

Strategies in Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

This paper is the first stage of a research study into strategies in teaching Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) in a trilingual education program in Thailand. Through related literature review, it was found that teaching Chinese characters to non-native Chinese learners is recommended at the start of learning regardless of their age because Chinese characters are the main part of the Chinese language and they are the combined components visible and constructive for learners. In addition, there is no attempt to examine any strategies in teaching Chinese characters in Thailand although it is nationally viewed as the third vital language for Thai students to study. CFL teaching strategies are then adapted to suit young Thai learners.

Keywords: *teaching strategies, Chinese as a foreign language, Chinese characters*

1. Introduction

Today's connected world apparently widens international communication between people from culturally diverse backgrounds, requiring common language knowledge and skills. In this context, English inevitably plays a vital role as a lingua franca, and it is preferably and/or legitimately studied as a foreign language in many countries. Thailand is not excluded since students at all levels must learn English. Socially speaking, it is also common for employers to recruit job applicants who are fluent in all English skills, so bilingual education has emerged and become popular among wealthy parents who want their children to acquire both Thai and English.

However, after China had prospered and become the world's largest economy, Chinese was nationally seen the third vital language for Thai students. Trilingual education becomes a new trend in Thailand although the Chinese language has been offered as a foreign or second language in both public and private schools in Thailand (Luo & Limpapath, 2016) and the second most studied foreign language in high schools (Siridetkoon, 2015) while English is always the most studied foreign language. What appears to motivate a few numbers of international schools to reform their curriculums recently, offering a trilingual program in Thai, English and Chinese, is the development of National Language Policy of the Royal Institute of Thailand from 2006 to 2010 which reached a consensus on 'trilingual + policy' as indicated in the following model: Thai + English + Chinese + 1 optional language (Brudhiprabha, 2015). At this point, trilingual programs remain state of the art.

The obvious problem young Thai students are facing appears to be learning or acquiring Chinese at the trilingual program in line with Plumb's assertion (2016) that Chinese is one of the most difficult languages. Its difficulty is largely due to complications in writing Chinese characters (Ma, Ren & Zhu, 2017). Since the Chinese language can be divided into spoken and written languages (McLaren & Bettinson, 2016), many words are used in writing but rarely used in speaking, and this factor makes it harder for non-native Chinese speakers to learn written Chinese language without learning Chinese characters (Kosek, 2016).

Learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) normally study the two-main components of the Chinese language: phonetic system (Pinyin) and its written system (Chinese characters).

Learning CFL mostly involves Chinese characters because it is seen an essential procedure of learning the Chinese language. There are three basic ways to look up Chinese characters in the Chinese dictionary: Pinyin, radical, and counting the stroke of the whole characters. Counting the quantity of the radicals and characters enables learners to learn Chinese autonomously and correctly.

According to International Chinese Language Ability Standard of Hanban (Hanban, 2018), in the grade five of HSK (Hanyun Shuiping Kaoshi), students are required to acquire 2,500 words and be able to read Chinese magazines with comprehension and appreciate some TV series and movies. In order to reach these standard requirements, learners must acquaint with a large number of Chinese characters. This can imply that learners should have intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation in learning. Concurrently, CFL teachers should instruct lessons with effective pedagogical strategies suitable for their group of students.

From the main author's experiences in teaching CFL to Thai learners aged between 7 and 9, they tend to experience difficulty in learning Chinese characters. Achievement in learning or acquiring Chinese characters needs effective teaching strategies. This paper therefore aims to explore what would be suitable strategies in teaching Chinese characters for young Thai learners aged between 7 and 9 in a trilingual education program in Thailand.

2. Teaching and Learning CFL in a Thai context

Chinese has become nationally vital for Thai students to learn, and it appears that there are a number of research studies into teaching and learning CFL in a Thai context. As a matter of fact, they are associated with affect in language learning, affect in language teaching, cognitive skills, and parents, but none of them regards teaching Chinese characters. For example, Luo and Limpapath (2016) explored attitudes toward Chinese in Thai senior high school students (Grades 10-12) and found that female students held more positive attitudes towards Chinese language learning than their male counterparts, and the students in the Chinese Language Program had more positive attitudes towards Chinese language learning than those in English and Mathematics Program with minor in Chinese.

Siridetkoon (2015) explored students' motivation in learning English and L3s (Chinese, Japanese and Korean) in a university and found that the importance of English has threatened learners' motivation to study other foreign languages while the predominance of English also makes students confident to study other languages. Furthermore, students' learning motivation is driven by the international posture and immediate need and future use of that particular language.

The research findings above align with Ye's (2016) arguments that learning motivation is influenced by many elements. First, it can be shown in gender as male students tend to obtain lower learning motivation than female students. Second, family background also impacts students' learning motivation. The ones from Thai-Chinese families tend to have higher level of Chinese learning motivation compared to those from Thai family background. The students from private schools possess higher level of learning motivation than those from public schools. The students who study more than 7 years have lower level of learning motivation than those who learn less than 6 years.

For affect in language teaching, Wei and Laksana (2018) explore volunteer Chinese teachers' job stress and satisfactions from 2013 to 2014 and found that they have higher level of stress in Workload and Career Development but lower level in cross-cultural teaching and communication. They are satisfied with "Recognition", "Teamwork", "Work itself" and "Achievement" while they are not with "Advancement". Furthermore, Ye (2017) found that there are top five challenges that Chinese teachers faced in their classroom in an international school in Thailand: students' diversity, classroom management, school support, parental involvement, and selection of teaching materials. Similarly, Masuntisuk (2013, p.1) pointed

out that one of the problems of studying Chinese in Thailand is “teachers lack competency to teach and attract students’ attention and enthusiasm”. In other words, teachers should well prepare for the teaching materials.

Many research studies have been carried out on Chinese pronunciation, reading, and translation. For example, Li (2015) found that Thai speakers displayed the most difficulty in the perception of Mandarin tone 2 and tone 3. Similarly, the hierarchy of tone accessibility from the least difficulty to the most difficulty was tone 4 > tone 1 > tone 2 > tone 3 (Rungruang & Mu, 2017). Cai and Lee (2015) compare between consonants and vowels in Chinese and Thai via pronunciations of five native Thai speakers who have learned Mandarin Chinese as a second language from 8 to 25 years. The results firstly show that the similarities and differences of first and second languages can be found by the contrastive analysis. Secondly, the differences may not be the reason of the difficulties of learning a third language. Thirdly, pronunciations of second language are influenced by first language. Lastly, the difficulties of second language may be caused by other factors. These results indicate first language’s positive and negative influences on second language learning.

Ping (2010) applied Task-Based Learning (TBL) in teaching Business Chinese Reading among the undergraduates and found that this approach is helpful in improving students’ reading skills. Later, Ping (2015) found that Thai students who learned Chinese business translation often made grammatical errors, wrote wrong Chinese characters and use inappropriate vocabulary and incorrect punctuation.

In terms of study in relation to parents, Liu and Ye (2015) found that parents were satisfied with Chinese language teaching in an international school. Hou and Lynch (2017) pointed out that positive parental encouragement could enhance their learning motivation and academic achievement in students of grades 4-6 in a bilingual school.

It is fair to summarize that teaching CFL have caused a high degree of attention in Thailand as the recent research studies on Chinese have covered some important areas as mentioned above. Undoubtedly, they have offered useful strategies for teaching Chinese from various aspects and different levels of students. As Chinese is the combination of sound, sharp, and meaning, teaching Chinese needs the cooperation from parents, teachers, and students. However, Chinese characters, the main part of the Chinese language, should never been overlooked in a Thai context.

3. Strategies in Teaching CFL in Other Contexts

Through related literature review, teaching Chinese characters appear to be more studied in other contexts, and CFL teaching strategies have drawn much attention among researchers in many countries, namely China, Australia, Malaysia, and Norway. It is also suggested that there is a need to understand how Chinese characters have been globally viewed. Firstly, they are widely known as ideograph (Chu & Toh, 2015), which represents an idea or concept. However, Walls and Walls (2009:7, cited in McLaren & Bettinson, 2015) held a different view and gave a comprehensive explanation that Chinese characters are not exact ideographic, but they are instead “morpho syllabic” or “ideophonetic compounds”. In other words, Chinese characters are not only ideographic but also phonetic.

According to Xu (2009, cited in Huo, 2012), Chinese characters can be divided into four categories - pictographs (象形字, xiàng xíng zì), indicatives (指示字, zhǐ shì zì), ideographic compounds (会意字, huì yì zì), and pictographic-phonetic compound ideograms (形声字, xíng shēng zì). Therefore, it is reasonable to identify that Chinese characters are “ideophonetic compounds”. Zeng (2015) also explained that there are three elements: “sound, shape, and meaning” in a Chinese character.

Learning Chinese characters in fact should be a procedure from simple to complex. The first simple step is writing with stroke. There are five basic strokes (横 (一)、竖 (丨)、撇 (丿)、点 (丶)、折 (乚)). The second is to learn radicals. There are 53 basic radicals recorded in The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (TCCD, 2000, p.1717). Some radicals indicate their meaning, for example, “三点水, sān diǎn shuǐ” means “water”, “四点底, sì diǎn dǐ” means “fire”, “提手旁, tí shǒu páng” means “hand”. The words which combine with this radical mean that the word had relative meaning with “water” “fire” or “hand”. The last step is to learn Chinese characters. Learning should be step by step because “characters are composed of components, components are sometimes characters on their own, and components can appear repeatedly in different components or characters” (Hung, 2012, p. 27 cited in McLaren & Bettinson, 2015).

When it comes to young learners of CFL, Hu (2003) found that second and third grade students are appropriate to study Chinese as LOTE (Languages Other Than English) and this indicated that characters could well be introduced to primary school students at an early stage of learning. Furthermore, it is an effective way to use the method of picturing to teach Chinese characters.

Teaching Chinese characters for native Chinese speakers has developed into systematic approaches. Undoubtedly, these approaches have various implications for teaching Chinese characters for non-native speakers. Lam (2011) pointed out that teaching Chinese characters in Hong Kong for native Chinese speakers can be divided into two main aspects: character-centered approach and meaning-centered approach. One the other hand, character-centered approach means learners learn and recognize the quantity of Chinese characters first. Teachers teach characters through semantic radicals and phonetic radicals, the analysis of the components, and pictures shown how the Chinese characters are originally created.

On the other hand, meaning-centered approach aims at reading and writing meaningful texts right from the beginning. Chinese characters can be learned in concrete context (word, sentence) and the ambiguities of the characters in different context. Learners are expected to write narrative, poetry, prose, and others with the Chinese characters they have learned. Pinyin approach allows learners to read unknown characters. Listening approach aims at learners’ listening to the texts many times then later gives them the texts, and they will connect the sounds and the Chinese characters by themselves. Both of them are also effective for teaching CFL, but teachers need to make appropriate judgments based on the specific requirements of their students’ situations.

The weak points of Chinese characters can also turn into advantage points of Chinese characters. The difficulties of writing Chinese characters are largely caused by the phonetic, semantic and graphemic character confusion as Kosek (2016) mentioned. Indeed, Chinese characters have phonetic, semantic and graphemic similarities, Zeng (2015) assorted Chinese characters with contact in the sound of Chinese characters and words, shape contact of Chinese characters, meaning contact of Chinese characters and words, and proved that these “combined methods” are effective methods to teach Chinese characters.

Similarly, Kosek (2016) explored the approaches for learning Chinese characters and recognizing characters without handwriting them for foreign language learners through analyzing 1,500 pairs of characters that had been mistaken for one another in the process of learning. Although these three researchers’ analyses base on the traditional Chinese characters, they are still available for the Simplified Chinese character teaching.

Huo (2012) explored visual pedagogy on teaching third and fourth year students’ Chinese characters in a public school in Australia. Visual pedagogy benefits students by making a problem more readily accessible in memory, for example, Chinese characters were presented

in a radical picture each lesson, with a core character in the middle and the others arranged around it.

Teaching Chinese characters are rich not only in the theoretical approaches, but also in the teaching materials and tools. No doubt that ICT (Information and Communication Technology) has become an essential role in modern education. It is not doubtful that a quantity of teaching materials including games, and manuals, has been afforded on the websites online. Ong, Er, Marimuthu and Liaw, (2015) found that Web-based instruction (WBI) were effective in teaching and learning Chinese characters. There are four Chinese character WBI: a) The Chinese Character Stroke from Harvard University; b) How to Write Chinese Characters from Oxford University; c) Chinese Characters Learning Application from the University of Hong Kong; and d) The BBC Learn Mandarin Online.

In Taiwan, Chen, Hsu, Chang, Lin, Chang, and Sung (2013) built an e-learning platform and applied the radical-derived Chinese character teaching strategy with 129 Chinese-American CFL learners. The participants are divided into two groups: experimental group (e-learning radical-derived character instruction), comparison group (traditional lecturing instruction), and the students from experimental group performed significantly better than the comparison group on a phonetic radical awareness test, a semantic radical awareness test, as well as an orthography knowledge test.

A number of research studies have focused on the mobile applications, integrated in teaching and learning Chinese characters (Chu & Toh, 2015; McLaren & Bettinson, 2015; McLaren & Bettinson, 2016). There are many apps that are affordable for Chinese learning including listening, writing and reading with games. Some of them are freely available but some are not. They enable students to learn Chinese characters beyond the classroom. For example, Chu and Toh (2015) found that CFL students could neither distinguish between homograph, homophone and homonym Chinese characters, nor use punctuation in sentences correctly. Therefore, they need to have more exposure in Chinese Pinyin, use Pinyin input and recognize the appeared Chinese characters with the same phonetic sounds or same phonetic sounds but different tones, or the same phonetic sounds but is different in meaning or grammar.

Chu and Toh (2015) also found that teaching Chinese characters through Interactive Character Learning Model (ICLM) with WhatsApp could enhance CFL students' learning motivation because they have great improvement in Chinese characters' shape, meaning and sound through sending instant text messages, images, voice-communication, and video communication among the WhatsApp groups.

E-learning tools have also been applied in teaching Chinese characters. For example, in Australia, McLaren and Bettinson (2015) pointed out that the use of electronic dictionaries aided students to identify Chinese characters and developed their Chinese literacy skills. In their project, teachers offered technological assistance about online course readers for students who were also encouraged to download the free version of *Pleco* which is one of the most widely used mobile applications for Chinese language learning. *Pleco* instructs with space repetition system to repeat the Chinese character which students have not yet aquatinted.

Later, McLaren and Bettinson (2016) applied *Skritter*, a digital tool to teach Chinese character writing and other skills in classroom learning in Australia. *Skritter* is a web-based service with automatic space repetition system. *IWrite* is produced by Tam and Huang (cited in McLaren & Bettinson, 2016) for teaching Chinese characters. J. De la Rouviere has investigated the use of spaced repetition in online applications for commercial Chinese character learning applications such as *Anki* and *Mnemosyne* (De la Rouviere 2013, cited in McLaren & Bettinson, 2016).

Based on the main author's personal observation as a native Chinese teacher, it was found that Thai students' writing behavior is the factor that leads to writing difficulties. They tend to write the stroke order "shù" from down to up which is opposite to the right stroke order because of their mother tongue interference. Since there is no research into strategies in teaching Chinese characters in a Thai context, it is appropriate for the main author to adapt teaching strategies that can help Thai learners of CFL write Chinese characters more effectively.

On the one hand, for the teaching tools, many mobile applications or websites are useful as they offer various materials or methods to make Chinese characters more visual, fun, and easy to learn. Furthermore, these electronic devices have changed the teaching styles, enabling teachers to teach Chinese characters inside and outside the classroom with unlimited time. For the teaching content, teaching the shape, sound, and meaning of Chinese characters at the same time is a good way to teach Chinese characters with the method of picturing (Hu, 2003) or another similar method of visual pedagogy (Huo, 2012). Both teaching methods have been successfully used.

4. Conclusion

In Thailand, trilingual education in Thai, English and Chinese is increasingly recognized and learning CFL becomes crucial. Recent studies into teaching and learning CFL can be found in Thailand, yet teaching Chinese characters do not exist. Although Chinese characters are considered the hardest to learn, it is inevitable for any beginners to start learning Chinese characters. Many studies in other social contexts have applied electronic technology and students' situation to teach Chinese characters with successful outcomes. It is therefore suitable for the main author who is a native Chinese teacher to apply those strategies in other social contexts as mentioned above to teach her Thai learners in a trilingual education program in Thailand.

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