

The Impact of Early Script Preparation on Mandarin Role-play Performance

Tengku Azeezen Tengku Shamsudden^{1*}, Ayesha Zhang Huiqin², Hidayu Shafie³, Tan Su Ling⁴

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, UiTM Shah Alam

*Corresponding Author

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.924ILEIID003>

Received: 23 September 2025; Accepted: 30 September 2025; Published: 29 October 2025

ABSTRACT

This study explores the impact of early script preparation on Mandarin role-play performance, emphasizing its role in enhancing language acquisition, cultural competence, and student engagement. Drawing on theoretical frameworks such as sociocultural theory and cognitive load theory, the research highlights how early preparation reduces cognitive demands, allowing learners to focus on pronunciation, fluency, and cultural nuances inherent in Mandarin. Through a quantitative approach specifically employing the survey method, the study identified key benefits of early script preparation, such as improved confidence, better vocabulary retention, and increased engagement in role-play activities. Challenges, including vocabulary limitations, cultural context understanding, and time management, were also examined, with practical solutions proposed, such as integrating technology, peer collaboration, and structured feedback mechanisms. Pedagogical implications suggest that early preparation fosters scaffolded learning, differentiated instruction, and learner autonomy, while long-term benefits include enhanced language proficiency and cultural awareness. The study concluded with recommendations for educators to prioritize early script preparation, incorporate cultural learning, and leverage digital tools to optimize role-play outcomes. This research contributes to the growing body of knowledge on effective language teaching methodologies, particularly in the context of Mandarin, and offers actionable insights for educators aiming to improve role-play performance and overall language learning experiences.

Keywords: (Mandarin language, early preparation, role-play, script, script writing)

INTRODUCTION

The use of role-play as a pedagogical tool is quite rampant, especially in the second or third language learning. According to Jakob (2018), role-play has emerged as a powerful pedagogical tool in the field of language learning, offering students a dynamic and immersive environment to practice their linguistic skills. The process of role-play commonly involves script writing preparation to ensure students are well-prepared to perform their role-play. The existing literature suggests that the level of script preparation can greatly influence the outcomes of role-play activities (Stevens, 2015). Scholars have pointed out that teachers should support learners by implementing specific didactic scenarios (collaboration scripts) to trigger and guide peer interaction. Collaboration scripts aim to engage students by providing explicit collective workflow descriptions and guidance, for example, by assigning student roles during the collaborative activity (Demetriadis et al., 2012). A good preparation of the script could help a performer to be more confident, hence fully immersing and committing oneself in the role-play activity. Specifically, in the context of Mandarin, where the language is characterised by complex grammatical structures, idiomatic expressions, and cultural nuances, a thorough understanding of the script can be crucial for a successful role-play performance (Negara, 2021).

As noted by Huda, role-play can be divided into two broad categories: scripted and unscripted (Negara, 2021). Scripted role-play, where students are provided with a pre-written dialogue or script, offers the advantage of familiarising learners with the specific linguistic and cultural elements required for the scenario. This can be particularly beneficial for Mandarin learners, as it allows them to focus on the appropriate use of vocabulary, sentence structures, and pragmatic conventions, rather than solely on the production of speech.

Bradford (2017) noted that educators mostly use role play to encourage students to participate, engage better, and have multiple perspectives. Similarly, in a number of subjects (e.g., psychology, sociology, and anthropology), role play can be used to introduce new material, concepts, and appropriate behaviour. Role play

is a most effective teaching method in review sessions. The discussion following the role play is extremely important. It is preferable to conduct immediately after the activity, while the verbal interactions are still fresh in the memory of students and the instructor (Alden, 1999).

In the context of this study, the third language subject is a unique and integral part of the curriculum at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia's largest public university. This program allows students to learn a third language in addition to Bahasa Malaysia (the national language) and English. UiTM offers a variety of third language options, including Mandarin, Arabic, French, Japanese, Spanish, Korean, German, and Italian, among others. The program is designed to equip students with additional linguistic and cultural skills, enhancing their global competitiveness and employability.

This study investigates the challenges faced by the students during scriptwriting and evaluates feedback on teaching approaches to refine future practices. By analysing perceptions and experiences, this study aimed to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in language education. In the context of Mandarin, where cultural nuances and conversational etiquette play a crucial role, the implementation of role-play can significantly enhance students' speaking abilities. One key aspect of effective role-play in Mandarin is the level of preparation and script familiarisation.

This paper aims to explore the impact of early script preparation on the performance of Mandarin roleplay, providing insights and reflections for language instructors and researchers. Based on the purpose of this study, the research objectives determined are as per the following:

1. to identify the students' perspectives on early script preparation
2. to determine the challenges that students face in script writing
3. to discover the students' feedback on the script preparation teaching methods

LITERATURE REVIEW

Role play in language learning

Role-play is rooted in sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasises the importance of social interaction in language acquisition. Role-play provides a scaffolded environment where learners can practice language in context, mimicking real-life interactions. Through role-plays, language learners help each other by interacting among themselves, hence increasing their confidence to speak and communicate in the language that they are trying to learn.

Role-play activities present some benefits for the learners. Firstly, role-play encourages active learning, where students are not just passive recipients of information but actively engage in constructing meaning through dialogue and interaction. The students can directly interact with the content of the language they learn with the guidance of their educators (Yulita et al., 2023). This active learning through role-play activities will eventually help them to better understand the language, thus assisting them in mastering the language faster.

Next, role-play could also help learners in terms of cultural immersion. In Mandarin, role-play is particularly effective because it allows students to practice cultural norms and pragmatic language use, such as honorifics, politeness strategies, and context-specific vocabulary. This is because learning a new language involves not only mastering the language grammar and structure. To speak the language correctly, one has to understand the cultural norms and pragmatic use of the language, too. According to Van Dyke and Acton (2022), using role-plays for students to learn and practice their speaking skills in the targeted language is "a natural bridge to integration and productive use of targeted forms" (p. 2). The probability of Mandarin learners to practice this language in real-life situations might be low due to several factors, such as anxiety. The role-play activities in the classroom could give them opportunities to practice it correctly with guidance.

Werth (2018) has noted that role-plays represent an innovative and exciting tool for educators. They provide the opportunity for students to immerse themselves in culturally authentic, communicative tasks. This research also pointed out that the group role-plays lead to superior student outcomes in terms of student enjoyment and perception of learning. Interestingly, there was no relationship between Chinese level and enjoyment, nor was there a relationship between Chinese level and students' perception that they had learned from the experience. This indicates that roleplays can be an effective tool for students of all proficiency levels.

In a study of Amani et al. (2024), the results of the assessment and evaluation of the role-playing dialog showed that most students were fluent in Chinese dialog, although there were some mistakes in the pronunciation of the intonation. Students stated that the role-playing method was able to make students feel confident and help train students' Chinese language skills, especially in speaking and grammar skills, and make learning interesting and fun.

Scripted role play

Research of Adnyani et al. (2014) found that students with high foreign language anxiety benefited more from scripted role-play compared to conventional methods. Scripted role-play can help reduce the negative effects of anxiety by providing a structured, less intimidating environment for students to practice speaking. Another research also found that play script implementation was effective, enhancing group work and problemsolving skills. The cooperative learning in drama enhanced speaking, pronunciation, confidence, and created an enjoyable atmosphere (Supriya, 2018)

For role-play script writing, students nowadays turn to using AI more than doing it themselves. A study of Kim and Park (2023) showed that students generally found GPT scripts to be more difficult than textbook scripts, citing challenging vocabulary and longer sentence structures. While they appreciated the engaging storylines of GPT scripts, many struggled with reading and enunciation, leading to decreased confidence. In contrast, textbook scripts were perceived as easier and more manageable, facilitating relaxed practice and boosting overall self-assurance.

Cognitive Load Theory

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) (Sweller, 1988) suggests that learners have limited working memory capacity. In order to ensure students can learn as much as they can, it is important to reduce the amount of irrelevant or unrelated mental load (Clark & Kimmons, 2023). This is because humans' short term memory is very limited, and there are situations where a person has to store a lot of information in the short term memory, which would lead to cognitive overload (Sweller, 1988). This theory is widely used for instructional designs in the teaching field. It is particularly useful to emphasize that teachers refrain from teaching too many things at once to the students, since they may have limited cognitive abilities that teachers need to consider (Asma & Dallel, 2020). Therefore, in the context of role-play performance, the early script preparation in this study is based on the CLT as it reduces cognitive load by allowing students to internalize vocabulary, grammar, and cultural context before engaging in role-play. This would lead to better retention and performance among the students.

Since role-play performance is an extensive activity to be involved in, especially in a third language (in the case of this study, Mandarin language), it is not an easy feat for the students to do. Students will have to act well, remember their lines, and ensure that their pronunciation of the Mandarin words are correct. These three major aspects are already heavy for a student's cognitive ability, and they might have fear of having grammatical mistakes (Ahmad Zaidi et al., 2017) during their performance. Therefore, the early script preparation would reduce the students' mental load in this activity, as suggested by the CLT. In addition, early preparation aligns with the concept of spaced repetition, where learners revisit and practice materials over time, leading to deeper encoding in their long-term memory. Furthermore, the early script preparation also allows instructors to check the students' linguistic proficiency through the script and make necessary corrections if necessary (Fan, 2020).

Challenges in role-play script preparation

The role-play activity, while it is a fun activity to be done in the classroom, also poses several challenges, especially to the third language learners. Some common challenges in role-plays and in learning a third language are linguistic challenges, cultural challenges, and differences in students' proficiency, and time management (Hao & Li, 2023; Ahmad Zaidi et al., 2017; Fan, 2020).

Firstly, Mandarin is a tonal language, which means that the meaning of a word can change based on its tone. The tonal language of Mandarin poses a challenge for a third language learner to properly pronounce and understand the word (Hao & Li, 2023). Not only that, Hao and Li (2023) also highlighted the challenges of structure and grammar of the language that students encounter. Mandarin grammar for example, such as the use of measure words and sentence particles (le, ma, ne), can be difficult for learners. Linguistic challenges could be said as a

major challenge for students who learn Mandarin as their third language, which could somehow demotivate the students from writing a script for the role-play. Fan (2020) reported that as students did not have linguistic accuracy, they could not meaningfully learn from their scriptwriting. However, the use of early script preparation would allow students to practice and internalize the correct tones, grammar, and structure to reduce errors during role-play. Early preparation would help these students practice these structures in context.

Next, cultural challenges are also another challenge that could make role-play in Mandarin difficult. Mandarin role-play often involves cultural elements such as hierarchical relationships, face-saving strategies, and indirect communication. This was proven in a study by Michaud and Hooper (2016) that found a cultural context can cause a challenge for students in Japan to interpret the context in script writing. Other than that, students' perspectives that regard the English language as more important than other languages also is another factor that could make learning other languages difficult (Hao & Li, 2023). The use of early script preparation would allow students to research and understand these nuances, leading to more authentic interactions. In conclusion, when students are given more time to research, practice, and understand their scripts through early script preparation, it should help them to perform better in their role-play activities.

In general, scriptwriting is not an easy task for third language learners. Ample time should be given to learners to properly and accurately write their script for their role-play performance. This approach would allow learners to practice the proper Mandarin tones, structure, grammar, and cultural context, hence reducing errors and building their self-confidence to perform in the role-play. By asking students to write their scripts early, it would be a more valuable and meaningful learning experience that promotes both linguistic and cultural competency.

METHODOLOGY

The research employed a quantitative approach, specifically using the survey research design. The study sample included students engaged in Mandarin language courses as third language elective subjects, from six different faculties in two campuses of a public university in Selangor, Malaysia. The respondents were chosen through random sampling, whereby all students of the Mandarin language courses in the six faculties mentioned were given fair chances to be involved in the study.

This study utilised an online questionnaire as an instrument for data collection. The link of the questionnaire was shared to the students through WhatsApp application and emails. There were four (4) sections in the questionnaire: 1) demographic profiles, 2) perceptions on early script preparation, 3) challenges in script writing, and 4) feedback on teaching style. In total, there were eighteen (18) items included in the questionnaire for the respondents to answer. The responses from the respondents were received through the Google Form database, and this study managed to gather 129 respondents.

To analyse the data, this study organised the data into Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics analysis was conducted to generate the results of the study, in the form of frequency and percentage. In order to report the findings, this study converted the analysed data into pie charts and bar graphs for the purpose of easy reading. The findings of this study are presented in the next section according to the research objectives determined.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceptions on early script preparation

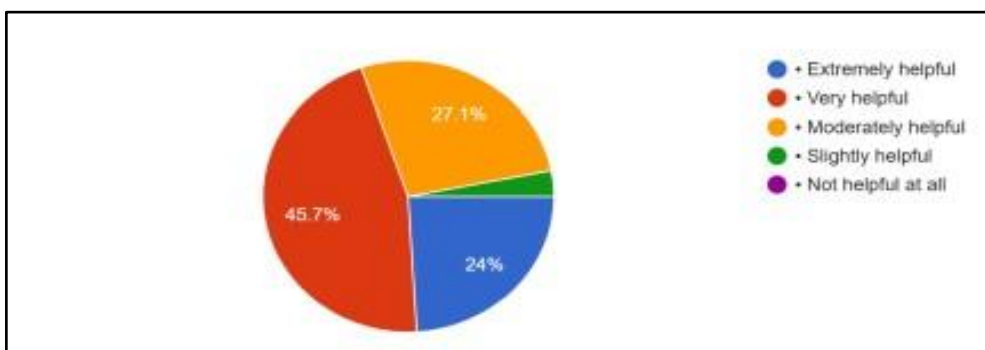


Figure 1 Perspective on helpfulness of script preparation

Figure 1 above shows the results of the respondents' perspectives on how helpful they find script preparation after completing 2 to 3 lessons in the classroom. Based on the figure, it showed that a majority of the respondents (46.1%) found early script preparation to be very helpful and extremely helpful (23.4%). Some of the respondents (27.3%) stated that the early preparation was moderately helpful for them. Only a minority of the respondents (3.2%) disagreed that early preparation helped them. This data reveals that generally, students highly agreed that by writing their role-play scripts earlier, it helped them in their role-play performance. This means that students in this study generally had a very positive perspective on early script preparation. These results confirmed the theory of Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1998) where early preparation helped them to have a better retention and to perform better.

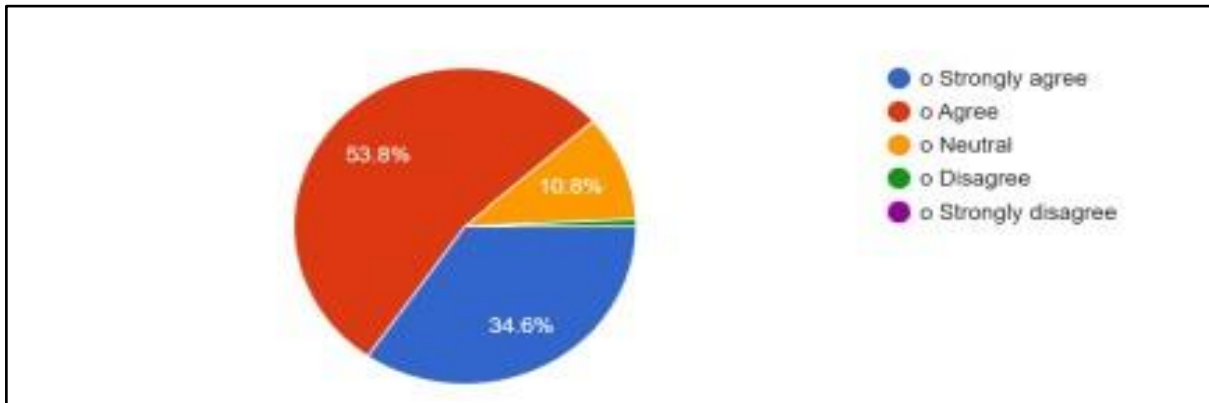


Figure 2 Perspective on early preparation effect on students' understanding

Figure 2 above shows the respondents' perspective on early preparation effect on their understanding in the classroom. The figure shows that early script preparation is highly beneficial for the majority of students, with 88.4% finding it at least somewhat helpful in understanding classroom lessons. As Yulita et al. (2023) suggested, active learning through role-play activities will eventually help them to better understand the language, thus assisting them in mastering the language faster. However, there is room for improvement, particularly for the 34.9% who found it only partially helpful and the 10.9% who did not find it helpful at all.

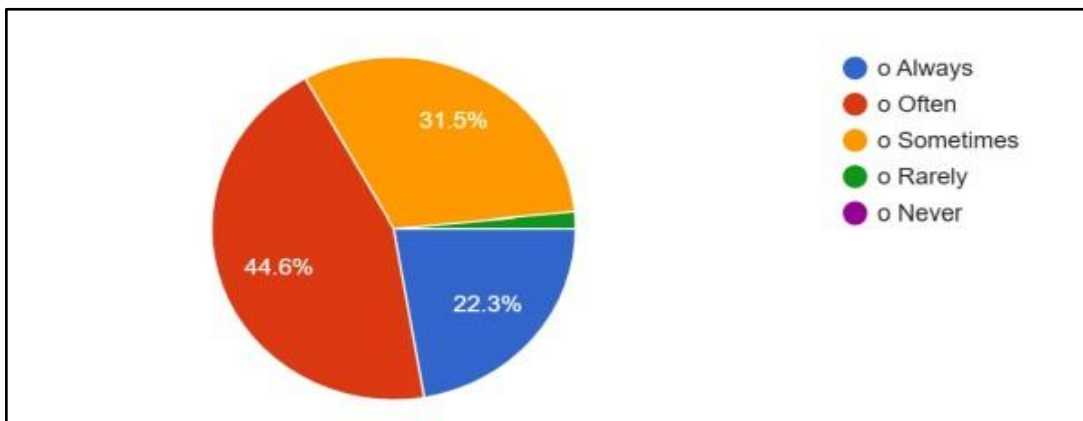


Figure 3 Perspective on vocabulary and sentence structures learnt in script preparation

Figure 3 above displays the respondents' perspectives on the vocabulary and sentence structures learnt in script preparation. Based on the figure, most of the respondents (76.8%) highly agreed that they were able to learn new vocabulary and sentence structure while preparing their script early. A percentage of 31.5% respondents stated that they sometimes learnt vocabulary and sentence structure during script preparation, while a minority of respondents (1.6%) stated they rarely learnt these two aspects. A very positive perspective on the learning of vocabulary and sentence structure during script preparation could be attributed to the students' opportunity to get their script checked and corrected by their instructor (Fan, 2020), which further helped their understanding of their own script.

Challenges in script writing

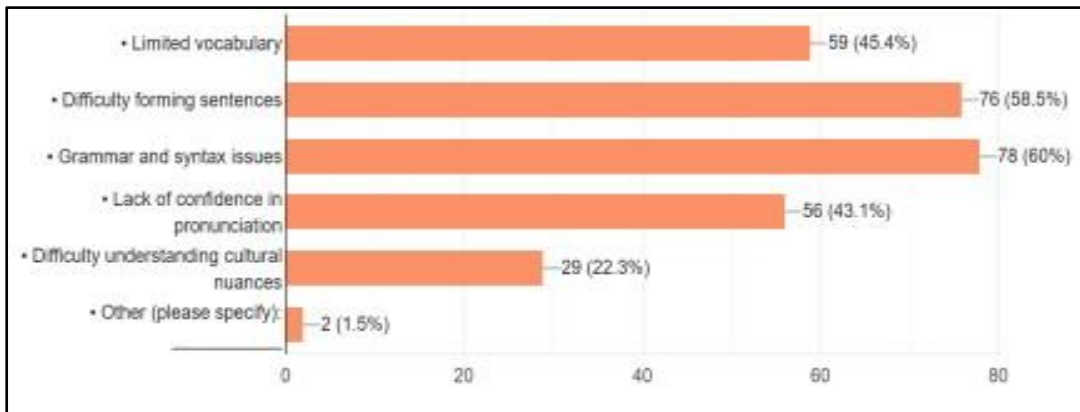


Figure 4 Challenges in script writing

Based on Figure 4 above, this research found that the respondents mostly had problem with the grammar and syntax issues (60%) in the Mandarin language script writing preparation. The second highest challenge is forming sentences in the script (58.5%). This is supported by Hao and Li (2023), who stated that grammar and structure of Mandarin language becomes a challenge that students normally face. Due to the respondents in this study were third language learners and they were not really proficient in the language, hence it is expectable that the respondents mostly had problems with these aspects of script preparation. The respondents had the least problem in understanding cultural nuances when preparing the script. This is an interesting finding, as Michaud and Hooper (2016) found that cultural context was challenging for students to interpret script writing context. The fact that the respondents in this study had the least problem with this aspect of script preparation might be due to ample teaching and learning inputs by the instructors, or students might be familiar with the cultural context of Mandarin language. These reasons could be further confirmed in future studies.

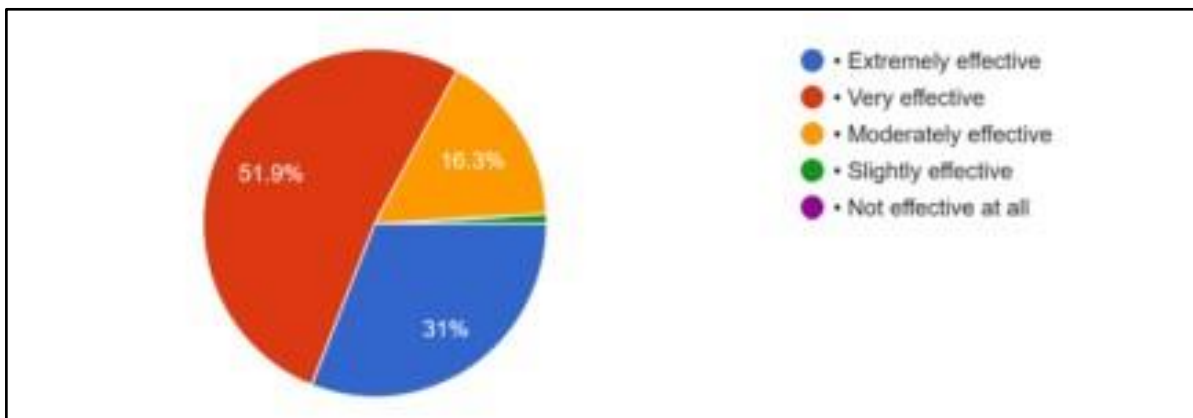


Figure 5 Perspectives on script preparation teaching methods

Figure 5 above displays the respondents' perspectives on script preparation teaching methods by instructors. Based on the figure shown, a majority of the respondents positively agreed that the teaching methods used were very effective (82.9%). Another 16.3% respondents stated that the teaching methods used were moderately effective for them. Only a minority of respondents mentioned that the teaching methods were slightly effective to them. This finding shows that the teaching and learning sessions in the classroom are very crucial and helpful for them to make early preparation of their script writing for their role-play preparations. Yulita et al. (2023) concurred that through guidance by the instructors in script writing preparation, it is easier for students to grasp and interact with the language that they are learning.

This study also gauged the respondents' recommendations on how to improve the teaching methods in script preparation. Among the responses received from the respondents were to use a more enhanced teaching materials

and resources such as a collection of sample scripts categorised by themes for easy reference, to conduct intensive workshops on script writing preparation and cultural nuances, as well as to implement structured feedback sessions for script writing and role-play performances. Based on the feedback given by the respondents, it is understood that the students prefer a more thorough guidance to help them prepare good script for their role-play performances.

CONCLUSION

This study has provided further insights and inputs in early script preparation for role-play performances in Mandarin language, which is lacking in the current existing literature. This is important to address due to the learning of third languages are rampant now, especially since possessing a third language is considered as a bonus in the work industry today. The findings of this study highlight the importance of early script preparation in building students' confidence and linguistic skills in the third language. By identifying the challenges that students face in script writing such as linguistic issues and cultural context, it helps instructors and students alike to figure out solutions to overcome the challenges. Meanwhile, students' feedback on teaching methods suggests that while interactive methods are effective in the classroom, students need further additional resources and more structured feedback mechanisms that could enhance their learning experiences.

This study has some implications for instructors of third languages. In role-play performances or assessments, it is better to get the students to prepare their scripts early, to encourage the students to start preparing their scripts well in advance. Early script preparation would allow instructors to carefully go through their scripts and give constructive feedback to the students. Next, it is also crucial to integrate the learning on cultural nuances of Mandarin language in the classroom. This will help students to understand the context of the script that they write, which will improve their comprehension and performance of the role-play. Other than that, collaborative activities in the classroom such as peer reviews and group workshops are also useful to facilitate peer learning. By implementing these activities, instructors would be able to help students to have more meaningful learning experiences.

To conclude, this study has shown that early script preparation can become a good pedagogical tool to enhance students' performance in role-play in the Mandarin language. By utilising the Cognitive Load Theory, early preparation would lower the mental load for students to prepare a good script for their role-play performance. This study showed that linguistic challenge is the main problem that students mostly have problems with, hence early script preparation would allow students to properly write the script and truly understand the cultural nuance of the Mandarin language. It will also lead to better language acquisition. It is recommended for instructors to include the teaching of cultural nuances in the classroom and leverage technology for a more engaging and interesting classroom activity. Finally, future researchers should conduct more studies on the longterm benefits of early script preparation in the third language.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study would like to thank the respondents involved, as they have provided valuable data in the field of third language learning.

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