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A study on the teaching of non-Chinese students in Malaysia primary schools

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Abstract

Considering Malaysia with Chinese language education for both Chinese and non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools, the academic performance of non-Chinese students is not as good as those Chinese students. Therefore, the present study investigated this issue from the perspective of teachers. Through questionnaires and face-to-face interviews, this research has looked into the teaching of non-Chinese students. The findings show that teachers are giving a “poor” performance evaluation to non-Chinese students in terms of their learning patterns, learning attitude, learning methods, and learning outcomes.

Keywords: Chinese primary schools; non-Chinese students; teachers; second language; southern Kuala Lumpur.

Un estudio sobre la enseñanza de estudiantes no chinos en escuelas primarias chinas de Malasia

Resumen

Si se considera a Malasia con educación en chino para estudiantes chinos y no chinos en escuelas primarias chinas, el rendimiento académico de los estudiantes que no son chinos no es tan bueno como esos estudiantes chinos. Por lo tanto, el presente estudio investigó este tema desde la perspectiva de los docentes. A través de cuestionarios y entrevistas cara a cara, esta investigación ha analizado la enseñanza de estudiantes no chinos. Los hallazgos muestran que los maestros están dando una evaluación de desempeño "deficiente" a los estudiantes no

chinos en términos de sus patrones de aprendizaje, actitud de aprendizaje, métodos de aprendizaje y resultados de aprendizaje.

Palabras clave: escuelas primarias chinas; estudiantes no chinos; maestros segundo lenguaje; el sur de Kuala Lumpur.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian Chinese are not the only students learning Chinese language in recent years. The trend shows that numerous non-Chinese students are studying in Chinese primary schools. The increasing number of non-Chinese students enrolling in Chinese primary schools has been the preoccupation of the Chinese society and the academic circles; the teaching of non-Chinese students however has hardly received any attention.

In Malaysia, the Chinese language education in Chinese primary schools is a mother-tongue education for Malaysian Chinese whereby Mandarin is the medium of instruction. There are both Chinese and non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools. The majority of the first group of students speaks Mandarin or a Chinese dialect as their first language, the rest of them speak English or other languages as their first language; as for the latter group of students, their first language is generally their mother tongue, i.e. other Malaysian ethnic languages. Mandarin is the main medium of instruction in Chinese primary schools and used in the schools' first-language teaching method, for both Chinese and non-Chinese students, and whether or not Mandarin is their first or second language. From the perspective of the mother tongue and the first language, the Chinese language education in Chinese primary school is

considered to be both mother-tongue and first-language education for Chinese students; this is contrary for non-Chinese students. There were no non-Chinese students who studied in Chinese primary schools in the early days; however, with the increase of the economic value of Chinese language, and thanks to the great school spirit and outstanding academic performances of Chinese primary schools, an increasing number of non-Chinese parents are enrolling their children to Chinese primary schools. However, few have paid attention to the issues of non-Chinese students studying in Chinese primary schools.

2. RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The issues of non-Chinese students studying in Chinese primary schools were first noticed by the Deputy Minister of Education Datuk Seri Dr. Fong Chan Onn on October 17, 1993, and his office has published a report about the number of non-Chinese students studying in Chinese primary schools from 1989 to 1993. Since then, the Ministry of Education published the number of non-Chinese students enrolled in Chinese primary schools annually until January 31, 1999. However, since 1999, the Ministry of Education has only published the said number twice: the first time was in 2002 when the Ministry of Education announced the report of the Independent Investigation Committee of the Ethnicity Division, which was established by the Ministry of Education, there were in total 24,000 Malay students studying in Chinese primary schools; the second time was in 2005, when the then Minister of Education Datuk Seri Hishammuddin Tun Hussein announced to the media that the percentage of Malay students studying in Chinese primary schools was in

total 7%, which accounted for approximately 4,400. Since then the Ministry of Education has not published the number of non-Chinese students studying in Chinese primary schools. (Shum Thin Khee, 2006)

The United Chinese School Teachers' Association of Malaysia (UCSTAM) (2007) made the discovery about the staggering number of non-Chinese students studying in micro-sized Chinese primary schools during its survey done on nationwide Chinese primary schools with less than 30 students or below from February till May 2007. In 2007, out of 106 Chinese primary schools, the number of non-Chinese students accounted for more than 50% in 35 of them and 50% (same amount as the Chinese students) in 2 of them. Stephanie Tay Cin Wun (2012) did an investigation by means of questionnaires and interviews on 11 Chinese primary schools in Sarawak. She found that even though the average use rate of Mandarin for non-Chinese students during the class was as high as 4.48, these students spoke a pidgin Mandarin after class and 45% of them failed their monthly tests.

On 9th January 2015, UCSTAM published "*the Evolution and Status of the Number of Primary School Students and Schools in Malaysia from 2000 to 2014*". This report shows that in 2010, the total number of non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools nationwide was 72,443, which accounted for 11.84%; in 2011, these students accounted for 12% (Malay 9%, Indian 2%, other ethnicity 1%); in 2014, 15.31%, which was 87,463 students. Non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools made up the highest proportion of non-mainstream ethnic groups in all types of primary schools. On 15th June 2015, UCSTAM did another survey on the situations of Chinese primary school in Kuala Lumpur. Again, the same

trend was reported in that, from 2010 to 2014, the number of non-Chinese students studying in Chinese primary schools in Kuala Lumpur had been on the rise. In 2014, there was an increase of 15,020 students in total.

Despite all these reports, the problems faced by teachers of Chinese primary schools in teaching non-Chinese students are still remain underexplored. It is startling to realize that the non-Chinese students are not performing as good as those Chinese students studying in Chinese primary schools due to their learning motivations, attitudes and the pedagogy used in the schools. Hence, the present study investigated the difficulties of teachers in teaching non-Chinese students in a more in-depth and focused perspective.

3. METHODS

3.1 Participants

The target respondents were all the 187 Chinese language teachers in the primary schools in southern Kuala Lumpur. The total number of questionnaires returned was 185, and 4 incomplete questionnaires were eliminated. The valid questionnaires were 181. In addition, this study interviewed two teachers from every school in order to solve some of the questions arising from the questionnaires.

3.2 Research design

Both quantitative and qualitative research tools were used. The quantitative instrument was in the form of a questionnaire survey to elicit information regarding teachers' experiences in teaching non-Chinese students. It has two sections:

Section A elicits demographic information of the teachers.

Section B elicits information from the teachers regarding their experiences in teaching non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools.

The questionnaire was divided into 9 parts: the first part mainly inquires the background information of the respondents; the second part mainly looks into the Chinese language teachers' evaluation of the students; the third part is the teaching activities that appeal to non-Chinese students; the fourth part is the learning patterns of these students in class; the fifth part is their usual state of mind in class; the sixth part is the top challenges faced by the teachers while teaching; the seventh part is the approaches to helping the students solve problems; the eighth part is the results obtained from the efforts made in teaching; the ninth part is the homework allocation after teaching.

The qualitative instrument used for the focus group interview comprises two components:

- i) A form that elicits basic background information of each interviewee.

- ii) A set of open-ended questions to elicit teachers' experiences in teaching non-Chinese students.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Background information of teachers

According to the background information of the teachers, they can be categorized by their gender, age, qualification, classes taught at the school and whether they are serving as a class teacher. In terms of gender, there are 27 male teachers and 154 female teachers. 17% of the teachers are under 30 years old, 51% are between 30 to 40 years old, 18% are between 41 to 50 years old and 14% are 51 years old and above.

With regard to their qualifications, 77.3% (140) obtained university degrees, 19.9% (36) received teachers' training for high school, the remaining 2.8% (5) hold a postgraduate degree. In terms of the class standards taught by the surveyed teachers, 42% of them teach Standard 5 and 6, 33% teach Standard 3 and 4, 25% teach Standard 1 and 2. Among the surveyed 181 teachers, 140 (77%) of them serve as a homeroom teacher.

4.2 The Chinese language teachers' evaluation of non-Chinese students

Graph 1 shows the teachers’ evaluation of non-Chinese students. Judging from their learning patterns, learning attitude, learning methods and learning outcomes, most teachers gave a “poor” evaluation. 117 (64%) teachers rated their learning patterns as “poor”; 120 (66.3%) teachers considered the learning attitude of non-Chinese students to be “poor”; also, 133 (73.5%) teachers judged the learning methods of non-Chinese students as “poor”; in terms of learning outcomes, 126 (69.6%) teachers indicated “poor”.

The overall evaluation of the learning patterns, learning attitude, learning methods and learning outcomes of non-Chinese students is negative. Combining “poor” and “very poor”, the lowest evaluation rate is learning attitude, which is 75.7%, the second lowest is learning methods, which is 84%, then learning patterns 85.1% and lastly the highest is learning outcomes 85.6%.

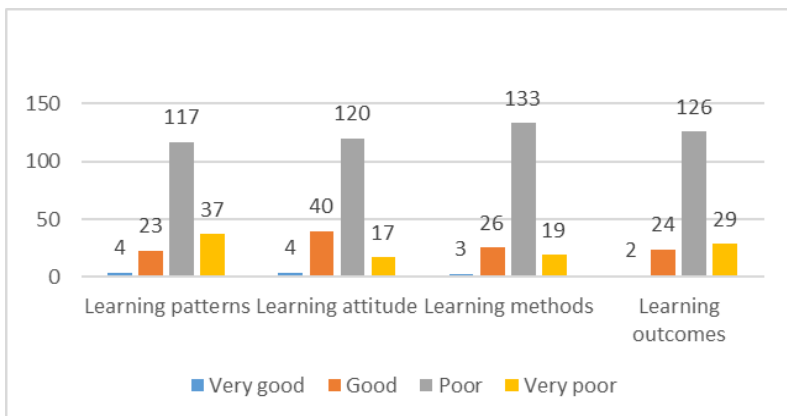


Fig.1 Teachers’ evaluation of the students

4.3 The teaching activities that appeal to non-Chinese students

From the teaching activities appealing to non-Chinese students in Graph 2, there are reading, Mandarin conversations, dictation, exercises and homework, character-recognition and writing. 102 (56.4%) teachers believed that non-Chinese students enjoy Mandarin conversation class the most, 41 (22.7%) teachers deemed the (second) favorite class is Chinese characters-recognition and -writing class, the next is Reading class chosen by 23 (12.7%) teachers and dictation rated by 9 (4.9%) teachers. The least favorite class is exercises and homework, which is only voted by 6 (3.3%) teachers.

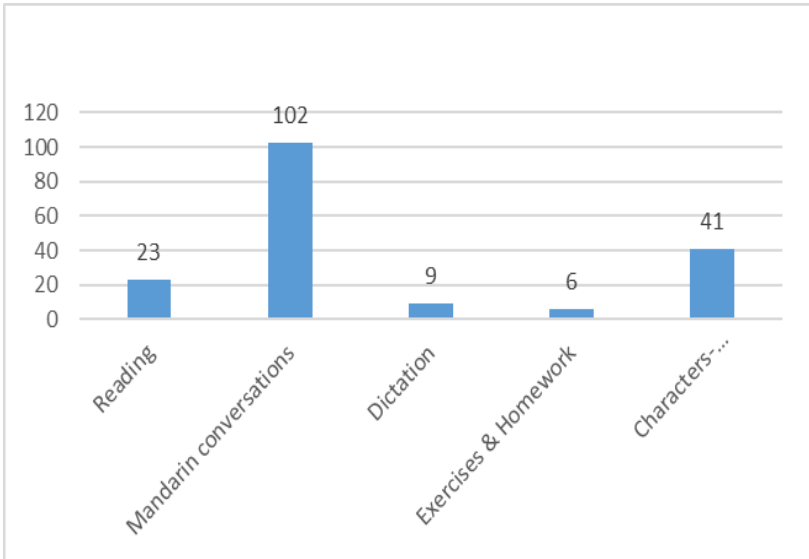


Fig2. Teaching activities that appeal to students

4.4 Classroom Learning patterns

Graph 3 shows the learning patterns of students in class, which can be 1) listening, self-reflection, note-taking, 2) discussion with teachers and classmates, or 3) self-studying alone. 62.5% of the teachers remarked that more often than not, non-Chinese students are seen sitting and studying alone. 29.8% of the teachers indicated that non-Chinese students discuss and learn together with the teachers and other classmates. Only 7.7% of them deemed that non-Chinese students learn quite independently as they listen, self-reflect and take-note simultaneously.

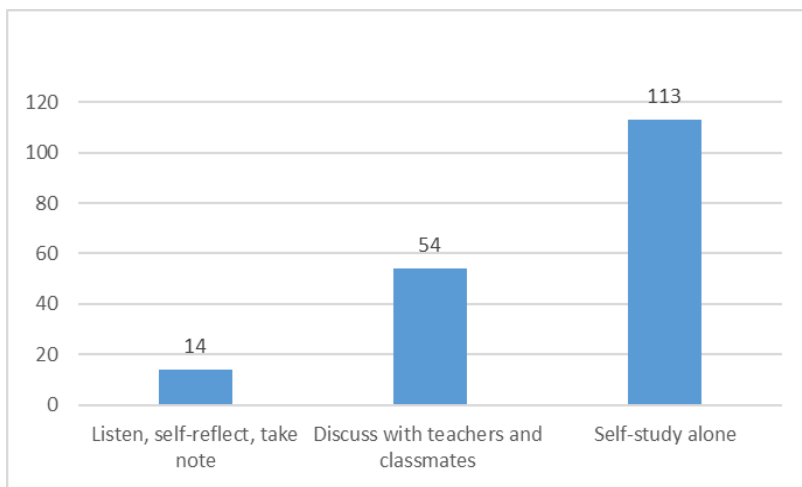


Fig 3. Learning patterns of students in class

4.5 Usual States of Mind in Class

Graph 4 shows the usual states of mind of the students in class, i.e. zoning out or being absent-minded, listening attentively to the teacher, reflecting and sensing, or actively participating. 42.5% of the teachers

pointed out that, non-Chinese students are often found zoned out or absent-minded. 37.6% of them believed that non-Chinese students listen attentively to the teachers; 16.6% of them said that non-Chinese students are sometimes in a state of reflecting and sensing. Only 3.3% of teachers considered that non-Chinese students actively participate in the classroom activities, interacting well with the teachers and classmates.

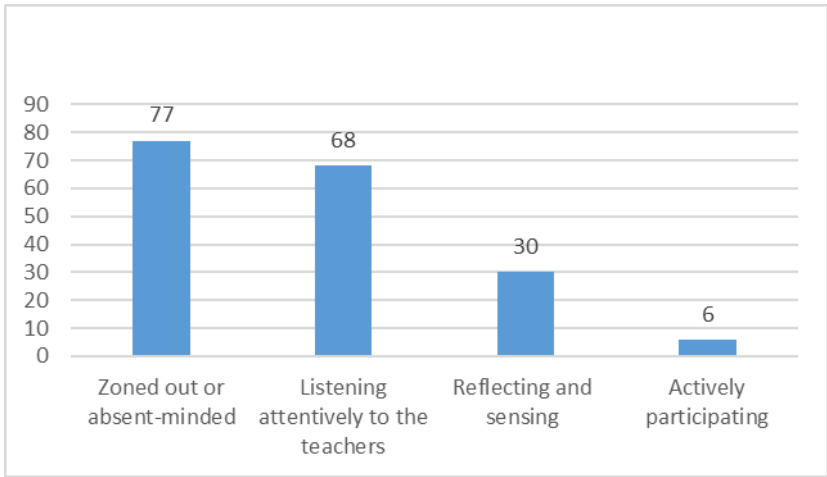


Fig 4. Usual states of mind in class

4.6 Top challenges faced by the teachers while teaching

Graph 5 shows the top challenges faced by the teachers while teaching non-Chinese students, i.e. their incomprehension, inability to speak Mandarin, reading difficulty or inability to write Chinese. 33.2% of the teachers said that what is most challenging is that non-Chinese students do not understand the teachers; 28.7% of the teachers considered another challenge to be non-Chinese students' inability to express

themselves; 21% of the teachers perceived non-Chinese students' writing inability as quite challenging; 17.1% of the teachers pointed out that non-Chinese students are facing reading difficulty.

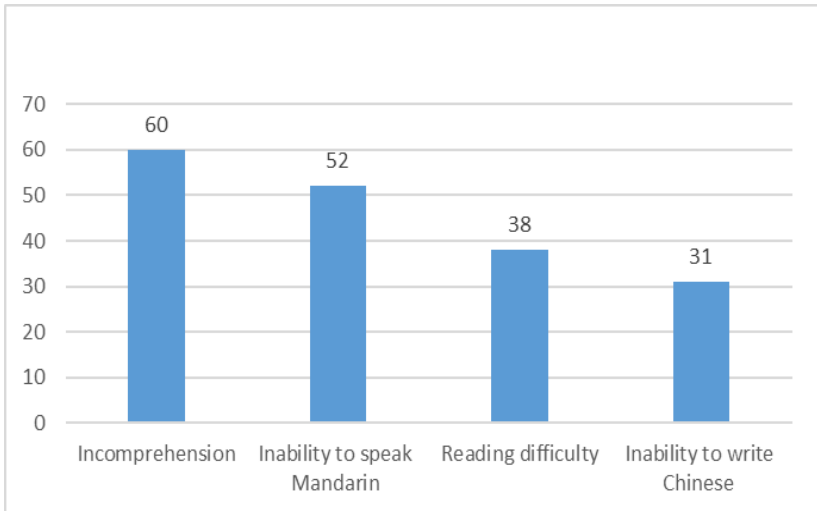


Fig 5. Top challenges while teaching

4.7 Approaches to helping the students solve problems

Graph 6 displays the approaches to helping the students solve problems, i.e. do a research, consult other more experienced teachers, allow other classmates to assist in explaining and ignore that particular student. The first approach that came to the mind of 61.9% of the teachers is to allow other classmates to assist in explaining; 29.8% of the teachers actively consult or seek the assistance of or discuss with other teachers; only 1.1% of the teachers choose to give up and ignore that particular non-Chinese student.

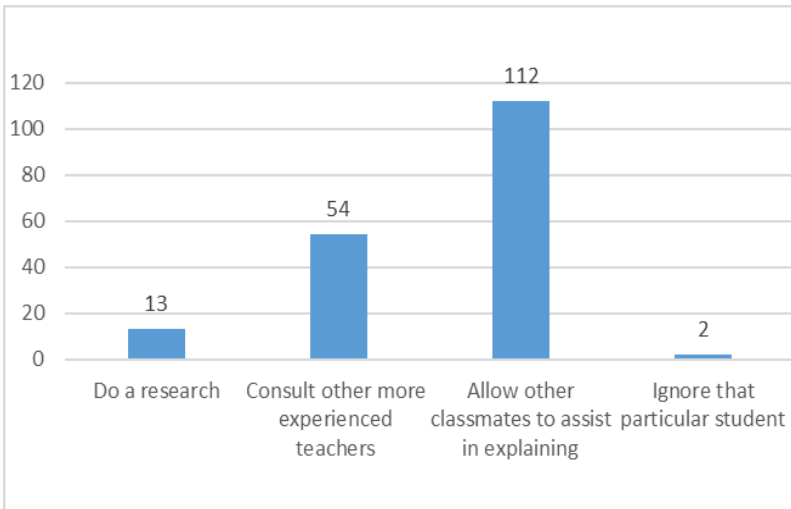


Fig 6. Approaches to helping the students solve problems

4.8 Results obtained from the efforts made in teaching

Graph 7 demonstrates the results obtained from the efforts made in the teaching, i.e. excellent results, mediocre results, just starting to make efforts, and irrespective. Under this circumstance, 80.7% of the teachers maintained that they are striving to teach non-Chinese students, but the results obtained are just average. However, only 11% of the teachers asserted that their efforts have reaped excellent results.

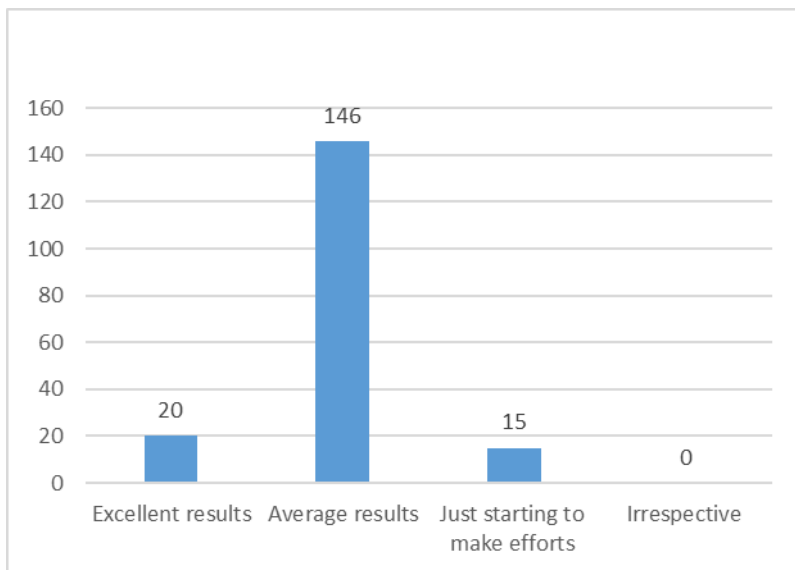


Fig 7. Results from the efforts made in teaching

4.9 Homework allocation

Graph 8 shows that the different actions of the students in response to the allocated homework after teaching: complete it independently and seriously, discuss with classmates and finish it together, copy the homework from a classmate who has completed it, and leave it undone. With regard to the level of homework completion among non-Chinese students, 56.4% of the teachers observed that non-Chinese students always seek help from other classmates to complete their homework. 22.1% of the teachers remarked that non-Chinese students copy their homework from top students; and 15.5% of the teachers commented that non-Chinese students often leave their homework undone; only 6% of the teachers

acknowledged that non-Chinese students complete their homework independently.

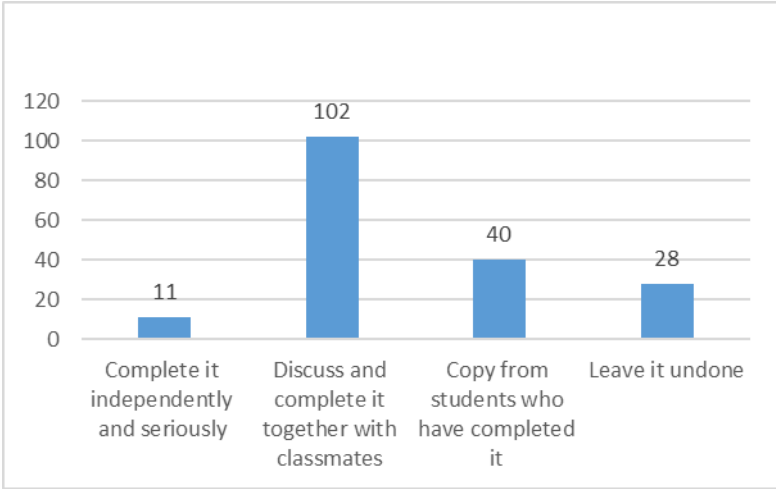


Fig 8. Homework allocation

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Research on Chinese language teachers' evaluation of the students

The teachers' overall evaluation of non-Chinese students in terms of their learning patterns, learning attitude, learning methods and learning outcomes is fairly negative, a rather "poor" evaluation.

The main reason is that non-Chinese students mix English and Malay while speaking Mandarin and learning Chinese. They rarely communicate with standard Mandarin and often avoid relatively difficult

grammar and vocabulary, replacing them directly with Malay or English grammar and words. Furthermore, given that our research covered the area of Kuala Lumpur where most Chinese families are financially well-off and highly educated, most Chinese students are well-acquainted with both Malay and English languages. Due to such an environment, non-Chinese students communicate by relying heavily on their most familiar language to mix and replace words. With these kinds of learning patterns and learning attitude, students are certain to not be yielding the desired learning outcomes.

In addition, Mandarin is the first-language medium of instruction in Chinese primary schools; it is however not the mother tongue of non-Chinese students. The learning methods and learning outcomes are naturally inadequate for the students whose mother tongue is not Mandarin as they are having a difficulty to catch up with the teaching progress (Abdillah, 2019).

5.2 Teaching activities appealing to non-Chinese students

Most teachers observed that the teaching activities appealing to non-Chinese students are conversation class and characters-recognition and -writing class; dictation and exercises homework however are not appealing to them. The methodologies for conversational class and characters-recognition and -writing class are more enjoyable in that teachers use anime, games or task-based classroom activities to stimulate learning motivation of the students. Dictation and exercises are on the contrary more boring and tedious as memorization and drills are often

instructed in the first language. Non-Chinese students find it difficult enough to have to learn in a language that is not their mother tongue, not to mention these activities are boring and tedious, which all together make them dislike dictation and exercises.

5.3 Classroom learning patterns and usual states of mind

Non-Chinese students are rarely seen studying independently at their seats, discussing with teachers and classmates on their study, or being actively engaged in the class listening, reflecting and note-taking. We gathered from some class teachers that the reasons are that most of the students do not understand the instructions, do not comprehend the text or are not able to express their own thoughts. Also, the majority of the non-Chinese students in Chinese primary schools are Malays who are by nature a shy and reserved people. They would not go to their teachers or classmates for help when they have encountered learning problems. Or it could also be that due to the stringent regulations on students' conduct and discipline in Chinese primary schools, students are too afraid to ask questions; they instead sit alone in a daze.

Besides that, the medium of instruction of all subjects is Mandarin in Chinese primary schools; teachers naturally teach in the first language to mostly Chinese. Therefore, even with the enrolment of non-Chinese students, the teaching methodology and medium remain the same. Consequently, the biggest problem facing non-Chinese students in their studies lies in the language. Not having yet mastered Mandarin, they struggle to understand the teachers in class and are left sitting by

themselves, lost in their own thoughts and unable to actively engage in classroom activities. We gathered from some class teachers that non-Chinese students' results of other subjects are relatively poor, for instance, most Malay students score poorly not only in subjects taught in Mandarin, but also in Malay subject. The main reason is that Malay language being taught in the second language in Chinese primary schools is perceived as oversimplified. Feeling overconfident that it is easy, Malay students no longer make the efforts to study it.

This explains why 37.6% of the teachers observed that non-Chinese students mainly listen to the teachers; 16.6% of the teachers perceived that non-Chinese students are sometimes found to be reflecting and sensing; only 3.3% of the teachers deemed that non-Chinese students are being actively engaged in classroom activities, interacting with the teachers and classmates.

5.4 Top challenges teachers face

Some of the greatest difficulties in teaching are as follows: 33.2% of the teachers considered the greatest difficulty as students' incomprehension of what they say, whereas 28.7% of the teachers described that another difficulty is that non-Chinese students are, more often than not, unable to express their thoughts. These students have not reached the level of proficiency in Mandarin/Chinese required for their age, especially in listening and speaking- the two major language skills. As all subjects in Chinese primary schools are taught in Mandarin, non-Chinese students not being able to understand nor express their own

thoughts are being hard-pressed, especially in studying other subjects. The overall scores of these students therefore are estimated to be poor understandably.

5.5 Approaches to helping students solve problems

Whenever a non-Chinese student is experiencing difficulty in learning, 61.9% of the teachers first think of allowing other students to assist in explaining, 29.8% of the teachers actively consult other teachers to assist and discuss with them, only 1.1 % of the teachers admitted they would give up and ignore that particular non-Chinese student. From these reactions we find that when non-Chinese students are faced with difficulties, teachers fall into the habit of consulting other teachers or allowing other students to assist, instead of doing research online. The main reason is that most teachers from Chinese primary schools are busy and swamped with teaching, preparation and school's administrative work. This is why 1.1% of the teachers choose to give up and ignore the one particular non-Chinese student instead of making the time to understand and become skilled at second-language teaching methods.

5.6 Results obtained from the efforts made in teaching

Concerning the results obtained from the efforts made in teaching, 80.7% of the teachers reckoned making considerable efforts in teaching non-Chinese students, though regrettably the results obtained are unimpressive. This can be due to unmatched expertise; even if they pour

out all that they have learned into teaching non-Chinese students, they may not be able achieve the expected results. The teachers from Chinese primary schools are indisputably qualified as a professional to teach Chinese students, 80.1% of them have university or postgraduate qualifications. However, the professional training they received from teacher training universities (Normal Universities) is using Mandarin for first-language teaching methods, not for second-language or foreign-language teaching methods.

This explains why during the interview of randomly selected teachers, they expressed the desire to learn second-language or foreign-language teaching methods. However due to hectic administrative work and teaching affairs and having been striving hard to teach both Chinese and non-Chinese students, these teachers find no time to learn how to use Mandarin to teach as the second language or foreign language.

5.7 Homework allocation after class

With respect to the homework completion of non-Chinese students, 56.4% of the teachers remarked that non-Chinese students always seek help from other classmates to complete their homework. 22.1% of the teachers noted that non-Chinese students copy their homework from top students. 15.5% of the teachers observed that non-Chinese students habitually leave their homework undone.

We therefore deduce from these statistics that non-Chinese students are quite serious about their studies. Many actively seek help and discuss

with their classmates in order to complete the allocated homework and some of the students copy from top students. Possibly due to the fear of the punishments for students with incomplete homework, students are prone to copying their homework from top students, instead of seeking help from other classmates to complete it on their own. Moreover, when students are actively “discussing” with their classmates in order to complete the homework, their classmates are telling them the answers directly. Consequently, there could be no desired learning outcomes.

6. CONCLUSION

Because of the limited Chinese proficiency of non-Chinese students studying in Chinese primary school, it is recommended that teachers categorize the students of two different levels of proficiency in class. Before the class, teachers should first prepare homework of different levels to Chinese and non-Chinese students, then divide the class time into two: while teaching Chinese students, assign non-Chinese students exercises to do and then vice-versa. In addition, teachers can also categorize the students into different groups and designate a few Chinese students with excellent results to be little teachers to lead, supervise and teach 3 non-Chinese classmates in small groups. In this way, these little student-teachers will play the role of a teacher in class and after class, guiding other classmates in difficulty. Exercising their role as the little teachers, they will look for shy students every day to study together and build a mutually trusting relationship. This method would allow the shy and reserved students to take a step out of their self-isolation and overcome their shyness to start asking questions to teachers and

classmates. Under the little teachers' guidance, non-Chinese students will guide each other, learn and grow together.

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