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Bridging Self-Directed Learning and Collaborative Learning to Nurture Chinese Language Communicative Skills of Young Pupils

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- In Chinese Language (CL) learning, it is conducive to connect independent, self-directed learning (SDL) of linguistic knowledge/skills and collaborative learning (CoL) activities (e.g., co-creation of artefacts, peer review) to accomplish the core national curricular goal of developing students' genuine communicative skills.
- An iterative SDL-CoL intervention can be achieved through gradual and systematic integration of the approach to the formal CL curriculum as a blended learning experience on the Student Learning Space (SLS) platform.
- "Differentiated Professional Development (PD)" should be applied to teachers of different profiles, prior knowledge/skills and pre-perceptions of (Information and Communications Technology) ICT in education.

BACKGROUND

Despite a major revamp in the national mother tongue curricula in 2012 which prioritises development of students' authentic communicative skills, many local CL teachers still tend to fall back to their prevailing teaching methods which privileges direct instructions and drill-and-practice of exam-style assignments. There is a need to raise teachers' awareness on why and how to transform their actual classroom practice.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This study aimed to develop the e-SDCL (e-Self Directed Chinese Learning) model. An ongoing learning experience of e-SDCL comprises multiple learning cycles. Each cycle corresponds to a CL textbook passage and encompasses any combination of four activity types: (a) in-class self-paced learning of linguistic knowledge/skills; (b) online individual artefact creation, sharing and peer review; (c) out-of-class learning journey for collaborative, contextualised "learning by doing" and peer review; (d) learning consolidation by individual or group creation of "higher-level" artefacts and peer review. Seven Teaching and Learning (T&L) packages that facilitate students' SDL in activities (a) and (b) have been developed; and (c) and (d) are essentially comprising CoL activities. An eight-month pilot study was carried out in Primary 3 classes at two schools.

KEY FINDINGS

The pilot students showed their favourable attitudes in terms of their learning interest in and "perceived usefulness (for CL learning)" of e-SDCL lessons. The pilot students' post-oral and writing test scores were significantly higher than students from comparison classes

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in terms of linguistic fluency, accuracy and complexity after controlling their pre-test scores. The pilot teachers demonstrated their improved Technological, Pedagogical and Content Knowledge (TPACK) for facilitating meaningful learning. Qualitative analyses on the students' and teachers' pre- and post-interviews and the project PD sessions revealed the reasons behind these findings as well as some caveats, such as (1) teachers' and students' overfocus on the roles and the effects of ICT but losing sight on the pedagogical-centric positioning of e-SDCL; (2) Teachers' perceptions of the roles of ICT should play in their students' overall learning process may affect their ways of using the tools, even resulting in deviation from the intended lesson designs; (3) Teachers' perceived challenges and attitudes in developing e-SDCL lesson packages on their own would impact the sustainability of the learning approach.

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Importance of connecting SDL and CoL in language learning for communication: The underpinning concept of e-SDCL is the bridging of SDL (where differentiated instructions may kick in) and CoL (creating opportunities for student-student interactions) activities. Thus, e-SDCL constitutes our interpretation of the national curriculum with a greater emphasis on bridging "active learners" (by the SDL component) and "proficient users" (by the CoL component). We also see e-SDCL as a means to increase CL teachers' awareness of the essence of the national curriculum, and the strategies to facilitate a more holistic CL learning experience for students.

Strategising improvement and diffusion of e-SDCL: We recommend (1) implement e-SDCL in a longer term, e.g., P3 to P5, with simpler learning activities to be facilitated at the early stage for students to pick up in a more "leisure" pace, and then accumulate other building blocks of e-SDCL later; (2) with a higher penetration of SLS in schools and new features including social media being incorporated, the entire e-SDCL learning experience can be implemented on the national platform; (3) transform e-SDCL into a blended learning practice with certain activities such as the SDL component or peer review being carried out at home, and new authentic activities being infused which involve family members and/or out-of-school environments.

Implications on teachers' readiness and PD to implement ICT-rich lessons: We envisage differentiated PD for teachers of different profiles or starting points. They may involve in the same project or PD activity, albeit with differentiated roles to start with. Teachers with greater readiness may take the lead by teaching pilot classes and involve other colleagues to assist in learning package designs preparations. Additional attention/support (or differentiated PD activities) may be applied to teachers with lower readiness to assimilate them in the e-Pedagogy practice.

PARTICIPANTS

A total 117 P3 students and seven teachers from two schools participated in the pilot study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study involved one or two pilot classes and one comparison class at each participating school. During the eight-month intervention period, 5 out of 13 textbook passages covered in the formal curriculum were conducted in e-SDCL mode while the rest were delivered with the regular instructional approach. The comparison classes delivered the same set of textbook passages, all with the regular approach. All pilot and comparison students took pre- and post-surveys, pre- and post-oral and writing tests which were scored with a rubric to assess their communicative skills. All pilot teachers and selected pilot students were interviewed before and after the intervention. All the e-SDCL lessons and PD meetings were video-/audio-recorded for qualitative analysis.

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