

USING INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES FOR TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS CHINESE CHARACTERS: NECESSITY AND PREREQUISITES

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This article describes the difficulties that non-native Chinese students face in learning Chinese characters. It emphasizes that the necessary writing skills should include not only the ability to write individual characters, but also the output of whole sentences and paragraphs with the purpose to facilitate written communication in various contexts. On this basis, the study first examines the necessity for reforming Chinese character training and argues that changes in the socio-cultural environment and upgraded information technologies are calling for a reform in the writing education. Then, by investigating the reform prerequisites from both the technical and theoretical perspectives, this study stresses that, in Chinese language education, it is imperative to use the modern information technologies to reduce the burden of writing and to make writing training truly serve the development of communication competence.

Key words: Chinese language; characters; language education; international students; innovative technologies; socio-cultural factors; pedagogical prerequisites.

ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ ИННОВАЦИОННЫХ ТЕХНОЛОГИЙ ДЛЯ ОБУЧЕНИЯ ИНОСТРАННЫХ СТУДЕНТОВ КИТАЙСКИМ ИЕРОГЛИФАМ: ФАКТОРЫ И УСЛОВИЯ

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В данной статье описываются трудности, с которыми сталкиваются студенты, не являющиеся носителями китайского языка, при изучении китайских иероглифов. Подчеркивается, что навыки письменной речи, достаточные для успешной коммуникации в повседневной жизни и продолжения учебы в учреждениях профессионального образования Китая, должны включать не только умение писать отдельные иероглифы, но и составлять предложения, а также тексты. В статье анализируются факторы и условия совершенствования практики использования китайских иероглифов с помощью современных информационных технологий. В данном исследовании утверждается, что при обучении китайскому языку необходимо использовать совре-

менные информационные технологии, чтобы уменьшить нагрузку на письменность. Так, чтобы обучение письменности действительно служило развитию коммуникативной компетенции.

Key words: китайский язык; иероглифы; обучение языку; иностранные студенты; инновационные технологии; социокультурные факторы; педагогические условия.

Learning Chinese characters has always been a difficult part in the Chinese language acquisition. However, despite the fact, it is of great necessity to learn the characters. The reasons could be investigated at least from two aspects. From the perspective of language learning, there are many homophones in the Chinese system and it is difficult to distinguish between them just by listening to their sounds. In addition, from a cultural learning perspective, Chinese characters are rooted in pictographs, which vividly depict the Chinese way of observing and thinking about the world. Moreover, the creation and evolution of Chinese characters carries with it the social and cultural transitions that have taken place throughout Chinese history. Thus, learning Chinese characters can help the learners to understand the Chinese society and Chinese culture more effectively.

What exactly should students acquire in the process of learning Chinese characters? In most universities, the development of language skills for Chinese learners has always included listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is important to make it clear that “writing” here is not just about writing individual characters, but also about the students’ output of sentences and paragraphs. In other words, students need to write correct Chinese characters on the one hand, and output proper sentences on the other, with the aim to facilitate written communication in different contexts and for different communicative targets.

In the last century, multimedia devices have gradually been used to teach Chinese to international students. The use of multimedia devices has had a profound impact on students’ listening and speaking training. However, in the process of Chinese character learning, the influence is very limited. The multimedia devices are mostly used in presenting knowledge for teaching, rather than helping students with their writing training. So far, the vast majority of writing tasks are still done with paper and pen.

Undoubtedly, practicing Chinese characters by handwriting has great benefits for learners to understand character structures and to memorize characters. However, this has never been an easy job. Different from alphabetic scripts, Chinese characters are ideographic scripts, and they have complex structures, strokes and stroke orders. As a result, writing Chinese characters is not easy for international students. Furthermore, being able to write stand-alone Chinese characters is not enough. A bigger challenge lies

in writing appropriate sentences and paragraphs. The factor is even if students can write sentences correctly, this generally takes a huge amount of time and is not conducive to smooth written communication. Besides, this process can also be stressful for students, which may affect their Chinese learning negatively.

With the rapid improvement of information technology since the turn of this century, the mode of written communication is constantly being updated. The frequency of handwriting has been greatly reduced and replaced by the use of innovative devices such as computers and mobile phones to output text. Meantime, some examinations are even held online, such as the Chinese Language Proficiency Test for international students, which is widely taken online, meaning that students do not need to write Chinese characters by hand at all in the exam, but only need to type them out on a computer.

These factors are calling for a reform in writing training. It is imperative to use new technologies to retool Chinese character teaching and learning methods for international students. In view of this research focus, the following section will further discuss the prerequisites for reforming the character education from two aspects.

The first is the technological premise. The new reform is based on new equipment, so this requires that every learner has access to new learning devices such as computers and mobile phones on a regular basis. Computers and mobile phones are much more expensive than pen and paper, but, with the development of society, such communication devices have already become affordable necessities for most of the learners' families. This is especially true for students educated at university, where almost everyone has their own smartphone and computer. The technological prerequisite for reforming the Chinese character training is thus in place.

The second is a theoretical premise. The theoretical premise here is based on two competency requirements or two necessary language skills. The first is phonological awareness, in other words, the ability to memorize the pinyin sets for different characters, even if the student does not know exactly how to write these characters. This ability directly determines whether the learner can correctly type the pinyin of the Chinese characters on a computer or mobile phone. The second is the ability to recognize characters. As mentioned earlier, there are many homophones in the Chinese character system, so after typing a set of pinyin, there are usually multiple options for Chinese characters. For example, when typing the pinyin set "you", the characters "又", "右" and "幼" may appear. Although these characters sound exactly the same, their meanings are very different, being "again", "right" and "young" respectively. Thus, if learners do not have a

certain ability to distinguish the shape of the characters, it is difficult to pick out the required character accurately.

In general, the reform of Chinese character training demands a certain level of phonological and character recognition skills in advance. This is to say in order to achieve a successful character output through computers or phones, students should have received prior oral and reading training for them to acquire enough knowledge about pinyin and sufficient competency of recognizing certain quantity of characters. In other words, the reform requires oral and reading training to come first, before writing. Normally, the learning of a second language requires the development of all language skills at the same time. Is it feasible to separate the development of different language skills in Chinese learning?

First, in Chinese language education, can oral training go first and then writing training later? Since the 1950's, this question has been discussed by scholars in the field of Chinese language education. For more than half a century, various scholars have been experimenting with this approach in their classes for international students. Although not all of the experimental results have been very positive, scholars and teachers in this field have never stopped exploring till now.

Zhao Jinming, an expert in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, has pointed out in his article that the characteristics of Chinese characters determine that an oral training first approach is reasonable [1, p. 381]. In the process of second language learning, oral training and written training mostly go hand in hand if the student is dealing with an alphabetic language, such as English, French or German. By learning just twenty or thirty letters of the alphabet, students can spell and learn words on their own, thus oral practice and writing practice have a mutually reinforcing effect. However, when learners are dealing with the Chinese language, it is difficult for them to spell on their own just by learning the strokes or radicals. The arbitrary relationship between the pinyin system and the Chinese character system naturally leads to a result that students' mastery of Chinese characters generally lags behind the development of their oral skill. Furthermore, a number experiments show that for students whose mother tongue is an alphabetic language, their memorization of Chinese characters and their meanings are likely to rely on their grasp of the pronunciation of Chinese characters [2, p. 194]. At the same time, the sequence of practicing oral speech first then focusing on text output is in line with the second language learning pattern by progressing from easy to difficult. Although not all experiments with the oral training first have been successful, this direction is worth trying and should be tried especially in the classes where most students' mother tongues are alphabetic languages.

Second, in Chinese language education, can reading training go first and then writing training later? In traditional Chinese language teaching, reading and writing are often taught at the same time. However, as the body of the students from non-Chinese character sphere grows larger and larger, the approach to teaching reading and writing at the same time has gradually begun to be questioned. As early as the 1970s, Chin directly questioned the necessity of writing practice in the process of learning Chinese characters in his article [3, p. 167]. From the 1990s onwards, more and more researchers began to argue that reading and writing could be separated. Following this, in the field of Chinese language education, the claims of learning to read first and writing later, as well as more reading and less writing, gradually emerged, with the purpose to construct students' ability to recognize Chinese characters as soon as possible within limited study period [4, p. 95].

These claims are also closely related to the inherent characteristics of Chinese characters. In most cases, reading a Chinese character requires students to grasp the overall structure of the character as well as some of its details; writing a Chinese character, however, requires students to memorize all the details in addition to the overall structure, and to master the sequence of all the strokes. The average stroke number of commonly used Chinese characters is around 10, and the characters with more than 20 strokes can be found everywhere. To master them in handwriting requires a lot of time and effort. This factor leads to a situation that most writing exercises in the classroom, due to time constraints, stop at writing individual characters rather than outputting sentences or paragraphs which have more obvious communication functions. Therefore, it is very much necessary to reform the current writing training with the help of modern information technologies, to reduce the burden of writing and to make writing training truly serve the development of communication competence.

Lastly, there is one more question that needs to be clarified – is handwriting training entirely unnecessary? The answer to this question is no. For students in Chinese character sphere, such as Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese students, handwriting may not cause much time consumption or mental burden. The parallel development of speaking, reading and writing skills is still a very good way of learning. For students from other cultures, a moderate amount of handwriting training is still essential to help them understand the different strokes, radicals and overall structure of Chinese characters, even if it should not be too much. The frequency of handwriting practice needs to be determined by teachers according to the language backgrounds and learning abilities of different students.

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