Abstract
College students’ perceptions, difficulties and strategies in learning characters at an introductory Chinese course

Statement of Research Problem
The purpose of this study is to understand how college students process characters while they are learning Chinese as a foreign language. In particular, I focus on how students interpret characters and what kinds of resources or strategies they employ in learning and processing them. Pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Significance of the Study
From a macro perspective, the findings of the study enrich the theoretical knowledge of acquisition of the Chinese writing system from the learners’ perspective. There is lack of research from the learners’ perspective. Most published research focus on teaching aspects (e.g. Huang, 2003; Taft & Chung, 1999; Tse et al, 2007; Zhang, 1987, 1992).

From a micro perspective, the findings of the study help teachers better understand student’s perspectives in learning the Chinese writing system. It informs teachers when they have to make decisions on when, what and how to teach characters to beginners.

Research Methodology

Research tradition
This is a grounded theory study. Grounded theory is a systematic qualitative research methodology in the social sciences emphasizing the generation of theory from data in the process of conducting research. Rather than beginning by researching and developing a hypothesis, collecting and analyzing data are the first step.

Data sources and data collection
The primary data source is the in-depth interviews I carried out with 17 students periodically throughout one semester. All interviews were audio-taped and transcribed completely.

Data analysis
I followed the four steps of data analysis used in grounded theory study. I extracted and developed systematic codes based on the interview transcripts. Then I grouped those codes into bigger concepts in order to see if there is any interaction among students’ interpretation, difficulties and strategies.

Findings
The findings of my study are presented as the following themes:
I. Motivation
Everyone who is taking Chinese is doing for themselves.

II. Perceptions:
A myth in the beginning: Characters are “pictures”
Students recognize radicals easily.
Naming and counting strokes help break down characters.

III. Difficulties:
Pronouncing characters without pinyin.
Strokes and stroke order can be inconsistent.
Remembering characters exactly as they are.
IV. Strategies:
Copying and repetition
Make flashcards
Relate characters to something they know
Look for common radicals
Refer to on-line resources

**Pedagogical implications**
- Teachers may sustain students’ interest through creating friendly environment, explaining meaning of radicals and allowing students to use pinyin as a crutch.
- Teachers may give explicit instruction on the structure of characters early.
- A good way to teach radicals is to group several characters together with the same radical.
- Teachers may take time to write characters stroke by stroke and break down characters into small parts.
- Textbooks or Workbook should print in big fonts for beginners.
- Teachers may show characters in different fonts and variation of strokes.
- Teachers may teach efficient learning strategies.
- Teachers need to keep updated with computer technology.

**References**