Semi-opaque and opaque characters Learning in L2 Chinese: 
how do radical knowledge and character knowledge work together?

Abstract

Chinese characters and the English alphabetic writing system differ in a lot of ways, teaching and learning Chinese characters is not easy. To tackle this learning challenge, one possible solution might be to make use of radicals in characters to recognize and learn characters (Ho, Ng, & Ng, 2003) since radicals can help readers retrieve word meanings (Zhang, Zhang, & Peng, 1990) and infer the meaning of unknown characters in a supportive context (Shu & Anderson, 1997). However, as the change of Chinese characters, we could not acquire the meaning of the characters in a lot of cases, and there are a multitude irregular characters whose meaning are unrelated to the meanings of their radicals, or only indirectly related, which can be called opaque (Flores d’Arcais, 1992; T’sou, 1981). As the proactive interference theory goes, past memories inhibit an individual's full potential to retain new memories (Anderson & Neely, 1996). Therefore, will L2 learners suffer proactive interference when they learn semi-opaque and opaque characters since the characters’ meaning are unrelated to the meanings of their radicals.

In addition, learners with higher language proficiency seem to have a better understanding of Chinese orthography (Everson & Ke, 1997; Shen & Bear, 2000; Zhang & Li, 2016). Then how does learners’ radical knowledge and character knowledge independently and jointly affect the memorization and retention of these semi-opaque and opaque characters. Due to the lack of relative studies, the following research questions are raised: (1) How does radical knowledge develop as learners’ character knowledge increases? (2) How does radical knowledge affect semi-opaque and opaque character’ learning? (3)To what extent do radical knowledge and character knowledge work together for semi-opaque and opaque characters’ memorization and retention? The study
comprised of two learning sessions and a delayed test. At the same time, five tasks were designed to test participants’ radical knowledge and character knowledge separately. The participants were college students enrolled in Chinese language program. The main findings showed that (1) learners with higher radical knowledge have better orthographic and semantic knowledge about radicals; and (2) radical knowledge has little effect on the learning of semi-opaque and opaque character for beginning level and higher-level students; (3) L2 learners did suffer proactive interference from previous radical knowledge when they are reading less familiar characters. The result preliminarily suggests increasing specific instruction regarding how to apply prior knowledge of radicals and characters to semi-opaque and opaque character learning, and to design more corresponding radical-character exercises in textbooks.

References: