Character Meaning Inference in Sentence Reading
among CFL Learners
汉语二语学习者句子阅读中的汉字字义猜测研究

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Abstract

This study investigates whether radical awareness (RA) affects Chinese foreign language (CFL) learners’ character meaning inference in sentence reading. Word-meaning inference is one of the most important word-learning methods (Nation, 2001), which involves making informed guesses based on available linguistic cues, readers’ world knowledge, as well as their awareness of available contextual clues (Haastrop, 1991). In word-meaning inference while learning, readers apply both global strategies (such as apply world knowledge) and local strategies, including morphological analysis and using sentential clues. Morphological analysis refers to dividing the unfamiliar word into its morphological units, which is invariably affected by readers’ morphological awareness (MA), the ability to reflect on, analyze, and manipulate morphemic elements in words. For L1 learners, MA contributes to learners’ literacy development in alphabetic languages (Carlisle, 2000) as well as non-alphabetic languages such as Chinese (Nagy, et al, 2002). There is also a growing number of studies involving CFL learners’ RA, an aspect of Chinese MA referring to the functional understanding of the role of semantic radicals in character formation, and Chinese word learning (Shen & Ke, 2007). However, to date, few CFL studies have addressed the issue of whether learners can concurrently apply RA and utilize sentential clues in character-meaning inference beyond word/character level.

Four research questions were investigated:

Does RA affect the accuracy rate of character-meaning inference in sentences?

Does familiarity with radical affect character-meaning inference in sentences?

Does the presence of sentential clues affect the application of RA?

What strategies do learners use when reading sentences with unfamiliar characters?

Participants were 19 elementary level college students. None had prior experience studying Chinese. Test batteries include (1) RA tasks containing a series of computerized structural awareness tasks and paper-and-pencil functional awareness tasks. (2) Sentence reading task. 26 unfamiliar target characters were embedded in 26 sentences frames. The participants were asked to select the most appropriate meaning for each target character from a pool of three possibilities in English. The target characters were of three types: with familiar radicals (N = 13), with less familiar radicals (N=7) and with no radicals (single-unit characters as fillers, N = 6). The
sentences frames were all short and contained only characters that were known to the participants, but support from the sentence context was only available in half of the non-filler sentences. (3) An online think-aloud task.

The participants were asked to articulate their thoughts while finishing the sentence reading task. All verbalization was recorded and transcribed into texts. Strategies emerged from the transcripts were coded and analyzed.

Preliminary analysis suggests that the participants’ RA was positively correlated with character meaning-inference, and they were able to infer the meanings of characters with familiar radicals more accurately. The participants were able to apply radical knowledge in reading novel sentences, but integrating sentential clues with radical information, especially when radicals are unfamiliar, was a laborious process. The results point to the potential benefit of explicit instruction on how to orchestrate multiple strategies in reading.