

## Drama in Education to Enhance Tone Pronunciation and Communication Skills Intonation in Online Chinese Language as Foreign Language Class

NIK NORAFIQAH BINTI NIK IBRAHIM

*Beijing Foreign Studies University*

*nn.afiqah11@gmail.com*

ZHANG XIAO HUI

*Beijing Foreign Studies University*

*zhangxiaohui@bfsu.edu.cn*

### ABSTRACT

*The Chinese Language has been one of the most chosen foreign languages among Malaysian. Most kindergartens, primary schools, secondary schools, universities or even language and education centres will offer Chinese language classes to students. Each Malaysian had an abundance of opportunities to learn the Chinese language. However, unfortunately, most of them give up after learning for a few weeks or months or are stuck at the beginner level for life because of the difficulty in mastering Chinese word tone and communication skills, especially during online classes. Chinese language as a tonal language had been so challenging for the learners even after learning the Chinese language for three months and reaching HSK 1. Online classes make learning harder, and using only traditional recognition or repetition-based techniques is impossible. Students could not master the right pronunciation or intonation. Therefore, during beginner-level HSK 2 Chinese language working adults' class, the Drama in Education technique was applied to increase the students' language production and enhance the intonation of their word tone and communication skills. Students' results for the first, second and third months were compared using the Google Translate audio feature, WeChat Voice-to-Text feature and teacher evaluation. Students' self-evaluation about their performance and views about Drama in Education were analysed. The results revealed student improvement in their word tone pronunciation and communication skills. Students' confidence and class participation also had been boosted.*

*Keywords: Drama in Education, Chinese language, online class, word tone, communication skills*

### INTRODUCTION

Chinese has been the world's most spoken first language and the second most widely used second language. The Chinese language is considered an important language worldwide as it opens that passage to understanding different important fields such as politics, economy, history and technology. In Malaysia, the Chinese language has been popular. It had been chosen as the third foreign language to be learned by Malaysia long before China was one of Malaysia's biggest trading partners. This is because of the number of Malaysian Chinese and the diversity of Malaysia. Nowadays, more young Malaysian are learning Chinese as it can help their resume stand out and boost their salary. Therefore, even after securing a job, many Malaysians still register for Chinese Language classes the university or private language centre offers to the public.

However, the Chinese language is not easy for Malaysian as it is a tonal language, unlike the Malaysian most used languages, Malay and English. Karloff (1996) stated that the tonemes concepts in tonal language could be clearer for atonal language learners. Malay or English is the atonal language, and learning the tonal Chinese language needs extra effort and more interactive and practical teaching methods. The standard Chinese language has five tones. The first one (T1) is a high and flat tone, the second tone (T2) is a rising tone, the third tone (T3) is a low falling tone, the fourth tone (T4) is falling, and the fifth tone (T5) is neutral tone or

toneless. Therefore, toneless first-language learners learning Chinese might have different perceptions and production. Tone acquisition had been one of the hardest for Malaysian Chinese students as most needed help differentiating the second tone (T2) and third tone (T3). Suppose they were using Chinese talking a whole sentence. In that case, Malaysian always raise the tone of the last word, ignoring the actual tone of the word as the Malay language communication intonation influenced it.

Over the past decade, in Chinese as a foreign language class that focuses only on the textbook, students will have little opportunity to practice, which causes them to lack spontaneous language production. The traditional classroom pedagogy will cause passivity and only focus on the language input rather than the language output. Chinese language teachers had been searching for a suitable pedagogy for the class. Drama in Education has been known as one of the most practical teaching methods for language class as it focuses on creating a good language environment in the class and focus on the student's language output as they need to practice their communication skills (Fujioka, 1996; Schebal, 2006; Torrico, 2015; Gascon 2019, Nik Norafiqah 2020). Drama in Education can also boost student confidence and cultivate their learning spirit despite all the barriers caused by online learning. Ronke (2005) proposed that the unique conditions of the drama that required the teacher and students to create unique conditions such as events, places, and characters will help students create suitable dialogue not only tied to the textbook context. Although the situations are all artificial, each situation can stimulate real communication.

With Drama in Education activities, techniques and approaches being applied in online Chinese language classes, each lesson will become more interactive, and students will be willing to participate in each class activity. Students tone pronunciation will be corrected throughout the class, and they can always practice natural communication.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

O'Neill and Lambert (1982) claimed that language and drama are closely connected to each other as the nature of both language and drama is socially constructed. The main purpose of language is communication, while one of the main purposes of a language class is to master communication skills. By using Drama in Education in Chinese language classes, students will have abundant experiences in different situations while practising their Chinese language. Students will be more engaged throughout the learning process as they will get more opportunities to enhance their language skills.

In traditional second language classes, students were bound by the fixed structures or settings that were presented in the textbook. The dialogue usually is repetitive, less challenging and unable to stimulate their communication skills. Ronke (2006) pointed out there Drama in Education will make the class the 'training field' and stimulate certain aspects of real-life communication, which is highly effective for a language class. Hsu's (1975) research findings stated that using drama in their experiments allowed language learners to get the context for meaningful exchange and directly improve their conversational abilities.

Zafeiriadou (2009) highlighted that drama would increase the learner's motivation and provide rich language experiences as it is entertainment and engages feelings. Heath (1993) also stated that drama can enhance the linguistic competence and confidence of the students. Liu (2002) identified three drama functions in the second language classroom, which are cognitive, social and affective. Stinson (2008) also find out that drama in a second language class will boost students' oral communication scores, motivation and self-confidence. The findings of the Stinson experiment on 140 English learners in Singapore were summarised into four categories: 1) the contextualisation of language; 2) the motivation, confidence and

enthusiasm promoted by the drama; 3) the encouraging and safe atmosphere of the drama classroom, and 4) the shift in power from teachers to students.

The exploratory study by Susan (2006) about the psychological perspective of drama in second language learning also found that drama will facilitate communication as self-esteem, motivation, and spontaneity will be heightened, capacity for empathy will be increased, and sensitivity to rejection will be lowered. Ronke (2005) stated that drama activities would create a joyful learning environment and motivate Foreign Language learners throughout the learning process. Drama activities will also help to store the new learning material faster in the long-term memory. This is because students not only rely on the vocabulary from the textbook for language production, but they also need to self-learn other vocab and expressions to make a better conversation. Therefore, drama activities will always require students to experiment with the target language in expressing the social context. Nedlands and Goode (2000) list several drama activities that are widely used, such as hot-seating, interview and television conversation, and poetic action like thought-tracking, caption making and documentary. These activities make the language class more interactive and maximise the students' language output.

Mehrabian & Wiener (1967) stated that 55% of language is expressed through body language, and 38% is from the tone of voice. As the tone of voice is crucial for a language, Chinese learners need to ensure that their intonation is correct to express their thoughts verbally, and their tone for each word must be correct too. Thus, past research has proved that drama techniques in Chinese language classes not only can help the learners practice their tone and intonation at the max but also will make the learning process more interesting and increase the participation of the students.

## METHODOLOGY

Most Malaysian will rise up the last syllable intonation when speaking. Therefore, when they try to say "再见" zàijiàn, they will pronounce it as zàijián or zàijiǎn, and the falling tone T4 for jian will change to the rising tone T2 or the low falling tone T3. The fourth tone is not hard to learn, but the code-mixing causes the students to use Malay language intonation speaking the Chinese language. To ensure students correctly pronounce the fourth tone, the falling tone, most teachers will ask them to stomp their feet or use an angry emotion. It might not be the best way as the students still cannot pronounce it correctly if they do not stomp their feet. Students need more practice, and teachers must create real-life experiences to help them correctly pronounce the tone. Hence, different Drama in Education activities, techniques and approaches were planned in each online session.

The participants of this research are 30 students who had passed the HSK 1 Chinese proficiency test and willingly registered for HSK 2 class. Their age range is 25 to 30, and they all work in different sectors in Malaysia. Their word pronunciation and conversation intonation results for the first, second and third months were compared using the Google Translate audio feature, WeChat Voice-to-Text feature and teacher evaluation. Students must also evaluate other groups and write a monthly summary of the activities. This will help them to focus on other people's pronunciation and intonation. The teacher will also share a short clip of drama and a movie related to the learning context in the telegram group every day, which helps the students learn through real-life conversation.

Each student's voice was recorded for each session using WeChat and google translate to calculate the pronunciation score. The teacher will also give the score based on the student's pronunciation and intonation. The total score was recorded monthly, and the average score of the students was calculated. Student self-evaluation was conducted using the questionnaire and semi-structured interview proposed by Chia-Ti (2018). Each of them must fill out a questionnaire by the end of the course. The questionnaires were divided into three parts. The

first part contains six questions that require them to evaluate their improvement in Chinese language skills. The second part includes five questions about the contextualised learning used during the class. The third part is the self-evaluation of their participation in the class activity, which contains five questions.

## RESULTS

Students' pronunciation and intonation scores were recorded during each session, and the total score was calculated monthly. The monthly average score of the students was divided into the Google Translate audio feature (pronunciation), WeChat Voice-to-Text feature (pronunciation), and Teacher Evaluation (intonation), illustrated in Table 1.

TABLE 1. Average Monthly Result of the student pronunciation and intonation.

	Month	1 <sup>st</sup> Month	2 <sup>nd</sup> Month	3 <sup>rd</sup> Month
<b>Average Result</b>				
<b>Google Translate audio feature (pronunciation)</b>		52	71	89
<b>WeChat Voice-to-Text feature (pronunciation)</b>		53	78	91
<b>Teacher Evaluation (intonation)</b>		70	89	98

Month by Month, students start to get more relaxed when conversing in Chinese. During the first month, as they get more relaxed, they converse with the right intonation depending on the context or situation, but they ignore the word tone pronunciation. Therefore, the average result of the first month could be better. During the Second Month, students started to grab the pronunciation better as they learned through drama and movies and needed to practice continuously during class. Students' conversation context was enriched and expanded, becoming more natural and not attached to the textbook. Students also started to focus on their pronunciation and always practised the pronunciation by themselves. In the third Month, the whole result increased significantly. Students' intonation is also almost perfect, and their pronunciation is amazing. They can pronounce almost every word perfectly. Students can also differentiate each tone clearly in the third Month.

## ENHANCING STUDENTS' OVERALL LINGUISTIC SKILLS

Students' perspectives regarding their improvement in Overall Linguistic Skills are collected using Google Forms, and the mean was calculated and recorded in Table 2.

TABLE 2. Mean Distribution on Students' Perspectives regarding their Improvement in Overall Linguistic Skills

	Item	Mean
1.	My Chinese listening ability has improved because of watching films.	4.5
2.	My Chinese speaking ability has improved because of oral presentation and acting during class activities.	4.7
3.	My Chinese reading ability has improved because of the other related learning sources provided by the teacher.	4.2
4.	My Chinese writing ability has improved as I need to summarise what I had learnt monthly.	4.4
5.	Overall, I think I have improved in all four skills of Chinese from the new learning methods used by the teacher.	4.5

6. Evaluating other group's presentation and performance helps me think of my own advantages and weaknesses.	4.4
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Students realised that through drama activities, not only their conversation skills are improved, but all four basic skills of language (listening, speaking, writing and reading) have also improved. As recorded in Table 2, students show positive responses for each item. Specifically, most students perceived that speaking ability had improved the most (M=4.7), followed by listening ability (M=4.5), writing ability (M=4.4) and finally, reading ability (M=4.2). As for the critical thinking ability, which required them to evaluate others, the mean score for item 6 is M=4.4.

From this personal analysis, it is obvious that drama not only improves the speaking and listening ability of the students but can also increase their reading and writing ability. By evaluating others, students can also learn to focus on other pronunciations and become more aware of their pronunciation. As Freeman (1992) stated, simultaneous usage of linguistic skills in meaningful, intriguing and collaborative contexts and activities will outweigh separated linguistic parts activities. Hence, drama activities which fulfil this requirement successfully enhance overall language learning.

### LEARNING AND USING CHINESE IN A MEANINGFUL CONTEXT

Students' perspectives regarding their improvement through class activities are collected using Google Forms, and the mean was calculated and recorded in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Mean Distribution on Students' Perspectives regarding Contextualized Learning

Item	Mean
1. Learning Chinese from short clips allows me to learn useful expressions and know how they are used in real communication.	4.8
2. Performing each class activities allows me to use what I learned in the short clips, movie and drama in actual practice.	4.7
3. Learning Chinese from short clips help me understand different cultures.	3.8
4. Learning Chinese from short clips make me aware of different usages in Chinese and Malay or English language.	3.6
5. I think I know better about how to interact naturally and properly in a conversation	4.8

From Table 3, the result indicated that students not only enjoyed the learning process but also believed the class activities and short clips shared by the teacher had taught them about useful expression and real-life communication (M=4.8). Besides that, students also had many opportunities to practice what they had learned from the short clips, movies and drama in the class (M=4.7). However, the short clips from movies and dramas the teacher shared had little cultural context (M=3.8). They also needed help differentiating Chinese, Malay, or English usage through short clips (M=3.6). As shown by the data, students think that drama activities and short clips really help their communication because of the meaningful context. However, they learned a little about the culture and different usage of languages. Students responded positively about the effect of class activities and short clips on their conversation skills (M=4.8). They interact naturally and properly after learning through class activities and short clips.

### AFFECTIVE BENEFITS: ENHANCED MOTIVATION, LOWERED ANXIETY, AND BOOSTED CONFIDENCE

Students' perspectives regarding their improvement in learning anxiety, self-esteem and motivation were collected using Google Forms and the mean was calculated and recorded in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Mean Distribution on Students' Perspectives Regarding Effects on Learning Anxiety, Self-Esteem and Motivation

Item	Mean
I think learning Chinese via short clips and performing drama activities is interesting.	4.2
After the 3-month class, I am now not afraid to speak Chinese in general.	4.5
I do not feel as anxious when I have to use Chinese language in public.	4.6
I start to speak Chinese without thinking too much in Malay or English.	4.4
I am now more confident to speak Chinese in general.	4.9

From Table 4, the result showed that students enjoyed learning through short clips and performing drama activities (M=4.2). They are not afraid to speak the Chinese language (M=4.5), do not feel anxious about using Chinese outside of the class and can converse with the public (M=4.4). Gained confidence through drama class and was unafraid to use Chinese outside the class (M=4.5). Thus, students also felt that they could have thought more in other languages and can directly use Chinese in conversation (M=4.4). Generally, students realise they are more confident speaking Chinese anywhere with anyone.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines the use of drama in education activities in HSK 2 Chinese language online classes for three months. The main focus of each activity is to enhance the student's tone pronunciation and communication skills intonation. Throughout the class's meaningful context activities, students improved their pronunciation, intonation, writing, and reading skills, as shown by monthly average results. They also gain more confidence in using the Chinese language in daily life. Banerjee (2014) states that drama in education techniques and activities can develop students' communicative ability naturally and dynamically, using gestures, pauses, different intonations of voice, and showing emotions. All these practical hands-on activities help them to master communication skills and can always be applied in real-life situations.

More drama in education activities and techniques should be applied and analysed to suit Beginner level students as their vocabulary is limited. More learning tools and materials should help the students master more vocabulary and not be limited to the textbook. The method and procedures used in this study can be further tested to find more materials, techniques and activities for Beginner level classes.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Nik Norafiqah binti Nik Ibrahim is a doctoral student at Research Institute of Foreign Languages, Beijing Foreign Studies University. The research directions are Applied Linguistic, Psycholinguistics, Chinese as Foreign Language Pedagogy and Psychology in Education.

Zhang Xiao Hui is an associate Professor, School of Chinese Language and Literature, Beijing Foreign Studies University. Her research directions are International Chinese Language Communication, Teaching Chinese for Special Purposes and Chinese Teacher Development.