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The Case for Pinyin: A Suggestion

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ABSTRACT

I present the following hypotheses: Providing students with comprehensible and interesting reading material in pinyin will result in improved acquisition of oral/aural Mandarin. This additional competence in Mandarin will make texts written in Hanzi more predictable and easier to understand, resulting in improved acquisition of Hanzi. If these predictions are confirmed, it means more rapid acquisition of Mandarin and more efficient acquisition of characters.

 If our goals in Chinese language education include improved acquisition of oral/aural Mandarin and a more efficient route to mastering Hanzi, it might help to follow the path of pinyin.

SOME THEORY

 There is now considerable evidence that we acquire language when we understand what we hear or what we read. When the comprehended language contains unacquired elements (meaning or form), and we are "ready" to acquire these elements (they are at "i+1"), we can make progress acquiring them (Krashen, 2013).

 We get a great deal of help in understanding from context. Context includes visual information, our knowledge of the topic we are reading about or listening to, and our knowledge of the language. Our knowledge of the language helps us make reasonable predictions about what we are about to hear or read next. For example, in this sentence, you can easily predict was the last word is going to ___ because of your knowledge of English.

 Relevant to this discussion is research on the acquisition of vocabulary by reading. Nagy, Herman, and Anderson (1985) concluded that for English as a first language, each time readers encountered a new word in a comprehensible context, they acquired about five to ten percent of the meaning of the word. This may not seem like very much, but Nagy et al. point out that with enough comprehensible input, this is more than enough to account for what is known of vocabulary development.

 Ku and Anderson (2001) found similar results for 4th graders in Taiwan reading in Mandarin, their first language. Each time they encountered an unfamiliar character in context, there was a modest increase in recognizing that character subsequently on a test, similar to the increase found by Nagy et al. for acquiring the meanings of unfamiliar words in English by native speakers of English. Ku and Anderson also reported that "characters were easier to acquire when contextual support was strong" (p. 249).

 Thus, we acquire by understanding input, not only aural but also written. The last four decades have shown us that interesting, comprehensible reading has a powerful effect on language acquisition, both first and second, and also in the development of higher levels of

competence in heritage languages (Krashen, 2010; Krashen & Ashtari, 2021). Thus far, studies show that self-selected reading (which includes fiction) increases vocabulary, grammar, and writing ability. In fact, those who read more do better in every aspect of language performance tested.

Students of second and foreign language are generally not ready to read "authentic" texts in their second language, but there is now a substantial amount of reading material available in a few languages that is both comprehensible and interesting for those who are acquiring the language. They are known as "graded readers." The good news is that graded readers have been steadily improving in quality. In fact, many can be called "literature."

The value of this kind of reading has been demonstrated in a number of studies. An example is Mason and Krashen (2017), a study of eight EFL students, ages 21 to 78 (!!) at a university in Japan. All had completed or were enrolled in an EFL class that focused on listening to stories in class and reading graded readers as homework, and they wanted to continue to improve in English after the course ended. Dr. Mason helped them engage in an independent reading program, and asked them to keep a record of what they read and the number of pages read. Subjects read mostly fiction: graded readers and books written for young adults (e.g., books by Judy Blume and the Harry Potter series). They took alternate forms of the listening and reading sections of the TOEIC examination, a widely used standardized test of English proficiency.

The results were astonishing: While there was modest individual variation, on the average subjects gained more than one-half point on the TOEIC for each hour of self-selected pleasure reading. According to these results, a reader can move from the bottom of the "Elementary Proficiency" level on the TOEIC to the threshold of "International Proficiency" in three years of engaging in relaxed, self-selected pleasure reading. The correlation between time spent reading and gains on the TOEIC was nearly perfect (r = .91). Krashen and Mason (2015) also reported that neither additional vocabulary study nor listening to the radio had any discernible effect; only reading had a positive impact on test scores.

Studies of this kind have only been done with EFL and ESL, but I can provide a case history that suggests that large quantities of reading graded readers has a positive effect for Spanish as a foreign language: The case is my own.

A year and a half ago, my competence in Spanish was low intermediate (my own assessment). When the pandemic began, my wife and I began a period of quarantine, leaving home only for an occasional shopping trip. For this, I visited the local market (they restricted shopping to "elderly" customers every Friday morning), and began a friendly relationship with Fidel, one of the employees who worked the cash register. We spoke Spanish. I have seen Fidel nearly every week since then, we have good (but short) conversations, and my Spanish has improved quite a bit over the months. The evidence is that Fidel now speaks more rapidly to me and uses more complex language, I think, in response to my growing competence. A short time ago, I was speaking Spanish to a Mexican-American colleague I have known for many years. She was quite surprised: "Steve, your Spanish is so much better! What have you been doing?" (She said it in Spanish.)

Talking to Fidel was not the reason, not how I moved from low intermediate to high intermediate. We could not have long conversations since he was working at the cash register and had other customers to deal with. After my first conversation with Fidel I started my own reading program, consisting entirely of graded readers in Spanish. Among the graded reader

authors, I found a few that were, in my opinion, excellent, producing real literature that easily held my attention.

My second personal case history deals with Mandarin. I have had a total of only about 20 hours of aural comprehensible input in Mandarin, entirely from demonstration lessons given at conferences by Linda Li and videos of a beginning Mandarin class taught by Haiyun Lu. Not a lot, perhaps a half of a semester, but in my opinion, both were of VERY high quality.

I have supplemented this with graded readers. I have read Haiyun Lu's kitten series (e.g., *I am Beibei*) and as well as her Willy Goat stories (*Not Easy to be a Child*), and several books by Terry Waltz (e.g., *Susan You Mafan*), all in …. PINYIN! It has worked. I have actually had a real conversation in Mandarin in the real world, and it lasted for about an hour.

I saw a lady in a subway station who was obviously lost, and I noticed she was consulting a guidebook written in Chinese. She looked very worried. I asked her "*wo bang ni ma*? (My version of "Can I help you?). Because of her baggage, I guessed she was going to the airport, and I asked, "*Ni qu feijichang ma?*" (My version of "Are you going to the airport?") I knew the word for airport from thoroughly and repeatedly reading a graded reader, *Shei Haokan*? By Linda Li and Stephen Krashen). She happily nodded, yes. I was going to the airport as well, so I said "*Ni gen wo qu feijichang.*" We had a pleasant conversation on the subway train (Topics included where we lived, where we were going), we showed each other pictures of our children ("*tamen hen hao kan!*" They are very good-looking.), and I accompanied her to the right terminal. What a thrill! The combination of a few hours of comprehensible input and the graded readers, written in pinyin, made it possible.

The problem with Mandarin, as with all languages other than English and Spanish, is that there are few graded readers available. Students need access to hundreds, even thousands of graded readers, to build real competence and to allow self-selection.

THE PATH TO HANZI

My own Mandarin example suggests that doing interesting reading in pinyin can result in increased competence in Mandarin. This competence can provide more context, which makes reading in the language more comprehensible, which in turn helps acquisition of Hanzi.

Assume that a less advanced acquirer of Mandarin is reading a Chinese text in Hanzi that includes a word the reader cannot read. In this example, the unknown word is "renshi" which appears in: Hen gaoxing renshi ni. (hen" = very; "gaoxing" = happy; "ni" = you) The reader does, however, understand the Hanzi versions of the other words in the sentence, and the context is helpful: in the story, people are meeting each other for the first time. Also, thanks to the previous reading, the reader understands "renshi" when presented in pinyin. The reader concludes that the unknown word is "renshi" and will make progress in acquiring the Hanzi representation of "renshi." Thus, reading extensively in pinyin means more knowledge of Chinese in general, a better ability to predict what is coming next, and can therefore lead to more acquisition of characters.

Currently, second language and heritage language students spend a great deal of time attempting to master writing systems that are very different from those used in the first or dominant language, a tedious process that can take years. Taking full advantage of pinyin might improve this situation.

There is, thus far, no demonstrated advantage to the early introduction of Hanzi in beginning Mandarin classes (Packard, 1990; Krashen, 2017). I suggest here that there may be

advantages to the early introduction of pinyin, along with encouraging students to read stories written in pinyin.

CONCLUSION

It must be pointed out that my suggestions are only suggestions. The evidence presented here is scanty. My goal in this paper to present the possibility that pleasure reading in pinyin might benefit the acquisition of Mandarin, a valuable supplement to the input presented in class, and, ironically, might help in learning to read Hanzi.

My hope is that more graded readers in pinyin will be written and made available so that we evaluate the impact of pinyin on Mandarin proficiency and on the acquisition of Hanzi with more valid tools than those described here. The path of pinyin deserves a trial.

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