

STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

Vol. 2, No. 1, 2011, pp. 26-32

www.cscanada.net

ISSN 1923-1555 [Print]

ISSN 1923-1563 [Online]

www.cscanada.org

The Compiling Methods for Pinyin Textbooks of Teaching of Chinese as a Foreign Language:

A Case Study on the *Textbook for Interesting Chinese Pinyin*

CAI Yunling¹LIU Delian²

Abstract: On the basis of reviewing and summarizing the current situation of Chinese Pinyin textbooks and considering the gains and experiences in the compiling process of *The Textbook for Interesting Chinese Pinyin*, this paper is to propose that Chinese Pinyin textbooks should take the difficulties for foreign learners fully into account and attach importance to the interest and practicality of teaching materials. We suggest to draw up a syllabus for Chinese Pinyin so that the teaching materials can effectively put teaching of pronunciation and speech flow together.

Key words: Pronunciation; Chinese Pinyin textbooks; Compiling; Principles and methods

1. THE PARTICULARITIES OF PINYIN TEACHING IN TEACHING OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (TCFL)

As known to all, one of the prerequisites to learn Chinese well is to learn well its pronunciation. As one of the three essentials of a language, pronunciation is the major medium of speech communication between people. "During the second language teaching, pronunciation affects the situation as a whole. The error of pronunciation will lead to errors of grammar and vocabulary, because the grammar and vocabulary are shown through the pronunciation." (SHENG Yan, 1990) Mr. Chao Yuen Ren once said a classic phrase: "One false pronunciation brings everlasting grief." Mr. LIN Tao also said "Once not pronouncing correctly at the very beginning, one couldn't correct for the whole life. Once speaking with foreign accent, it's very hard and late to correct sometimes." Chinese Pinyin is the basis of the pronunciation of Chinese language. For foreign learners, Learning Pinyin is the very beginning of learning Chinese, which therefore can be counted as the first stage of Chinese language learning. The learning effect of the first stage directly impacts the interest and confidence of foreign learners in learning Chinese, so teachers of TCFL should be fully aware of the importance of Pinyin teaching.

Compared with teaching and learning of Chinese character, vocabulary and grammar, teaching and learning of Pinyin shows obvious differences as follows:

¹ School of Chinese as a second language, Peking University, China. Email: cylwt@pku.edu.cn.

² School of Chinese as a second language, Peking University, China. Email: liddl128@pku.edu.cn.

*Received 19 September 2010; accepted 5 february 2011.

First of all, Pinyin takes alphabets rather than characters as a carrier. This fact is particularly important for foreign learners. Since most native languages of foreigners belong to phonogram, when they come into contact with Chinese, a kind of ideogram, they would feel hard to grasp. When they see Pinyin shown by alphabets, they often have a familiar feeling of *déjà vu*. They then spontaneously pronounce Pinyin alphabets by imitating the phonetic sounds in their native languages. Thus foreign learners are prone to mix Chinese Pinyin and their native pronunciation up. This learning process differs from the Chinese native speakers. For Chinese children, Pinyin alphabets are fresh and special that can be grasped by detailed explanations, systematic study from zero and long time repeating from memory. However, for most foreign learners, due to the similarity between Chinese Pinyin alphabets and their native alphabets, with the function of the positive transfer of the native language, they can quickly learn the correct pronunciation of some of Pinyin and remember them without too much. At the same time, we can not ignore the interference caused by their native languages in the process of Pinyin learning. The negative transfer of the native language also makes them sink deep into the quagmire of pronunciation in foreign accent. The distinctiveness of Pinyin learning reminds us that when compiling Pinyin textbooks for foreigners, we should pay attention to the differences from Pinyin textbooks for natives. In other words, we have no use for compiling Pinyin textbooks or teaching Pinyin for foreigners in full accordance with the order of The Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet; we have no use for strictly following the elaborate explanations of phonology system. Instead, we should make a rational arrangement of both particularization and simplification in the necessary places and make the focal points stand out by putting the emphasis of textbooks instructing on the pronunciation prone to be affected by the negative transfer of the native language so that foreigners can overcome the difficulties caused by the influence of the negative transfer of the native language and grasp Chinese Pinyin as quickly as possible.

Secondly, the learning type of pronunciation is quite different from that of other structural aspects of language learning. To learn the pronunciation of a language is actually to learn and grasp certain skills of movements. From this point of view, learning pronunciation is like gymnasts practicing gymnastic movements. As long as practicing in standard level and adequate methods, one can do any gymnastic movements with high standard and perfection. The only difference is just that pronunciation through the mouth and nose is a kind of delicate movements of small pieces of muscles. Gymnasts reach a high level through hardworking exercises day after day. The same situation also occurs in the process of language learning. Through scientific and systematic training, the pronunciation, no matter how hard it is, can be grasped very well. The key is the method we use. Most Chinese Pinyin textbooks nowadays focus only on dissemination of knowledge and theory of phonetics, lack of instructions of learning method in pronunciation. Unfortunately, these teaching materials cannot presented like gymnastic coaches to use scientific and effective means to help learners grasp pronunciation skills. There are mainly two reasons: one reason is that the compilers of these textbooks are not front-line teachers so they lack of relevant knowledge in this area; the other is that the compilers of these textbooks cannot fully understand the importance of learning method in pronunciation in the teaching process.

For the particularity of Chinese Pinyin teaching and learning, we can give more examples, e.g. the relationship between pinyin teaching and Chinese character teaching, etc. However, we emphasize two points of view elaborated above, with the guiding significance of compiling Chinese Pinyin textbooks as the compiling issues on Chinese Pinyin textbooks are chiefly discussed in this paper.

2. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF CHINESE PINYIN TEXTBOOKS IN TEACHING OF CHINESE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

For foreign learners, nowadays there are mainly two kinds of Chinese Pinyin textbooks. One kind belongs to systematic teaching materials. Depending on different purposes, the first kind of Pinyin textbooks can be divided into two types again below:

a. Textbooks compiled for instructions of the basic knowledge of Chinese Pinyin and targeted to foreign beginners;

b. Textbooks compiled for correcting pronunciation and targeted to foreigners who pronounce Pinyin with their native accent because of unsystematic learning.

The other kind of Pinyin textbooks, strictly speaking, cannot be counted as independent textbooks but supporting materials about brief introduction of composition and pronunciation of Chinese Pinyin and relevant exercises, which are attached to the formal textbooks, used before studying a text, generally only a few simple lessons. Although textbooks mentioned above vary in their own ways, overall they are full of disadvantages manifested in the following areas:

First of all, quantities of professional knowledge and terms of phonetics and phonology are directly used in these textbooks, including the linguagram of vowels, International Phonetic Alphabet, descriptions of characteristics that differ between vowels and consonants and Chao Tone Letters (A famous system invented by The Father of Chinese Linguistics Chao Yuen Ren, using 5 numerals for showing pitch contour of Chinese tones). Even a native Chinese who has received higher education, if his or her major is not linguistics, it's probably quite difficult for him or her to understand such diagrams and letters, let alone for a foreigner. We consider that as designers and teachers of Chinese Pinyin teaching, we must be well acquainted with phonetics and phonology both in theory and practice, but such theoretical knowledge should not be taught as direct contents neither in textbooks nor in classes for foreign students. Instead, we should try to blend such theoretical knowledge with the explanation and practice of texts together through various flexible methods. As a result, foreign students can master the correct use of phonetic rules with gradual and imperceptible influence instead of systematical study of the professional knowledge and terms, which needs to be noticed by compilers of teaching materials. As said in a famous Chinese ancient poem, "On the heels of the wind it slips secretly into the night. Silent and soft, it moistens everything."

Secondly, in the process of designing, some pronunciation exercises arranged in those textbooks are nonsense because of taking false syllables that do not exist as contents. As known to all, there are four tones in Chinese pronunciation: the first tone, the second tone, the third tone and the fourth tone, but not all combinations of initials and finals in Chinese Pinyin have all four tones. For example, the combination of the initial s and the final u lacks the third tone. Therefore, it would be meaningless to arrange learners to practise this false combination when doing listening exercises. The syllable fo only has the second tone. It's also meaningless to arrange learners to practise all four tones of this syllable. These pronunciation exercises about false syllables that do not exist in the real speech with which learners practise again and again are apt to mislead learners. Moreover, what learners practise are the false pronunciation no use in the actual expressions at all. In this case, we can't help raising such a question: what is the purpose of these teaching contents?

Thirdly, Chinese characters matched with Pinyin syllables in those textbooks are no use in the daily life at all. The purpose of giving some corresponding characters to the pronunciation is to help students understand the relationship between Pinyin and characters. Once finding some Pinyin and characters are commonly used in their daily life, students tend to cherish higher aspirations to study characters that lay the foundation for further character learning. The selection of common and easy characters is helpful for learners to obtain windfalls during Pinyin learning, to arise learners' enthusiasm of pronunciation practicing and further learning, and to make pronunciation teaching in class not so boring. What is the significance for foreign learners to learn rarely used characters even by native Chinese like cǎ (礮), g á (噶), pǒ (叵), bú (醜), etc.? The confusing appearing of such characters can achieve nothing but increase the fear of learning characters by causing them to feel that Chinese is mysterious and abstruse. Contents arranged in the textbooks must be useful enough for learners so that they are willing to touch on them, understand them, study them and then use them in life. This is exactly connotations of the practicability we have emphasized repeatedly in the process of textbook compiling.

Mr. LIN Tao once said, "Compiling a textbook nowadays still keeps in the same old mode as before, in which pronunciation practice lasts transiently only a few days. Without enough time, even a fairy can not master a new skill. This problem has nothing to do with boredom fancied by people. Some people think pronunciation should be taught in a short time because students have no interest in learning pronunciation. However, it is the ability of teachers to compile phonetic textbooks rather than the length of teaching time that leads to learners' feeling of boredom. Whether to seize the crucial or not and whether to be bold in making innovations or not, these concerns the ability of teachers to compile phonetic textbooks." It is thus clear that the quality of phonetic textbooks has direct impact on the result of pronunciation teaching. The

most decisive point is “to seize the crucial” and “to be bold in making innovations”, which must catches our attention. *The Textbook for Interesting Chinese Pinyin* is exactly compiled by our efforts to realize this point.

3. THE COMPILING PRINCIPLES AND METHODS OF THE TEXTBOOK FOR INTERESTING CHINESE PINYIN

Owing to a shortage of proper phonetic textbooks, we have to use various remedies to counteract weaknesses of the textbooks during teaching pronunciation. The shortage of proper phonetic textbooks also fetches out our desire to compile new phonetic textbooks. We therefore, cooperating with a common wish, following the guidance of certain theories and taking full advantage of our experiences in teaching pronunciation, compiled *The Textbook for Interesting Chinese Pinyin*. After the publication of the textbook and repetitious use, Feedback received from teachers and students is mostly "useful", "interesting", "practical" and other positive judgment.

We took the effective methods to compiling *The Textbook for Interesting Chinese Pinyin* that was proved effective in the practice of pronunciation teaching according to principles below.

3.1 Oriented Principle

After thorough consideration of difficulties in learning Pinyin for foreign learners, following the principle of easy things first, we adopted popular teaching methods during compiling the textbook, explaining systematically to help learners keep going forward circularly and spirally. *The Textbook for Interesting Chinese Pinyin* is a practice-based textbook that integrates professional phonetic knowledge smoothly into the explanations and practices of Pinyin.

Many compilers for phonetic textbooks of TCFL do not take into account the characteristics of foreign learners. They give all Pinyin knowledge and then exercises of certain specific aspect in one immoderate revelation rather than step by step with the same treatment for a Chinese child. But this kind of textbook is just double Dutch to foreign learners whose native languages are not alphabetic writing. As said by Mr. XU Jialu, teachers of TCFL should try to think from the learners' angle if you have to read in a foreign language that you have never seen before, for example Nepali, what kind of feelings you would have? Otherwise for foreign learners whose native languages are similar to alphabetic writing or belong to alphabetic writing, they often only choose contents which don't exist in their native languages to learn. For them, contents that make them have a familiar feeling of déjà vu but are totally different between Chinese and their native languages are frequently studied little. It then allows the learning of the new language influenced by the function of the negative transfer of the mother tongue.

Without full consideration about users' identity, needs and native language features, a language textbook will probably stump many foreign learners and make teachers at a loss what to do.

According to many-year experiences in teaching pronunciation, we don't teach initials and finals in full accordance with the order of The Scheme for the Chinese Phonetic Alphabet when making arrangement for contents of Pinyin teaching in our textbook. Instead, we divide initials and finals into several parts and arrange the teaching order of relevant Pinyin knowledge according to their level of difficulty, the characteristics of the foreign learners and cognitive difficulty of our teaching objects. We explain these parts alternately and practise them repeatedly. For example, we arrange finals of a single vowel and tones in the first lesson so that learners can understand a complete phonetic form at the very beginning of learning; we also match those phonetic forms with pictures and characters so that learners can understand the images and meanings of every sound they have learned. Studying in this straightforward way can arouse the learners' interest and stimulate their enthusiasm for learning. Next, we arrange in the second lesson such initials as b, p, m, f, d, t, n, l, g, k, h, etc., which are relatively easy to master for foreign learners. In addition, after mastering these initials and finals of a single vowel and tones in the first lesson, many Chinese syllables can be spelt out by putting them together so that learners can have a more complete concept about

Pinyin. After that, learners can learn simple compound finals, then more difficult initials than those in the second lesson and then nasal finals with great difficulty.

This arrangement is from the elementary to the profound from easy to difficult so that students can learn Pinyin well step by step.

Besides, different from some textbooks, we integrate relevant professional knowledge naturally into the explanations of Pinyin introduced by the textbook rather than explain phonology knowledge with the long-winded preachment. We also try to make professional phonetic knowledge and terms concrete and visualized. There are no long-winded preachments or systematic introductions about contents involving phonetic knowledge such as tonal modification of the third tone, tonal modification of the words “一” and “不”, retroflexed finals (a pronunciation phenomenon whereby the suffix “兒” in modern Chinese is not independent as a syllable, but combined with the syllables in front to give a retroflex sound) and light tone (unstressed syllable pronounced without its original pitch in Chinese pronunciation), etc. Instead, we divide these contents into several parts, match them with simple words (accompanied by translations) as well as charts, cartoons, etc. and provide a variety of practical and funny exercises so that learners can understand and consolidate relevant knowledge.

At last, we try to make each lesson of this textbook helpful for learners to gain new insights through reviewing old materials and to review old contents when learning new. When new knowledge emerges, explain the new by using the contents that learners have learned before. In this way, learners not only learn of new knowledge, but also review about the old. By explaining both new and old knowledge alternately and practise them repeatedly, we help learners keep going forward circularly and spirally. By learning new knowledge and consolidating the old together, after learning tones, initials and finals, learners are provided with a complete summary by the textbook which makes learners have an overall understanding of Chinese Pinyin.

3.2 Great Attention to Interest

In recent years, interest has become one of the principles to be followed in textbook compiling and one of the bases for evaluating the quality of a textbook.

It has been proved by practice that unsuccessful language teaching is prone to make learners bored. How could learners have the enthusiasm to learn abstract pronunciation with no image, when they have to mechanically repeat syllables in four tones without understanding just like reciting scriptures? Interest will enhance the attractiveness of a textbook to learners. Once interested in the contents and exercises of textbook, learners' enthusiasm to learn will be greatly enhanced.

By naming this phonetic textbook as *The Textbook for Interesting Chinese Pinyin*, we hope to spare no efforts to make the textbook interesting. The approaches we used to make our textbook interesting are as follows:

(a) To combine the sound with the image by a lot of pictures and to make professional phonetic knowledge and terms concrete and visualized

“Interesting illustrations and eye-catching layout can make the textbook more interesting.” (Lü Bisong, 1993)

It's boring for learners to learn and practice pronunciation mechanically and repeatedly. So we add quantities of lovely cartoon image for introductions and exercises of syllables so that learners are likely interested in what they will learn. When learners know syllables “māo” and “g ōu” are lovely animals through pictures matched with them, how will they not feel excited? When learners know the simple ways to distinguish b and p, d and t by placing a piece of paper or a hand before the mouth during pronouncing them through the caricatures in the textbook, they could not help imitating them.

A large number of color photographs on the one hand increase the attractiveness of the textbook to learners so that students can keep a fresh feeling, say goodbye to black and white world and avoid "aesthetical fatigue"; the one hand, can also help learners understand relevant phonetic knowledge vividly.

(b) To match Pinyin, pictures, characters and translations of the teaching content together to help some foreign learners who have enough learning ability study independently and master Pinyin

When doing such match, we try to illustrate with common things in daily life so that learners can understand the relevant characters and words commonly used while learning Pinyin. In this way, we help learners integrate Pinyin learning with character learning so that they can lay the foundation for their further learning. By doing this, the teaching of Pinyin is no longer a “meaningless” and “mechanical” practice in sounds. Pinyin classes are no longer boring.

(c) To help learners recognize the importance of correct pronunciation by making contrasts between similar sounds

We have arranged a lot of exercises of contrasting between similar sounds to help learners understand the importance of pronunciation. If pronunciation is not accurate, it is possible to make the listener misunderstood or make a stupid mistake. For example, we make a contrast between the pronunciation of “yǔ yī (雨衣)” and the pronunciation of “yù yī (浴衣)” so that learners recognize the importance of tones; we make a contrast between the pronunciation of “shàng chuán (上船)” and the pronunciation of “shàng chuáng (上床)” so that learners recognize the difference between front nasal finals and back nasal finals; we make a contrast between the pronunciation of “méi jìn (沒勁)” and the pronunciation of “méi jìnǎr (沒勁兒)” so that learners recognize the difference between retroflexed finals and other finals, and so on.

(d) To enhance interest of pronunciation learning through various interesting practice methods

For instance, practising light tones by reading the nursery rhyme looking for friends; practising in the difference between initials pronounced with the tip of the tongue and retroflexed initials by reading the tongue twister “sì” and “shì”.

Other interesting methods to practise pronunciation like riddles, puzzles, etc. can also enliven the atmosphere of classes.

3.3 Instruction in Easy and Practical Methods

People learning Chinese always have such a feeling that it's not an easy task to master Chinese pronunciation only through the textbook. Even if there are clear diagrams of place of articulation and detailed explanations in the textbook, learners are always uncertain about their pronunciation and need teachers' face-to-face instructions.

According to experiences groped out from the practice in Pinyin teaching for years, we make bold use of pronunciation practice methods which are proved effective in our teaching practice and helpful for learners to master certain sound. For example, when learning finals of a single vowel, the most difficult one for foreign learners is the final “ü”. To pronounce the final “ü”, we recommend learners to pronounce the final “I” firstly, and then to round their mouth. For each version of the textbook, we give an appropriate suggestion according to the learning characteristics of a learner with certain nationality. For instance, in the Japanese version, according to the learning characteristics of Japanese that they can't pronounce front nasals correctly since they can't find the exact articulation position of “n”, we recommend them a special way named “Reverse Pronouncing Method”. To take the front nasal “a n” as an illustration, we recommend learners firstly to pronounce the single sound “n” and “a ”, next to pronounce the sound “na ”, then to shut up their mouth quickly and to pronounce from “a ” to “n”. In this way, Japanese learners will feel easy to pronounce the front nasal “na ”.

When explaining about Pinyin knowledge, we try to make learners clear by using plain language and simple pictures. For example, when explaining about tones, we don't mark out the phonetic values, because we find in the teaching practice that the phonetic values give learners little help in pronunciation learning. Instead, we show the relative pitch positions of four tones on five-line stave to help students' clear differences between the pitch of four tones.

4. THE RATIONAL PONDER OF COMPILING PHONICS TEXTBOOKS OF CHINESE LANGUAGE

4.1 To Draw Up a Syllabus for Pinyin Teaching of TCFL as Quickly as Possible, According to Which Normative Phonetic Textbook can be Compiled

YE Jun (2003) analyzed the three major problems in current pronunciation teaching. He pointed out “the main reason for these problems is that there has been no syllabus and overall design for Pinyin teaching of TCFL.” He also indicated “by drawing up a scientific and practical syllabus, completing the overall design and teaching pronunciation under the guidance of the syllabus, the current situation of pronunciation teaching lagging behind will be fundamentally changed.”

At the same time, he proposed a project outline of pronunciation teaching. However this proposal is adopted by few phonetic textbooks at the moment.

4.2 To Put Teaching of Pronunciation and Speech Flow Together

For the problem that “the quality of the Chinese language grasped by foreign students” was not authentic, LIN Tao (1979) pointed out that the main reason was tones; light tones; accents and intonation were not standard. He therefore advocated putting teaching of pronunciation and speech flow together based on the emphasis on pronunciation teaching.

We always have such an understanding that for some learners, it’s okay to pronounce single syllables. While pronouncing combinations of syllables, learners are probably out of tune. This problem relates to lack of speech flow teaching.

Peter KUPFER (2003) pointed out Chinese Pinyin, after “globally chosen as the sole standard orthography of the Chinese language”, has become more and more influential in the whole world. When discussing the role and application of Pinyin in Chinese teaching in the world, “News medium around the world have transliterated Chinese names, company names, trademark names, and even some concepts of Chinese history and culture into Chinese Pinyin, such as “Taijiquan (太極拳)”, “Wushu (武術)”, “Jiaozi (餃子)”, etc. So he proposed “In order to meet the challenges of globalization, from the beginning of the 21st century, Dual Script System should be realized, according to which both Chinese characters and Pinyin should be used in all occasions of China’s foreign exchanges.” If this proposal is widely accepted, we must pay more attention to speech flow teaching. Besides, compilers should pay more attention to this point too, since present phonetic textbooks lack contents of speech flow teaching badly.

RERERENCES

- Peter KUPFER. (2003). The Chinese alphabet: its role and application in Chinese teaching in the world. *Chinese Teaching in the World*, (3), 67-72.
- LIN Tao. (1979). Pronunciation teaching and syllable teaching. *Language Teaching and Linguistic Studies*, (4), 1-6.
- Lü Bisong. (1993). Introduction of teaching Chinese as a foreign language (Lecture Notes) 5. *Chinese Teaching in the World*, (3), 217.
- SHENG Yan. (1990). *Principles of Language Teaching*. Chongqing: Chongqing Press, 249.
- YE Jun. (2003). An approach to the syllabus for Pinyin teaching of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language. *Yunnan Normal University Journal*, (3), 63-66.