

A Survey of Issues of Activity-Based Teaching in The Context of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language in Beijing

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Received: March 21, 2024 Accepted: April 19, 2024 Online Published: May 16, 2024

doi:10.5430/jct.v13n2p374 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v13n2p374>

Abstract

This study aims to explore the issues associated with activity-based teaching in the context of teaching Chinese as a foreign language (TCFL) in Beijing. This study adopts a descriptive quantitative survey method. To identify the issues encountered by teachers in activity-based teaching, we administered a questionnaire to collect data. The survey includes three aspects: activity design, activity implementation, and activity evaluation. The sample for this study comprises 234 TCFL teachers in Beijing. The results indicate that TCFL teachers are confronted with issues in the areas of activity design, implementation, and evaluation when conducting activity-based teaching.

Keywords: issues, activity-based teaching, teacher, teaching Chinese as a foreign language

1. Introduction

Activity-based teaching refers to activities that are offered in the classroom. Engagement in the learning process and students' participation are the key elements of activity-based teaching (Başer, 2020). Activity-based teaching provides scaffolding for students and fosters connections with their classmates, which leads to enhanced effort and motivation (Anwer, 2019).

Xun (2021) has emphasized that activity-based teaching has become a major strategy for promoting quality education and implementing new curricula. Therefore, it has become a focal point of China's educational reform in the 21st century. At the same time, classroom activities play a crucial role in TCFL (Xun, 2021).

In fact, it is a complex task for a teacher to effectively perform an activity. Ruo (2020) stated that there are currently many issues with activity-based teaching. Therefore, this study aims to identify the issues related to activity-based teaching in the context of TCFL.

2. Literature Review

The learning activity should be intentional, meaningful, and useful. These activities should enable students to engage with and develop their skills, knowledge and comprehension. Mehmood and Kanwal (2021) found that activity-based teaching can adopt Dramatization, Gamification, Group Discussion, Role Play, Brain Storming, Problem-solving, Discovery Learning, Project Learning, and Concept Mapping. Azuka (2013) found that the Discovery Approach, Small Group Learning and Practical Work can promote activity-based teaching. Agbenyeku (2017) points out that activity-based teaching can adopt the following: discovery approach, cooperative learning, problem-solving, inquiry method, project method, and demonstration.

Many scholars have conducted research on the principles of activity-based teaching, which provides guidance for teachers on how to do activity-based teaching. Wen (2019) believes that activity design should follow the following principles: (a) Combining language knowledge points, (b) Rules are easy to operate, (c) Time arrangement, (d) High participation. Shu (2022) proposed four principles for activity design: (a) Target towards the instructional goals, (b) Communicative nature of the content, (c) Interest, (d) Multi-level of the content. Samperio (2017) believes that activity design needs to follow the principle of matching students' preferences. Yu (2023) proposed four principles for

activity design:(a)Combining with teaching objectives, (b)Logic, (c)Stimulating students' thinking, (d)Reasonable density. Kardena (2019) believes that there are four points to pay attention to when implementing classroom activities:(a) Rearranging their seats, (b) Explaining the purpose of the activity, (c)Explaining the progress of the activity(d) Establishing rules. According to Wei (2012), when implementing activities in the classroom, it is important to focus on two key points:(a)Explaining the rules of the activities and (b)Increasing interactive communication with their students.

However, current activity-based teaching is related to many issues (Ruo, 2020). Many scholars have undertaken extensive research on these issues, which have been categorized into three main areas: activity design, activity implementation, and activity evaluation.

2.1 Activity Design

A significant body of research has been conducted on specific activity design issues. Firstly, one concern is the single-form activities. A recent study by Pan (2022) investigated the application and effectiveness of classroom games. The conclusions indicated a tendency among teachers to perform a single type of classroom activity, which gives rise to a lack of diversity and richness in classroom games.

Secondly, there is an issue regarding real-life nature. Yan (2014) conducted a study on the real-life issues of classroom activities, revealing that many classroom activities can be carried out in real-world scenarios, but they often fail to conform to the characteristics and principles of real-life situations.

Thirdly, there is a mismatch between activities and the age-specific characteristics and knowledge levels of students. Through classroom observation, Shan (2020) identified a lack of student analysis among TCFL teachers, so the selected activities do not match the age characteristics and knowledge level of the students. As a result, the activities are either too difficult or too easy for execution.

Fourthly, activities are misaligned with students' preferences. In a survey conducted by Samperio (2017), 51 frequently employed activities, which represent 82% of the total activities included in the questionnaires, did not match students' preferences.

Fifthly, a notable concern is related to the low participation rate in activities. Hong's (2023) study on the design of practical application activities showed a common practice among many teachers that limits participation to a small number of students in order to save time. This approach, however, results in low participation rates.

2.2 Activity Implementation

Many scholars also conduct extensive research on specific activity implementation issues. Firstly, it is common for teachers to perceive the rearrangement of tables and chairs as laborious and time-consuming; therefore, they ask students to carry out activities in a confined space, which hampers the effectiveness of activities (Jiao, 2022). Kardena's (2019) viewpoint is consistent with Jiao's, as seen in the transcription of the interview, which reveals a lack of consideration among the teachers for seating arrangements. The teacher was unaware of or did not realize how seating arrangements could influence her control over the progress of her students.

Secondly, teachers neglect the establishment of rules for students to follow during classroom activities. Kardena (2019) observed that teachers did not provide detailed information about group activity rules, nor did they enforce consequences when students violated the rules. Instead, the teachers simply informed students of the tasks to be completed. Therefore, students are unaware that they must obey these rules, so they have developed their own potentially conflicting rules that directly impair the progress and quality of group work.

Thirdly, effective time management in classrooms can help complete teaching tasks (Wade, 2020). Cong (2018) pointed out that various unexpected situations cause time wastage during the implementation of classroom activities. However, even in cases where time was lost, teachers did not pay attention to the remaining time and neglected to make timely adjustments to the time allocation for the following activities, resulting in the inability to complete the teaching tasks (Cong, 2018).

2.3 Activity Evaluation

Through classroom observation, Gui (2021) identified a lack of formative evaluation in TCFL. Teachers were found not to dive deep into students' activities during the activity process, not to fully inquire into and solve students' problems and not to provide them with timely evaluations. At the same time, through case analysis and interviews, Wan (2018) points out the ineffectiveness of classroom summative testing. In the preparation stage of the test, experienced teachers were absent in the question setting and review, as well as the analysis of test content validity of the test. After the test, the teacher failed to analyse the test data and provide prompt feedback to students. As a result,

students cannot measure their level of understanding in a timely manner, and teachers are also unable to evaluate the effectiveness of the activity.

In conclusion, previous research has revealed the issues of activity-based teaching in activity design, implementation, and evaluation. This study aims to determine whether the above issues also exist in activity-based TCFL in Beijing and propose suggestions to promote activity-based teaching in this field.

3. Methodology

This study adopts TCFL teachers from universities in Beijing as a sample. As China's political and educational centre, Beijing is known for its high-quality education. Beijing serves as not only the pioneer province in the development of TCFL but also boasts the largest number of foreign students in China (Xun, 2019). Therefore, in this stage, the TCFL teachers in Beijing universities are adopted as samples to determine the issues of activity-based teaching. Xun(2023) pointed out that there are currently about 440 TCFL teachers in Beijing. According to krejcie and morgan's table, the researcher should chose a sample size of 214 TCFL teachers in Beijing, which is the minimum sample required. In this study, the researchers received a total of 260 survey questionnaires. By removing the unqualified questionnaires, a total of 234 survey questionnaires remained, which also met the requirements for the number of questionnaires in this study.

3.1 Instrument

The researchers designed a questionnaire to determine the issues that teachers encounter in classroom activity-based TCFL teaching. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: the demographic information about teachers and the issues that teachers encounter in classroom activity-based TCFL teaching. According to the literature review, the researcher divided the questionnaire into three components: activity design, activity implementation, and activity evaluation. Each element in the survey questionnaire also comes from a literature review. Researcher developed items based on literature review. Table 1 provides an overview of the elements from the literature review.

Table 1. The Elements from Literature Review

Component	Element	Literature review
Activity design	Real-life nature	Shu (2022)
	Match students' level	Ya (2009)
	Match students' preferences	Samperio (2017)
	Diversity	Hong (2023)
	High participation	
Activity implementation	Seat arrangement	Kardena (2019)
	Establish rules	Cini (2017)
	Time management	Wade (2020)
Activity evaluation	Formative evaluation	Northern Illinois University (2023)
	Summative evaluation	Hong (2007)

3.2 Pilot Study

For clarity of instructions and the questionnaire items, the questionnaire was translated into Chinese and given to a group of TCFL teachers representing the whole sample.

The validity of the questionnaire was verified by identifying the Content Validity Ratio (CVR). The researcher offered the questionnaire to a panel of five experts, including four TCFL experts and one expert in measurement and evaluation. All the expert panels were asked to indicate whether each item was 'essential', 'useful but not necessary', or 'not necessary' for inclusion in the scale to measure the construct (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2010). The percentage of agreement will be computed using the following formula: $CVR = (N_e - N/2) / (N/2)$. According to Lawshe's table, the critical value in the case of five arbitrators starts at .99 (Lawshe, 1975). The survey results indicated that all the items obtained a CVR value above 0.99, signifying that all items were necessary. At the same time, the expert panel provided feedback on item clarity and commented on scale instructions, item format, and sentences. As a result, the researchers made modifications to items 1, 2, 3, and 8 based on expert feedback to enhance clarity and comprehensibility.

After completing the validity test, the researcher will conduct a reliability test. In this study, the researchers selected 40 TCFL teachers as exploratory samples. The reliability of the questionnaire was verified by using the internal consistency coefficient method known as "Cronbach's alpha" (Christmann & Van Aelst, 2006). The study uses 40 TCFL teachers in Beijing as exploratory samples. Table 2 shows Cronbach's alpha results for three proposed constructs.

Table 2. The Cronbach's Alpha Results for Three Proposed Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Activity design	13	.940
Activity implementation	10	.911
Activity evaluation	7	.944

As shown in the table, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the activity design construct (.940), activity implementation construct (.911), and activity evaluation construct (.944) are above the recommended threshold of .70 established by Nunnally and Bernstein (Leyro et al., 2011). Therefore, no revisions are necessary to the items of the questionnaire.

4. Finding

Table 3. The Issue of Activity Design

Items	Statement	Mean	SD
Diversity			
1	I often design similar classroom activities	4.02	.900
2	I am only aware of a limited number of classroom activities	4.06	.911
3	The steps of the classroom activities I designed are not innovative	3.89	.956
Total		3.99	.922
Match students' preferences			
4	I lack analysis of the types of activities that students are interested in when choosing activities	4.02	.956
5	Some of the classroom activities I designed do not attract students.	4.02	.938
Total		4.02	.947
Match students' level			
6	I lack an analysis of student age to compare it with the execution required for classroom activities.	4.00	.933
7	Some of the classroom activities I designed are too childish for college students to carry out	4.08	.964
8	Some of the activity knowledge points I designed are too difficult for students to complete	3.85	1.019
Total		3.98	.972
Real-life nature			
9	I lack an analysis of the real-life nature of textbook content when determining teaching content of the activity.	4.01	.898
10	Some of the dialogue content of the activity I design rarely relates to real life	3.87	.871
11	Some of the activity topic I choose sometimes does not conform to the trend of the times	3.94	.922
Total		3.94	.897
High participation			
12	The classroom activity rules I designed limit the number of participants, with many students unable to participate.	4.10	.895
13	Some of the group activities I designed had too many students in each group, with some students lazy and not participating in discussions.	3.93	.987
Total		4.02	.941
Activity design		3.98	.935

Table 3 shows that the average score of activity designs for TCFL teachers is 3.98 (SD=. 935). The average of the element for diversity is 3.99 (SD=. 922), for matching students' preferences is 4.02 (SD=. 947), for matching students' level is 3.98 (SD=. 972), for communicativeness of content is 3.94 (SD=. 897), and for high participation is 4.02 (SD=. 941). The survey questionnaire concluded that each of the activity design elements is exposed to several issues. The highest average value is for High participation and Matching students' preferences, while the lowest is for Real-life nature. Among all the items, "The classroom activity rules I designed to limit the number of participants, with many students unable to participate" achieved the highest average value of 4.10, which is the worst behavior that TCFL teachers have done in activity design. On the other hand, "Some of the activity knowledge points I designed are too difficult for students to complete" achieved the lowest average value of 3.85, which means that compared to other issues, TCFL teachers have done relatively well in this area, but there is still room for improvement.

Table 4. The Issue of Activity Implementation

Items	Statement	Mean	SD
Seat Arrangement			
14	I don't think it's necessary to rearrange the classroom seats.	4.15	.920
15	I rarely rearrange classroom seats according to the needs of activities.	4.26	.863
16	The arrangement of classroom seats can be entirely decided by students.	3.93	1.025
Total		4.11	.936
Establish rules			
17	I did not establish rules for students to follow when executing this activity(ex: don't use your phones to search for information, don't show your answer to anyone else, don't remind others)	4.19	.955
18	I did not establish any penalty details for breaking the rules.	4.08	.942
19	I did not frequently remind students to follow the rules during classroom activities.	4.00	.974
Total		4.09	.957
Time management			
20	I didn't always pay attention to the remaining time in class.	4.10	.966
21	I didn't often remind students of the remaining time.	4.08	.992
22	I didn't often adjust the various links of classroom activities in a timely manner based on the remaining time in the class.	4.21	.897
23	The activity I design often cannot be completed exactly during class time.	4.01	.942
Total		4.10	.949
Activity implementation		4.10	.948

Table 4 shows that the average score of activity implementations for TCFL teachers is 4.10 (SD=. 948), for seat arrangement is 4.11 (SD=. 936), for establishing rules is 4.09 (SD=. 957), for time management is 4.10 (SD=. 949). The average value of seat arrangement is higher than the average value of establishing rules and time management. From the above data, we can conclude that all three elements have issues. Among all the items, "I rearrange classroom seats according to the needs of activities" has the highest average of 4.26, indicating the worst performance of TCFL teachers in this area. On the other hand, the item "The arrangement of classroom seats being entirely decided by students" received the lowest average score of 3.93, suggesting the relative satisfactory performance of TCFL teachers in this aspect.

Table 5 shows that the average score for activity evaluation for TCFL teachers is 3.91 (SD=. 994), for formative evaluation is 3.87 (SD=. 988), for summative evaluation is 3.97 (SD=1.001). It can be concluded that the average value of summative evaluation is higher than that of formative evaluation, which means that teachers tend to exhibit worse performance compared to formative evaluation. However, both elements indicate issues that need to be improved. Among all the items, "I didn't provide students with timely feedback on summary tests" achieved the highest average score of 4.03, indicating that TCFL teachers did the worst in this regard. On the other hand, "I didn't identify students' problems during the activity process, such as low participation rates, difficulty completing tasks,

and so on" achieved the lowest average score of 3.73, indicating the relatively superior performance of TCFL teachers in this area. However, there is still much room for improvement.

Table 5. The Issue of Activity Evaluation

Items	Statement	Mean	SD
Formative evaluation			
24	I didn't fully observe students' behavior and expressions during the activity process.	4.00	.943
25	I didn't fully listen to students' discussions during the activity process.	3.93	.974
26	I didn't often identify students' problems during the activity process, such as low participation rates, difficulty completing tasks, and so on	3.73	1.002
27	I didn't often provide detailed evaluations to students during the activity process.	3.82	1.034
Total		3.87	.988
Summative evaluation			
28	The summative test I designed rarely does content validity by inviting experienced teachers.	3.94	.998
29	I didn't often analyze student test data in a timely manner after class.	3.93	1.025
30	I didn't often provide students with timely feedback on summative tests	4.03	.980
Total		3.97	1.001
Activity evaluation		3.91	.994

5. Discussion

From the data in Table 3, it can be inferred that there are issues regarding diversity, student preferences matching, student level matching, high participation, and the real-life nature of TCFL teachers in activity design. Regarding the diversity of activities, the results suggest that teachers often use similar activities and obsolete activity designs. This finding aligns with Shan's (2022) finding that 90% of teachers are more likely to organise simple and repetitive game activities because these activities are easier to implement. Matching activities to students' preference is another crucial aspect that requires attention. The results suggest that many activities designed by teachers do not align with students' preferences, and the students do not like these classroom activities. This result is corroborated by Samperio's (2017) report, which found that 51 activities teachers often use, representing 82% of the total number of activities included in the questionnaires, did not match students' preferences. Matching student level is another critical aspect of activity design. This result suggests that teachers often struggle to match students' age and learning level, leading to either too difficult or too easy activities. Lack of student analysis by teachers is one of the main reasons for this problem, resulting in design activities that do not match the level of students (Shan, 2020). The real-life nature of content is another key factor that needs to be noted in activity design. The research results indicate that the content and knowledge points of many activity designs lack relevance to real-life situations, which may hinder students from better communicating in real life. This viewpoint is consistent with Ying's (2021) viewpoint; she argues that so many communication topics or dialogue contents that teachers choose are rarely related to real life, which is not conducive to the cultivation of students' language communication skills. Finally, high participation in activities is also a major challenge faced by teachers. For time-efficiency reasons, many teachers limit participation to a few students, which can negatively impact students' learning outcomes and motivation (Hong, 2023).

From the data in Table 4, it can be concluded that there are issues with the implementation of activities for TCFL teachers, including seat management, time management, and rule establishment. Regarding seat management, the results suggest that teachers rarely or incorrectly arrange seats for students. The main reason for this problem is that teachers often perceive the rearrangement of tables and chairs as laborious and time-consuming (Jiao, 2022). Consequently, they tend to overlook the importance of seat arrangement, leading to confined spaces that hinder the effectiveness of activities. Similarly, the results also indicate that teachers have not established appropriate rules to constrain student behavior during classroom activities. This result is consistent with Kardena's (2019) research, which suggests that classroom activities are disorganized due to teachers not providing detailed information about activity rules and not enforcing consequences when students violate rules. In addition, the results indicate that time management is also a huge challenge for teachers when implementing activities, and many teachers are unable to complete classroom tasks. This issue is because teachers failed to notice the remaining time and make timely adjustments to the time allocation for the following activities (Cong, 2018).

From the data in Table 5, it can be concluded that there are issues with formative and summative evaluation for TCFL teachers in activity evaluation. This conclusion is consistent with previous research. Yang (2022) found that the teachers stand aside as "bystanders" and do not go deep into the students' activities, resulting in insufficient investigation and resolution of their problems and failure to provide timely feedback. Wan (2018) points out the ineffectiveness of classroom summative testing. The teacher did not invite experienced counterparts to evaluate the effectiveness of the test content.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals many issues facing TCFL teachers in the context of activity-based teaching. More specifically, this study indicates issues in activity design, such as a single activity format, a mismatch between activities and students' preferences, misalignment of activities with students' knowledge level and age characteristics, a low participation rate, and a lack of real-life nature. There are issues with seat arrangement, time management, and rule establishment during the implementation of activities. There are also issues with formative and summative evaluations in activity evaluation. In addition, the average value of activity implementation is higher than that of activity design and evaluation, indicating that TCFL teachers face the greatest challenge in activity implementation and have the greatest room for improvement.

7. Recommendation

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher proposes the following recommendations for the improvement of activity-based teaching.

The research results indicate that teachers encounter issues with activity design. Therefore, relevant colleges should provide on-the-job training to teachers on effective classroom activity design.

Activity implementation poses another challenge for TCFL teachers. The college should establish a mechanism that requires teachers to observe the classroom at least once a week and submit a summary report. This practice will enable teachers to learn from experience and improve classroom implementation.

This study also shows the issue of activity evaluation. Colleges should conduct regular surveys with students to assess whether teachers provide targeted assessments in class, assist students in problem-solving, test classroom teaching content, and provide timely feedback. At the same time, the college should also evaluate the teacher's test papers to ensure the content is appropriately constructed.

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Acknowledgments

Not applicable

Authors contributions

Not applicable

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

Not applicable

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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