Suitability of Textbook for the Improvement of Linguistic Competence in Chinese by International Relations Students in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The necessity of mastering the Chinese language, Indonesia's second foreign language, has made it a priority subject among foreign languages in the Department of International Relations (IR) in many universities in Indonesia. The ideal textbook for the subject can boost learning and student competence and achievement in mastering the language. The selection of textbooks has not taken into consideration the background and motivation of students, learning objectives, frequency and length of study and student expectations. This paper discusses the need for a textbook to be used by IR majors in Indonesia. The data collection is populated through the distribution of questionnaires to eight universities that hold Chinese language classes for IR majors. The study concludes that the students expected a textbook to contain appropriate and applicable formal and informal language acquisition materials related to IR. The study looks at the cultural knowledge of the destination, lessons on the writing of Chinese characters and grammar exercises. Regarding the order of topics for learning Chinese by IR students, the students perceived that the right order would be: greetings, self-introduction, letters and numbers, time, names of days and months, daily activities, transportation, public facilities, directions and instructions, professions, international relations, politics and economy.

Keywords: International relations, Chinese language, textbook, foreign language

INTRODUCTION

At present, International Relations (IR) students studying the Chinese language are not equipped with a proper textbook. To acquire the language, students must depend on habitual utterance expressions including self-introduction, providing their profile, the alphabet, numbers, telling the time, the days of the week and stating daily activities. Students enrolled in such classes have opined that the Chinese textbook in use was superficial and contained little discussion of issues related to society, the economy, the law, politics, culture, local values and other pertinent matters. This suggests that to the students at least, a textbook plays a prominent role in foreign language learning.

Chen (2013) contended that Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (TCFL) had become a common phenomenon throughout the world in recent years. This was confirmed by Chisoni (2015), who stated that learning Chinese had become a global trend. According to Chisoni (2015), the demand for learning Chinese in the world is driven by political, social and economic needs. In addition, the rapid growth of China's economy and political power has nudged Chinese onto the world stage as a prominent language.

Pearson (2014) and Chisoni (2015) contended that the more extensive the diplomatic and trade ties between China and the West, the more the desire of Western countries to learn Chinese for practical purposes. Chisoni (2015) underlined that not only was there a need for the Chinese language to now be learnt, an understanding of the Chinese culture is also necessary because language and culture are interdependent and interrelated. Previous research into Chinese as a second language only emphasized on the challenges and difficulties of the Chinese characters and the tonal system and the importance of understanding Chinese grammar. Trivial emphasis incorporates how cultural differences in learning a second language can affect the way a foreign or second language is taught or learnt, whereas Pearson (2014) asserted that the textbook was the most important teaching tool and was useful for learning the Chinese language.

Textbooks play an important role in the classroom and to some extent prepare learners for future learning as well. The development of learner autonomy is sometimes undertaken through a 'training school' or 'instructions of specific strategy' but most likely, the context in which learners encounter the idea of autonomy regularly is the language course and the textbooks used. According to Reinders and Balçikanli (2011), textbooks might include a deliberate focus on the learning process and might encourage students to reflect on their progress, and thus, textbooks were likely to play a potentially important role in the development of students' independent learning skills.

Ying et al. (2017) reiterated the importance of studying IR, pointing out that it was not only acquiring the ability to analyze interaction among different state actors, but also non-state actors, specifically

individuals and groups of people through language and culture. Understanding and mastering foreign languages of other countries can improve bilateral relations and create mutually advantageous relationships. In addition, mastering a foreign language will enable students to analyze phenomena and common issues pertaining to social, economic, legal and political issues of the country in which they are interested. Foreign language proficiency is also a very good asset for students interested in learning basic negotiation skills and diplomatic techniques, which are indispensable for International Relations students. The Department of IR, BINUS University, encourages students to learn a second foreign language other than English. The Chinese language has been a favorite among students. However, the available textbook seems inappropriate and cannot fulfil the expectations of students and or of the job market.

This research sought to look into the expectations of IR students with regard to an appropriate textbook and its structure. The study aimed to identify the requirements for an appropriate Chinese textbook. The implementation of the research was oriented for the development of an opposite Chinese textbook for IR students based on the characteristics of learners' relevant knowledge studies. The study contributes to and offers feedback for teachers of the Chinese language in selecting appropriate material to achieve the targeted competencies and objectives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jack (2001), said that the textbook was an essential component in most language programmes and in many situations, they serve as the basis for the input language. Textbooks are the main source of learning materials for learners. Teachers, in addition to teaching, contribute vital feedback on students' learning that can help them progress in mastering the language. Roger Seguin (1989) said that the role of a textbook was not only to facilitate teaching but also to develop the learner's interest in books and the habit of using textbooks to expand knowledge and to search for information. Meanwhile, Nguyen (2011) also identified that learners relied on language learning from textbooks.

According to Tim Oates (2014), teachers considered textbooks to be very helpful in clarifying the progress of learning a subject. Texts used in the textbook encourage clarity on the key concepts and the core knowledge, provide clear learning progress, including examples and applications, supporting reflection of the students, and can be used in different ways by different teachers. Pearson (2014) said that the effective textbook was a mixture of the teaching experience of non-natives and realistic user input from the native language. The partnership between the perspective of native and non-native is something we have to consider when trying to find source material. In addition, learning about what is relevant to the individual is the biggest motivating factor in learning a language. Textbooks show how the way teachers teach and the way students learn

can be integrated effectively. Lee (2012) stated that the role of the textbook was important in an educational situation. She emphasized that textbook provision for foreign language education should be in line with the learner's quality of the learning experience and objectives in learning the language.

Ellis (1997) argued that the evaluation of textbooks helped managers and teaching staff to choose the most appropriate materials for specific learning. It also contributes to identifying the strengths and weaknesses of a particular textbook that has been used, giving feedback to teachers in the process of adapting to the use of textbooks. Wang (2014) said that a textbook was a tool, and teachers must know not only how to use it, but how to make it more useful. Research conducted by Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) about the relationship between textbooks and learner autonomy found that many language textbooks do not explicitly encourage learner autonomy.

METHODS

This qualitative research was based on the Qualitative Description (QD) method. According to Sefcik and Bradway (2017), QD was a suitable goal when a straight description of a phenomenon is desired or information is sought to develop and refine questionnaires or interventions. Data collection was achieved using a self-administered questionnaire (Fink, 2002). The population under study came from International Relations departments in Indonesian universities enrolled in Chinese language classes. The selection of sample was undertaken using simple random sampling techniques (Ali, 2014; Creswell, 2013). The data gathered from the questionnaire accommodated the IR students' expectations of textbooks for learning Chinese. The sample of 145 students consisted of 60 men and 85 women. This research took six months, from January to July 2015. The research phase began with pilot testing of the questionnaire to find out the validity of the contents of the questionnaire and the substance of the questions (Ali, 2014) based on 20 students majoring in IR. Questions that complied with the criterion of understanding were selected and the rest were revised. Valid questionnaires were distributed to students majoring in IR who were enrolled in Chinese language classes in eight universities in Indonesia, namely: Al-Azhar (Jakarta), BINUS University (Jakarta), Padjadjaran University (Bandung), UNIKOM (Bandung), Sebelas Maret University (Surakarta), Andalas University (Padang), Udayana University (Bali) and President University (Cikarang).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study focused on the content of Chinese textbooks as expected by International Relations students. The researcher intended to reveal the reasonable background to students' preferences to the course whether or not it was in the curriculum, personal motivation to understand the Chinese language, future employment factors,

family encouragement, peer influence or environment support. The graph (Figure 1) below is based on data obtained from the 145 respondents from eight universities and shows their purpose of learning the Chinese language.
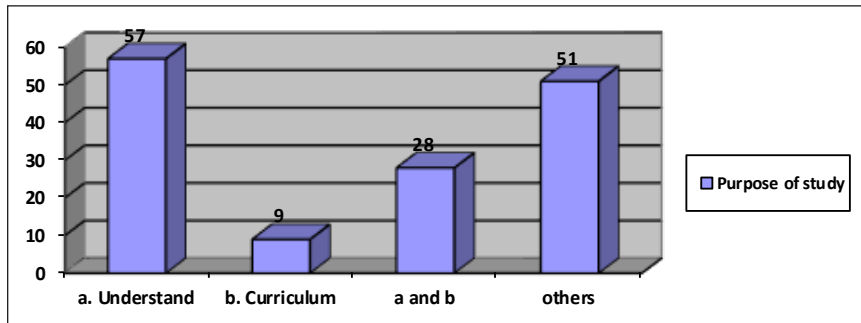

Figure 1. Purpose of studying the Chinese language

The data depicted that most of the students were motivated to learn the Chinese language because of personal desire to understand the language. The highest percentage for purpose of studying was to understand the language (39.31%). This concurred with research results obtained by Pearson (2014) that showed that the most important motivation for learning a foreign language was the ability to communicate verbally with others. Research by Wang, Kong and Farren (2014) was also in line with the findings of this study, as they had found that the students surveyed had hoped to communicate with others and to understand what was said in conversations.
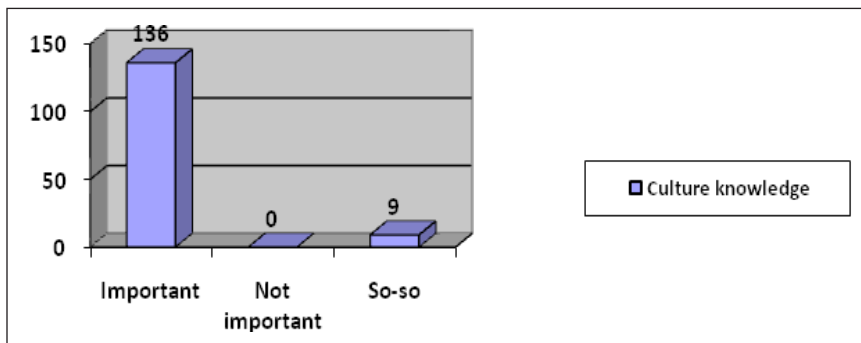

Figure 2. Culture knowledge in Chinese language textbooks

Ninety four percent of the students realized the importance of understanding the Chinese culture, signaling that they were aware that language and culture are interdependent. The success of communication depends on the understanding of native culture. Learning a language is inseparable from the learning

process of daily-use intention, especially the influence of the language and its role in forming the culture of native speakers. In today's language learning methodologies, the ability to speak fluently like a native speakers is no longer the most important objective. Understanding the culture of the language being studied plays a significant role in determining the success of the delivery of the message and the establishment of smooth communication between the speaker and the interlocutor.

Cultural understanding or the intercultural competence of students needs to be developed because it is an ideal achievement for attainment in language learning, especially when the language in question is a second or foreign language. Chisoni (2015) opined that one would not be able to speak the language without the culture. Language and culture are intertwined. Society expresses their views in language and preserves a culture from generation to generation. Culture, in terms of language teaching and learning, is usually associated with language acquisition (Byram & Grundy, 2002). Tang (1999) argued that one of the aspects that sometimes appeared as a topic of discussion in foreign language teaching is the relationship between knowledge of foreign languages and cultural knowledge of the origin language. Tang stated that language was part of a culture and language comes with some cultural associations attached to it. He added that by speaking a language, therefore, one automatically aligned oneself with the culture of the language.

Arabski and Wojtaszek (2011) argued that communicative competence was the goal of teaching and learning a foreign language; the relationship between language and culture has been a new emphasis in research on second language acquisition and foreign language learning. Cakir (2006) said during language teaching culture should also be automatically taught so that when language learners communicate privately with individuals from other cultural backgrounds, they understood the cultural influences on individual behaviour in the workplace as well as the influence of cultural patterns that affected the mind, activities and form of linguistic expression. In addition to cultural knowledge in Chinese language learning, vocabulary learning and knowledge related to the field of International Relations of science is also important. The use of textbooks that contain vocabulary and knowledge in accordance with students' learning abilities and goals are considered substantial. Therefore, understanding the language and cultural knowledge is highly notable.

As many as 85% of the students in this study found that a textbook that contains vocabulary and knowledge in accordance with is important. They found that teaching materials that taught only everyday conversation were able to prepare them for communication in international society and they demanded such information from the textbook in use. Indeed, Reinders and Balcikanli (2011) had proposed that textbooks attempted to provide information about and practice in skills for autonomous
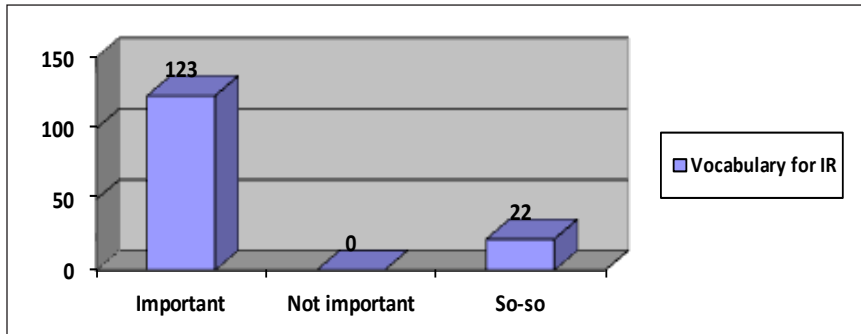
Figure 3. Vocabulary for international relations

language learning. The importance of vocabulary in language learning was also noted by Cobb (2007), who highlighted that text comprehension depended heavily on detailed knowledge of most of the words in a text.

Pearson (2014) in a study of Chinese language learning in London identified that diplomats would more likely be fully literate elites because of the context of the materials they translated and the social groups they interacted with. This interaction would require a knowledge of more advanced, comprehensive and abstract vocabulary. Thus, IR graduates who aspire to become diplomats also require knowledge and vocabulary that would support them in their career as a diplomat. Jiang (2000) stated that the task of vocabulary acquisition was primary for remembering the world.
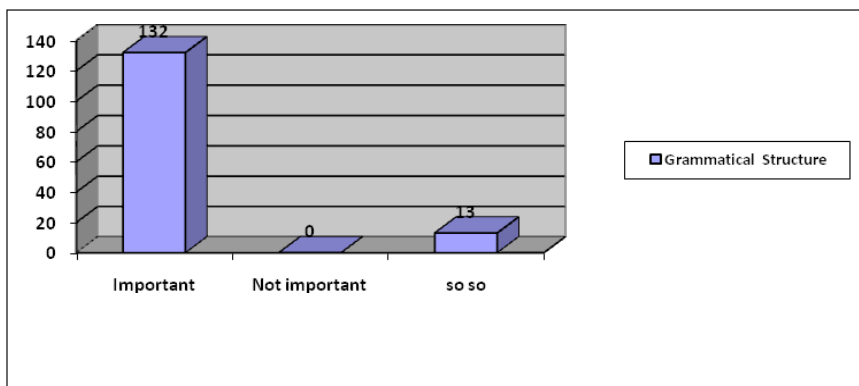

Figure 4. Formal or informal language in textbooks

As many as 54% of the students responded that reading material or dialogue in the textbooks should contain use of formal and informal language. The students were aware of the international associations i.e. they knew that they needed to read content related to their field of study. Teachers can also assess the ability of students from their reading ability instead of through observation. Singhal (1998) stated

that the reading process was essentially "unobservable," so that teachers are required to make significant efforts in the classroom to understand their students' reading behaviors and be able to help students understand those behaviors. Therefore, formal and informal language in the textbook is related to the vocabulary, grammatical structure, and cultural knowledge.
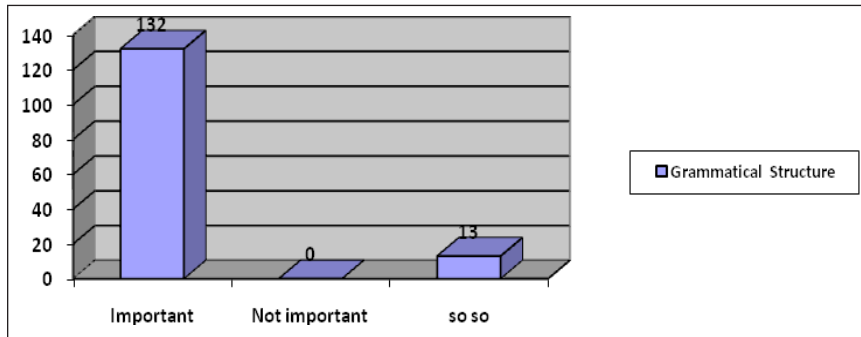

Figure 5. Importance of learning grammatical structure

As many as 93% of the students believed that grammar was important, while 85.51% considered learning to write characters was important and 68.27% thought that writing skills were important. Felder (1995) argued that effective language teaching must contain elements of interest. The material presented in each class should be a mixture of the definition of words, grammar rules and concepts (syntax, semantic information, language background and culture). Campbell and Zhao (1993) in their research explained that in learning a second language (L2) Chinese teachers and students revealed that grammar analysis was very important in learning a foreign language and doing exercises in the classroom was a good way to learn a foreign language in addition to other criteria.
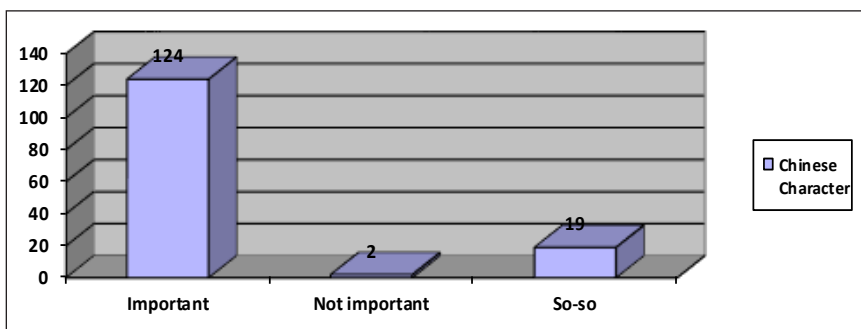

Figure 6. Importance of learning Chinese characters

A total of 92% of the students believed that learning Chinese characters was important even if they realised that the ability to learn Chinese characters is the most difficult language skill to acquire. This corresponded with Ye (2011)'s statement that writing characters is the most difficult skill based on his research among 914 students and 192 Chinese language teachers in the United States. Responses from both teachers and students indicated that in most Foreign Language (CFL) programmes in the US Chinese character learning is introduced in the first semester. In addition, Wang, Kong and Fallen (2014) emphasized that although learning Chinese is considered difficult, the students considered that learning is not only limited to learning the characters but also includes using it conversationally.
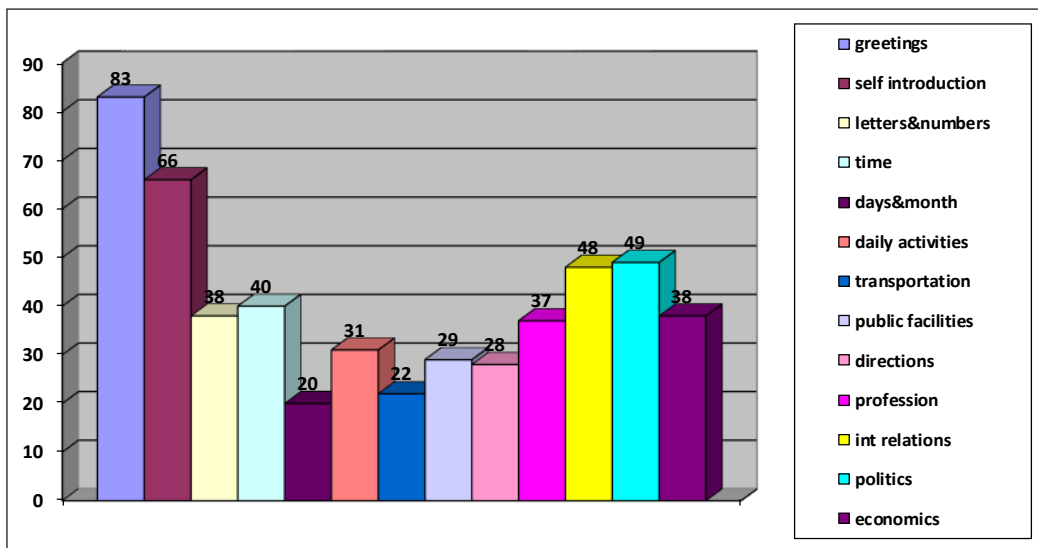

Figure 7. Chinese learning topics in sequence

This study also sought to identify the students' expectation of the topic sequence in Chinese language learning. The topics were sorted by the number of respondents choosing the topic. Based on the results of the questionnaire, 83 students believed that the first topic of study should be Greetings and 66 thought that the second topic should be Self Introduction, while 49 stated that the third topic should be Political Issues and 48 indicated that the fourth topic should be International Relations. In addition, 40 students chose time as the fifth topic and 38 chose Letters and Numbers and the Economy as the sixth topic. Both topics were considered equally important and they felt they could be studied together. Meanwhile, 37 thought that Professions should then follow. Daily Activities was chosen as the next topic by 31 respondents, while 29 chose Public Facilities and 28 chose Directions and Instructions and 22

chose Transportation. The last topic selected as it was considered the least important was Dates.

CONCLUSION

This paper successfully discovered the needs of IR students in terms of textbook selection for the learning of the Chinese language to increase their competencies and interest in learning a foreign language. The students' expectations of a suitable textbook were: (1) A suitable order of topics namely, Greeting, Introduction, Self-Introduction, Politic Issues, International Relations, Time, Letters and Numbers, the Economy, Professions, Daily Activities, Public Facilities, Directions and Instructions, Transportation and Names of Days and Months; (2) The textbook should include cultural knowledge and understanding; issues related to International Relations; formal and informal language; grammatical structure and the Chinese characters. Based on the results of this study, it is recommended that efforts to create an appropriate textbook for learning foreign languages based on students' needs and interests should be encouraged.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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