

A Survey on Chinese Character Learning Difficulties of Advanced Chinese Learners

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Abstract

Based on interviews with overseas students with advanced level of Chinese, this study focuses on the difficulties of advance Chinese learners in Chinese character recognition and writing. The study found that the subjective attitude of these overseas students towards Chinese characters is generally positive, but they still have many difficulties in learning Chinese characters. The time they spend on practicing Chinese characters is not fixed, but they have mastered certain Chinese character memory methods. These findings could provide some ideas for Chinese character teaching for advanced Chinese learners.

Keywords

Chinese characters; Learning difficulties; Overseas student; Advanced level.

1. Introduction

Chinese characters, as the only ideographic characters in active use at present, are one of the oldest characters in the world. Chinese characters have always been one of obstacles for overseas students to learn Chinese. J.F. Fei (1998), Y.N. Liu (2005) and other scholars have investigated the difficulties in learning Chinese characters. W.X. Zhang (1990), J. Zhou. (1998, 2004), W.Y. Peng (2008), D.S. Li (2011, 2017) and other scholars have discussed the teaching methods of Chinese characters. However, at present, there are few studies focusing on the learning difficulties of advanced Chinese learners. This study focuses on the difficulties of advance Chinese learners in Chinese character recognition and writing. Based on in-depth interviews with learners, this research analyzes Chinese character learning difficulties. The interviewees who have passed HSK5 or HSK6 examinations are all overseas students studying for degrees in China.

2. Subjective Attitude of Chinese Learners towards Chinese Characters

Most Chinese learners have not been exposed to the ideographic system before learning Chinese. At present, some Chinese second language learners choose not to learn Chinese characters. Some Chinese intermediate level learners are only satisfied with fluent oral Chinese and do not continue to learn Chinese characters. When they need to record some information in Chinese, they will use Chinese pinyin. Chinese characters have become the bottleneck for these learners to improve their Chinese level.

For foreign students studying for a degree in China, Chinese characters are a must. They must master the structure, pronunciation and meaning of Chinese characters. Language attitude would affect language learning and language use of learners. We have learned the subjective attitude of overseas students towards Chinese characters through interviews.

From a cognitive point of view, all learners have affirmed the importance of Chinese character learning, and the vast majority of learners believe that Chinese character learning is very

important. And from the emotional point of view, most learners also like to learn Chinese characters. For these Chinese learners, Chinese characters are very important. On the one hand, they must master Chinese characters to study for a degree. Chinese characters are also one of the contents of HSK. On the other hand, they have realized the importance of learning Chinese characters for mastering Chinese and understanding Chinese culture. Characters are the writing form for human beings to record their ideological and cultural achievements. The historical and cultural knowledge of China depends on Chinese characters to keep. Learning Chinese characters and understanding their connotation and development history are of great help to understand Chinese culture. Only by mastering Chinese characters can they read more Chinese books, deepen their understanding of China, and become a real China expert. Therefore, although Chinese characters are difficult for them, they all agree on the importance of learning Chinese characters, and like to learn Chinese characters.

3. Chinese Learners' Self-perception of Chinese Character Learning

3.1. Overall Perception

Through interviews, we found that more than half of the learners think that Chinese characters are the most difficult among Chinese pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and characters, and more than 80% of the learners think that Chinese characters are very difficult or relatively difficult. Less than 20% of the learners consider the difficulty of Chinese characters is average. For overseas students whose native language is alphabetic characters, learning Chinese characters requires mastering a new set of writing rules, changing the original writing and visual habits, and at the same time constructing a set of phonetic-text correspondences that are different from the native language system, that is, to complete the recognition conversion from alphabetic characters to ideographic character. Alphabetic characters are a one-way linear combination, which is easy to write and read, while Chinese characters are three-dimensional shapes. The basic directions include top to bottom, left to right, and middle to both sides. Learners need to adapt to this visual change. At the same time, the large number of Chinese characters, the complex structure, and the various ways of making Chinese characters undoubtedly increase the difficulty for overseas students to learn Chinese characters. Even for the learners with advanced Chinese proficiency, Chinese characters are still very difficult.

3.2. Learning Difficulties

From the perspective of listening, speaking, reading and writing, half of the learners think that writing Chinese characters is the most difficult, followed by speaking and reading. During the interview, several learners clearly expressed that they are afraid of writing Chinese characters. In order to refine the difficulties of learning Chinese characters, we make further analysis from the perspectives of the configuration and type of Chinese characters.

3.2.1. Viewing from the Configuration of Chinese Characters

Chinese characters are composed of strokes and radicals. It is not easy for Chinese learners whose mother tongue is alphabetic characters to master the structure and writing method of Chinese characters. The Chinese characters errors of Chinese learners are generally divided into stroke errors, radicals errors and whole character errors.

From the perspective of stroke errors, Chinese learners often have stroke increase or decrease, stroke deformation, inter-stroke errors, and stroke order errors. Stroke increase or decrease means that the number of strokes is wrong, and writing more or less strokes results in writing errors. Stroke deformation refers to the non-standard shape of strokes, including graphic strokes and confusing strokes. Although the number of basic strokes in Chinese characters is not large, it is still difficult for learners who are not familiar with the structure of Chinese

characters to memorize and write the strokes that constitute each Chinese character. Some learners also turn some strokes into graphics or letters, numbers, etc. Inter-stroke errors refer to errors in the positional relationship between strokes, including strokes deviating from the correct position and wrong combination of strokes. Stroke order error is a dynamic writing error, which means that learners do not follow the general order of writing Chinese characters during the writing process. Based on these types of errors, we investigated students' learning difficulties from the perspective of the shape of strokes, the direction of strokes, the number of strokes or radicals, and the relationship between strokes or radicals.

In the interview, more than 50% of the learners thought that the most difficult thing in writing Chinese characters was the shape of the strokes, the number of strokes or radicals, and the order of the strokes. Some learners think that the direction of strokes and the relationship between strokes or radicals are also difficult. It can be seen that for Chinese second language learners, the basic strokes of each Chinese character, the specific shape of each stroke, and the sequence of strokes are all difficulties in memory.

3.2.2. Viewing from the Types of Chinese Characters

There are many ways to classify Chinese characters. We mainly investigate the learning difficulties of learners from the perspective of similar characters in structure, pronunciation and meaning.

According to the interview data, about 70% of the learners think that synonyms are the most difficult type to master, followed by words with similar structures and pronunciations. From the perspective of learners' self-cognition, the structure similar words or pronunciation similar words are not the most difficult types for most learners. Of course, actually in the process of students' writing and learning of Chinese characters, it is common for them to confuse the similar characters in form and pronunciation. In the process of reading, these two types of characters are less troublesome to learners.

4. The Learning Process Needs of Chinese Learners

B.B. Chen (2010) constructed a student's personal needs model in the English needs of college students, and divided the needs of the learning process into learning strategies, learning methods, etc. We investigated the habits and strategies of overseas students.

4.1. Learning Time

Through investigation, we found that most overseas students with advanced Chinese proficiency do not practice Chinese characters every day, which is due to that there are many other learning tasks after entering the advanced level, and Chinese character course is often no longer offered. Moreover, they have basically mastered the writing characteristics of Chinese characters, and the time for special practice of Chinese characters is greatly reduced. A few learners insist on practicing Chinese characters for fifteen to thirty minutes every day, mainly to cope with the HSK test and improve their Chinese.

4.2. Learning Habits

In the process of learning Chinese characters, learners will form their own cognitive and writing habits. We investigated the habits of learners in memorizing and writing Chinese characters, and found that about half of the learners read and wrote Chinese characters one stroke by one, and a small number of learners started writing after looking at the whole character. From the perspective of dynamic writing habits, most learners sometimes write in stroke order and sometimes not. It is not easy for them to memorize the strokes and radicals of a word clearly, and it is difficult to take into account the writing order of the strokes.

4.3. Learning Strategies

Learning strategy is a complex scheme about the learning process adopted by learners in order to improve the learning effect and efficiency in learning activities. It is a synthesis of rules, methods, skills and control methods. In the aspect of Chinese character learning, it is helpful to understand learners' Chinese character learning strategies for analyzing their Chinese character learning needs. We mainly focus on which methods learners use to memorize Chinese characters. Through interviews, it is found that the learning methods adopted by learners to memorize Chinese characters mainly include the following.

4.3.1. To Practice more

For Chinese second language learners, learning Chinese characters is inseparable from writing practice. All interviewees say that they memorized Chinese characters by writing more and practicing more. Although this memory method is mechanical and boring, it is an effective method, which deepens the learner's grasp of Chinese characters through repeated reinforcement. For learners who are exposed to the ideographic system for the first time, their formation of Chinese character awareness requires this intensive practice.

4.3.2. To Study the History of Chinese Characters

The development of Chinese characters has a long history, and the shape of the characters has undergone many changes, but the character system has not undergone fundamental changes. Back to the creation of Chinese characters, the main methods of character creation are pictographs, self-explanatory words, associative compounds and pictophonetic characters. Among them, if the pictographs, self-explanatory words, associative compounds are restored to the form when they were created, it is very helpful for learners to grasp the structure and the meaning of the character. Constructivism holds that knowledge is acquired by learners through meaning construction with the help of others and necessary learning materials in a certain situation. After understanding the rationale for the creation of Chinese characters, learners may yield twice the result with half the effort. Therefore, most learners like to study the history of Chinese characters to help them memorize the characters.

4.3.3. Classification and Comparison

In this investigation, we found that some learners prefer to use the method of classification and comparison to memorize Chinese characters. The categorization comparison is mainly to classify and summarize the similar characters in structure, pronunciation and meaning, and find out the differences of these characters through comparative analysis, so as to identify these characters better. This method fully reflects the learners' subjective initiative.

4.3.4. To Sort Out the Characters That Are Easy to Make Mistakes

In the interview, some learners said that they would sort out the characters that are easy to make mistakes. This is a reflective learning method, which can improve the efficiency of Chinese character learning.

By analyzing the students' learning methods of Chinese characters, it can be found that they have both mechanical and constructive ways of memorizing Chinese characters, in which mechanical writing practice is the method that all learners would adopt.

5. Discuss

Through this survey, we conducted a study on Chinese characters learning difficulties of advanced Chinese learners. From the perspective of learners' cognition and needs, we knew their habits and difficulties in Chinese character learning. The following points could be paid attention to in the process of Chinese character teaching.

The first thing is about the structure of Chinese characters based on their reasons and rules. Most advanced level Chinese learners would like to study the history of Chinese characters consciously. Teachers can strengthen the explanation of the reasons and rules of Chinese characters in the teaching process. C.L. Shi. and Y. Luo (2007) pointed out that the reasons and rules of Chinese characters are related both to ancient Chinese and modern Chinese, which reflects the internal law of the interrelationship between the structure, pronunciation and meaning of Chinese characters. Explaining the reasons and rules of Chinese characters to learners is not only in line with the characteristics of Chinese characters, but also in line with the cognitive laws of learners. It can help students establish a sense of Chinese characters as soon as possible.

Secondly, we should pay attention to the teaching of stroke order of Chinese characters. Whether the stroke order is correct or not is related to the writing speed and the beauty of the font to a certain extent. Therefore, the teaching of stroke order has always been one of the contents of Chinese character teaching. However, for overseas students, it is very difficult to write the correct stroke order. Teachers should adjust the requirements of stroke order according to the needs of students.

There are still many problems worthy of in-depth exploration in the research of Chinese characters learning and teaching. How to effectively carry out teaching in response to the learners' difficulties in learning Chinese characters needs further detailed research and discussion in the future.

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