
**An Empirical Study on Teaching Radicals to Beginners with the Character Primer**

**Abstract:**

Radicals are like phonemes or Greek and Latin roots, which form morphemes and words in English. Knowing the meaning of the roots helps learners to figure out the meaning of the whole word. Etymology not only helps learners of Chinese to better understand and more easily memorize Chinese characters, but also helps them decode the meaning and sound of unknown characters. In the meantime, they can learn about Chinese culture since Chinese characters are one of the oldest writing systems with thousands of years of history. The purpose of this study is to research the short-term effectiveness of teaching beginners declarative knowledge of Chinese radicals and characters and the skill to remember, comprehend, and analyze Chinese characters.

This study is primarily based on the cognitive model for Chinese orthographic awareness proposed by Ke (1996b; 2002), which is comprised of three successive stages, and Fan’s (2010) research on developing orthographic awareness among beginning Chinese language learners. The presenters argue that higher order thinking skills can be incorporated into learning activities even at ILR Level 0+, because if we keep asking low level students to memorize, comprehend and apply only, they are unlikely to retain the language in their long term memory. Instead, we can teach beginners declarative knowledge of Chinese radicals and compound characters. Learners need to analyze the structure and components of an unknown character and guess its pronunciation and meaning based on their knowledge of the rules. A hypothesis of early intervention with semantic priming using most frequently used characters found in beginning level textbooks is tested.

The research is also based on two presenters’ experience of teaching Chinese characters at the beginning level course. One presenter conducted the experiment on adult English native speakers in the summer of 2013. The method is made up of an intervention procedure and evaluation of the short-term effectiveness. The control group used the regular textbook, and Chinese characters were taught as they appear in the textbook. The intervention group was treated with a character primer at the beginning with a systematic introduction to the Chinese writing system including character formation rules *liushu* (六書), basic strokes, stroke order, and radicals organized by semantic groups. The radicals were presented along with characters and words containing the radicals. Students worked on consciousness-raising questions during the learning process. Classroom observations and teaching journals from the perspective of the instructor are included. The evaluation is conducted in the form of a survey with a questionnaire and a test. Students’ views are reflected in their comments on the survey form. The other presenter conducted a similar experiment in 2006 and found out that there are some weaknesses in traditional Chinese
character textbooks for Chinese as a second language. One weakness is that the selection of characters is not based on difficulty degree or frequency of usage of the characters. After taking the course designed by the presenter, the students can sustain their knowledge on Chinese characters and even can apply their knowledge to authentic materials.

Based on Student’s t-test results, we did not find a significant difference in the test of memory retention score between the intervention group and the control group. However, students in the intervention group were able to decode the meaning and pronunciation of more unknown characters correctly, compared to the control group. The difference was statistically significant. Four levels of orthographic awareness for the intervention group, recommendations to teachers on how to teach radicals and directions for future research will also be discussed.

References:


*Huang, W., & Ao, Q. 黄伟嘉，敖群 (2008). Illustration of the Radicals of Chinese


