Teaching Characters in the Context of Literacy Development

Der-lin Chao
Hunter College

1. Introduction

It is widely recognized that students in beginning-level Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) courses find learning characters to be one of the most difficult aspects of learning Chinese. Because the issues involved in character instruction are rather complex and controversial, character instruction in CFL has long been a challenge faced by both instructors and students. Many teachers consider the teaching of characters as an obstacle or stumbling block to learning, rather than as an essential step toward achieving literacy that should be integrated into the core of the Chinese curriculum.

In this paper, I propose a new approach to character instruction in the context of literacy development. To prove that character instruction should be included as one of the core components in the beginning Chinese curriculum, I will discuss these three points: (1) the role of character instruction in CFL language acquisition, second, (2) guiding principles for teaching characters successfully, and (3) the role character instruction plays in the stages of literacy development.

2. Literacy Skills are Essential in CFL Training

Achieving advanced-level reading literacy in Chinese is a challenge faced by many students pursuing careers in areas related to China and Pacific region. The workplace requires professionals to read authentic materials on general topics as well as materials related to their profession. Right now, only a few students who graduate from our language programs achieve an advanced level of literacy proficiency. This deficiency in learning outcomes is to a large extent due to the current unbalanced curriculum model that overlooks the fact that literacy skills need to be cultivated from the beginning level and up. If we do not provide students with adequate training in literacy skills at lower levels, students not only experience difficulties in reading authentic materials in advanced-level Chinese courses, they also find themselves unable to meet the linguistic challenges in the workplace.

What does literacy in Chinese mean? Traditionally, a person’s literacy proficiency level in Chinese is determined by the number of characters he or she can read. The Chinese government sets this number at 2,000. This means that if a Chinese can read 2,000 characters, he or she is officially considered literate in Chinese. This criterion of using the number of characters one can read to define whether a person is literate or not has been adopted by CFL programs without questioning its legitimacy. For example, a typical description for Chinese courses often states that students will learn 500 characters in beginning year, an additional 1,000 characters in intermediate Chinese, and so forth. However, using the number of characters students have learned to rate their literacy levels is misleading because (1) such a number tells us nothing about the relation between the characters learned and their relevance to literacy, and (2) the number does not accurately reflect the literacy proficiency levels attained in the context of the learning process.

Since the learning objectives of literacy development in relation to character instruction are not specified, character instruction has been mistakenly considered to be unimportant or supplementary to learning Chinese.

Given that literacy in Chinese is defined as “possessing the skills to read Chinese texts,” we should take a look at what Chinese texts are composed of. Chinese texts are written in characters, and use the vocabulary and sentence structures of formal written-style Chinese known as Shumianyu. The lexicon and sentence structures of written-style
Chinese are considerably different from those used in informal spoken Chinese. The structure of written language is usually classified into three levels: word, sentence, and paragraph. In the case of Chinese, however, the smallest unit is not the word, but the character, because words in Chinese are formed by one or more characters. The majority of Chinese words are made up of two characters, though many words have three or four. The meaning of each multiple-character word in turn is derived from the combination of its individual character meanings. Thus, studying the individual characters used to form words in written-style Chinese is the fundamental first step students must take to achieve literacy.

There are over 50,000 characters in Chinese, and CFL students at college level only have, on average, two to four years to achieve literacy. To make learning more effective, it is necessary to consider which characters should be studied first. Character frequency surveys have shown that learning the 3,000 characters that appear most frequently in modern Chinese texts and publications will permit readers to recognize up to 99 out of every 100 characters they read. To make learning more effective, character instruction should focus on teaching these 3,000 most frequently used characters rather than teaching any characters without a focus so that students can achieve literacy in two to three years.

3. Two Misconceptions that Cause Character Learning Difficulties

The challenge of learning characters is the major reason why Chinese has been considered to be one of the most difficult languages for Westerners to acquire. Why are characters difficult to learn? Many find faults in the writing system itself because they think a character-based writing system is not as efficient as an alphabetic system.

As a language teacher, our responsibility is to use our professional training and knowledge to help students to overcome any learning difficulties they encounter rather than to hold a judgmental view toward the language that we teach, because these judgmental views may affect how we teach and how students learn Chinese. In this section, we will discuss two misconceptions that may have helped to make it harder for students to learn characters.

(1) Chinese Writing is not Rule-Governed.

The first misconception is that Chinese writing is not rule-governed. At the first glance, this seems true because each character has a unique shape of its own. Keep in mind, however, that Chinese people have used characters for thousands of years. If characters had not been created based on consistent underlying principles, it is doubtful that the system would have survived because of the impracticality of attempting to learn thousands of unrelated symbols. Furthermore, both traditional and simplified characters were created by following the same principles of character formation because both forms were derived from the same origin.

If we fail to help students understand characters by teaching them basic information such as the principles of character formation, we reduce the systematic learning of characters to mechanical memorization of the unique shape of each and every individual character. Year after year, teachers tell their beginning level students that rote memorization is the only way to learn characters, despite the fact that it is time-consuming and ineffective. Many students dutifully follow their teachers’ advice and spend countless hours copying characters over and over again. In time, the amount of memorization required becomes so great that many students find it to be an insurmountable task, and quit learning
(2) Character Instruction Begins with Writing Individual Characters.

The second misconception about teaching characters is to think character instruction begins from writing and memorizing individual characters. This teaching method neglects to introduce basic rules and information concerning the internal structure to enable students to understand how individual character is formed. It also neglects to teach students the best strategies for learning and reviewing characters so that they know how to apply the rules and methods effectively to study characters on their own. Without teaching students these fundamentals, learning of characters becomes unnecessarily difficult for our students. Day to day, they are forced to decipher the seemingly random strokes and shapes of character forms, it is no wonder that many find memorizing characters to be an agonizing chore, especially when the number of characters they must learn rises quickly.

To change this situation, it is of critical importance to remember that character instruction should not begin with teaching individual characters; it should start by teaching students basic information about the principles of character formation, stroke types, stroke order, and components as well as strategies for learning and reviewing characters. Time should be allowed for students to practice and become familiar with this information before they are asked to learn new characters by themselves.

4. Principles To Master Characters

After students have acquired the basics of character structures, following the two principles below will insure success in character instruction.

(1) Recognition before Reproduction

When students see a new character, the first step is not to learn to write the character, but to learn to recognize it. Recognition of characters does not mean that the student quickly tries to memorize the character form. Instead, the student should go through a purposeful cognitive learning process to analyze and gather information about the character. This purposeful analysis will enable students to construct a clear image of the character in their mind and build up many memory associations related to the character. These activities will ensure long-term memory of the character. Because the Chinese writing system is not phonetic, the process of visualization and purposeful analysis is critical to enable students to make associations between the shape, the meaning, and the sound of the character to be learned.

The topics for character analysis should include seven items: pronunciation, meaning, radical, other component, stroke order, total stroke count, and word or phrase examples in which the character is used. Only after students complete the recognition analysis of a new character should they move on to reproduction and writing exercises.

The assessment of characters should also be divided into two steps: recognition and reproduction. Teachers should first assess how well their students recognize new characters, and then test their accuracy in reproducing them. The assessment for recognition may include identifying the seven types of information mentioned earlier: Is the student able to (1) Pronounce the character accurately, with good tones? (2) Give the English meaning of the character? (3) Identify the radical and relate it to the meaning
of the character? (4) Recognize the other component and identify its meaning and sound? (5) Determine the correct stroke order for the character? (6) Count the total number of strokes? (7) Give at least one word or phrase example of how the character is used?

Recognition assessment should also be determined by testing whether a student is able to read word compounds, and later, sentences and paragraphs in which the designated characters are used. The assessment for reproduction involves checking that the student writes the character with well-written strokes, accurately positioned, in the correct stroke order.

As a general rule, CFL students should not be asked to read text that they have not learned how to speak. A lesson might include asking students to read a dialogue or paragraph that they have studied in conversational class. It is all right if students have not learned every character used in the text; teachers can ask students to read the text aloud to train their ability in reading characters. Teachers can then choose some characters in the dialogue for students to learn. It is recommended that the teacher consult the list of the 3,000 most frequently used characters. If a character in the dialogue is on the list, students should learn to write it. For other characters, recognition is sufficient.

Reading fluency practice is also important for CFL students whose native language is alphabetical because written Chinese does not add extra spaces between words. Reading fluency practice can help beginning students who read with their eyes fixed on individual characters to gradually become comfortable in reading in meaningful units of words and phrases.

After students gain experience in reading text written in characters and develop a better grasp of grammar and vocabulary, they can try to read something that is different from the dialogues or passages from their language textbooks or the materials they have studied. The reading materials should not contain many new characters that students do not know. A good strategy is to have pinyin juxtaposed with the characters so that students do not become frustrated during the reading process. Reading materials written for Chinese children with pinyin can be used to give heritage speakers as much reading practice as possible, and also have some fun!

(2) Analyze the Meaning of Individual Characters of a Word-Compound

While the use of pinyin text is a common teaching method used in beginning Chinese courses, it may cause problems if all the materials students read is written in pinyin. As students learn more words, they will find that there are many homophones in Chinese. If the character version of the reading is not provided for students to learn these words, they may be confused about what characters they should use when it is time to write. A common writing mistake of beginning students is to confuse a character with one of its homophones. Thus, students should be taught that there are many homophones in Chinese and that they cannot use characters that have the same pronunciation interchangeably.

Because the choice of characters in a word compound is meaningful and not random, students should study the meaning of individual characters when they learn word-compounds, that is, words formed by multiple characters. This information also helps students clearly understand which homophone character should be used in a word context.

Studying the individual character meanings not only will give students a chance to learn or review characters, it will also reinforce their understanding of the word and its meaning by showing why two or
three individual characters are put together to form a word. Analyzing how Chinese words are formed will help to prepare them for the study of the vocabulary and sentence patterns of written-style Chinese.

5. Learning Goals for Character Instruction in Stages of Literacy Development

Literacy skills are similar to any linguistic skills that can be divided into different levels of proficiency: beginning, intermediate, and advanced.

At the beginning level, character instruction should be emphasized because it is the foundation of literacy. At this stage, the goals are to build a good foundation by helping students toward a deeper understanding of the Chinese writing system that will facilitate the learning of characters. During the first year, students should focus on studying the 1,000 most frequently used characters and the basic and common written-style Chinese vocabulary words formed by these characters. This will prepare students for the next tasks at the intermediate level of literacy development.

At the intermediate level, students should learn about the formation of vocabulary words and sentence structures of written-style Chinese. Students will learn and review up to the 2,000 most frequently used characters and the vocabulary words in written-style Chinese formed by these 2,000 characters. Selected excerpts of sentences and short reading passages will be used to prepare students for reading authentic Chinese texts in newspapers and literary works.

At the advanced level, students should practice reading authentic materials on a variety of genres and topics. They will study and review all the 3,000 most frequently used characters and focus on building vocabulary formed by the 3,000 characters. Students should be required to use authentic materials to practice reading comprehension. They can also read materials related to a specific interest such as business, politics, international relations, and so forth, to become familiar with the vocabulary and style of professional writing.

The learning goals for each level in relation to character instruction are summarized below:

**Learning Goals for Beginning Level:**
1. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the Chinese writing system.
2. To be familiar with strategies of learning and reviewing characters.
3. To apply the knowledge acquired to learn the 1,000 most frequently used characters and words formed by these 1,000 characters.

**Learning Goals for Intermediate Level:**
1. To gain a comprehensive understanding of written-style Chinese.
2. To learn the most frequently used characters up to 2,000 and words formed by these characters.
3. To practice reading sentences and paragraphs composed in these 2,000 characters.

**Learning Goals for Advanced Level:**
1. To learn the most frequently used characters up to 3,000 and words formed by these 3,000 characters.
2. To practice reading authentic materials of general topics.
3. To practice reading authentic materials related to professional areas.
6. Conclusion

This paper discusses the role of character instruction in the context of literacy development. Character instruction should be an integral part of the beginning Chinese curriculum because knowledge of characters is essential to achieve literacy in Chinese. In order to teach characters effectively, students need to first establish a foundation by learning basic information concerning character formation, strokes, stroke order, and components. Students should also be introduced to the best strategies to learn and review characters. At the beginning level, students should first practice these strategies with the guidance of the instructor until they can apply them without problems. A solid training in character instruction at beginning level will enable students to learn any characters that they would encounter and ultimately to achieve literacy with success.

References


