements and attitudes towards activities.” Therefore, it could be concluded that the application of activity-based learning had a positive impact on Chinese listening and speaking through the whole term.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Summary

The teacher-researcher made modifications that built on Cycle One for Cycle Two. For song activities, Cycle Two made modifications to the activities built on Cycle One by building less familiar material from English language but using repetition strategies. For the visual arts activities, Cycle Two include the knowledge in Cycle One and some strategies were added in Cycle Two to increase students’ interaction. This is demonstrated by Lawson et al. (2015) that in successive cycles, improvements and understanding are produced in the problem-solving practice. It was clear that students engaged cognitively and emotionally, and were highly involved in various activities and evidence of the learning outcomes was obtained through analysis of data from the teacher-researcher, classroom teacher and students. Students’ improvement in Chinese speaking was shown by analysing student checklists. Therefore, the activity-based learning was conducive to creating a relaxed and enjoyable learning environment.

### 6.2. Reflecting

A challenge was to maximize students’ interaction by using the Chinese language they have learned. In the *Assembling a Paper Panda* activity, the teacher-researcher encouraged students to talk about the body parts in Chinese. She provided this opportunity to allow students to use what they learned; this also helped to improve peer interaction and student-teacher interaction. However,



most students preferred to discuss in English rather than Chinese even though they know how to say those body parts words in Chinese. Reflecting plays an essential role in the process of action research. A research reflective journal can help a teacher “theorise their practice”, according to McAteer (2013). In the process of making an opera facial mask, the teacher-researcher observed students’ interaction and encouraged them to discuss the color and face part words in Chinese. For example, if a student asked the teacher-researcher a question such as “Is this a nose?” in English, she would respond “Yes, it is a nose, but can you tell me how to say nose in Chinese?” or praised their work then asked “Wonderful job, could you introduce the Chinese name for these colours for me?” If the teacher-researcher found students who actively talked in Chinese conversation, they would be offered a “Caught You Being Good” card. With the help of encouragement and questions, students took the chance to practise Chinese speaking in class. It resulted in positive response and feedback, there was an increasing number of students who began to say Chinese and some of them also handed up their work to show that they could express all the color words or the face parts words on their own.

The research showed a strong correlation between student achievement of learning outcomes and the selection of learning activities. As a result, the teacher-researcher carefully selected a wide range of hands-on activities in terms of music and visual arts. These activities were used to assist students to review, reinforce and practise Chinese listening and speaking. Using the teacher-researcher’s weekly reflection on teaching, the teacher-researcher chose the most relevant activity and then modified the activity to better accommodate students’ learning needs and stimulate their engagement. As a result, activity-based learning was incorporated in the classroom and students responded well to each activity. Moreover, students had more opportunities to practise Chinese listening and speaking in the process of doing the activities, so that they were more likely to grasp the knowledge faster and have it more solidly embedded.

The teacher-researcher suggested that teachers should create a positive classroom atmosphere in which they can manage the time effectively, present the instruction and expectations explicitly and cater for individual students’ learning needs. These findings are useful for the future teaching practice for the teacher-researcher as well as for other beginning teachers.

### **6.3. Limitations of the Findings**

Action research is “localized and conducted with an existing group of people, who may or may not represent a random selection from a larger population” (Pine, 2008: p. 89). As this research focused on a Western Sydney primary school with a particular social-economic background, the findings from this research may not be able to be generalised to other Australian schools or participants. Even though the data and results are valid, they are considered to apply to this particular research context.

Another limitation of the research design is the short time period (a nine-

week project) and that only one class was used for the research, although the teacher-researcher has collected substantial data and evidence. The research participants were around eight years old, a new age group for research. The teacher-researcher attempted to provide students with a suitable summative assessment tool, but not all students could use it successfully. Further investigation is needed into a standard and simple instrument for assessing language learning outcomes for young students.

Overall, students were highly engaged in Chinese language learning through the use of activity-based learning, and they achieved learning outcomes in a pleasurable environment. Students enjoyed learning Chinese through various forms of activities and those activities made Chinese language easier to learn.

#### **6.4. Implication for Using Activity-Based Learning.**

In the Australian context, teachers could make Chinese easier to learn by using activities which result in learning being enjoyable. Enjoyment and interest motivate students to continue to learn. Language classes can integrate arts elements like music and visual arts so that students learn by active participation rather than through passive listening and repetition. Activity-based learning is a good approach to engage students while learning a foreign language.

To conclude, the use of an activity-based learning approach for young learners in this school in the Western Sydney region has had a positive impact on their Chinese language learning. By the implementation of various activities, including songs and visual arts activities, students have achieved the outcomes outlined in the Chinese syllabus in a pleasant learning environment. Children enjoyed learning Chinese and they maintained their interest in learning. It is important for them to be able to build on their knowledge as they continue further study in primary school and beyond.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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