An Exploration into the Process of Reading Chinese among CFL Beginners

Abstract:

Reading Chinese characters is perceived as a difficult task for students who learn Chinese as a foreign language. While we have been much informed of the reading process among those who learn English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL), there are fewer studies on this process in learning Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). Due to the difference in the Chinese scripts from European languages, learning Chinese, especially learning to read and write in Chinese has been perceived as arduous but intriguing by students as well as teachers. However, it seems inevitable to avoid reading in Chinese characters, especially for progress into a higher level of learning. The study will review a few studies on the reading processes with native speakers of languages with the alphabet scripts. On the basis of these previous findings, this study looks into how the Bernhardt’s constructive model of L2 reading can be used to explain the process of reading Chinese among CFL learners. According to this model, L2 reading is an interactive process that involves the simultaneous interaction of several factors. Three text-driven factors includes word recognition, phonemic/graphemic decoding, syntactic feature recognition and another three conceptually driven factors refer to intratextual perceptions, prior knowledge, metacognition.

With the aim of gaining a clearer understanding of how beginners learn Chinese characters, three sets of data are collected for this study. First, an online questionnaire about students’ learning strategies were sent to 63 CFL beginners who took Chinese as their optional modules with 69 contact hours during the three terms. It was adapted Shen’s (2005) questionnaire into a relatively short online survey (using software called Quia) consisting of 39 questions: 3 bio-data questions, 33 statements, and 3 free-response questions. Apart from the online survey, another part of data came from the students’ self-reports which were provided as their answers to the three free response questions and in individual discussions with their teacher about their character learning, in which they summarised and evaluated their ways of learning Chinese characters with examples of their successes. The third part of the data derived from the students’ e-portfolio: a self-reflection of their learning process through an online platform Mahara. Then the researcher analysed them and summarised the emerging themes by coding the students’ responses. The major findings include what the difficulties these learners face, what strategies they have used to overcome the learning difficulties, and what they know about the Chinese language through figuring out the effective methods of learning. In particular, the study critically evaluate how integrated the Bernhardt’s constructive model of L2 reading can be into the reading process of Chinese. The implications can be drawn for teaching practices.

References:


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