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Bringing Calligraphy Art Back to Writing – An Exploration of Calligraphy Education for Chinese Beginners

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Abstract

Incorporating Chinese calligraphy exercises into introductory Chinese courses facilitates a nuanced understanding of Chinese character structure and aesthetics. These exercises serve to reposition calligraphy to its fundamental role of writing, thereby bringing learners in proximity to the essence of calligraphic art and fostering a sense of accomplishment in their educational journey. This integration provides advantages for novice learners, engaging multiple senses simultaneously and enhancing their understanding of stroke order and character structure. It effectively addresses the tedium of mechanical character copying and alleviates anxiety associated with Chinese character acquisition.

Keywords: Chinese calligraphy, Chinese character writing, novice learner

Chinese, as one of the world's oldest languages, has always maintained a unique writing system - Chinese characters. The characteristics of Chinese characters, which involve form, pronunciation, and meaning, each being independent yet combined into one, pose the greatest challenge for Chinese language learners. How to help Chinese learners reduce their anxiety about learning Chinese characters, develop a concept of characters, cultivate stroke order habits, and establish correct writing habits is also the greatest challenge for every Chinese teacher. Chinese calligraphy, as the art of writing Chinese characters, has a long historical tradition and has always been considered a gem of Eastern art. It is a traditional and artistic way of writing Chinese characters using a brush and ink. This ancient art embodies a unique writing style that transcends mere communication.

Hence, the objective of this paper is to explore the integration of Chinese calligraphy with Chinese character writing. Chinese calligraphy is not solely an artistic form, but also a distinct writing method. Typically, calligraphy courses prioritize culture, entailing the replication of renowned artist's works or practicing diverse styles. Consequently, the curriculum significantly diverges from that of Chinese language classes. Is it possible then to integrate calligraphy with the establishment of character forms and the acquisition of stroke order to expedite learners' mastery of characters? May this ancient art cease to appear remote.

Drawn on Vygotsky's scaffolding theory, scaffolding instruction as a teaching strategy originates from Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The concepts of "hard scaffolding" and "soft scaffolding" are part of Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of development, which emphasizes the role of social interactions in learning. Scaffolding, in this context, refers to the support provided by a more knowledgeable individual to help a learner achieve a task or develop a skill.

Hard Scaffolding involves explicit and direct support provided by a more knowledgeable person. This support is usually specific, structured, and gradually withdrawn as the learner becomes more competent. In teaching a child to ride a bike, a parent might initially provide hard scaffolding by holding the bike and guiding the child's movements. As the child gains confidence and skill, the parent gradually reduces the support until the child can ride independently.

In contrast, Soft Scaffolding is associated with subtler and more flexible support, often adapting to the learner's needs. It encourages independence and problem-solving skills by providing guidance rather than direct assistance. In a classroom setting, a teacher using soft scaffolding might ask open-ended questions to guide students in solving a complex math problem. Instead of giving direct answers, the teacher encourages students to think critically and arrive at solutions independently.

In both hard and soft scaffolding, the key idea is to provide the necessary support to help learners reach higher levels of understanding or skill, with the ultimate goal of enabling them to perform tasks on their own. The transition from more support to less support is a crucial aspect of Vygotsky's scaffolding concept, reflecting the idea of the "zone of proximal development" where learning is most effective.

According to Raymond (2000), "The zone of proximal development is the distance between what children do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance" (p. 176). A "hard scaffold" refers to less direct approach where the teacher doesn't provide direct guidance but offers clues for students to draw on their own. This fundamentally promotes higher-level thinking. If we consider our explanations in class about Chinese character structure and stroke order as providing students with a "soft scaffold," then the calligraphy combined with the textbook will serve as a "hard scaffold." Students are guided and supported by instructor's calligraphy video which related to the textbook vocabulary through learning activities that serves as interactive bridges to help them progress to the next level. In fact, Pure theoretical explanations are far less effective for beginners in mastering the art of Chinese character writing than getting supportive stroke copy writing.

Current Situation

Upon reviewing the research on Chinese calligraphy, it becomes clear that it encompasses a multifaceted exploration of its many roles in Asian culture. The research primarily centers around historical context, artistic worth, and significance as a form of Chinese writing. Through investigation, scholars have uncovered crucial themes and findings that shed light on these aspects. They have delved deep into the cultural importance of Chinese calligraphy as a reflection of the heritage. This encompasses studying its historical evolution, its impact on artistic expression, and role as a cultural identifier.

In regards of the implications, research may explore the integration of Chinese calligraphy into educational settings, particularly in language learning. Studies may investigate how calligraphy exercises contribute to a better understanding of Chinese characters, stroke order, and overall language acquisition for learners. Some research may delve into the cognitive benefits of practicing Chinese calligraphy. This could include studies on the impact of calligraphy on memory, attention, and fine motor skills. From the cross-cultural perspectives, scholars may examine how Chinese calligraphy transcends national borders, influencing other East Asian cultures and providing insights into the interconnectedness of Asian societies through shared artistic practices. In addition, with the advent of digital tools, research may explore how

technology influences the practice and preservation of Chinese calligraphy. This includes examining the role of digital platforms in learning, creating, and disseminating calligraphic art.

In recent years, there has been a notable upswing in the popularity of Chinese calligraphy education in the United States. According to Li (2022), the number of Chinese calligraphy courses in the US has doubled in the past decade, with increasing registration numbers each year. This surge is attributed to the growing fascination with Chinese language and culture. Consequently, various educational institutions, cultural centers, and calligraphy enthusiasts have responded by offering a diverse array of classes and workshops catering to individuals of all skill levels, from beginners to advanced learners.

Chinese calligraphy plays a crucial role in the broader context of learning Chinese culture. In university syllabi, instructors design these courses to provide foundational knowledge of Chinese calligraphy and its reflection of Chinese history, culture, and philosophy. The classes not only provide practical instruction but also delve into the rich history, philosophy, and aesthetics of calligraphy, enhancing students' understanding of this art form. Essential materials such as brushes, ink, ink stones, and rice paper are readily available to students, with some classes even incorporating modern tools and digital techniques to align with the evolving nature of the art form.

The existing studies predominantly focus on the appreciation of calligraphy art and the organization of different calligraphy styles (Li, 2022). In this booming situation, Li point out calmly: There remains a noticeable gap in literature addressing the role of calligraphy in classroom teaching (Li, 2009).

Recently, we are very pleased to see that some master's students are studying the use of calligraphy in the classroom as part of their research, Wu (2015) explains the relationship between Chinese character configuration and Chinese calligraphy in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, looks for the importance of Chinese character configuration theory and Chinese calligraphy to teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and proposes feasible learning strategies for teaching Chinese character calligraphy as a foreign language. Zuo (2014) mentioned that the role of calligraphy teaching in teaching Chinese characters also includes three aspects: 1. It can enhance students' interest in Chinese characters; 2. It takes into account the understanding of traditional Chinese characters; 3. Improve students' ability to learn Chinese characters. These papers discussed the Chinese calligraphy experience the positive affection on the learning of the Chinese as second language in theory aspect. But we are regret to see they don't have first-hand data on the Chinese calligraphy affect to the Chinese character writing from abroad Novice learner to support their research.

As an Education expert and Chinese calligrapher in the U.S., Li (2022) focus on the study on Chinese calligraphy learning in the U.S, his most studies discussed the appreciation of calligraphy art and the teaching organization of different calligraphy styles. His earlier work proposes that Chinese calligraphy holds a unique capability in facilitating the understanding of Chinese character structure. As articulated in the article, apart from a small number of single characters, 90% of Chinese characters are compound characters, composed of two or more parts. The method of calligraphy emphasizes the synthesis of these parts and the overall structure of characters. Consequently, integrating calligraphy classes with Chinese language courses can not only impart cultural knowledge but also offer supplementary language and knowledge tailored to the proficiency levels of the students.

Li (2009) proposes the capability of Chinese calligraphy in learning the structure of Chinese characters. According to the author, the method of calligraphy pays great attention to the

synthesis of parts and the overall structure of characters. Generally speaking, therefore, setting up a calligraphy class based on the Chinese language class can not only introduce cultural knowledge, but also supplement the language and knowledge according to the students' Chinese situation.

This paper aims to address the following research questions:

1. Does Chinese Calligraphy have an effective impact on the correct writing of Chinese characters and long-term memory for novice learners?
2. Can the practice of Chinese Calligraphy, which is related to the learning content, reduce the boredom of copying Chinese characters?
3. Besides Chinese character, do students gain any other positive experiences?

The answers to these questions are expected to assist Chinese language instructors in making decisions regarding the use of Chinese Calligraphy practices in novice learning, such as the type of activities and whether to incorporate vocabulary. This can particularly benefit the facilitation of Chinese character memorization and immersive cultural experiences. Additionally, the findings of this pilot effort may inspire further research in this area.

Research Methodology

This study investigates the nexus between traditional Calligraphy Art and the acquisition of beginner Chinese Characters, utilizing the Fall 2022 Beginning Chinese classes as a case study. Employing a qualitative observational approach, data collection involved an open-ended observation method, facilitating an in-depth exploration of the focal point from a genuine perspective, with emphasis on a specific observation topic. Two classes, encompassing a total of 40 students, participated in the study, with 19 males and 21 females among the participants. Those participant pool comprised students just start to take Beginning Chinese Course. As part of their laboratory class, all participants were mandated to attend a weekly Chinese calligraphy class.

At the research university under scrutiny, the Chinese 101 course is structured as a four-credit program, with three credits allocated to lectures and one credit to the laboratory component. Classes convene for 50 minutes each on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, with the Chinese class occurring on Thursday afternoons designated for calligraphy exercises. During the fall semester of 2022, calligraphy exercises seamlessly integrated into the curriculum of two beginner-level classes, focusing on the practice of newly learned vocabulary words from weekly lessons. Students were instructed to follow provided calligraphy videos and transcribe the new words using regular script. Completed calligraphy works were then submitted for evaluation at the conclusion of the laboratory session, with evaluation criteria based on the structural integrity of the font and the overall aesthetic appeal of the work.

Chinese calligraphy encompasses various styles, such as seal script (篆書, zhuànshū), official script (隸書, lìshū), cursive script (草書, cǎoshū), and regular script (楷書, kǎishū). Regular script was chosen for practice due to its proximity to printed characters in the textbook, alleviating the burden of remembering different styles. Each practice session involved two parts: the first part comprised copying characters from the textbook onto old newspapers, and the second part involved creative writing on rice paper. By the end of the class, students independently copied each character 5-10 times for perfecting their writing, enhancing the learning experience compared to traditional practice of merely copying characters.

Students' calligraphy practice closely intertwines with daily learning, yielding two major benefits: acquiring new words and honing calligraphy skills within a limited timeframe. The deliberate pace of calligraphy enables students to focus on stroke order and font structure, fostering a deeper understanding. Additionally, the artistry of calligraphy not only involves copying characters but also encourages students to appreciate the beauty of Chinese character writing. Through repeated copying and completion of each piece of work, students experience a sense of accomplishment in their learning.

At the semester's end, a survey regarding the Calligraphy Laboratory Experience was administered. Students provided feedback on the Chinese Calligraphy Laboratory by addressing the following questions:

- 1) How does this lab aid in memorizing Chinese characters through calligraphy writing?
- 2) In what ways does this lab contribute to your performance in class quizzes and tests?
- 3) Did you find a sense of calm and focus while engaging in calligraphy writing? Did you experience a feeling of relaxation?
- 4) Following the completion of one calligraphy writing piece, did you experience a sense of achievement?
- 5) What is your most lasting impression of the calligraphy class?
- 6) Are you interested in furthering your knowledge of Calligraphy art in the upcoming semester?

Results

Students' responses were collected and analyzed. Some emerging themes are as follows:

Theme 1. Memorization and Learning Aid

1) Chinese calligraphy practice was found to enhance learners' ability to recognize Chinese characters more effectively. As noted by Liu (2021), "From a cognitive perspective, calligraphy has the characteristics of slow writing and magnification of Chinese characters, which are highly advantageous for analytical Chinese character learning in the early stages of language acquisition." Liu (2021) further emphasizes that "since stroke order is a fundamental aspect of calligraphy, students must write following the stroke order in reinforced practice to make it a part of muscle memory" (63-67). One student said, "I think the lab had a large role in helping me memorize the new Chinese characters along with helping me when I was first learning the character to learn the stroke order. This was a major help. It helps on the quizzes and tests by being a foundation on which to begin to memorize characters and their stroke order. Without the lab there would have been more time spent on my own memorizing character stroke order."

2) Personal involvement in writing Chinese characters fostered deeper emotional connections, facilitating memory retention and a better grasp of meanings. Traditional methods of character memorization, such as repetitive copying, were deemed less effective. Chinese calligraphy, as a writing art, its artistic expression will engage student copy Chinese character actively. "My deepest impression is how much skill, time, practice, and effort it takes to create beautiful characters. Doing calligraphy on my own was the only way for me to see how difficult it is and appreciate it that much more." One student said, "I think the experience of using rice paper and

ink made the lab more authentic and relaxing. It was more effective than if we just used paper and pencil.”

3) Boosting confidence to the learning evaluation. Through consistent practice and improvement, learners gain confidence in their ability to master the Chinese language. It was stressed that by one student mentioned: “Lab time helped me memorize Chinese characters because the words we wrote were based on our lesson. The videos from integrated Chinese taught me the stroke order of each character which we usually do not go over in class. Due to this, the labs helped me study for the quiz. I was impressed with my improvement.” “I also think one of the most effective ways of learning and memorizing Chinese characters is by writing them down many times. This helps on tests and quizzes because I remember the characters, it also forces me to find patterns in the characters with the radicals so that if I am hesitating when writing a character, I can use my knowledge of radicals and the meaning of the word to figure out how to write it.”

Chinese Calligraphy Laboratories emerge as an effective method for enhancing Chinese character memorization and learning. The integration of this traditional art form provides students with a more engaging and authentic experience, ultimately contributing to their success in language assessments. The findings suggest that the reintroduction of Chinese calligraphy as a fundamental writing method holds substantial advantages for novice learners of the Chinese language.

Theme 2. Stress Reduction and Mental Well-being

Kao (2014) has demonstrated Chinese calligraphy handwriting (CCH) as a new role in health and therapy in his paper named *Calligraphy and Meditation for stress reduction: an experimental comparison*. His results of the present study show that 8 weeks of CCH training had a significant attenuating effect on physiological parameters of arousal (heart rate, electromyographic scores, skin temperature, and respiratory rate) in participants suffering from stress on a daily basis. This study was also verified in our study. One student mentioned, “I noticed that when practicing calligraphy, I became much calmer and could feel my heart rate lowering.” One of male student said, “I feel calm when doing calligraphy and experience spirit relaxing because calligraphy is hard to perfect, but by focusing so intensely on it, I forget everything else happening around me (like stress, homework, things I have to do, etc.). Additionally, to do calligraphy well, I have to calm my hand and breathe slowly to not mess up.” One student mentioned, “From my own personal experience, while the calligraphy practice did take my mind off from other stressful things for a period of time, it wasn’t exactly the most calming or relaxing experience in the world, as it took a lot of focus and concentration to make sure that each brush stroke made a proper looking character.”

The stress reduction and mental well-being is getting from enhancing attention and patience: Calligraphy necessitates focused attention and patience, as each stroke requires precise execution. This cultivates the concentration and patience essential for learning Chinese effectively.

Theme 3. Sense of Achievement

1) Master a time-honored art

As a tradition writing art over 3000 years, Chinese calligraphy challenged everyone with its unique skill, one student had experienced, “it is definitely a difficult art because factors such as the way you hold the brush and the pressure exerted will change the line work.” Just because of this, it also makes everyone gain a big sense of achievement through personally writing in a creative way. The student said, “During our first and second calligraphy classes, I felt very accomplished for learning a new skill. It was nice to complete my first few works, since I did find calligraphy more difficult in the beginning of the semester. It was also very rewarding to finish my last few calligraphies works, as I was able to see improvements in my brush strokes and technique. I slowly got the hang of the art form and was able to paint with more ease as time went on.”

2) The satisfaction and sense of completion

The sense of achievement also came from a satisfaction and sense of completion after spending a period on one thing and achieve one goal. A student described his feeling after he finished one artwork in brush, “I did feel a sense of achievement, especially with how satisfying it was to see my characters get progressively better along the rice paper. My primary impression from this calligraphy lab is the satisfaction and sense of completion I feel after finishing an entire rice paper.”

3) Culture ascription

One Asian student said, “I did get a sense of achievement after my calligraphy work because when I took my time to create nice strokes, I created something beautiful that is my own work. When I show it to my parents and grandparents, they are so happy because it looks good, and they don’t think I made it. It makes me feel proud.”

Theme 4. Cultural Appreciation and Exposure

Chinese calligraphy is intertwined with Chinese culture, offering learners a deeper understanding of China's history, traditions, and values. One student said, “The deepest impression I got from this was that it was a nice way to learn more about Chinese culture and be exposed to it.” Some Responses also indicated that the workshop provided students with an opportunity to learn about and appreciate Chinese culture, particularly the art of calligraphy. The student said, “I enjoy learning about the evolution of Chinese Characters, and I feel that goes hand in hand with calligraphy work.”

Without a doubt, Calligraphy is a form of art that nurtures individual artistic sensibilities and aesthetic preferences. It encourages the appreciation of diverse calligraphy styles and the development of a unique personal style. A few responses suggested the idea of forming a calligraphy club or offering the workshop as an optional activity, highlighting a desire for more inclusive and accessible opportunities to engage with calligraphy. One girl left her desire on Chinese Calligraphy Laboratory: My deepest impression of calligraphy class is writing Happy Birthday in Chinese for my dad. If I have time, I am interested in learning more about Calligraphy art next semester.

Conclusion and Discussion

Chinese calligraphy, characterized by its emphasis on brushwork, stroke order, and aesthetics, holds a unique place in cultural and linguistic education. Beyond its artistic and cultural dimensions, Chinese calligraphy education contributes to personal growth by improving concentration, patience, and mindfulness.

We used Chinese calligraphy laboratory as a hard scaffold on Novice Chinese Learning. Calligraphy exercises for beginners are based on overcoming anxiety about learning Chinese characters and becoming familiar with Chinese character structure, stroke order. Because of an important aspect of scaffolding instruction is that the scaffolds are temporary. As the learner's abilities increase the scaffolding provided by the more knowledgeable other is progressively withdrawn. Finally, the learner is able to complete the task or master the concepts independently. With the current withdrawal of handwriting from daily life, our writing practice will transform into a cultural experience in advanced Chinese classes.

In summary, calligraphy practice offers a valuable learning method that enhances multiple facets of beginner Chinese language learners' abilities and understanding. It also provides a fulfilling and meaningful avenue for personal growth. Regardless of whether one aspires to become a professional calligrapher, everyone can derive benefits from this ancient art form.

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让书法艺术回归书写——汉语初学者书法教育的探索

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摘要

中国书法通常被认为是亚洲文化的标志性代表，被广泛认为是具有数千年历史的传统艺术形式。然而，人们常常忽视的是，书法的核心是一种书写方法。在通过中国书法了解亚洲艺术、文化和文字历史的过程中，我们还可以向中国初学者介绍汉字的书写艺术。这种将中国传统书法作为书写汉字的手段与语言学习相结合的方式，为初学者提供了许多优势。它同时调动了他们的视觉、听觉、言语和触觉，避免了机械字符复制带来的单调乏味。此外，它还显著增强了他们对笔顺和汉字结构的理解，同时也减轻了与汉字习得相关的焦虑。

关键词: Chinese calligraphy, language learning, novice learner