QIUYUE YE

(Eötvös Loránd University, Chinese Department)

A Study on the Teaching of Chinese Characters in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University

Abstract

The teaching of Chinese characters is a "big problem" in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, especially for learners who are not in the cultural circle of Chinese characters, it is the biggest difficulty in learning process. This article analyzes the current situation of Chinese character teaching in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University from the aspects of teaching materials, teachers and teaching methods, points out the advantages and disadvantages, and proposes corresponding teaching strategies in order to improve the teaching effect of Chinese characters.

Keywords: teaching of Chinese characters, grasping both language and Chinese characters, arrangement of teaching content, teaching efficiency

叶秋月

罗兰大学中文汉字教学研究

摘要

汉字教学是对外汉语教学中的"老大难"，尤其是对于非汉字文化圈的学习者来说，更是学习的最大难点。本文从教材、教师和教学方法等方面，分析罗兰大学中文系汉字教学的现状，指出有点和不足，并提出相应的教学策略，以期提高汉字教学效果。

关键字：汉字教学，语文并进，内容编排，教学效率

ye.qiuyue@btk.elte.hu

Chinese Characters and the Teaching of Chinese Characters

With more than half a century of development since the 1950s, teaching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) has gradually developed a relatively independent teaching system. However, the teaching of the Chinese writing system has created problems for both educators and many foreign learners that hinder the development of teaching CFL. Chinese characters have always been a key but difficult issue for foreign Chinese learners, especially for learners whose native languages do not contain Chinese characters. Liu noted that for learners whose mother tongue is not Chinese the uniqueness of Chinese characters makes it difficult to recognise, remember, and write them, and they are considered the hardest part of Chinese learning.[1] Lü summarised the reasons for why Chinese characters are difficult to learn: they are as difficult to recognise as pictures; they contain complicated strokes; there are many of them; there are complex relationships between the sounds, patterns, and meanings of Chinese characters; and it is difficult to look up Chinese characters.[2] According to Chao, among the language systems existing worldwide, Chinese grammar is easy for learners; generally, Chinese is not that difficult for children who have never learned any language, but Chinese characters are rather hard.[3]

Fei claims that because Chinese characters are difficult to learn, teaching them has for many years been relegated to a secondary or 'subordinate' status in Chinese education throughout the world.[4] This has seriously affected the development of teaching CFL and has aroused widespread concern in academic circles. In 1996, Joel Bellassen, chairman of the French Chinese Language Teachers Association, delivered a speech titled *Integration, Independence or Separation? – the Dispute between Characters and Language in Chinese Textbooks* at the 5th International Symposium on Chinese Language Teaching, pointing out that

> 'currently, the major problem with Chinese teaching is that although relevant textbooks have been improved to a certain extent, most textbooks ignore the teaching of Chinese characters, which is the main

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[1] Liu 2000: 369.
[2] Lü 1995: 132.
[3] Chao 1980: 86.
[4] Fei 1998: 119.

reason for the long-term stagnation of teaching Chinese as a foreign language'[5].

Xu also claimed at the same symposium that 'it is time to concentrate on effectively studying the teaching of Chinese characters in teaching Chinese as a foreign language'[6]. The 5th International Symposium on Chinese Language Teaching raised awareness of the need to lay greater emphasis on teaching Chinese characters in CFL. In order to put this into practice, it would be important to start with a thorough analysis of the current situation of the teaching of Chinese characters. In June, 1997, the Center for Language Education and Cooperation, the former Office of China's Leading Group for International Promotion of Chinese, held a seminar on teaching Chinese characters to foreign learners in Yichang, Hubei Province, that examined areas such as the relationship between the teaching of these characters in particular and Chinese language teaching in general, the relationship between research and teaching in this area, and the design, principles, and methods of Chinese character teaching. As a result, a number of authors were selected to participate in the International Symposium on Chinese Characters and Chinese Character Teaching jointly held by the International Society for Chinese Language Teaching and the French Chinese Language Teachers Association in Paris in February 1998. More than 180 scholars and teachers from all over the world attended the symposium. Subsequently, *Selected Papers on Chinese Characters and Chinese Character Teaching* (edited by Lü Bisong) was published in 1999. In 2006, the Commercial Press published *Research on Teaching Chinese Characters to Foreign Learners* (edited by Sun Dejin). By this time, research on Chinese character teaching had already developed into a school of its own (Wan 2019, 59).

Over the past decade, research has achieved a great deal in the area of Chinese character teaching, investigating areas such as the ontology of Chinese characters, the establishment of Chinese character teaching systems, teaching methods, the compilation of teaching materials, the process by which learners acquire Chinese characters, and the training of teachers. In *A Study on the Construction of Etymology Teaching Method of Teaching Foreigners Chinese Characters*, Peng Wanyong (2009) analysed the weaknesses of traditional teaching methods, proposed a new method for teaching etymology,

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[5]   Bellassen 1996: 573
[6]   Xu 1996: 19.

and comprehensively discussed this method. In *A Study on Chinese Characters Textbooks in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language*, Yi Rong (2007) selected seven widely used textbooks on Chinese characters for comparative analysis, pointed out shortcomings, and made suggestions on compiling textbooks of Chinese characters for foreigners. In a paper titled 'Examples of Errors in Chinese Characters Written by Foreign Students', Cui and Hou (2008) suggested remedial measures for Chinese character teaching based on the analysis of errors in Chinese characters written by foreign students. Wang's (2011) paper titled 'Research Review on Foreigners' Acquisition of Chinese Characters' offered an overview of research on foreigners' learning of Chinese characters in recent years, analysed the current research situation, summarised corresponding research results, summarised the factors affecting foreigners' acquisition of Chinese characters, and analysed the developmental process of the acquisition of Chinese characters. He started from the perspective of learners themselves to explore relevant learning strategies. In *Investigating the Influences of Written Corrective Feedback on Chinese Character Writing of CSL Elementary-Level Learners*, Zhu and Chen (2016) conducted two rounds of Chinese character-writing tests on 156 beginner-level Chinese learners at Beijing Language and Culture University and gave them three different kinds of written feedback. The research results indicate that all three types of written error-related feedback positively affect learners' writing of Chinese characters, while if there is no feedback, foreign learners' writing will not be significantly influenced.

Research Status of the Teaching of Chinese Characters in Hungary

It is, perhaps, worth providing a brief overview of CFL teaching in Hungary, which started with Sinology being offered as a major in colleges and universities in the 1950s. In the 1980s and the 1990s, with the rise of China's economy and the influx of Chinese immigrants, there was an upsurge of learning Chinese in Hungary. Moreover, with the rapid development of the Sino-Hungarian relationship in recent years, the number of Chinese learners in Hungary has risen sharply, and the enthusiasm for learning Chinese continues to increase.

In the early 1980s, only a dozen people in Hungary studied Chinese.[7] Now, Chinese has been included in Hungary's national education system for university, secondary school, and primary school students. Both Eötvös Loránd University and Pázmány Péter Catholic University have Chinese departments, and several other institutions offer courses for Chinese majors. Moreover, there are another two Confucius classrooms, one in the Sino-Hungarian Bilingual School in Budapest and the other one in a secondary school in Kecskemét. Founded in 2004, the Sino-Hungarian Bilingual School is the only primary school in Hungary where children take Chinese as a compulsory subject and the only public Sino-Hungarian bilingual school in the European Union that teaches in Chinese and Hungarian, which indicates that Chinese has established itself in the primary and secondary stages of the Hungarian national education system.

On the one hand, Chinese teaching is thriving in Hungary; on the other hand, relevant research on Chinese teaching is comparatively scarce, especially when it comes to the teaching of Chinese characters. Entering 'Hungary' and 'Chinese teaching' as the keywords on www.cnki.net brings up 135 research results, including both undergraduate and postgraduate theses. However, entering 'Hungary' and 'Chinese character teaching' brings up only six research results, all of which are master's theses written by volunteer teachers in Hungary. The titles of these theses give an idea of the quite varied contexts and specific topics investigated: *Based on the Concept of "Learning by Doing" Research on the Teaching Practice of Chinese Characters in Primary Interest Class* by Wei (2020), *Action Research on Chinese Characteristics Online Teaching for Hungarian Primary Chinese Learners-Take the Ninth Grade Chinese Learners of Radnoti High School in Szeged as an Example* by Gu (2020), *Research on Cultural Teaching of Chinese Characters in a Hungarian Middle School* by Jiang (2018), *Investigation into Chinese Characters Learning of Students in Miskolc Abbey School* by Hou (2017), *A Brief Analysis of Primary Chinese Character Teaching Methods in Hungary* by Ding (2016), and *A Study on Chinese Character Teaching Strategies Based on Research on Chinese Character Learning* by Xu (2014).

In view of Hungary's notable traditions and the vigorous current status of Chinese teaching, these six research results are meagre in the extreme.

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[7]   Mei 1990: 127.

Though in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University is the oldest, best established Chinese teaching institution in Hungary, hosting the largest number of Chinese learners, it has achieved practically nothing in terms of research on Chinese character teaching. Zhao pointed out that 'Chinese character teaching is an important part of teaching Chinese as a foreign language as well as a critical factor that hinders the improvement of the efficiency of teaching Chinese as a foreign language'[8]. Liu said that 'If the problem of Chinese character teaching cannot be well solved in teaching CFL, the overall development of CFL will be restricted'[9]. Therefore, it is urgent to study Chinese character teaching in Hungary and solve relevant problems. This study takes in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University, the most representative Chinese language teaching institution in Hungary, as its research object.

Chinese character teaching in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University

Chinese character teaching here refers to teaching activities conducted using the teaching methods of foreign languages with foreigners as the teaching objects, modern Chinese characters as the teaching content, and mastering the skills of applying Chinese characters as the teaching objective. The ultimate aim is to clarify the patterns, sounds, and meanings of modern Chinese characters, as well as to help students to accurately identify and write Chinese characters, as part of their general study of the language[10].

Chinese character teaching of in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University is part of the language course, which is given cooperatively by local teachers and native language teachers. Native language teachers are in charge of teaching pronunciation and spoken Chinese, while local teachers are responsible for teaching Chinese characters and grammar, with three 45-minute classes per week. The teaching of Chinese characters is mainly carried out in the freshman and sophomore years, which takes up some time in the three classes per week; Chinese characters are taught in Hungarian

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[8]   Zhao 2004: 413.
[9]   Liu 2000: 68.
[10] Bian 1999: 71.

by local teachers, so that their sounds, patterns, and meanings can be clearly explained; the textbook used is *New Practical Chinese Textbook* (Liu 2002). In the following sections we specifically analyse the teaching situation of Chinese characters in terms of teaching materials, teachers, and teaching methods. *New Practical Chinese Reader* (Liu 2002) is the textbook used.

1. Textbooks

Most of the teaching content regarding Chinese characters appears in Volumes 1 and 2 of *New Practical Chinese Reader*, where it takes up 26 classes. This series of textbooks emphasises the rules of forming Chinese characters, containing teaching content that is intended to move 'from easy to difficult', from basic strokes to radicals and single characters. General language development is separated from the study of Chinese characters, which is divided into two parts: namely 'identifying and writing basic Chinese characters in isolation' and 'identifying and writing Chinese characters from the texts in the book'. Sixty commonly used, easy-to-learn, and strongly compatible basic Chinese characters and some radicals are taught in the first six lessons of Volume 1, so that learners can master these radicals and combine them into compound characters. In addition, the structural and writing rules of Chinese characters are laid out in the textbook.

First of all, the textbook introduces the basic strokes and the order of strokes, and then explains how strokes are combined, the radicals of Chinese characters, as well as the overall structure of Chinese characters. The first lesson only includes six basic strokes, namely dot stroke, horizontal stroke, vertical stroke, left-falling stroke, right-falling stroke, and rising stroke, and correspondingly lists six Chinese characters, '门', '一', '木', '力', '八' and '我' as examples. The fourth lesson explains the order of strokes, that is, the sequence of writing different strokes. For instance, a horizontal stroke comes before a vertical stroke (e.g., '十'); a left-falling stroke comes before a right-falling stroke (e.g., '人'); the left radical comes before the right one (e.g., '妈'); the top radical should be written before the bottom one (e.g., '只'); the outside part comes before the inside part (e.g., '月'); for completely enclosed characters, the inside part should be written before it is fully completely surrounded; and the central radical comes before the side ones (e.g., '小'). It is of great importance for learners to gain a preliminary understanding of the order of strokes. The fifth and sixth lessons further introduce the

compound strokes and stroke combinations of Chinese characters, which enables learners to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese character strokes and the order of strokes. The seventh lesson introduces the radicals, which helps learners to gain a basic concept of the structures of Chinese characters. Lessons 8–12 introduce the structures of Chinese characters in detail, so as to equip learners with a clear understanding of the structures of Chinese characters. Based on this, the 13th and 14th lessons present the methods of looking up Chinese characters via radicals and phonetic sequence, respectively. Lessons 15–24 give a detailed introduction to the formation of Chinese characters. Lessons 25 and 26 distinguish homonyms and characters with similar patterns. In this way, the sequence should ensure that learners in the early stages will be able to construct a detailed and scientific knowledge system of Chinese characters.

The arrangement of teaching content about Chinese characters in *New Practical Chinese Reader* also needs improving. The knowledge about stroke structures and radicals of Chinese characters is not always arranged in a detailed and comprehensive way. The strokes and radicals of Chinese characters are the key and most difficult points in Chinese character learning. Mastering relevant knowledge is the key to learning Chinese characters. In view of deficiencies in this aspect, it is suggested that the arrangement of teaching content should emphasise the arrangement of stroke structures and radicals of Chinese characters, so that learners can learn more about the strokes and radicals of Chinese characters, thereby laying a solid foundation for Chinese character learning.

2. Teachers

Chinese character teaching, as a part of the overall course, is carried out by local teachers. Such an arrangement is undoubtedly rational. First of all, local teachers teach Chinese characters in the learners' mother tongue, which helps to clearly explain the patterns, sounds, and meanings of modern Chinese characters. In this way, students can correctly identify and write Chinese characters. Secondly, local teachers who have learned Chinese characters know better about how learners whose mother tongue does not include Chinese characters should overcome the fear of difficulties and learn Chinese characters effectively. Although in the Chinese Department does not offer any specific course about Chinese characters, this aspect has always

been placed in a very important position. In each lesson, teachers spend time explaining the structural framework of Chinese characters and guiding students to write some key characters. Moreover, teachers assign abundant assignments related to Chinese characters writing and require students to write in squared exercise books with the correct sequence of strokes.

Chinese teaching is a rigorous task that has strict requirements on teachers' knowledge of Chinese characters and teaching skills. As pointed out by Wang in his monograph *Introduction to Chinese Characters Configuration*,

> 'Chinese characters must be scientifically interpreted in a way that conforms to the rules [of composition] of Chinese characters, rather than randomly associated based on subjective assumptions. Since Chinese characters constitute a semiotic system, random splitting and unscientific explanation will not only violate the reality [sic] of Chinese characters, but also disturb its system, making it more difficult to remember and learn Chinese characters'[11].

Chinese character teaching requires a certain amount of dedicated time. In the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University, Chinese character teaching is included in the three classes per week. The specific duration is decided by teachers according to the teaching tasks. Although teachers attach great importance to teaching characters, due to the limited time and large quantity of material to cover, the time spent in Chinese character teaching usually cannot be guaranteed, which impacts the effect of Chinese character teaching.

In the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University grasps both language and Chinese characters when it comes to the teaching of Chinese characters. 'Mastering both language—speech, vocabulary, and grammar—and Chinese characters' is currently the most extensively applied teaching model for Chinese characters. Chinese character teaching is integrated into the whole course. Students learn new Chinese characters, relevant grammar, and the overall text at the same time. Apart from listening and speaking, students are also trained to identify and write Chinese characters. This teaching model focuses on both the pronunciation and patterns of characters. It ingeniously integrates the difficult points of Chinese character teaching into each lesson, which helps students realise that it is not that hard to

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[11] Wang 2015: 19.

learn Chinese characters. Carrying out character teaching in the normal teaching process can remarkably improve learners' learning interest, and learners can gain a sense of accomplishment and become more proactive in their studies. However, the mode that language teaching and Chinese characters go forward together is also reflected as 'identifying Chinese characters in context', which is not easy to implement, either. It is difficult to write some characters that appeared quite early (e.g., '谢'), while some characters with simple patterns came into focus relatively late. It is thus clear that the one-size-fits-all approach is not effective. It is necessary and important to think deeply and analyse carefully, so as to make more reasonable arrangements. It is suggested that teachers should appropriately reduce the requirement of students' being able to write complicated Chinese characters at the initial stage of learning. As time passes and command of the language develops, both general language teaching and character teaching can be realised, and students will learn to identify Chinese characters in context. Zhou goes so far as to say it is unnecessary for all learners to achieve all the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), and it is important to distinguish between receptive and productive skills: between reading and writing Chinese characters.[12] Some Chinese characters should be correctly memorised and written, while some only need to be identified. This is especially applicable to the initial stage of learning Chinese characters.

In terms of specific teaching methods, the most commonly used methods include guiding students to identify Chinese characters, demonstrating the correct writing, and dividing characters into different groups based on their radicals for better memorisation. Guiding students to identify Chinese characters can help learners establish the connection between pronunciation and pattern of Chinese characters. In this way, learners can write Chinese characters when they see the pinyin and correctly pronounce the Chinese characters when they see their patterns. Demonstrating correct writing is an important link in the teaching of Chinese characters. The characters seem to be complicated with multiple strokes, but with correct guidance and demonstration, teachers can help learners develop correct writing habits. Importance must be attached to demonstration and practice, so as to lay a solid foundation from the beginning. While learning the writing of Chinese characters, many learners write randomly without following the correct sequence

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[12]   Zhou 1999: 197.

of strokes and the structural framework of Chinese characters. Once the wrong habits are formed, they will easily be ingrained in the hearts of Chinese learners, thereby hindering their further study of Chinese. Dividing characters into different groups based on their radicals for better memorising is another teaching method commonly used in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University. Chinese characters are mostly pictophonetic characters. While teaching them, teachers can explain the pictophonetic and phonetic symbols based on the features of pictophonetic characters, so as to achieve twice the result with half the effort. More diverse methods, such as adding character-learning games and explaining the origin, development, and cultural connotation of Chinese characters, can be integrated into the future teaching of Chinese characters, so as to enrich the teaching activities and better mobilise the enthusiasm of learners.

Conclusion

In a word, in the Chinese Department of Eötvös Loránd University offers relatively rational teaching of Chinese characters in terms of teaching staff, teaching materials, and teaching methods, though there are some shortcomings. In the future, the Chinese characters in *New Practical Chinese Reader* should be properly processed to foster strengths and circumvent weaknesses. Under the teaching model of 'mastering both general language and Chinese characters', requirements concerning learners' ability to write complicated Chinese characters can be lowered at the initial stage. In terms of the teaching methods, more attempts can be made to enrich classroom teaching and improve its efficiency.
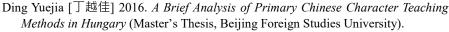
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