EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING TO ENHANCE MOTHER TONGUE LANGUAGES (MTL) LEARNING IN SINGAPORE'S CONTEXT AMONG JC1 STUDENTS - A CASE STUDY OF BALESTIER CULTURAL TRAITS

Nor Hanisah Saphari
Mother Tongue Department, Catholic Junior College, Singapore
norhanisahsaphari@moe.edu.sg

Makhfadzah Abu Bakar
Mother Tongue Department, Catholic Junior College, Singapore

K Thiru
Mother Tongue Department, Catholic Junior College, Singapore

Tan Kian Hoe
Mother Tongue Department, Catholic Junior College, Singapore

Abstract

Singapore's bilingual policy is implemented to cater to the needs of its multilingual population. While English is the official language, the other main ethnic languages namely Malay, Chinese and Tamil are termed as Mother Tongue Languages (MTL). Educators have been challenged to teach the MTL effectively amidst the rampant use of English among younger generation especially in the 21st century. Experiential Learning has been one of the strategies to enhance MTL learning among students who are learners of the 21st century. This study looks at how Experiential learning specifically a planned heritage trail-based trip can affect students' learning and influence their perception of the MTL as a living language. This

method has been useful and students' appreciation towards the learning of MTL has also improved. Although Experiential Learning is found to be effective, more steps and initiatives need to be taken and adopted in order to realise the vision of the bilingual policy in Singapore and to prepare students face future challenges by equipping them with 21st century competencies.

Keywords

Experiential Teach, 21st Century Competencies, Mother Tongue Languages, Living Language, Heritage Trail

1. Introduction

The teaching and learning of Mother Tongue Languages (MTL) in Singapore has undergone several stages of development amidst Singapore's vibrant and dynamic educational landscape in the 21st century. MTL also face its own challenges in the new century as the profiles of its clients – students have also changed over time. MTL curriculum planners and educators alike continuously look for avenues to adapt teaching strategies to suit the needs of the 21st century MTL learners and to achieve the two main objectives of learning MTL in Singapore at the pre-university level as follows:

- To be proficient in the language and use it effectively in different situations and
- To appreciate the language as a cultural language and language of knowledge and information in a context of plural society.

2. Problem

One of the challenges face by educators is that MTL learners do not see the importance of MTL in current times. They do not find the relevance of MTL as a living language. With the vast use of English as a common language in Singapore, MTL learners are more comfortable to converse and communicate in English relative to the MTL. Consequently, MTL learners offer the MTL solely for the purpose of clearing school and national examinations and securing the required grade to be enrolled into a university.

3. Assumptions

This research is based on the following two assumptions:

- Students are 21st century learners who require specific learning needs and acquire specific learning abilities;

- Teachers need to adapt teaching strategies according to students' needs and abilities.

3.1 Theory Framework

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory (1971, 1984) is used as the research theory framework. This theory is typically represented by a four stage learning cycle in which the learner 'touches all the bases': Concrete Experience (CE), Reflective Observation (RO), Abstract Conceptualisation (AC) and Active Experimentation (AE).

In CE, a new set of experience is encountered by a learner and the learner interprets or reinterprets the existing experience. A learner then makes a reflective observation as seen in RO to see any inconsistencies in the new experience and how the learner understands it. In AC, the learner undergoes a reflection process to give rise to a new idea or modify the existing abstract concept. Under active experimentation, the learner applies the newly acquired concept to the world around them to see what results can be obtained from the application.

3.2 Research Methods

Questionnaires are provided in three different MTL namely Chinese, Malay and Tamil to accommodate to the different MTL groups. Two sets of questionnaires are made available and students complete them at two different stages: one prior to the Bales tier cultural trip and the other after they have returned from the trip. Data collected from the 2 sets of questionnaires are analysed in the various languages that are then translated and collated.

3.3 Research Questions

The following are the guiding questions for this research:

- How does a cultural trip case study-based experiential learning improve the learning of MTL in a junior college in Singapore?

- Does experiential learning (as stated in question 1) affect students' perception on MTL as a living language?

4. Limitations

This research is part of the teachers' Professional Learning Teams (PLT)'s project which looks to improve and/ or value-add specific teaching and learning (T & L) area. It takes place at the same time while teachers carry out their normal responsibilities. As such, the research is done not without time constraints amidst their busy schedule in preparing lessons and other duties. Secondly, the nature of this study that focuses on a specific case may not be representative to other settings. Results from this study may apply specifically to the institution's needs and qualities and may not be applicable to others.

4.1 Potential Learning Points

Despite its limitations, this study hopes to generate these learning points:

- To understand students' learning styles and needs
- To develop conceptual framework as a basis for pedagogical enhancement
- To accommodate and prepare lessons according to students' learning styles and needs

5. Analysis

There are a total of 33 students who take part in this study. Out of the students, 15 are Malay H1 students, 7 Chinese H1 students, 5 Chinese 'B' students, 5 Tamil H1 students and 1 Tamil 'B' student. All participants respond to 10 pre-trip questions and 9 post-trip questions. They also participate in the cultural trip to Baluster Heritage Trail[2] as an activity to enhance MTL learning during the MTL Fortnight during week 8 and 9 in Term 1, 2015.[3]

5.1 Section 1: Summary of Students' Profile

All students who take part are year 1 students in a junior college in Singapore who will sit for their 'A' level examinations at the end of year 2 of the junior college course. Students are from 16 to17 years of age.

Students generally use MTL for pragmatic reasons namely for learning and communicating purposes. They use the language mainly in MTL classrooms and when they need to communicate with their MTL tutor or friends who can converse in the respective languages.

These students face difficulties in learning the MTL especially in oral and writing. They are not fluent to converse in the language while they have problems articulating their ideas into writing.

Nonetheless, most of them are interested in learning the MTL. They still find it useful to learn the MTL in Singapore's context. However, students who are not interested to learn

express their concerns due to the conduct of uninteresting lessons and also because of their poor command of the language.

Most students have not experienced lessons outdoors and/ or experiential learning (EL). Those who have experienced EL, enjoy the lesson because they have acquired new experience that is different from the norms and routines conducted in classroom settings.

Overall, students display positive attitudes towards the learning of the MTL. They acknowledge the uniqueness of MTL and its function as a cultural heritage. Nonetheless, they also acknowledge that with the vast use of English Language in Singapore, it is enough to communicate even if their command of MTL is relatively weaker.

To the students, learning MTL is a good experience. They acknowledge their weaknesses in MTL and that their objective in learning the language is for examinations and to acquire grades. On the other hand, they appreciate MTL as part of their respective cultures and its importance in interaction especially in Singapore and Malaysia.

5.2 Recommendations 1

Teachers should employ varied teaching methods that involve interaction and group activities. One of the ways is to show relevant video clips to enable students to understand the background of the language. Background information to the relevant cultural aspects of the language may be helpful to enhance students' appreciation of the respective language and enhance their interest into the learning of the language. Other activities that students enjoy and prefer to participate in classroom teaching also indicate their interest in interactive work that enables them to communicate with their peers and allow them to express their creativity. These include infusion of literary components into language lessons, conducting sharing sessions based on personal experiences (Show & Tell), group assignments, and story-telling sessions, sharing of essay writing skills and writing samples of authors.

Based on their lack of experience with experiential learning, teachers should provide platforms and opportunities for students to experience outdoor lessons which are different from the usual classroom settings. These lessons may value-add to students' learning experience of the MTL and enable them to look at the learning of the language from a new perspective. Consequently, students' characteristics as 21st century learners are also acknowledged.

5.3 Section 2: Students' Experience during Trip

During the trip, students are brought in groups to explore various cultural and/ or historical sites along the Bales tier Heritage Trail. Based on their groups' arrangement, students visit at least three of these sites: Water Point at Boon Tack Road, Lam Yeo Coffee

Powder Factory, Sweetlands Confectionary and Bakery, Whampoa Market, Maha Sasana Ramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple, Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall, The Former Shaw Malay Film Studios, Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong Temple and Traditional Shop houses.

There are two compulsory assignments that students have to submit based on the trip. One is an individual-based collage creation. This assignment requires students to capture five photographs using their camera or smart phones during the trip based on a selected theme. The collage must be accompanied by a relevant caption between 20 to 25 words in the respective MTL. The submission must reach the respective tutors at the end of the same day as the trip. The second assignment is a group's collaboration. Each group is required to produce a 2-minute long video based on their experience during the trip. A voice-over recording in the MTL must accompanies the video. The content of the video can be a general report of the entire trip or it can focus on a particular theme or issue that students find interesting.

However, students face two basic hurdles during the trip. They do not have enough opportunities to use the MTL due to limited interactions that enable them to communicate in MTL with various parties. During the trip, students are able to use the MTL to converse with their respective language tutors and or friends. Little communication is needed between students and store owners or site managers. If students need to get information from the sites they visit, they could access it from the information already available at the sites or they could ask the person/s in charge at the site who are generally conversant in English. Nonetheless, those who need to speak directly to shop-owners who could only speak in the MTL had the opportunity to converse in the language. The Malay Language students have more opportunity to read in the language when they visited *The Former Shaw Malay Film Studios* as they are required to access information from the exhibits there that are labelled or explained in the Malay language. The person who helps to answer the students' queries is able to speak in both English and Malay. The Tamil students, on the other hand have to exercise more on their translation skills to make use of the Tamil language.

Students also face problems in the process of taking photos and recording videos at the sites because too many people were crowding at the same places at any one time. They are also concern about the duration given to them to submit the assignments. Students are also hindered by their weak command of language. This factor becomes the main issue because they are required to submit the collage with the caption almost instantaneously after the trip to their tutor. Nonetheless, every student manages to submit their collage with caption via *wasp*.

Despite the challenges students face, the conduct of lesson outside the classroom is well received. They find it interesting and they get authentic experience by learning from the different sites they visit. Students also appreciate culture and traditions in Singapore. They are amazed by the presence of old places in the forms of film studio and shops that continue to practice traditions. These are new experiences for students. At the same time, students are grateful for the technological enhancements they experience and embrace today compared to the past but at the same time they also appreciate that the "old" are preserved. This is to maintain Singapore's cultural identity. Overall, students understand the relevance of assignments given (collage and video making) and they can see the linkage with the learning of MTL.

5.4 Recommendations 2

Based on the experiences students encounter during the trip to Bales tier, if such trips were to be organised in the future, the number of students going for the trip in a group should be reduced to a more manageable number. This will assist students with difficulties taking photographs and video recording for their assignments. Time spent at each site or station should also be increased so that students are able to spend more time in getting information from the respective places they visit. Students should also be given more time to complete the assignments especially for the video recording. This will give them more time to edit their videos as most of them are doing this for the first time. Also, as all students are amateurs in video making and video making skills are crucial for submission, students should be provided with basic video producing skills so that they are more equipped and confident in their submission. Otherwise students have to be directed to specific sources of information for self-directed learning in order to learn how to produce a video. Their own research on video producing will give them the platform to independent learning and self-empowerment.

In view of the findings as described above, the following observations are made. Lessons that provide opportunities for students to learn about Singapore's varied culture should be continued. Outdoor classroom activities and/ or lessons can address students' problems of disengagement and divided attention during MTL lessons. Technology-based activities should be continued because they help students to follow MTL lessons better.

6. Discussions

This study affirms that the participants (MTL students) are 21st century learners. They have characteristics that fulfil the criteria and thus they require specific learning needs including the learning of MTL. The four main characteristics of a 21st century learner are

evident in this study as follows:

- Students learn by doing;

- Students live in a world of digital, audio, and text;

- Students are multitaskers that use sound and image to convey content whenever possible; and

- Students use multiple sources, including technology, to find and gather information.

All the characteristics stated above are observed in the activities planned and executed during and after the trip in forms of visiting sites, after trip assignments and students' interaction with other people or artefacts. With the assumption that students need to be equipped with 21st century skills, this study proves that to a certain extent, Experiential Learning has provided some groundwork for students to acquire relevant skills.

Students are found very comfortable with the use of Information Technology (IT) tools. This study employs the use of smart phones or digital camera for assignments' submission. Students' acknowledgement and affirmation of IT-based assignments confirms that IT makes teaching MTL more meaningful to both teachers and students. Students can relate the assignments with the lesson and learning of MTL better as they are familiar with the use of IT tools and digital development around them.

Kolb's Experiential Learning as a tool to experience language learning therefore can be adapted to the learning of MTL in a Singapore context. Rather than looking at MTL as a convenient instrument for the purpose of examinations, the experiential aspect of this process enables learning to be enjoyable, meaningful and purposeful for both teachers and students. Experiential learning creates space for creativity and autonomous decision making by students. This experience also reduces differences in learning ability among students as students undergo the same experience and reflect upon their own learning regardless of their academic abilities. The present circumstances based on the common experiences that they spend time together with also makes learning a unique involvement for every student. This also makes students more engaged and empowered in their own learning and they bear responsibility in accessing knowledge and acquiring skills. Such self-directed learning processes allow students to perceive MTL as a living language in a new light.

7. Conclusion

The learning of MTL in Singapore entails a few implications. This study exemplifies how learning MTL in a 21st century setting can still achieve its fundamental goals of appreciating language and preserving culture and heritage through relevant strategies and by maximising students' skills and prior knowledge. By adapting and accommodating learners' profiles and technological development, acquiring skills and to be competent in MTL competencies can be realised and accomplished.

The "Teach Less, Learn More" (TLLM) movement, started in 2006, helps our teachers and schools to focus on the fundamentals of effective teaching, so that our students are engaged, learn with understanding, and are developed holistically, beyond preparing for tests and examinations. (It is not about teachers literally "teaching less".) To do so, schools have innovated in curriculum (what to teach), pedagogy (how to teach) and assessment (how much have learners learnt).

(Minister of Education Singapore, April 26, 2010)

The above quotation sums up the direction that the teaching and learning of MTL should take. Since 2006 with the inception of TLLM, the education landscape has developed and transformed the way teaching and learning takes place including the MTL.

Ultimately, the desired outcome of education of Singapore can be achieved. With the relevant teaching strategies and interventions, the education system *vis-a-vis* the teaching and learning of MTL strive to achieve the qualities as spelt out in the desired outcome of a confident person, self-directed learner, active contributor, and concerned citizen.

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