

The Thematic Content Short Course Model for Accelerating Language Proficiency Among Learners of German and Mandarin Language and Literature: An Experimental Study

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Abstract. Language learning, particularly foreign languages, is not always appealing or effective for the general public, especially when the available time is limited and expectations include both engagement and practical competency tailored to specific needs. This study aims to produce a viable instructional module to introduce foreign languages, specifically German and Mandarin, to the general public in the form of a short course. This research falls into the research and development category, with effectiveness determined not only through expert validation but also by measuring its impact via a pre-test and post-test experimental design. A total of 10 beginner learners participated in the short course. Data were analyzed using content analysis, examining qualitative data gathered from learner feedback, comments, and suggestions on the short course to identify themes and patterns that could inform the development of the short course model. The results indicate that the developed short course model of the themes ‘*sich vorstellen*’ (perkenalan), ‘*Familie*’ (Keluarga), ‘*Alltagsleben*’ (kehidupan sehari-hari), ‘*Essen und Trinken*’ (makanan dan minuman), and ‘*Das Hobby*’ (hobi) can significantly enhance learner competency. The most effective components in boosting learner competency were practical training, group discussions, and feedback. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that the developed short course model increases learners' motivation and self-confidence.

Keywords. German Language, Short Course, Thematic Content Model.

1. Introduction

Acquiring foreign languages, including German and Mandarin language and literature, poses a special challenge to novices. On top of linguistic complexity [1], the often-limited duration of learning poses difficulties for learners in achieving adequate proficiency the typically brief learning duration likewise causes hardship to learners in gaining sufficient proficiency in a limited period of time. By linguistic complexity herein, we mean the degree of difficulty in the foreign language being learned, in this instance, German and Mandarin. These languages, as any other foreign language, also have structures, grammar, and vocabularies that might make learning even more complicated. Because the learning period is brief, as viewed by [2] the time for studying the language is always not adequate, while efficient learning entails having ample time to learn and master the subject. This intertwining of language difficulty and learning period brevity even makes learning harder. Simultaneously, learning problems are directly linked to the learner's ability to attain a satisfactory enough level of competence, which enables effective communication and comprehension of the language. Hence, it is feasible to surmount these problems through aptly formulated learning mechanisms and a sensible allocation of time in order to attain the desired learning outcomes.

In order to overcome these constraints, we need to have a thematic content model in German language learning as a short course as a dynamic learning process. The German language is reported to be difficult to learn since it possesses a complex grammar, a complicated sentence structure, and a very extensive vocabulary [3]. To surmount these difficulties, the introduction of a thematic content model in the teaching of German as a foreign language can be a dynamic and effective measure. A functional approach to grammar, in which grammar is viewed as a means of creating meaning within a particular linguistic and cultural context, can also be extremely helpful for learners of the German language [4]. It is based on Systemic Functional Linguistics and Cognitive Linguistics, which theorize grammar as a tool for meaning-making under the influence of historical, social, and biological constraints. Taking a functional viewpoint, teachers of foreign languages can reconsider the place of explicit teaching of grammar in building learners' communicative competence in a second language [5]. This approach focuses on the comprehension of grammar in the context of whole texts and the development of metalinguistic awareness that allows learners to create meaning appropriately in a particular context.

According to [6] short courses are continuing training instruments that include fundamental information to assist professional activity. They are taken by a broad variety of individuals, comprising professionals, researchers, and students wishing to learn about particular subjects, in order to satisfy the demands of the labour market. In accordance with [7] short courses can be an educational innovation, rendering education more flexible for lifelong learning. The popularity of short courses and their usage in German language learning is evident. Moreover, short courses also address the contemporary issues in higher education, i.e., the numerous complaints and protests from the public regarding lengthy programmes [8] and lack of flexibility. Students are becoming more concerned with careers and jobs, and the public sector is being asked by stakeholders to address the skills shortage. Government requires a higher education system that is more sensitive to the needs of the labour market.

The thematic content-based short course model is an intensive pedagogical concept that aims to speed up German and Chinese language and literature learning through the utilization of a certain theme as the primary pedagogical framework. Within this model, the subject matter is centered on issues that are pertinent, contextual and stimulating to learners, for instance, cultural, historical or societal issues associated with the target language [9]. This theme-based strategy enables students to comprehend the cultural context and language comprehension by direct usage in practical situations.

Thematic content-based short courses structured thematically, have several benefits [10]. First, it provides a more organized and specialized learning environment in which learners can refine their language capability within a brief period. Second, it emphasizes the relationship between language and culture, which allows learners to acquire knowledge of the use of language in a wide social and cultural context. Third, since it is theme-based, the short course allows for the application of the language in different contexts, aiding in the development of early learners' communication and critical thinking skills.

For complex languages such as German and Chinese, the thematic content model especially applies since grammar, vocabulary, and sentence structure can be learned in authentic contexts, which allows students to acquire the language rules more organically. Short courses also facilitate flexibility and lifelong learning since the subject matter is covered in a concise and effective way, which makes it convenient for students with active lifestyles or indeed for anyone who wishes to gain particular competencies in a limited time frame.

As part of developing science, technology and art, the implementation of German and Mandarin short courses must be complemented by a dynamic, relevant and technology-driven curriculum. Pedagogy and linguistics form the foundation for developing learning materials in conformity with the nature of German and Mandarin. Systematic modules are also tailored to address gaps in learners' linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, instructors are provided with theories of second language acquisition to enable them to make learning more effective and facilitate the learning of both languages within their respective culture-specific contexts. Online learning portals, language software, and interactive programs [11] are some of the technologies utilized to enrich this short course by making it more participative and accessible as it is delivered in multimedia-based content. Even technology such as

artificial intelligence (AI) can also be used to provide automatic grammar or pronunciation feedback, and also adjust the difficulty level of the material based on the improvement of students' skills [12]. Being a component of culture in language acquisition, art, particularly literature and culture, can be attained through art-based thematic content, including poems, songs, films, and literary texts [13] in both German and Chinese. Students acquire not only the language but also the embedded cultural norms. Art provides an avenue through which students get exposed to the language at a subconscious level so they can employ language with a finer sense of appropriate cultural shading and expression. Thematic material offered in the teaching module for short courses is selected to make the learning of languages more contextualized and manageable. Short courses in this paper play a role in speeding up German and Chinese language and literature students' learning of language since through this method, the learning process is intensive and concentrated, and it enables students to get results in a shorter period of time. Short courses are designed to present material in a concise and concentrated or efficient and well-organized fashion, and minimize the time needed to learn different elements of the language.

As curriculum is well structured, students are able to concentrate on the core content, such that the level of progress as desired may be attained in a short time. It is also possible for students to acquire language skills in a sequential and systematic manner from understanding the basics to its usage in complicated scenarios. Furthermore, the contextualised and practical learning in the short course targets students who wish to apply their German or Chinese language skills directly in the workplace or study setting.

2. Method

This research adopts the Research and Development (R&D) approach, with the IPPPE stages (Identification of needs, Design, Testing, Implementation, and Evaluation) [14]. R&D is a systematic process that aims to develop, test, and implement new systems. In education, the method is widely employed in designing more effective instructional materials, curriculum, or technology [14]. The IPPPE phase was conducted with a focus of developing and evaluating a thematic content model short course in learning Chinese and German language and literature. The process involves several key steps with the focus of ensuring that the developed model is theoretically relevant as well as functional at the learning practical level. It comprised an experimental design in which the pre-test and post-test strategy was employed with the focus of ascertaining the effectiveness of the so-developed short course.

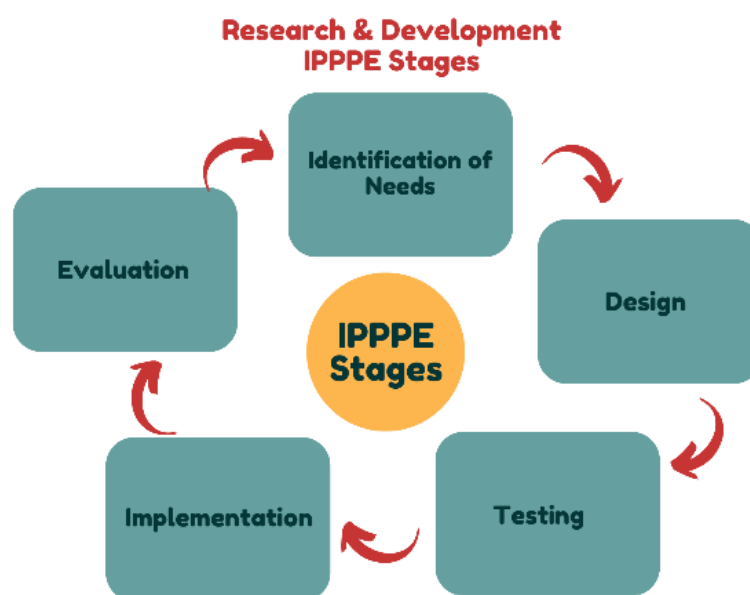


Figure 1. IPPPE Stages

Source: [15]

During the needs analysis phase, German and Mandarin learners' skills and competencies to be acquired are determined. Data is gathered in this activity through questionnaires and interviews given to students and teachers. During the design phase, a prototype of a reading skills module with the topic of daily life was crafted. The module has material descriptions, practice questions, literary work, and self-tests that are organized in a systematic manner according to good module preparation standards. The study materials were structured through the use of a relevant thematic content approach. The content has elements of grammar, vocabulary, and culture presented within a predetermined theme framework. Once the materials have been prepared, they are analyzed by language and education specialists to check if the content and methodology employed are aligned with the learning goals and can be academically accepted. The testing phase entailed pilot-testing the thematic content Short Course model for measuring how effectively it can contribute to faster learning of the languages by German and Chinese Language and Literature students. This testing is done through the implementation of the learning module on a sample of participants based on the determined criteria. The outcome of this phase constitutes the grounds for revision of the module prior to its large-scale implementation. During implementation, thematic content-based learning model is implemented in short course learning activities to support linguistic competence for German and Chinese language and literature students. This involves the introduction of a thematically designed module in a structured way, providing a contextualized and meaningful learning experience. The students are subjected to numerous interactive activities, from discussions, simulations, to real text-based problem-solving. Furthermore, the assessment stage was carried out in an attempt to examine the effectiveness of the model employed. The assessment was done by means of linguistic testing prior to and following the application of the short course, observation of student activity, and feedback from learners and instructors. Assessment result analysis is the foundation for refining the model of learning to continue enhancing the efficacy of speeding up language proficiency for students in the future.

The sources of data in this research are 10 short course students with a beginner level of linguistics with sample size based on the number of short course applications at Faculty of Letters, State University of Malang who have the characteristics under study being investigated, i.e., interested in thematic content short courses, and aged between 19 - 22 years. Evidence gathered from the pre-test and post-test will be examined through content analysis, i.e., examination of qualitative data gathered through learners' feedback, suggestions, and comments on the short course, with a view to determining themes and trends that can be utilized to inform the development of the short course model. Analysis will entail observation and interpretation of test results gathered from both samples. Thus, the findings of the study through the analysis will offer an overall view of the experience and effectiveness of thematic content-based learning.

In order to examine the outcomes of the tests, questionnaires and interviews shall be administered among the short course participants to collect data on each of their personal experiences during the short course. The data shall then be used in revising and enhancing the learning model that has been created. Through the application of orderly R&D steps, this study aims to make a constructive contribution to the development of short course models for German and Chinese language and literature acquisition and also bring new insights into language teaching at schools. To establish how the explanation of the improvement of students' competence is attained, the following formula is applied:

$$\text{Peningkatan (\%)} = \left(\frac{\text{Skor Post-test} - \text{Skor Pre-test}}{\text{Skor Pre-test}} \right) \times 100$$

3. Results and Discussions

This study has successfully developed a thematic teaching material module with the theme of 'sich vorstellen' (introduction), 'Familie' (family), 'Alltagsleben' (daily life), 'Essen und Trinken' (food and drink), and 'Das Hobby' (hobby) and this theme has been successfully tested for foreign language

introduction, specifically German and Mandarin, to the general public as short courses. Out of 10 beginner learners took part, pre-test and post-test results showed a significant increase in proficiency after attending the programme.

3.1 Material Expert Validation Results of Thematic Content Module

Validation was conducted to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of the 'sich vorstellen' learning module for German language instruction at A1 level. The primary aim was to make sure that the content, structure, and activities within the module are aligned with the curriculum, responsive to learners' needs, and capable of enhancing participants' knowledge about self-introduction. Validation was carried out by expert lecturers in German language teaching and linguistics. Validation is the process of verifying the content of the module, deciding the suitability of vocabulary and sentence structure, examining learning activities and interactions, and providing feedback and suggestions for improvement. The outcome of validation is that the 'Sich Vorstellen' module has several strengths, but requires some improvements too. Table 1 shows the outcome of the evaluation by the material expert.

Table 1. Material Expert Validation Results

No	Component	Appropriate	Not appropriate
1	Content suitability	√	
2	Clarity of structure and systematics	√	
3	Interactive activity potential	√	
4	Attractiveness of presentation	√	

Notes: Proceed with revision.

Areas of Improvement:

1. It is suggested to add variety in activities, such as language games or creative projects that involve more visual elements.
2. Incorporating technology, such as the use of language learning apps, can increase learner engagement.
3. It is recommended to provide more detailed guidance on how to give feedback after practice activities, to help learners understand their mistakes.
4. Although illustrations are already present, it is recommended to add more visual elements that support comprehension, such as pictures of real situations relevant to the vocabulary being taught.

It is concluded, according to the results of the validation, that the 'sich vorstellen' module can be utilized in the teaching of the German language at A1 level with some suggested enhancements. The module can advance learners' understanding in the relevant theme and can be utilized as an effective component in the learning process. The result of the revision is that this module can provide a more valuable and interesting learning experience for students and as a reference to improve and further develop German learning modules.

3.2 Results of Short Course Participants' Language Proficiency

Of the 10 beginner learners who participated, the pre-test and post-test scores indicated that there was a significant improvement in language learning after the programme. The following Table 2 shows the comparison of the scores of the participants in different aspects of language skills (vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, reading and writing) before and after the programme.

Table 2. Pre-Test and Post-Test Scores

No.	Participant Name*	Pre-Test Score (100) **	Post-Test Score (100) **	Improvement (%)
1.	EAL	45	75	66.7
2.	TGS	50	80	60.0
3.	IAS	40	70	75.0
4.	AAR	55	85	54.5
5.	KNR	35	65	85.7
6.	MDR	48	78	62.5
7.	NNA	50	82	64.0
8.	APS	38	68	78.9
9.	MMN	47	77	63.8
10.	TSM	42	72	71.4

Description:

* Acronym of the participant's name

** Pre-test score and

**Post-test score is the total score of all tested linguistic aspects (vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, reading, and writing), with a maximum score of 100.

As can be observed from this table, all the participants had an improvement in scores after participating in the programme. Both the pre-test and post-test scores in this study were used to measure the development of the participants' language capacity before and after they had gone through the thematic content model short course programme. The pre-test scores were collected before the participants started the programme. The test sought to determine the participants' initial level of ability in the fields of language to be addressed, i.e., vocabulary, grammar, speaking, listening, and reading and writing ability. The results of the pre-test provide a summary of the participants' initial level of knowledge and skill, which is generally at the beginner level. On the basis of pre-test scores, the participants have low mean scores, reflecting their limitations in the linguistic features under test. This kind of pre-test gives an initial baseline that allows more objective evaluation of learning gains [16].

After the participants have completed the short course programme, they are given a post-test with the identical structure and material coverage as the pre-test. The post-test aims to measure how well the linguistic capacity of the participants has grown after they have gone through the intensive theme content-based programme [17]. The results of the post-test often show a significant increase in the average writing or score of the participants. The post-test results are objective evidence of the efficacy of the learning method used, showing that compared to the pre-test. As observed from the results in Table 1, there is a development in the areas trained in the programme, i.e., use of vocabulary, sentence structures, and speaking fluency participants have acquired new skills or developed their knowledge of the foreign language acquired. Overall, the pre-test and post-test comparison provides empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the short course programme in achieving language learning for beginner

learners at a quicker pace, thus demonstrating the positive impact of the thematic content-based learning approach.

Content analysis of the learners' feedback, comments and suggestions identified some of the most significant factors contributing to the success of the programme, such as practical training, group discussion and feedback. In the practical training plan embraced to extend language learning to students of German and Chinese Language and Literature, the tasks of the 'Thematic Content Model Short Course' were crafted in an integrated manner. The activity should facilitate a more profound and applicable learning process, such that students not only acquire theory, but also practice language in a direct manner in realistic contexts. In some sessions, role-playing of daily dialogues is carried out by pairing the students and giving them scenarios to act out. In this task, students not only practice speaking, but also their listening skills and cultural sensitivity, which are very important in foreign language learning.



Figure 2: Practical Training Activity

In the practical training there is explicit feedback given by the instructor. Participants get an opportunity to share their experiences, identify challenges faced, and get constructive feedback for development after each practical session. This approach builds confidence among the participants so they are better equipped to use the language in a broader context.



Figure 3. Short Course Poster

There are 5 thematic contents in the given module, including 'sich vorstellen' (introduction), 'Familie' (family), 'Alltagsleben' (daily life), 'Essen und Trinken' (food and drink), and 'Das Hobby' (hobby). Thematic content being utilized enables participants to engage with other participants in a small group setting. This encourages a dynamic collaborative learning environment where participants can share experiences with each other and learn from other participants. In module 'sich vorstellen', the learners pick up a few words: name, age, occupation, hobby and hometown. The recommended exercise is role-playing of introduction to class with minimal dialogue.



Figure 4. Module Cover 'sich vorstellen' Theme

Group discussion is the second pillar in the success of the thematic content model short course programme of quick language learning for German and Chinese language and literature students. By group discussions, students can interact directly to attain language skills and exchange knowledge concerning issues [18]. Such group discussions enable individuals to have direct contact, therefore enabling students to refine their speech, listening, and thinking capabilities in the foreign language under study. In addition, group discussion enables collaborative learning whereby students do not only acquire knowledge from the teacher/tutor, but from other participants too [19]. This enables students to learn diverse perspectives and overcome language or cultural comprehension challenges that they may experience while pursuing the short course. Group discussion also encourages students to be more creative in using the language, which has a positive effect on their learning motivation. Experimental studies show that group discussions are better at enhancing retention and understanding of the material compared to passive learning methods. Hence, this aspect not only adds to language acquisition but also provides a more engaging and meaningful learning experience for students.

Feedback in the context of language learning, provides explicit and prompt feedback on participants' knowledge of the material, mastery of vocabulary, mastery of grammar, speaking, and writing abilities [20]. With appropriate and timely feedback, course participants can be able to know what they are doing wrong and learn strategies to improve. Feedback provides a quick and simple way of adjusting instruction in brief course programs. Due to its thematic and acceleration-led design, the programme requires continuous assessment that can be directly utilized to improve learning outcomes. Feedback is therefore not only an assessment tool, but also part of continuous coaching, encouraging learners to be more competent and effective in communicating in the target language.

From the findings obtained, the short course model not only contributes to improving linguistic skills but also helps in a positive way towards the confidence and motivation of learners. The improvement is essential since it is observed that the majority of the general populace have a tendency to avoid learning a foreign language, especially within a narrow context. Practical training is a critical factor since it allows the learners to apply what they have learned directly into real-life settings. Group discussions enable students to engage in listening and speaking, two of the key components of language learning. Constructive feedback encourages them to become more confident and conscious of their mistakes, hence improving learning as a whole.

The results of this research, thus, suggest that the practice-based and interactive learning approach is highly effective in developing the foreign language skill of the masses, albeit over a comparatively short period. The short course model can be replicated or modified for other foreign languages, providing impetus for more fruitful and engaging language learning efforts in the future.

Conclusions

The results show that the thematic short course model of 5 (five) contents ‘sich vorstellen’ (introduction), ‘Familie’ (family), ‘Alltagsleben’ (daily life), ‘Essen und Trinken’ (food and drink), and ‘Das Hobby’ (hobby) developed in this programme is able to significantly improve the linguistic competence of learners of German and Chinese language and literature. This improvement is seen in various aspects, including vocabulary, grammar, speaking skills, and listening comprehension. Factors supporting the effectiveness of the model include intensive practical training, interactive group discussions, and regular feedback focusing on participants' strengths and areas of improvement. In addition to improving linguistic competence, the short course model also proved to be able to increase learners' motivation and confidence in using the language learnt, so that learners feel more prepared and confident in communicating. This finding confirms that thematic content-based learning approach with short duration, yet intensive, can be an effective strategy for language acquisition acceleration, especially for beginner learners who want to achieve progress in a relatively fast time.

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