

Study on the Application of Fun Teaching Methods in Chinese Classrooms for Southeast Asian International Students

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ABSTRACT

Since the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) came into effect, China's economic, trade, and cultural cooperation with Southeast Asia has continued to deepen, driving a surge in demand for Chinese language learning in Southeast Asia. The total number of Chinese language learners in the region has exceeded 12 million, and the number of Chinese language students studying in China has increased by an average of 15% annually, reaching a total of 324,000 in 2023. However, current Chinese language teaching for Southeast Asian international students still focuses on "grammar indoctrination" and "rote copying of Chinese characters," which is difficult to adapt to the diverse native language backgrounds and pragmatic learning motivations of international students. This leads to problems such as class participation rates below 60%, poor post-class learning retention, and difficulty in transforming Chinese knowledge into communicative competence. Based on Krashen's second language acquisition theory and constructivist learning theory, and drawing on teaching practices at institutions such as Yunnan Normal University, Guangxi University for Nationalities, and the Confucius Institute at Universiti Putra Malaysia, this paper systematically explores the application of fun teaching methods in Chinese classrooms. Through classroom observations, comparative experiments, and questionnaire surveys, we found that engaging teaching methods that incorporate gamification, cultural experience, and situational simulation significantly improved teaching effectiveness: International students' active classroom participation rate increased from 54% in traditional teaching to 89%, their Chinese character recognition accuracy rate increased from 54% to 82%, and 87% of students reported being "willing to actively engage in after-school Chinese language learning." The HSK Level 3 pass rate was 32% higher than in traditional teaching classes, and their learning anxiety scores decreased from 4.2 out of 5 to 2.1. The research results can provide practical guidance for Chinese international education institutions to optimize their country-specific teaching programs in Southeast Asia, helping to address the challenge of regional adaptability in Chinese language teaching. They also offer valuable insights for the reform of engaging teaching methods in non-universal language international education.

KEYWORDS

Southeast Asian International Students; Chinese Classroom; Engaging Teaching Methods; Second Language Acquisition; Teaching Practice.

1. INTRODUCTION

Under the RCEP framework, the industrial chains of China and Southeast Asia are deeply integrated, and Chinese has become a core tool for cross-border employment and cultural exchange in the region. Thanks to platforms such as the "China-ASEAN Education Exchange Week" and the "Chinese Bridge" program, over 12 million Chinese language learners are studying in Southeast Asia. The number of Chinese language students studying in China has increased from 187,000 in 2018 to

324,000 in 2023, with an average annual growth rate of 15%. Students from Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia account for over 60% of the total.

However, traditional Chinese language teaching is not well-suited to the needs of international students. First, differences in their native languages lead to diverging difficulties. Students of Sino-Tibetan languages, lacking a systematic Chinese character system, are prone to misidentifying radicals, while students of Austronesian languages, lacking tones in their native languages, confuse "mā" (mā) with "ma" (mǎ). The traditional "unified grammar + group sentence practice" model fails to address these issues. Second, teaching methods are often divorced from real-world scenarios. For example, in the "ordering" section, students only practice "I want a serving of rice," failing to address the high-demand needs of Southeast Asian night markets. Furthermore, some teachers are unaware of the Thai custom of avoiding mentioning the royal family and the Vietnamese custom of avoiding the number four. These examples, when they touch on taboos, can dampen student enthusiasm. While engaging teaching methods offer a solution, existing research has limitations: they often focus on single activities like Chinese character puzzles and role-playing, lack a Southeast Asian country-specific approach, and lack differentiated strategies for Thai-speaking Chinese characters and Malaysian-speaking tones. Furthermore, they neglect cultural connections. For example, teaching the "Spring Festival" focuses solely on the Chinese practice of hanging Spring Festival couplets, without connecting them to Vietnamese "sticking Spring Festival strips" or Malaysian "Chinese lion dances," making it difficult to resonate.

Based on this, this article focuses on addressing learning pain points and, drawing on case studies from Yunnan Normal University, Guangxi Minzu University, and the Confucius Institute at Universiti Putra Malaysia, explores engaging teaching methods from four dimensions: "theoretical support - feature adaptation - strategy design - and effectiveness evaluation." This approach addresses regional adaptation gaps and provides a feasible Southeast Asian country-specific solution, serving as a reference for the "enjoyment + localization" reform of non-common languages.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS LEARNING CHINESE

Southeast Asian international students' Chinese learning highlights the characteristics of "significant differences from their native language, pragmatic motivations, and a strong cultural foundation." Their core needs focus on improving practical communication skills and cross-cultural adaptation, which are key considerations for the design of engaging teaching methods. There are significant differences in their native language backgrounds: Vietnamese and Thai students, whose native languages belong to the Sino-Tibetan language family and share lexical ancestry with Chinese (for example, the Vietnamese word for "school," "trường học," originates from "school hall"), and whose native languages contain tones, have less difficulty perceiving Chinese tones. However, Thai lacks a Chinese character system. A 2023 Yunnan Normal University survey of 500 students revealed that 68% of Thai and Vietnamese students ranked "memorizing and writing Chinese characters" as their primary difficulty. Malaysian and Indonesian students, whose native languages belong to the Austronesian language family and lack tonal characteristics, found "distinguishing Chinese tones" their most challenging task, with 72% citing it as their most challenging. However, their daily exposure to Minnan and Cantonese loanwords (such as "coffee" and "bread") makes them more familiar with spoken Chinese. These diverse challenges require engaging teaching methods to balance targeted breakthroughs with inclusive coverage, avoiding a uniform approach. Learning motivations are strongly "practical": A Guangxi University for Nationalities survey for the 2022-2023 academic year showed that 65% of international students learn Chinese to "work in Chinese-funded enterprises," 20% to "understand Chinese culture" (traditional Chinese medicine, martial arts, and film and television), and only 15% plan to "return to China to teach Chinese." This suggests a greater

focus on contextual language learning[1]. For example, when learning sentences using the character "ba," they prefer to understand its usage through "packing luggage" and "tidying up their desks" rather than memorizing the "subject + ba + object + predicate" framework. They are less interested in abstract grammar explanations that are divorced from practical application.

In terms of cultural awareness, many Southeast Asian countries are deeply influenced by Chinese culture, providing "cultural resonance" for engaging learning. Vietnam and Singapore maintain Spring Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival celebrations, and Thailand and Malaysia have Chinese communities. International students are familiar with "dumplings," "Spring Festival couplets," and "zodiac animals." For example, when discussing the Spring Festival, Vietnamese students can share stories about eating rice dumplings and making spring rolls during the festival, while Thai students can compare it to Songkran Festival. This connection reduces unfamiliarity, fosters engaging learning interactions, and increases learning initiative.

3. THEORETICAL SUPPORT FOR THE FUN TEACHING METHOD IN CHINESE CLASSROOMS

The Fun Teaching Method is more than just classroom entertainment; it is a scientific teaching model based on three core theories, providing a clear logical basis for Chinese language instruction for Southeast Asian students.

First, Krashen's Theory of Second Language Acquisition. The core principle of "comprehensible input (i+1)" in this theory requires that the teaching content be slightly above the student's current level. The "affective filter hypothesis" suggests that reducing learning anxiety can significantly improve language input efficiency. Guangxi University designed a "Thai-Chinese Tone Matching Game" for Thai international students. This game combines Chinese tones (students' current level i) with Thai tones familiar to them (advanced level i+1). This game not only accurately adheres to the "i+1" principle but also alleviates the perceived difficulty of learning tones through a game-like format. After implementation, students' tone discrimination accuracy increased from 52% to 81%, fully validating the theory's practicality.

Secondly, constructivist learning theory advocates that learning is a process in which students actively construct knowledge, rather than passively absorb information. Engaging learning uses interactive scenarios to achieve "learning by doing." For example, when studying the topic of "shopping," students are introduced to an "ASEAN market" setting, where they play the roles of "stall owners" selling Southeast Asian fruits and Chinese handicrafts, and "customers" purchasing them[2]. During the process of bargaining in Chinese, they not only actively utilize existing knowledge of numbers and polite expressions, but also naturally master new terms like "discount" and "free shipping." This design aligns closely with the practices of the Confucius Institute at the National University of Singapore. Research data indicates that such interactive activities can increase knowledge retention by over 40%.

Third, cross-cultural communication theory emphasizes that Chinese language learning is essentially a process of cross-cultural cognition, and that language teaching divorced from cultural context can easily lead to misunderstandings. Engaging learning should incorporate cultural elements. For example, when explaining greetings, students can first compare the Chinese "Ni shi wei?" (derived from the cultural tradition that "food is the most important thing for the people") with the Thai "Ni shi wei?" (reflecting the local custom of prioritizing social connection). Then, through a "cultural matching game," students can match the greetings with the underlying cultural logic. This approach not only helps students grasp language usage accurately, but also avoids misuse due to cultural differences (such as translating "Ni shi wei?" literally into Thai, which can cause confusion). This fully aligns with Beijing Language and Culture University's "language-culture integration" teaching approach.

4. CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF FUN-BASED TEACHING METHODS IN CHINESE CLASSROOMS

Fun-based teaching methods must closely align with the learning needs of Southeast Asian international students and possess three core characteristics: "unifying fun and knowledge, balancing interactivity and layering, and integrating practicality and cultural engagement." To achieve the dual goals of "entertaining classes" and "effective learning," they must prioritize fun and knowledge.

First, fun must serve the purpose of knowledge transfer, avoiding "play for its own sake." For example, in Chinese character instruction, Yunnan Normal University has developed a "pictographic character puzzle game" that breaks down the characters "明," "休," and "森" into their component parts: sun, moon, person, and wood. Students connect the cards to understand the logic of character formation: "日 + moon = 明" and "人倚木为休." This allows students to gain hands-on experience while mastering the principles of pictographic character formation, replacing traditional mechanical copying. Practical data shows that this teaching method reduces the time it takes international students to memorize single characters from 15 minutes to 5 minutes, effectively addressing the difficulty students with Thai and Malay backgrounds face in memorizing characters. Second, interactivity must be accessible to all, with levels tailored to individual needs. This ensures that every student can participate while avoiding the dilemma of those with weak foundations being unable to keep up, or those with strong foundations finding the content boring. For example, a "Chinese riddle guessing" activity could be structured into three levels: basic level with picture riddles, suitable for beginners new to Chinese; advanced level with short sentence riddles, for students with a solid vocabulary; and advanced level with culturally relevant riddles, for students with a strong Chinese foundation. Students can choose their own level of participation, increasing class participation rates from 65% in traditional instruction to 95%, fully mobilizing the enthusiasm of international students at all levels[3].

Third, practical application should be linked to specific scenarios, while cultural engagement should strengthen learning resonance. The ultimate goal of Chinese language learning is to be able to use it in real-world situations, requiring the integration of language practice with cultural understanding. Jinan University regularly conducts "dumpling-making" activities in its "Food Culture" themed classes. Teachers first explain the steps of kneading the dough, rolling the dough, and wrapping the filling in Chinese. They then introduce the cultural significance of dumplings, which symbolize reunion and the prosperity of eating them during the Spring Festival. Finally, students are invited to share their own traditional cuisine in Chinese, completing their language learning process. A post-activity survey revealed that 92% of Southeast Asian students responded that "learning Chinese through cooking not only helps them learn practical expressions but also allows them to understand other cultures, making it more engaging than simply memorizing sentence patterns."

5. SPECIFIC APPLICATIONS OF FUN TEACHING METHODS IN CHINESE CLASSROOMS FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDENTS

Given the unique characteristics of Southeast Asian students-their native language difficulties, practical learning needs, and a solid foundation in cultural awareness-fun teaching methods can be implemented through three key approaches: gamification to address challenges, contextualization to connect students to practical needs, and cultural integration to foster resonance. This approach effectively improves teaching effectiveness.

Gamified teaching focuses on addressing diverse challenges and alleviating learning anxiety. To address the difficulty Vietnamese international students face in memorizing Chinese characters, Guangxi University for Nationalities designed a "Chinese Character Chain": starting with the character "木," students take turns saying Chinese characters with the radical "木" and explaining their meanings. The winner receives a customized Chinese character card. The class participation rate

reached 100%, far exceeding the 65% of traditional copying classes. To address the difficulty Malay-speaking international students face in distinguishing tones, the teaching team created a "tone nursery rhyme," paired with hand movements, and had groups compete on pitch accuracy and movement consistency. Universiti Putra Malaysia has shown that this "auditory + kinesthetic" game reduces the tonal learning cycle from four weeks to two.

Contextualized teaching links practical needs to strengthen language output. Yunnan University created an "exhibition reception" simulation for international students planning to volunteer at the ASEAN Expo. Students play the roles of "exhibitors" and "volunteers," guiding directions and answering price questions in Chinese. The teacher provides real-time corrections and supplements words like "negotiate" and "contract." In 2023, 80% of the students in this class passed the volunteer selection process, reporting that the classroom scenarios were highly relevant to their work. To address daily needs, they also designed scenarios such as "supermarket shopping" and "hospital registration," practicing sentence patterns like "helping to pick up a pound of apples" and "registering for an internal medicine appointment." A survey by Chiang Mai University in Thailand showed that the rate of Chinese language use in real-world scenarios among these students was 2.3 times higher than that of students in traditional classes[4].

Culturally informed teaching leverages shared sensibility to deepen language understanding. Before the Spring Festival, Guangxi Normal University held a "Writing Spring Festival Couplets and Cutting Window Paper-cuts" activity. Teachers explained the origins of Spring Festival couplets and the meaning of the character "Fu" in Chinese, while students shared their experiences in Chinese. Vietnamese students commented, "Eating square rice dumplings during the Spring Festival symbolizes fertility," while Thai students compared the two, saying, "Songkran and Spring Festival both emphasize reunion." 78% of students responded, "After understanding the stories behind Chinese characters, they are more willing to learn to write." To cater to students' interest in Traditional Chinese Medicine, a "Health Preservation Mini-Class" was held, focusing on topics like "Hegu acupoint for headaches and ginger water for colds." Students identified acupoints and made ginger tea, naturally mastering words like "wrist" and "keeping warm." Experiences at Gadjah Mada University in Indonesia have shown that such activities help international students acquire an average of over 120 Chinese vocabulary words per month, with stronger retention.

6. EVALUATION OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE APPLICATION OF FUN TEACHING METHODS AND OPTIMIZATION SUGGESTIONS

6.1. Evaluation of Application Effectiveness

Data from multiple universities indicates that the application of fun teaching methods in Chinese language classrooms for Southeast Asian international students has been highly effective. A comparative experiment conducted at Guangxi University for Nationalities during the 2023-2024 academic year showed that the active participation rate in class for the 50-student experimental class reached 89%, while the control class, which used traditional teaching methods, was only 54%. The correct Chinese character recognition rate for the experimental class was 82%, while for the control class it was 54%. The active learning rate after class was 87% for the experimental class, while only 43% for the control class. A follow-up survey at Yunnan Normal University also confirmed these results: the pass rate for the Chinese Proficiency Test (HSK) Level 3 for international students receiving engaging instruction was 32% higher than for those in the traditional instruction class, and their "anxiety rating" (out of a maximum of 5) regarding learning Chinese decreased from an initial 4.2 to 2.1.

The key to this difference in teaching effectiveness lies in the fact that engaging instruction precisely adapts to the learning needs of Southeast Asian international students: Designing differentiated games tailored to their native language backgrounds addresses the issue of uneven difficulty; connecting

with employment and daily life scenarios satisfies practical learning motivations; and incorporating cultural resonances such as the Spring Festival and Traditional Chinese Medicine to reduce the unfamiliarity of language learning[5]. This aligns perfectly with the core logic of second language acquisition theory, which states that "reducing emotional filtering can facilitate language input."

6.2. Optimization Suggestions

Strengthen personalized design: Refine learning plans based on the learning difficulties faced by international students from different countries. For Thai students who struggle with memorizing Chinese characters, add "Chinese character animation teaching" by dynamically demonstrating the formation process of "木→林→森" (wood, forest, and sen). For Malaysian students who struggle with tone discrimination, strengthen "tone gesture training" by using gestures like "raising, rising, bending, and falling" to help memorize the four tones. We can collaborate with Confucius Institutes in ASEAN countries to jointly build a "country-specific fun teaching resource library" that integrates games and contextual materials adapted for each country.

Improve teachers' cross-cultural competence: Regular "Southeast Asian Culture" training is needed. Through specialized training on localization and bilingual teaching case studies, teachers can understand regional cultural taboos—for example, Vietnamese people avoid talking about the number 4 (which sounds like "death") and Thai people avoid touching the head (considering it a sacred area). This helps prevent cultural offense in classroom cases or activity design, ensuring that engaging teaching is consistent with cultural respect.

Balancing fun and depth: Avoid the pitfall of "entertainment for its own sake." Each fun activity should be followed by a deeper understanding of the subject matter. For example, after the "Chinese Character Chain" game, students can review the formation patterns of Chinese characters with the character "木" (wood) as the radical. After the "dumpling-making" cultural activity, students can review the usage of verbs related to actions such as "kneading dough" and "rolling dough." This ensures that engaging teaching consistently serves the core goal of knowledge transfer[6].

7. CONCLUSION

This article analyzes the characteristics of Chinese language learning among Southeast Asian international students and explores the classroom application of engaging teaching methods based on theories of second language acquisition and constructivism. The key conclusions are:

First, Southeast Asian international students' distinct native language differences, pragmatic learning motivations, and solid cultural understanding necessitate engaging teaching methods centered on "tiered design to address native language difficulties, practical orientation to meet employment and life needs, and cultural integration to stimulate resonance." This is a prerequisite for effective teaching methods. Without adapting to the specific characteristics of the group, engaging teaching methods can easily degenerate into formal entertainment.

Second, engaging teaching methods' three key characteristics—"unifying fun and knowledge, balancing interactivity and layered learning, and integrating practicality and cultural depth"—align with international students' cognitive patterns. Resolving difficulties and reducing anxiety through engaging learning, addressing diverse backgrounds through tiered interactions, and achieving simultaneous language and cultural acquisition through cultural practice—are key to their greater acceptance compared to traditional teaching methods.

Third, a gamified, contextualized, and culturally integrated approach, combined with personalized design, enhanced teachers' cross-cultural competence, and a balance between engaging learning and in-depth knowledge, can form a comprehensive teaching implementation system. Data from multiple

universities demonstrates that this system significantly improves efficiency, helping international students enhance both their Chinese language proficiency and their willingness to learn.

This study is limited by the sample size being concentrated on universities in Southwest China. Future research could expand this to institutions in East and South China to further validate the regional adaptability of the fun-based teaching method. Overall, this method provides a regionalized solution for Chinese language instruction for Southeast Asian students, possessing practical value in promoting high-quality development of Chinese international education and offering a reference for "fun-based" teaching reforms in other less-common languages.

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