

Group-Arrange-Touch-up (GAT): A Method of Teaching Non-native Mandarin Speakers in Restructuring Elementary Mandarin Sentence

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ABSTRACT

In Malaysian local universities, Mandarin is offered as the third language course to students who are the non-native Mandarin speakers. Since Mandarin is distinctive with its own grammatical and sentence patterns, Mandarin instructors need to come up with the effective method to teach the non-native speakers who are rather weak in restructuring Mandarin sentences. Many non-native speakers of Mandarin are fail to restructure Mandarin sentences correctly at elementary level due to the limited contact hours, unsupportive Mandarin learning environment, and the influence of mother tongue. To reduce this learning predicament among these non-native speakers, this paper proposes the use of GAT method for restructuring Mandarin sentences. GAT, an acronym for Group-Arrange-Touch-up, incorporates 'Word Sequence' Diagram (WSD) in the form of graphic impressions, which can be used by non-native speakers in their quest of learning Mandarin. This method is supported by the 'word sequence' approach and other relevant theories proposed by some prominent researchers such as Liu Hongmo, Shen Xiaolong, and Zhang Lizhao. This paper demonstrates how GAT is used to teach non-native speakers to restructure basic Mandarin sentences without the need to master the grammar of Mandarin thoroughly. After implementing GAT in a Mandarin class throughout a four-month semester in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Penang Campus, the result obtained from an oral interview to the students had found that GAT was a favourable method among the Malay students in restructuring Mandarin sentences.

Keywords: Mandarin, GAT, WSD, word sequence, non-native speakers

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Introduction

Since Malaysia gained its independence in 1957, Malay language has been accorded as the National language while English language is used as the second language. In response to the rapid economic growth of China, the Malaysian government has identified Mandarin as a foreign language that is required to be taught to Malaysian undergraduates. In UiTM, students take Mandarin as the third language course. In 2008, a total of 13061 UiTM students had registered for Mandarin courses and they were sharing these common traits:

1. The medium of instruction in their primary and secondary schools was Malay language;
2. They studied English as their second language;
3. They had no background knowledge of Mandarin language; and
4. They were of 18 years old and above.

Teaching elementary Mandarin to non-native speakers like the students in UiTM Penang Campus who have no basic knowledge in Mandarin, is always a demanding task. Since there is a fairly short span of time to cover the syllabus in one semester and most of the students communicate in their mother tongue, the students' exposure to the target language environment is extremely limited. The language environment, which can establish the 'sense' of using the target language, is imperative for non-native speakers. It can indirectly help the students to construct the Mandarin sentences in correct order. Since 'Word Sequence' Diagram (WSD) is the key to format all elementary Mandarin sentences correctly, incorporating WSD in GAT method will help students to restructure correct Mandarin sentences even though they are situated in a limited foreign language learning environment.

The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how GAT can be incorporated in teaching elementary Mandarin particularly in sentence restructuring skill and identify the users' responses via oral interview after GAT implementation in Mandarin classroom. GAT is designed by the researchers from their years of teaching experience and linguistic knowledge in Mandarin. This method is also supported by the 'Word Sequence' approach and other similar theories proposed by Liu Hongmo, Shen Xiaolong and Zhang Lizhao. Besides, this paper demonstrates a few solid samples of GAT application that are relevant to the teaching of elementary Mandarin to non-native

speakers. Later, the responses gathered from the users of GAT are analysed and discussed.

Literature Review

At a glance, word sequence in Mandarin generally looks fairly similar to English; for example, the combination of subject-verb-object. On closer inspection, however, based on typical grammatical structure of Mandarin, more distinctions can be observed between these two languages. In Mandarin, determining the relationship between the grammar and its meaning is particularly important since Mandarin does not have tenses like in English. Thus, Chinese users depend entirely on word and phrase sequence to express meaning. In fact, the ‘word sequence’ approach has already been put forward by some prominent researchers. Liu (1983) cited in the Han Chenqi’s article introduced an approach that built on the natural progression of events. According to him, the grammatical pattern of Mandarin language is a sign of a natural progression of events; for example, one may construct a sentence as such:

我向母亲要钱，到市场买米，煮成饭，给家人吃。

‘I asked mother for some money, (after that) I went to the market to buy some rice, (after that) I prepared a meal for my family members.’







In addition, Shen (1990) introduced the theory of ‘a chronological order’ and proposed some chronological sequence that is usually traced in Mandarin sentences. Zhang (1990) has discussed extensively the ‘word sequence’ or ‘time order’ approach. According to Zhao (1990), the logical development of events will shape the pattern of speaking in Mandarin. Mandarin sentence patterns follow a chronological pattern of events and the nouns have to be arranged to show possession. Furthermore, the Mandarin users perceive things from a larger unit to a smaller unit.

According to Hu (1995), a person speaks word by word in line with the ‘time order’ or ‘word sequence’ that is the basic feature of a natural language. Besides looking into the word sequence, the phrase sequence also needs to be focused in sentence building. Based on his teaching experience with foreign students, Zhao (1997) observed that their learning strategies include translating different group of ideas

into grammatical construction, assembling the ideas in some sensible pecking order, and refining their expressions according to the respective conditions and nuances of the target language.

According to Hoe and Kuek (2004) on making sentences using WSD, the learners need to have all the vocabularies of a target language in mind before the sentence is made. The non-native speakers are bound to produce grammatically incorrect sentences that can be classified according to Zhang (1990)’s principles such as violating the logical sequence, chronological sequence, and subordinating order. According to WSD as depicted in Table 1, an easy and simple sentence can be arranged as follows:

Table 1. The Full Diagram: ‘Time Indicator/(s) + Subject + Predicate’.

Time indicator/(s)	Subject		✍️ Predicate		
					
今天 (Today)	早上	7点	妈妈	去药房	看医生。
2004年6月1号 (1 June, 2004)	(morning)	(7 o'clock)	(mum)	(went to clinic)	(to see a doctor)
星期 (Monday)					
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)

Cheun, Ho, and Hoe (2008), who conducted a study on students’ problems in restructuring correct Mandarin sentences, proposed GAT as an effective method to help students answer restructuring Mandarin sentence exercise. Based on the theories proposed by Liu (2000) and Zhang (1990), WSD can be very useful for non-native elementary Mandarin speakers in learning to restructure sentences. This is because students only have to remember the sequence of four icons derived from WSD instead of having to absorb the complicated grammatical rules of restructuring Mandarin sentences. Students can visualise the logical flow of ideas in correct Mandarin sentence structure and will be more autonomous and confident in learning Mandarin.

Problem Statement (Please relocate the whole section to the section between Introduction and Literature Review)

English and Malay languages are used as the medium of instructions in all subjects offered by UiTM. Students who are taking degree courses are obliged to sign up a foreign language such as Mandarin, Japanese, France, or Arabic and they need to obtain a pass in this course to complete their degrees. Since 2001, a new policy has been implemented whereby the contact hours of a course have to be equivalent to their credit hours. Hence, the four contact hours of Mandarin courses are reduced to two contact hours. The implementation of this policy has diminished the Mandarin syllabi and shifts the focus on communication skills only. Due to the time constraint, the grammar components have to be excluded and this has become one of the factors resulted in UiTM students having difficulties in restructuring Mandarin sentences.

More and more people from all around the world desire to learn Mandarin nowadays since China has emerged as a global economy super power. Most of the students in UiTM are taking Mandarin as the third language as they may intend to run businesses or work in China one day. As non-native speakers, they often encounter three common difficulties: recognizing and writing of the Chinese characters, reading Chinese characters, and restructuring Mandarin sentences.

As the result of reducing the contact hours from four to two, students only practise their oral communication during the Mandarin lessons. Two hours per week for degree students and four hours per week for diploma students are definitely inadequate for them to learn and practise their third language. With only 30 hours to complete a Mandarin course in one semester, the time constraint for learning the third language becomes another obstruction in learning Mandarin.

In addition, students are very unlikely to do away with the influence of sentence patterns in their mother tongue. Since Malay students always use their mother tongue to communicate among themselves and only use Mandarin during their Mandarin classes, a positive target language environment is hard to establish. As stated by Liu Xun (2006), without the target language environment, the 'language sense' (语感) of using Mandarin cannot be generated and restructuring Mandarin sentences will become more difficult. Therefore, students generally encounter difficulties in producing Mandarin sentences in correct word order, as well as violate grammar rules and nuances of Mandarin sentence patterns.

Consequently, there is a need to formulate a simple and easy method of rearranging words into a grammatical sentence, which does not require students to master comprehensive grammar rules and extend learning hours. To tackle these problems in learning Mandarin in UiTM, this paper proposes the use of GAT that incorporates WSD for the teaching of elementary Mandarin to the students as the non-native Mandarin speakers.






Methodology

A study on the application of GAT method was carried out in a Level 2 Diploma Mandarin class during the first semester of 2010. This class consisted of 19 students from Food Service Programme in UiTM Penang Campus. They were all Malay who are also non-native speakers of Mandarin. At the beginning of the semester, students were taught by the researcher in a simple step-by-step approach using GAT to restructure simple and complex Mandarin sentences. Below is an example of the application of GAT in restructuring Mandarin simple and complex sentences.





Restructuring Simple Sentence

A simple sentence can be rearranged using WSD as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. The full diagram of 'Word Sequence' Diagram (WSD).

		 Explanation
Time	People	 Place  Action
1	2	3 4

For example, the given words – 银行 (*yinhang*) 'bank', 去 (*qu*) 'goes', 爸爸 (*baba*) 'father', 工作 (*gongzuo*) 'work', and 早上 (*zaoshang*) 'in the morning' – can be rearranged based on WSD as depicted as follows:




		 Explanation	
Zaoshang	baba	qu yinhang	gongzuo.
早上	爸爸	去 银行	工作。
In the morning	father	goes to bank	to work

Restructuring Complex Sentence

For complex sentences, the GAT as a step-by-step method is used to rearrange the sentence components. GAT is illustrated as follows:

G (Group) – All the related words are grouped together according to the symbols as shown in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1. Symbols represent the time, people, place, and action. If the sentence is not equipped with place  or action  word / phrase, then the symbol of explanation  will take place.

A (Arrange) – All groups of words are arranged based on the order of the symbols located in the WSD (See Table 2.).

T (Touch-up) – The produced sentence is touched-up as the last step of editing process. The procedure of editing process is described in Table 3 below:



Table 3. Elements for Touch-up in GAT

Elements	Example
Interrogative sentence – subject is always located at the beginning of a sentence.	家明 什么 时候 去 银行? (Jiaming <i>shenme shihou</i> qu yinhang?) 'When Jia Ming goes to bank?'
Special case – 就 (<i>Jiu</i>)/还 (<i>hai</i>)/在 (<i>zai</i>) are always placed before verbs.	晚上 他再 打 电话 给你。 (Wanshang ta <i>zai</i> da dianhua gei ni.) 'At night he will call you again.'





Example 1

这里 妈妈 在 爸爸 工作 他 和 的
 (zheli) (mama) (zai) (baba) (gongzuo) (ta) (he) (de)
 'here' 'mother' 'at' 'father' 'work' 'his' 'and' -

Step 1: Group the words.

- ↑ - 爸爸 (*Baba*) 'father' 和 (*he*) 'and' 妈妈 (*mama*) 'mother'
-  - 在 (*zai*) 'at' 这里 (*zheli*) 'here'
- ↑ - 他的 (*ta de*) 'his'
-  - 工作 (*gongzuo*) 'work'

Step 2: Arrange the words.

	↑		
-	1	 2	 3
-	他的爸爸和妈妈 (<i>ta de baba he mama</i>) 'his father and mother'	在这里 (<i>zai zheli</i>) 'at here'	工作 (<i>Gongzuo</i>) 'work'

Step 3: Touch-up.

Elements	Action
Interrogative sentence	X
Special case	X




他的爸爸和 妈妈 在 这里 工作。
 (*Ta de baba he mama zai zheli gongzuo.*)
 'His father and mother work here.'

* *It is not necessary to be touched-up.*





Example 2

几 他 月 吉隆坡 去 号 几
 (ji) (ta) (yue) (Jilongpo) (qu) (hao) (ji) ?
 ‘which’ ‘he’ ‘month’ ‘Kuala Lumpur’ ‘go’ ‘day’ ‘which’

Step 1: Group the words.

-  - 去 (qu) ‘go’ 吉隆坡 (Jilongpo) ‘Kuala Lumpur’
-  - 几 (ji) ‘which’ 月 (yue) ‘month’ 几 (ji) ‘which’ 号 (hao) ‘day’
-  - 他 (ta) ‘he’

Step 2: Arrange the words by referring to WSD.

			
几月几号	他	去吉隆坡	
1	2	3	
(ji yue ji hao)	(ta)	(qu Jilongpo)	-
‘which month which day’	‘he’	‘go to Kuala Lumpur’	-

Step 3: Touch-up.

Elements	Action
Interrogative sentence	√
Special case	X

In interrogative sentence, all question words except 谁 (shui) ‘who’ cannot be treated as the subject of the sentence. Since 几月几号 (ji yue ji hao) ‘which month and which day’ is not appropriate to become the subject of the sentence, the edited sentence after the touch-up process is as follows:

他 几月几号 去 吉隆坡?
 (Ta ji yue ji hao qu Jilongpo?)
 ‘Which month and which day does he go to Kuala Lumpur?’

Example 3

附近 吉隆坡 公共 没有 国际 电话 飞机场
 (fujin) (Jilongpo) (gonggong) (meiyou) (Guoji) (dianhua) (feijichang)
 ‘nearby’ ‘Kuala Lumpur’ ‘public’ ‘does not have’ ‘international’ ‘phone’ ‘airport’

Step 1: Group the words.

- ↑ - 吉隆坡 (Jilongpo) ‘Kuala Lumpur’ 国际 (Guoji) ‘international’
飞机场 (Feijichang) ‘airport’
- ✍ - 没有 (meiyou) ‘does not have’ 公共 (gonggong)
‘public’ 电话 (dianhua) ‘phone’

* ↑ becomes subject. If there is no word for ‘✍’, ✍ explanation will take place.

Step 2: Arrange the words by referring to ⌚ → ↑ → 🏠 → 📞

		
-	1	- 2
-	吉隆坡国际机场 (Jilongpo Guoji Feijichang) ‘Kuala Lumpur International Airport’	- 2 没有公共电话 (meiyou gonggong dianhua) ‘does not have public phone’

* 附近 (fujin) ‘nearby’ is unsure to be located at any where.

Step 3: Touch-up.

Elements	Action
Interrogative sentence	X
Special case	√

附近 (fujin) means ‘nearby/close to’, which corresponds with **place**. Thus, 附近 (fujin) ‘nearby’ will be placed before or after 吉隆坡国际机场 (Jilongpo Guoji Feijichang) ‘Kuala Lumpur International Airport’. To show the direction, the landmark must exist first. Thus, the correct word order in Mandarin is that the direction noun should put after the landmark: 吉隆坡国际机场附近 (Jilongpo Guoji Feijichang fujin) ‘nearby Kuala Lumpur International Airport’. Other similar examples are: 屋前 (wu qian) ‘in front of the house’, 车后 (che

hou) ‘behind the car’, and 路旁(*lu pang*) ‘beside the road’. The edited sentence after the touch-up process is shown as below:

吉隆坡 国际 飞机场 附近 没有 公共 电话。
(*Jilongpo Guoji Feijichang fujin meiyou gonggong dianhua.*)
‘Nearby Kuala Lumpur International Airport does not have public phone.’

Observation was conducted by the researcher when the students were doing their restructuring Mandarin sentence exercises in the workbook. Five restructuring exercises were completed in the classroom throughout the ten-week period of study. In the last week of study, 14 students were selected at random to be interviewed to get their oral feedback on the effectiveness of using GAT for restructuring Mandarin sentences.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the observation, students were using GAT step-by-step to complete their exercises. GAT had been found really helpful to answer the Mandarin sentence restructuring exercises since it provided them as a point of reference in answering the Mandarin sentence restructuring exercise. They could finish answering all the exercises independently without much asking for researcher’s guidance. Besides, they were able to complete the tasks in shorter period of time. Fewer mistakes were detected when the researcher discussed the answers with the students. 14 students who took part in the interviews gave positive comments towards the use of GAT method. Below are the three examples of the students’ feedback on their perception on using GAT method:

“I think this formula is really great. Besides that, it really helps me when I face problem when doing the make sentences questions. I really enjoy this formula and I will always practice my Mandarin with this GAT formula.

“For my opinion, this formula very useful for me. This is because, it makes me feel easier to do sentences, questions or reading. I am very weak in Mandarin Language but now I will apply this formula to improve my Mandarin language”.

“From my point of view, this method or this formula really helps me to make one complete sentence. I will not to worry whether my

sentences are wrong or not. This method is really helping me. Thus, I can write and speak in Mandarin fluently”.

Based on the feedback obtained, the students claimed that they would apply GAT in the future because it offers students direction to form sentences. They found that GAT was effective to restructure simple sentence structure. They knew how to restructure Mandarin sentences in a more meaningful and systematic way. Although GAT cannot guarantee that students will answer correctly all the questions in the exercise, it can ensure that they can at least get more right answers compared to previous attempts, which they often produced wrong answers. Thus, GAT method has given the non-native speakers great confidence to learn Mandarin. However, acquisition of vocabulary is very important in answering the Mandarin sentence restructuring exercises. With ample storage of Mandarin mental lexicons, chances to answer correctly are higher when students do the complex sentence restructuring exercises.

Conclusion

In conclusion, GAT is one of the useful methods of teaching Mandarin to non-native speakers to enhance the effectiveness in restructuring Mandarin sentences. It is also one of the easiest and simplest methods as it utilises icons to enhance understanding. Moreover, it can be used without a lot of memorisation to produce grammatically correct Mandarin sentences. Hence, through this paper, the researchers hope the application of GAT method can be popularised in the practice of restructuring Mandarin sentences among the non-native speakers. In a broader sense, the creation of GAT can facilitate the Mandarin instructors to integrate non-native speakers with the Mandarin speaker community through meaningful communication and interaction in Mandarin.

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