The Acquisition of Chinese Characters Innovative Teaching Approaches for a Real Learning Challenge

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Abstract: The considerable increase of Chinese language programmes in Europe has led to a reflection on the conventional teaching approaches, especially on the methodologies oriented to writing skill acquisition. Although Chinese characters represent a real challenge for students of all ages, the leading approach adopted in various textbooks — unipolar methodology — apparently does not give them the importance they deserve.

In this article we explore three alternative approaches based on the disjunction between oral and writing abilities, whose common intent is to pay the right attention to Chinese characters and set priorities in the teaching-learning process. They include: a) the threshold of characters (Bellassen, 1985), a table of useful characters selected according to their frequency of use; b) the pedagogical applications of phonograms (Hoa, 1999), in particular the opportunity to plan writing skill acquisition according to the structural complexity of target characters; c) the national Chinese L2 syllabus, which defines a database of words and characters selected in function of their natural progression and communicative relevance.

Keywords: Chinese L2, oral-writing disjunction, acquisition of Chinese characters, teaching approach, unipolar methodology

1. Introduction

Since the late 70s, Chinese characters have been the core subject of several researches from philosophy to history, from linguistics to archaeology, from sociology to cognition sciences. The popularisation of Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) in many European universities, together with the recent introduction of CFL in French and Italian secondary schools represent two key factors having shed new light on the pedagogical approaches to Chinese teaching, more specifically to Chinese writing system. In the wake of this new trend, CFL teaching communities are debating on the competences to prioritise along the learning process, on the strategies for a fast and effective writing skill acquisition, and on the way to present Chinese characters and vocabulary in textbooks.

2. Common Clichés About Chinese Script

Since CFL curricula were formalised in universities, generations of students have been scared by illogical clichés about Chinese writing system, the most common one is probably the idea that modern Chinese comprises several thousands of characters completely different from one another. But reality is very far from how students

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figure it out. For example, it is well known that 93% of all reading and writing needs can be fulfilled by mastering only 1500 characters; moreover, the total number of basic graphemes (essential units of modern Chinese script) can be summarised in 400 units and most of them are characters themselves (Xing, 2005). Another issue affecting L2 learning process is orthography, especially if considering the high relevance it has in the framework of European languages. Chinese writing abilities might take a longer time to be mastered compared to alphabetic languages, but its orthography is definitely not the most difficult one. A character has an invariable written form unchangeable from context to context, which implies it can be acquired once and for all. Curiously, this specific aspect of Chinese language, despite being quite encouraging for students, is rarely put in evidence in learning environments!

3. The Limits of Unipolar Methodology in CFL Textbooks

Despite the numerous conclusions one may draw, Chinese characters remain a key question of all CFL learning process but the leading teaching approach adopted in Europe does not give them the importance they *de facto* deserve. This approach can be traditionally found in CFL textbooks published in mainland China and widespread in Europe and United States, the so called "unipolar" teaching method (Bellassen, 2010). It consists of units including a text followed by a vocabulary list and grammar explanations and exercises. This method fosters the idea that students should learn to read and write anything they learn to say. Vocabulary is taught in the form of glossaries where words are listed in their order of apparition in the text, just little attention is paid to graphical components as if characters were as transparent as combinations of letters.

Unipolar methodology apparently does not consider three important principles of Chinese writing philosophy:

1) *Apparently it ignores the fact that characters have the property to combine with other ones to form bisyllabic or trisyllabic compounds*. This implies that once studied a limited number of characters, students are able to build up many lexical items.

2) *Glossaries do not take into account the graphical complexity of Chinese characters.*Despite the clichés we mentioned above, modern characters are formed by a limited range of graphical components which should be learned before other units, in this way the acquisition process of writing skills may become more linear and progressive. A clear example may be found in a textbook widely used in Italian secondary schools[1]. The character 谢 xiè (thank) is first introduced in unit 3, even though its graphical shape is rather complex for absolute beginners and its frequency of use limited to the words 谢谢 xièxie (thanks) and 不谢 búxiè (you are welcome). A counter-example may be represented by the character 水 shuǐ (water): despite having a relatively simple graphical shape (only 4 strokes) and composing several daily words (水果 shuǐguǒ fruit, 喝水 hēshuǐ drink, 香水 xiāngshuǐ perfume), students see it for the first time in their book only in unit 12.

3) *Apparently there is no pedagogical logics behind vocabulary glossaries*. Words are merely listed as they appear in the reference text, without any selection based on their frequency of use. The risk is to create omnivorous learners unable to prioritise the frequent (thus more useful) characters over the rare ones. In most textbooks it is quite common to find complex-shaped characters being introduced earlier than

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[1] *Il cinese per gli Italiani* (2010).

simple-shaped variants, this is not only illogical according to the principle of character structural evolution, but also counterproductive in terms of memorisation and acquisition. To clarify this point, we draw two examples from a textbook adopted for long time at Beijing Languages and Culture University and in some French universities[2]. The characters 跑 pǎo (run), 饱 bǎo (full) and 炮 pào (firecracker) can be respectively found in units 34, 40 and 42, while the character 包 bāo (bag, package) which is an original constituent of the first three characters, does not even appear in the textbook. The same can be observed in the case of 房 fáng (house) and 放 fàng (put), found in units 10 and 26, while the character 方 fāng (side, place) does its first apparition in unit 29.

These few examples show how one of the most widespread textbook compiling approaches — the unipolar method — impacts on the acquisition of CFL writing abilities, partially compromising memorization processes and having the whole learning cycle laden down.

4. Emergency for Innovative Methodologies

It is only through the efforts of some pioneers like Bellassen, Allanic and Hoa, that Chinese characters gradually started to emerge from the darkness they used to be placed: these sinologists deserve credit for having conceived some innovative teaching strategies for vocabulary and writing skills acquisition and planning. Several French secondary schools in a first time, and some universities later, welcomed this new teaching philosophy based on four key assumptions:

1) During the first learning stages, the acquisition of oral skills should be disjoined from the acquisition of writing skills. This is basically possible because communication and speaking abilities can rely on *pinyin* (Chinese phonetical transcription system), in this way students are not forced to memorise any single character they learn to pronounce. Speaking-writing disjunction was formally recommended for the first time in French Official Bulletin in 2002.

2) Along the teaching process, it is highly recommended to have a time gap between the apparition of a word in the speaking module and in the writing module. It is important to teach how to pronounce and use a word before teaching how to write it, especially if it is a character with a complex structure. The characters 谢谢 *xièxie* (thanks) and 喝 *hē* (drink), due to their frequency of use and communicative relevance, should appear much earlier in speaking modules than in writing modules.

3) In CFL teaching planning, the essential units of speaking activities are words and sentences, while basic units of writing activities are characters and graphical components. A list of 104 elementary graphical components first appeared in French Official Bulletin in 2002.

4) Teachers should not expect students to learn the writing form of all the characters contained in speaking activities, they should teach prioritarily the most frequent characters and the easiest to write.According to this, a character like 爱 *ài* (love), due to its relatively simple structure and frequency, is supposed to appear earlier than 视频 *shìpín* (video, clip).

These features inspired four pioneering textbooks published between 1999 and 2009, and adopted in some French universities and high schools: *C'est du chinois* (1999), *Méthode de chinois - premier niveau* (2003), *Le chinois…comme en Chine* (2008), *Ni shuo ne?* (2009). The underlying idea these manuals have in common is the

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[2] *Modern Chinese Beginner's Course* (1980).

concrete intention to go beyond unipolar methodology and pay more attention to the acquisition of characters. In addition, this initiative aims to give the appropriate space back to the four language competences, and restore their place and timing along the teaching-learning process. This reasonable approach relieves the speaking modules of the burden of writing activities, and allows a faster word acquisition thanks to the phonetical orthography of Chinese characters. Finally, the disjunction between oral and writing skills ensures a high degree of teaching freedom: characters should no longer be taught randomly but selected according to specific criteria.

5. Different Viable Routes to the Acquisition of Characters: Conclusion

Once clarified the advantages this new methodology can bring, the next question one can raise is how we should plan the acquisition of characters and which strategies may balance efficiency and study time. It may be interesting to analyse the different solutions that French and Italian educational systems have experimented in the last decades to answer these questions.

(1) Characters threshold (Bellassen), officialised in France in the late 80s, was originally conceived for secondary schools, though it has gradually penetrated universities too. It mainly consists of a table containing 400 selected characters to be presumably acquired by the end of the course. Threshold-characters are selected on the basis of their frequency in ordinary web and paper publications and according to their property to combine with other characters. But how converting the threshold into a teaching practice? Writing activities should be planned in function of the threshold, so it is recommended to show students the etymology and the graphical constituents of any character listed in the table. Although explanations do not always appear realistic, they actually seem to arouse students' curiosity and interest. Since its introduction, characters threshold has ensured a solid database for students to stick to and for teachers to plan the didactic activities. Longterm learning objectives are clear, at least in the filed of writing abilities, and are strictly followed to design CFL final examination. Up to now, this system has not been largely transferred to university courses as it particularly fits elementary and intermediate level students, but seems inadequate to advanced learners.

(2) The second solution, more recent and equally bold, is represented by the method conceived for *C'est du chinois* (M. Hoa), published in France in 1999. In the manual, oral competence is based on vocabulary and grammar acquisition (L2 functional level), whereas writing ability is related to memorisation process of graphemes and their spatial disposition (L2 basic level). This method, despite basing on oral-writing disjunction as threshold does, expects teachers to focus only on the "really exploitable" characters: the phonograms (表音字 *biǎoyīnzi*). Phonograms are families of characters originated from the same phonetic functional component but presenting, in their modern form, some distinctive semantic constituents. The first examples of phonograms were found on oracle bones but it is at the time of Qin and Han dynasties that they sensibly multiplied until today, representing 90% of all officially recognised characters. From an educational perspective, identifying and explaining phonograms helps learners classify characters into families and memorise them according to phonological and morphological criteria. An example is the phonogram 主 *zhǔ*: its original form acquired various semantic consitutents (偏旁部首 *piānpáng bùshǒu*) over the centuries, which originated several distinct characters in modern Chinese (Table 1).

Table 1   Original Phonogram: 主 zhǔ

Originated characters	Pronunciation	Meaning of the semantic constituent	Meaning of the character
住	*Zhù*	Person	Live
驻	*Zhù*	Horse	Locate
注	*Zhù*	Water	Pour
柱	*Zhù*	Wood	Pillar
蛀	*Zhù*	Bug	Moth

(3) The solution Italian educational system adopted in 2016 is the publication of a national syllabus of Chinese language, especially conceived for secondary institutions. It is the product of joined efforts of Ministry of Education and a team composed by university researchers and secondary school teachers. At a first sight, syllabus goals may appear quite similar to character threshold ones, however, a deeper analysis can show their different nature. Threshold presents characters (not words) to be mastered by the end of the study cycle without specifying at what stage of the process a single character should be learned. Syllabus instead is a comprehensive table of language and cultural contents divided per time units, specifying the words (not the characters) to be acquired every year. Words are presented in a "natural" progression and appear in function of their semantic relevance. Obviously, syllabus does not focus on characters, nor on writing abilities, nor even exploits the teaching philosophy of phonograms, but at least tries to define CFL competences over the 5-year curriculum and a sort of word database representing the essential stock of items for daily communication and mutual comprehension.

We believe the three national experiences reported in this article can clarify the different degrees of awareness of CFL-related pedagogy in Europe and do explore some specific methodologies aimed to foster writing abilities and character memorisation. We are conscious that teaching practice efficiency depends on many more factors, but we are still firmly convinced that Chinese language acquisition starts from the comprehension of characters and their morphological and syntactic functions. This is the reason why developing this research field and the related pragmatic applications may lead to a substantive leap forward in CFL didactic theory and practice.

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