Title:
Developing Orthographic Awareness through Beginning Level Textbooks: What Insights into Characters do Beginning Textbooks Provide?

Abstract (489/500 words):
To develop proficiency in reading Chinese, researchers have put forth the theory that native Chinese and Chinese as a foreign language (CFL) readers develop Chinese orthographic awareness to infer meaning and pronunciation of Chinese characters through repeated exposure to print and explicit orthographic instruction (Ho & Bryant, 1997; Ho, Yau, & Au, 2003; Jackson, Everson, & Ke, 2003; Shen, 2005; Shen & Ke, 2007). Orthographic awareness is the ability to identify, analyze, and infer the structure of words and their internal elements. A component analysis of Chinese characters provides us with structural knowledge about Chinese characters, and it helps material designers, test developers, and teachers to select and evaluate the characters to be learned, taught, and tested. Most of the component analysis studies have examined Chinese characters from dictionaries or corpus database (Chen, 1997; Fu, 1989; Guder-Manitius, 1999). Rarely have studies investigated characters from beginning level textbooks (Everson & Fan, 2008). In the CFL context, since reliable target language input is limited largely to textbook materials and teacher instruction, it is important to more rigorously examine the inventory of Chinese characters that is typically presented in CFL textbooks. From such investigations, we will be able to build better models of how CFL orthographic awareness is developed.

The purpose of this character frequency and component study was to systematically describe and evaluate Chinese characters in ten CFL textbooks, published from 1961 to 2008, for college and adult beginning learners. The main focus is to compare the different textbooks in the following areas: explicit orthographic decomposition instruction, character frequency selection, radical combination frequency, radical semantic transparency, radical positional regularity among different character graphic structures, phonetic element reliability, and phonological component combination frequency. To accomplish the analysis required for this study, a special character database was created by using Microsoft Access and Excel. Dictionaries were used to classify character characteristics, and documented frequency lists were used to classify the character usage frequency.

The findings revealed that most textbooks rarely include explicit orthographic decomposition instruction in the vocabulary lists and/or in each lesson. In addition, whether frequency lists from the 1980s or 2000s frequency were used to classify the character frequency rankings, the ten textbooks still contain many high frequency characters. Furthermore, the results indicated that 60% of the characters in the database were classified by relatively few radicals (17%). Across all textbooks, less than 44% of the characters contain useful radicals to infer the meanings of the characters. The most commonly appearing character graphic structure is leftright structures. About half of the characters are semantic-phonetic compound characters, which is lower than is reported in the research literature. In addition, these beginning level CFL textbooks contained low percentages of reliable phonetic components to help learners infer the
pronunciations of characters. Relatively reliable analogy groups (homophone, partial homophone, and same rhymes) appeared more frequently than unrelated groups. Finally, implications for pedagogy and recommendations for building vocabulary lists and explicit orthographic decomposition instruction were discussed. (489/500 words)

References:
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