

CHARACTER RECOGNITION THROUGH WILD ASSOCIATION: AN ALTERNATIVE IN LEARNING CHINESE SCRIPT FOR BEGINNERS

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Manuscript received 22 December 2017

Manuscript accepted 15 March 2018

ABSTRACT

Learning Chinese characters can be a daunting experience for the non-native learners. This quantitative study aims to experiment the effectiveness of 'Wild Association' on learners' ability to learn Chinese characters, and to determine whether these learners who use 'Wild Association' demonstrate higher achievement in character recognition and character writing compared to learners who study Chinese characters by drilling. Consisting of 98 learners from the elementary level of Mandarin proficiency course in UNIMAS, the learners used their own imagination to learn Chinese characters, and at the same time, relating their own experience in doing so. Learners' performance was measured through the pre-test and post-test in

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the form of dictation and character-recognition worksheet. The results indicate that 'Wild Association' is effective in helping learners to recognise and write characters, and is especially more effective in helping learners to recognise characters. However, learners who underwent traditional drilling approach still outperformed those who employed 'Wild Association'. It can be concluded that 'Wild Association' is a possible alternative for teaching characters in the initial stage, when characters are still foreign to learners. The result implies that 'Wild Association' suits the learning style of learners nowadays.

Keywords: reading, writing, Chinese characters, non-native learners, imagination, association

Introduction

Despite their well-known uniqueness such as being the longest continuously used writing system in the world (Zhou, 2014), highly concise and expressive, Chinese characters are also commonly known for their obvious drawbacks such as hard to recognise, remember, learn and write (Feng, 2004; Sung, 2014; Zhao, 1985). Such viewpoints then lead to the arguments on how best to teach Chinese characters.

The traditional way of teaching Chinese characters to Chinese children has always been memorising some most basic characters (such as 人 'human' or 口 'mouth') before applying such knowledge into the learning of more complex characters (such as 他 'he', 们 'indicating plural', 你 'you' and 叫 'call', 咬 'bite', 吃 'eat'). More often than not, prior to the learning of characters, Chinese children would have possessed some ability in speaking the language. Therefore, this approach can work for them. However, it hardly works for the non-native learners in a local national university setting such as Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), who hardly know anything about this language. Time constraint is the major challenge as they merely take up the language as an elective subject for one semester (14 weeks) (Lam & Hoe, 2013). Within that one semester, learners will be exposed to a number of high-frequency characters, which may or may not come from the category of basic characters indicated earlier. For example, the characters for one of the most frequently used phrases in Mandarin, 谢谢 'thank you', are not even from the basic characters category. This is the reason why it would be naïve for one to imagine that non-native learners can learn Chinese characters the same way as the native Chinese do (Lam, Ang, Damien, & Hoe, 2017). In order to enable the non-native learners to start learning characters within a 14-week-long semester, innovative approaches have to be employed.

Many studies suggesting a wide array of approaches to teach Chinese characters to non-native learners have been conducted. These studies include parts analysis, contrastive analysis and characters riddles guessing (He, 2008), emphasise the radical structure (Kuo et al., 2015; Taft & Chung, 1999; Tong & Yip, 2015), memory strategies, examine the writing system of learners' first language (Lin & Collins, 2012), and utilise digital tools (McLaren & Bettinson, 2015, 2016). One of the way to teach Chinese characters is to utilise the pictographic (象形) properties of Chinese characters. The noun form for pictographic is pictograph. Pictograph is the drawing of an object according to its shape (Zhou, 2014). A number of Chinese