

TEACHING AND TESTING

Fun and effective approaches to teaching Chinese characters

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Introduction

To plan and carry out an effective and successful language programme for young learners of Chinese, it is essential to have a good understanding of the characteristics of children's second language learning.

We all agree that children are very different in language learning from adults.

- Full of curiosity : they are always keen to explore and learn new things.
- Full of imagination : children are weak at abstract thinking and strong at figurative thinking. They learn through pictures, colours and sounds.
- Full of creativities and enjoying competitions : competitions give them a purpose in learning and make their learning challenging but fun.
- Risk takers : they are not shy in imitating and don't worry too much about making mistakes or losing face.
- Their concentration span is short : as language teachers we should endeavour to create interesting and fun learning environment, in which children can learn and explore the language in fun.

In this paper, I am going to talk about a variety of approaches I have tried in my eight years of teaching Chinese to primary school children in Kristin Junior School, Auckland and discuss about how to empower students with the skills of decoding Chinese characters, and how to build up their confidence and sustain their enthusiasm and interest in learning Chinese.

Since reading can be separated from writing in the primary stage of learning, the teaching of reading Chinese characters can be separated from that of writing Chinese characters. Therefore, the focus of my paper is on reading and understanding Chinese characters. Chinese character reading skills are essential in developing learners' character writing skills, in that with the easy access to computers and possibility of typing Chinese characters on every computer, students can write anything in Chinese characters as long as they know Pinyin and can recognize the characters

1) Teaching Chinese characters through telling stories

- Storytelling is the oldest form of education. Cultures have always told tales as a way of passing down beliefs, traditions, and history to future generations.
- Stories are the way we store information in the brain. A list of facts will be forgotten, but stories are always remembered.
- Stories/explanations go straight to the heart. Because students are emotionally involved and truly enjoy storytelling, it can help to create a positive attitude toward the learning process.

Therefore, I always introduce Chinese characters by telling stories. 日, 月, 山, 水 are usually the first group of characters to start with my children. Instead of explaining how their characters

were invented according to the books, I usually make up a story to teach them together. First of all, I will show the class this picture and tell them that this was a letter 5 thousands of years ago and ask them to explain the meaning to me. They always give me a variety of versions of the letter and then I will tell them the story about a hunter and his BBQ invitation letter and give them my version of the letter.

The hunter and his BBQ invitation letter

Once upon a time, a hunter living in a little village at the foot of a big mountain hunted a pig which was the most beautiful food at that time, and baked it on a pile of fire. But because it was so big and had so much meat, the hunter's family couldn't finish it by themselves and they got no where to keep it as there was no refrigerator at that time. So he decided to invite his friends and relatives to share the meat. But how to send the message around? He had no telephone, no mobile phone, no computer, nothing. (At this stage I will ask the children to help him to find a way to send the message and always they tell me that he should write a letter and post it to his friends and relatives.)

When he started writing an invitation letter, he found that he had no idea of what writing was. So he drew pictures on a piece of bark of a tree. His friends and relatives got the message and had a feast in his house.

The letter

When the sun comes down and the moon goes up, please come to my house to have a BBQ with us. My house is located at the foot of a big mountain and there is a little river flowing before it.

Later on, people found drawing pictures took too much time, so they simplified these pictures to characters - ri becomes 日, yue becomes 月, mountain becomes 山 and water becomes 水。

Some more stories for Chinese characters are:

家: Where should we keep the pig?

国: The king and his kingdom

茶: Who should go and pick up the leaves?

酒: A vinegar and his big jar

看 : I can see! I can see!

This way of introducing Chinese characters is a very effective attention catcher and children love it. Whenever I say Once upon a time, or Long, long ago or One day..., my pupils would immediately become focused and eager to listen.

Here, we must be aware that a story doesn't have to be true and it doesn't have to be long either. It is almost impossible regarding of time to make up a long and detailed story for each character we teach. Sometimes it just needs a few sentences to wrap up the main idea and to make the learning fun and effective.

2) Promoting students interest in Chinese characters by the media of drawing and colouring

We all agree that primary school children are active and imaginative. They enjoy using the media of drawing and coloring to express their ideas. I have tried this method in teaching Chinese characters and found it is very effective. As we know, writing Chinese characters can be boring to children as they are abstract strokes which don't really make sense to them. However, when they draw pictures to illustrate and decorate, they put vivid life into those abstract characters. Students are always motivated and show great enthusiasm in doing it. In this process, they have to think creatively and use their imagination to create vivid pictures for the characters, and by doing so, they have not only remember the characters but also improved their ability of creative thinking.

3) Expanding Chinese vocabulary by playing block building with Chinese characters

Even though Chinese characters have the problem of lacking of correlation between the forms and the pronunciation, which makes it much more difficult to learn than English, it also has its advantages which English and other western languages don't have :

- Chinese characters are the most expressive and informative language in the world. It's said that the ratio of Chinese to English is 1:4, which is one character contains information of 4 English words.
- Each character is an information block which can be used flexibly with another character to make up new words, phrases and sentences, without worrying much about tense, gender, agreement and so on as in English.

Chinese phrases are made of two or more characters, mostly two characters. Once students know the base meaning of a character, they will have in their hands a powerful tool to work out new phrases and sentences. To equip them with this ability, I always create exercises for them to try their hand at.

In Year 3, for example, after we learn 日, 月, 山, 水, 大, 小, 人 we will start putting them together to make up new words:

- 大山, 小山, 大水,
- 二月五日, 三月八日,
- 日日月月, 大月, 小月,
- 大人, 小人

In Year 4, we use 牛, 马, 羊, 鱼, 鸟, 鸡 to make

- 大牛, 小牛, 水牛
- 大马, 小马, 木马, 上马, 下马
- 大羊, 小羊, 山羊
- 大鱼, 小鱼, 飞鱼, 木鱼
- 大鸟, 小鸟, 水鸟
- 大鸡, 小鸡, 山鸡, 火鸡

After teaching them a certain amount of characters, I will start putting characters together to build up sentences. For example, in Year 4, after learning the characters for horse, sheep, ox and so on, I will get the children to read and translate sentences like these:

- 小马上山，小羊下山。
- 小牛下水，小鸟上天。
- 山上有小羊，山下有大牛。
- 水中有小鱼，天上有小鸟。
- 水牛大，山羊小。
- 大水牛下水，小山羊上火车。小马上飞机。
- 中国有中国人。中国有大山。
- 天上有一只小鸟。山上有一只小羊。

My students call this kind of practice playing block building games. Sometimes I put them together for students to guess the meaning in English; sometimes I give out English the meaning before letting students construct a word. Mostly, we do it in competition either between boys and girls or groups.

Students always show great enthusiasm and enjoyment in doing this activity even the reluctant and slow learners put their hands up to give it a go. By doing this, they have not only reviewed the characters they learnt in the previous years but also learnt how to use those characters to make up sentences. This activity is also rated as one of their favourite activities in their self appraisals.

It has been proved in my practice that this block building method

- links those unrelated and isolated characters together to make up new words and phrases;
- gives students a feeling of achievement and success;
- boosts students' confidence greatly in learning Chinese characters;
- demonstrates vividly and effectively how Chinese words and sentences are formed.

4) Input Chinese characters by building up students' own **说文解字** – the interpretation of words and characters

In the traditional approach to teaching Chinese characters, the teacher controls everything and explains everything. The students listen and copying the characters and practice hundreds of times until they remember them. This approach is ineffective. Why?

First of all it is highly inefficient. The teacher does all the thinking and all the talking. The teacher soon gets tired because she is doing all the work. Meanwhile, the students get bored because they are inactive.

In business they say: Nothing happens until we make a sale. In teaching Chinese characters, it should be: Nothing happens until the student does something. The more active the students are, the more learning can take place.

When I started teaching characters, I also explained the character according to the books, trying to make it easier to memorise characters. For example, 火, I would draw a fire and told the

children how this character was developed. However, when I asked students whether they thought it looked like a fire, most of them said no and told me that it didn't look like a fire but an evil face or a cat face. I realised that our traditional explanations of characters don't always create the same image as we thought in students' minds. So I started getting them to describe the characters in English according to their imagination and this worked out very well.

Usually, I put the character on the board after giving its meaning and sound, and then ask students to look at the character carefully and tell me or write down what they think it looks like. This question always gets quick and enthusiastic responses right away.

Here are some examples from Yr 4 students when doing the topic – I love my family.

- 爸 cross bones on a pirate flag
- 弟 a snake curling up a tree with tongue hissing out
- 哥 an apartment with two big windows
- 妹 a person standing by a Christmas tree
- 姐 a person ready to climb a ladder
- 有 a cross on a church

This method has turned their learning from passively remembering what the teacher has told them into actively and creatively learning by themselves. Students are hooked into looking at the characters carefully pay attention to the details of the structure of character.

If you just ask them to look at the characters carefully and then learn how to write it they will feel bored. But the question: What does it look like? motivates them to explore with creativity and imagination and to form a picture of the character with details in their mind, which makes it much easier to memorise the shape and structure of the character.

5) Teaching complicated characters by letting students make discoveries

If Chinese characters are hard to learn, Chinese characters with many strokes often scare students away. But these characters are not a combination of random strokes but one of radicals or simple characters. Therefore, one way to make it easier for students to see the structure is to let students find out how many characters are contained in one characters. The question I use for this is: How many characters can you find/see in this character?

This question can always turn the boring abstract and complicated character into an interesting and exciting maze or puzzle before their eyes. Their curiosity switches their mind to search for characters they have learned motivates them to look at the characters to every detail to find as many characters hidden as they can.

The result is reading and writing those characters become an interesting and challenging game of making discoveries. They not only review the characters they have learnt but also exam with great attention the characters I am teaching and remember their by heart more effectively and vividly.

Here are some of the examples to the question: How many characters can you find in this character?

- 是: 日, 一, 人, 丁,
- 果: 十, 田, 木

- 卖：十，大，头，买，人，一
- 春：三，人，大，日，
- 茶：人，木，小
- 胖：月，半，二，十

Conclusion

In this paper, I have talked about a few approaches to teaching Chinese characters. These methods are based on my teaching practice and have been proven to be effective in helping young students recognize, comprehend, and memorize Chinese characters. However, since the teaching of Chinese as a second language is quite new, especially teaching at primary level, there is very little experience I can refer to or access to justify these approaches theoretically. Moreover, I have only tried these methods in my school with primary school children, problems and shortcomings are unavoidable. I welcome feedback from experts and colleagues to make Chinese teaching and learning more enjoyable and exciting and contribute my bit to promoting Chinese learning in New Zealand schools.

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