

Chinese Traditional Literature and Academic Achievement:

A Study of Secondary Schools Students

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to determine the opinions of the secondary school students of learning Chinese classical literature, the difference in the level of acquisition between male and female, and find out the relationship between the acquisition of knowledge in Chinese traditional literature and their academic achievement. This study was done in two secondary national-type schools (SNTS) in Selangor. The instrument consisted of a set of acquisition test and questionnaire drafted based on the Language Acquisition Theory. The respondents were 104 form four students, consisting of 52 students randomly chosen from two schools. The findings showed that form four students overall held negative views about learning Chinese classical literature. There was a significant positive correlation between the acquisition test scores of Chinese traditional literary knowledge ($M = 39.56$, $SD = 11.66$) and the grades obtained by the students in the Chinese subject in the Lower Secondary Assessment Examination ($M = 3.77$, $SD = 1.27$), $r = .686$, $p < .01$). The results show that actions should be taken to raise students' interest in traditional literature and to improve students' acquisition of Chinese traditional literary knowledge as well as to ensure that the Chinese syllabus is implemented effectively.

KEYWORDS - Chinese traditional literature, Chinese language, Secondary schools, Opinion

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a critical advancement in human history. Without it humanity would likely not be nearly as advanced as it is today. There are four reasons to not only study literature, but to master the study of literature. Literature is a tool to record historical events as well as knowledge. It's also quite capable at bringing people together. Lastly, the understanding of literature is a form of power in historical and modern societies. These are all good reasons to emphasize the importance of literature. Therefore, the use of literature in language teaching and learning is effective in producing balanced and harmonious individuals [1].

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEMS

In Malaysia, Chinese language is an elective subject that is offered to secondary school students. Many students did not choose to study Chinese language at secondary school level even though they have studied six years of Chinese primary education.

In Chinese traditional literature component in Chinese Language at Malaysia Certificate Examination (MCE), famous core element is important to be learnt and mastered. Zhang's [2] findings in 2009 involving 600 students from five secondary schools in the district of Johor Bahru, Johor, reported that a total of 88.33% of the students were of the view that Chinese famous core element is very important in the teaching and learning of the Chinese language. Zhang's findings also showed that the lack of literary background has disadvantages and it affects the learning of Chinese famous core element. This is unexpected because the element of Chinese traditional literature is a vital component in the curriculum of Chinese Language. If sufficient learning of Chinese traditional literature were achieved, why was the level of students' acquisition of Chinese literature still not satisfactory?

Furthermore, there is a lack of research to examine the level of acquisition of Chinese traditional literature knowledge among Form Four students in NTSS in Malaysia; hence this study was designed to meet this need. In addition, a study done by Rita, Raj, & Shubhangna [3] on 100 children between the ages of 6 to 18 years in India have shown that female prefer the works of art and literature than male. Does this mean that female perform better in literature than male? Some studies have also indicated that male generally have a lower of achievement in language than female [4]. The female also showed a more positive learning attitude than male at the school who speak Dutch [5]. On the other hand, as studies in the U.S.A., Australia, Taiwan and Japan have shown, girls outperform boys on various verbal tasks and also have shown higher verbal self-concepts than boys [6, 7, 8]. Being aware of this could have

strengthened girls' as compared to boys' language acquisition. This raises the need to explore the extent of differences in the level of acquisition of traditional literature knowledge between male and female students and how this is related to academic achievement.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study is designed to find out the opinions of the students of learning Chinese classical literature among Form Four male and female students in NTSSs, and the relationship between the level of acquisition of Chinese traditional literature knowledge and their academic achievement.

This study is aimed at answering the following research questions:

- (i) What are the opinions of the students of learning Chinese classical literature after attending secondary school education for three years?
- (ii) Is there any significant differences between male and female in the level of acquisition of knowledge in Chinese traditional literature?
- (iii) Is there any relationship between the level of acquisition of knowledge in Chinese traditional literature and academic achievement among the students?

THEORY OF LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire the capacity to perceive and comprehend language, as well as to produce and use words and sentences to communicate. Language acquisition usually refers to first-language acquisition, which studies infants' acquisition of their native language. Language proficiency is an issue of interest to researchers in the field of linguistics. Various theories from different disciplines have been submitted to explain this issue. In general, the theory of language acquisition or language proficiency can be divided into two types: the cognitive theory that emphasizes the biological effect and theories asserting behaviorism experience and environmental impact.

Cognitive theory was pioneered by Jean Piaget in his famous Theory of Cognitive Development. Piaget (1959) [9] stressed that children's language development is closely related to mental development. This theory was agreed upon by Noam Chomsky, a psycholinguist from the United States. He submitted that man is born with the ability to master the language at a certain time [10]. In other words, the potential of human language is the natural utterance and language can occur without formal teaching in schools [11]. For example, according to Chomsky, although an adult never spoke to her baby under the age of one year, this baby is still able to master the language.

In contrast, psychologists believed that language proficiency is determined by nature, this group of behaviorism theorists asserted that behaviorist language abilities of a person are related to environmental factors. According to a famous theorist of behaviorism, B. F. Skinner, language is a behavior that can be learned through experience and reinforcement [10]. In other words, the child's mastery of a language takes place because the adults around him or her provide reinforcement or reward while teaching the child to speak. This theory was later improved upon by Albert Bandura who highlighted the view that language proficiency is related to imitation and the reinforcement from adults around them [12].

A major question in understanding language acquisition is how these capacities are picked up by infants from the linguistic input. Input in the linguistic context is defined as "all words, contexts, and other forms of language to which a learner is exposed, relative to acquired proficiency in first or second languages" [13]. Nativists find it difficult to believe, considering the hugely complex nature of human languages, and the relatively limited cognitive abilities of an infant, that infants are able to acquire most aspects of language without being explicitly taught. Children, within a few years of birth, understand the grammatical rules of their native language without being explicitly taught, as one learns grammar in school [13]. A range of theories of language acquisition have been proposed in order to explain this apparent problem. These theories, championed by the likes of Noam Chomsky and others, include innatism and Psychological nativism, in which a child is born prepared in some manner with these capacities, as opposed to other theories in which language is simply learned as other cognitive skills, including such mundane motor skills as learning to ride a bike.

The conflict between the theories assuming humans are born with syntactic knowledge and those that claim all such knowledge is the product of learning from one's environment is often referred to as the "Nature vs. Nurture" debate. Some think that there are some qualities of language acquisition that the human brain is automatically wired for (a "nature" component) and some that are shaped by the particular language environment in which a person is raised (a "nurture" component). However others, especially evolutionary biologists, strongly object to assuming syntactic knowledge is genetically encoded and provided by automatic wiring of the brain.

In this study, the behaviorism theory will be applied because the theorists asserted that behaviorist language abilities of a person are related to environmental factors besides that language is learned through experience and reinforcement, is found suitable and relevant to the study.

METHODOLOGY

This study applied quantitative survey method to gather information about the academic achievement of form four students in traditional Chinese literature. According to Creswell [14],

observation or survey is appropriate to describe the trends in a population. In this study, data collection was based on the respondents' feedback on a proficiency test and the questionnaire.

This study was conducted in two national-type secondary schools (NTSS 1 and NTSS 2) at the city of Klang, Selangor. The selection of these two schools as a place to study is because such a study has never been carried out while the majority of students in these schools are required to take the Chinese language subject in the LSA and MCE. In addition, the schools are located at the urban area and the students are exposed to the importance of learning Chinese language as a preparation for their future career.

Students in NTSS 1 and NTSS 2 are exposed to the teaching of traditional Chinese literature during the Chinese language lesson. The learning time is five periods or 200 minutes per week as scheduled in the school timetable. In national secondary schools, only three periods or 105 minutes per week are allocated to the teaching and learning Chinese language. In some national secondary schools, Chinese language lessons are taught in the mother tongue classes which are usually held in the evenings or on Saturdays.

In this study, the sample size was 104 out of a population of 1028 students in the two schools. Stratified random sampling method was employed in this study. The number of respondents from each school was 52 and gender was equally selected that form 26 female and 26 male students respectively.

Most of the students have obtained good result in the Chinese language subject during the LSA examination in 2011. A total of 26 (25%) of the respondents achieved grade A, 12 (11.5%) students obtained grade B, 7 (6.7%) students scored grade C, 6 (5.8%) students got grade D and only 1 (1%) student scored grade E.

About 64.1% of the respondents' father had education up to junior high school or high school level only. Most of them join the business world or work as skilled labors, salesmen, mechanics, taxi drivers, and carpenter. A similar situation was observed in the level of education among the respondents' mother. A total of 74.1% or 77 respondents completed secondary school education only. In addition, only 14.4% (15 people) of the respondents' mother were educated at the tertiary level. This certainly would explain why the study showed 65.4% (68 people) of the respondents' mother work as a housewife.

INSTRUMENTS OF THE STUDY

The data pertinent to this study was collected by administering two instruments of study; namely a set of questions testing students' achievement in learning the Chinese traditional literature as well as a set of questionnaires. The test was designed by the researcher based on the content of the curriculum and

textbooks that have been learned in lower secondary school level. This test emphasized more on the basic knowledge and understanding in the context of Chinese traditional literature.

A total of 50 questions constructed in three parts; part A was aim to test the understanding of three traditional Chinese prose, part B was two traditional Chinese poetry text comprehension while part C was concerned with the questions on *mingju jinghua* (Chinese catchphrase). For each part of this test, the questions were set based on the MCE format.

Content validity of the instrument was obtained by getting agreement on the construction of each item in the test papers from the head of Chinese organizing committee, Madam T; Chinese language trainers Madam W; assistant chief of LSA examiner, Mr. T and Chinese language unit, Assistant Director of the Selangor Department of Education, Ms. L who also have experiences of teaching Chinese language more than 10 years.

The questionnaire was constructed based on a theory of language acquisition that has been discussed before. This questionnaire consists of 40 items divided into five parts, namely Part A, B, C, D, and E. Section A related with the background of the respondents, Section B consisted of 7 items to identify the attitude of the respondents towards Chinese traditional literature. Part C consisted of 9 items to find out the influence of parents in the learning Chinese traditional literature of the students. Part D displayed 10 items to measure the agreement of the respondents with respect to the influence of teachers in students' proficiency in Chinese Traditional literature in the Chinese language subject. Part E consisted of 14 items that displayed the way of teaching from the opinion of the respondents to improve the learning achievements in Chinese traditional literature of the respondents. Parts B, C, D and E were measured with five point Likert scale from disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

After the verification was done, a pilot study conducted on 30 respondents to test the reliability of this questionnaire and Cronbach alpha value found at .81, this means that this instrument was consistent and further study can be pursued.

In this study, descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, standard deviation and percentage were used. Inferential statistics used were *t*-test to examine the difference between the variables, and Pearson-*r* correlation to determine the relationship between the variables.

FINDINGS

1. Students View towards Learning Chinese classical literature

There were 74 respondents or 71.2% who gave their views on learning the Chinese classical literature. Having studied and analyzed the data, it was found that the students' view on learning Chinese classical literature in both schools was negative. Details of the views of the students in learning Chinese classical literature are displayed in Table 1.

TABLE 1: STUDENTS' VIEWS TOWARDS LEARNING THE CHINEE CLASSICAL LITERATURE

Students' View	NTSS 1				NTSS 2				Total					
	M		F		M		F		M		F		Σ	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
1. Boring / hate	5	6.8	8	10.8	3	4.0	11	14.9	8	10.8	19	25.7	27	36.5
2. Don't understand/ difficult	2	2.7	5	6.8	6	8.1	4	5.4	8	10.8	9	12.2	17	22.9
3. Teaching is not interesting	2	2.7	3	4.0	1	1.3	5	6.8	3	4.0	8	10.8	11	14.9
4. Useless in future	1	1.3	2	2.7	2	2.7	1	1.3	3	4.0	3	4.0	6	8.1
5. Study for examination only	1	1.3	-	-	1	1.3	-	-	2	2.7	-	-	2	2.7
6. Satisfactory / yet to be improved	1	1.3	-	-	3	4.0	1	1.3	4	5.4	1	1.3	5	6.8
7. Favor subject because I may gain a lot of knowledge	4	5.4	-	-	1	1.3	1	1.3	5	6.8	1	1.3	6	8.1
Total	16	21.6	18	24.3	17	22.9	23	31.1	33	44.6	41	55.4	74	100

From Table 1, it was found that 61 (82.4%) of the respondents were of negative view with reference to the statements 1 to 4 listed. Female students in both schools held more negative view compared with males. For NTSS 1, 18 female students compared with 10 had negative thinking than male; meanwhile in NTSS 2, 21 female students compared with 12 male students have unpleasant feelings in learning classical literature.

Instead, there were only 2 respondents who considered the literature is important due to the examination demand. Five respondents reported being satisfied with the learning of Chinese classical literature and 5 (6.8%) students really enjoyed the learning of classical literature.

2. Difference in the Level of Acquisition of Chinese Traditional Literature in terms of Gender

To determine if there is any significant difference between male and female students in the terms of mastery of traditional Chinese literature, the *t*-test was used. The result is shown in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2: T-TEST ON ACQUISITION OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE LITERATURE BY GENDER

Gender	N	df	M	SD	t value	p	Effect size (Cohen d)
Male	52	102	37.69	10.48	-1.65	.103	.32
Female	52		41.42	12.55			

Table 4 shows that there is no significant difference in the acquisition of traditional Chinese literature between male ($M = 37.69, SD = 10.48$) and female students ($M = 41.42, SD = 12.55$), $t(102) = -1.65, p > .05$. The mean values for the male and female for the level of acquisition of Chinese Traditional literature were almost similar. However, the mean score for female was higher than for male. Cohen's *d* value, 0.32, shows a small effect size. This means that gender has little effect on achievement or mastery of traditional Chinese literature in this study.

3. Relationship between the Level of Acquisition of knowledge in Chinese Traditional Literature and Academic Achievement

To find out if there is a significant correlation between the level of acquisition of Chinese traditional literature knowledge and academic achievement of students in Chinese language, Pearson-*r* correlation test was used. Correlation between the grades in Chinese language obtained. The level of acquisition of knowledge of Chinese traditional literature in exam-oriented question (MFE) and the questions on basic knowledge of Chinese traditional literature (MFK) was also carried out in the study. Table 3 shows the correlation statistics.

TABLE 3: PEARSON-R CORRELATION FOR TEST MASTERY OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE LITETARURE AND LSA CHINESE GRADE

		N = 104		MFE*	MFK**
LSA	Chinese	Value Pearson- <i>r</i>	.686	.633	.561
Grade		Sig (2-tailed) <i>p</i>	.000	.000	.000

* MFE: exam-oriented question scores

**MFK: basic literature knowledge question scores

The study showed that there was a significant positive correlation between the test scores of Chinese traditional literature ($M = 39.56, SD = 11.66$) and grades in Chinese language obtained in the LSA examination ($M = 3.77, SD = 1.27$) with a value of $r = .686; p < .01$. There is also significant correlation between the grades in Chinese language in exam-oriented question scores ($r = .633; p < .01$),

and basic literature knowledge question scores ($r = .561; p < .01$). This means that the better the grades in Chinese language, the higher the scores in the acquisition of Chinese traditional literature knowledge in the acquisition tests. Similarly, the higher of the level of the acquisition of traditional Chinese literature among the respondents showed the higher of the grade obtained by them in the Chinese language subject.

DISCUSSION

The results show that overall the surveyed form four students held negative views about learning Chinese classical literature. Out of 74 respondents who gave their views on learning Chinese classical literature, 61 were of the view that learning Chinese classical literature is boring, it is hard and cannot be understood due to the lack of interesting teaching. They also argued that the classic literature has no economic value, and does not guarantee their future career, so they were not interested in learning it. Some students recommend that this classic literature component be taken away in order to generate students' interest in Chinese language subject.

These findings indicate that the phenomenon of perceived classic text difficulty is the main cause of the dropout of candidate who registered for Chinese Language subjects in the MCE compared with the LCA from 2007 to 2010. Difficulty of classic prose passages and comprehension questions in MCE Chinese Language is said to have caused a negative view of students and students do not want to sit for the Chinese language in MCE [15].

Mastery of classical literature is an effective mediator and culture inherited for everyone [16]. However the findings of this study show the view of the students toward Chinese classic literature is passive even though classic literature is an important component in Chinese language. Students should play the role of cultural heirs in the future. These findings show an alarming phenomenon and should not be underestimated.

Past studies [3, 4, 5] have shown that male students have lower language achievement than female students. Females are also said to prefer works of art and literature compared with males. In most countries and at both age levels, the gender of students was consistently an important factor in accounting for differences in literature achievement, with females outperforming males [6, 7, 8]. These differences were consistent with gender differences in students' literary interests [17].

However, in this study, the findings showed that there was no significant difference in terms of the mastery of Chinese traditional literature among male students ($M = 37.69, SD = 10.48$) and female students ($M = 41.42, SD = 12.55$), $t(102) = -1.65, p > .05$. In addition, the t -test on achievement in terms of grades in Chinese LSA also showed no significant difference between males ($M = 3.54, SD = 1.34$) and

females ($M = 4.00$, $SD = 1.72$) with $t(102) = -1.87$, $p > .05$. This means that females and males have roughly the same performance in the acquisition of Chinese traditional literature and Chinese language although the mean score for boys and girls is different.

Next, Pearson r analysis was done to determine the relationship between the acquisition of knowledge in Chinese traditional literature and an academic subject, which is Chinese language. The results of this study showed that there was a significant relationship between the acquisition of knowledge in Chinese traditional literature and academic achievement in Chinese with the Pearson- r value .69 and $p < .05$. This means that a high level of acquisition of Chinese traditional literature knowledge will help them in their learning of the Chinese language as well.

The findings are in line with findings of Ibrahim [18] (2006) in Malaysia that found students who can master Malay literature would perform better in the Malay Language examination. This finding is also consistent with some overseas studies, such as the studies by McClellan and Fields [19], Konrad, Helf, and Itoi [20] and Kinniburgh and Byrd [21], which have concluded that the use of children's literature in language teaching can improve students' academic achievement. This means that students who like literature will have a better academic achievement than those who do not like literature [22, 23, 24, 25] (Stevens, 2006; Bozorgi, 2009; Zhu, 2011; British Council, 2013).

As a result, this study is found verified the theory of behaviorism that language is a behavior that is learned through experience and reinforcement obtained in addition to regular contact with environmental factors. Difficulty in obtaining grade A in Chinese Language in MCE impeded the students' interest to learn and master the Chinese language and literature, particularly traditional literature. This coupled with the attitude of school administrators and parents who do not encourage the students to take the Chinese language subject in MCE due to fear of compromising their excellent results [26].

IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

In this study, it was found that interest of the students in traditional Chinese literature is very low, similar to their negative views on the classic Chinese literary. Thus, panel policy makers should focus on the interest of students when they select Chinese classic literature passages in the Chinese language textbook to be used in schools. The interesting and good classic literature passages in the Chinese language textbook will increase students' interest and enthusiasm to learn literature [27, 28].

The findings of this study will be of interest to various parties concerned, especially the Curriculum Development Centre, Ministry of Education Malaysia, which is responsible for the implementation of the Chinese language curriculum as outlined in the ISCC syllabus. The supervision and monitoring of the

effectiveness of teaching are interlinked; this means continuous and effective monitoring is essential to ensure the effectiveness of learning literature [29]. A study by Wan Yusof and Zainura [30] also found a significant relationship between supervision and academic achievements of students in the University of Technology Malaysia with Pearson-*r* value of .667.

In addition, the study done by Husain et.al [31] showed that the result of the commitment of the committee members of the Department of Electrical, Electronic and Systems, Faculty of Engineering and Building Environment, National University of Malaysia has shown good result which CGPA students has increased to 2.8 and it also appeared to a department that has a minimal total number of students being expelled. This showed the importance of the monitoring of students' academic achievements. Therefore, systematic monitoring should be done to ensure the effective implementation of the Chinese language curriculum in secondary schools as well. If these problems can be overcome, then the acquisition of knowledge in Chinese traditional literature by students would improve and this would lead to an improvement in students' personality as well [24].

This study, even though limited to Chinese Literature education in Malaysia, the problem of acquiring the knowledge of literature and its academic achievement is applicable to any other developing countries that emphasize on science and technology, but ignore literature as an important subject to enhance the emotion, personal and spiritual development of the students who will become the future leaders of the nation.

CONCLUSION

The role of literature in strengthening the culture of a nation cannot be overstated. Given today's students' lack of interest in learning Chinese traditional literature, effective measures should be taken to prevent this problem from becoming more widespread. The researchers believes that with the cooperation from the top management at the ministry of education to the teachers, the younger generation will learn more about the Chinese culture and ensure the continuation of Chinese education in Malaysia.

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