Research on Chinese Characters Teaching Based on International Chinese Textbooks

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Abstract

As the symbol of Chinese culture, Chinese characters not only carry meanings and information, fulfil the basic function of communication, but also have their own unique way to express meaning and logic. However, because of their special way to express meaning and their multitudinous shapes, characters teaching has always been a difficulty in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. In order to analyze the current situation of characters teaching in international Chinese language education, this study selects two comprehensive textbooks, HSK Standard Courses and Hanyu Courses, as the research texts, and analyzes the current situation and status of characters teaching. It is found that the teaching of Chinese characters in comprehensive courses is insufficient in number and low in proportion. Besides, the teaching is mainly word-based, and mostly adopts a symbolic teaching method. In order to address the issues, this study proposes four new ideas to teach Chinese characters, combining ancient and modern characters and incorporating the knowledge of "six categories of Chinese

characters" into the teaching, and provides a sample of Chinese characters teaching materials.

Keywords : Chinese characters teaching, Teaching Chinese as a foreign language, Textbooks, Reform of pedagogical methods

Introduction

Over the past 30 years, with the strengthening of China's comprehensive strength and the enhancement of its international status, Chinese language has been spreading widely around the world, and the number of learners has steadily increased. In order to improve the level of Chinese language education, a large number of excellent teaching materials have come into being. According to the different type of lessons, the target groups and the learning objectives, teachers may choose different textbooks. Among these textbooks, comprehensive textbook aims to cultivate learners to learn and apply Chinese in a systematic way, which are the most authoritative and representative textbooks.

Normally, the comprehensive textbooks should contain four elements: listening, speaking, reading and writing. And students are required to learn Chinese from four aspects: phonetics, vocabulary, grammar and Chinese characters. However, the section of characters teaching has the same feature in different comprehensive textbooks: small proportion and short duration. Nowadays, although teaching Chinese as a foreign language aims to enable learners to achieve "communicative purposes", the ignorance of Chinese characters teaching is not conducive to the long-term development of education. Chinese character is an important part of Chinese culture. Comparing with phonetics, vocabulary and grammar,

Chinese characters have a deeper level of thinking, and behind them lie the philosophies, worldviews and values of China. The ultimate goal of teaching Chinese as a foreign language is to enable learners to understand Chinese language and culture. Therefore, the role and status of Chinese characters teaching must be squarely addressed.

However, at present, Chinese characters teaching does not occupy the deserved position in international Chinese language education. The reason lies in the differences between the characteristics of Chinese characters and the goals of learners. Unlike phonetic scripts, Chinese characters have unique structures and meanings, which pose a significant challenge for learners who come from outside of the "Chinese cultural area". Whether for recognition, comprehension, or writing, these learners face a considerable difficulty. Meanwhile, most learners do not aim to "master Chinese" but rather to achieve basic communicative goals, often without the necessity of recognizing or reading Chinese characters. As a result, the inherent difficulty of Chinese characters, combined with the low demand of learners, has led to the marginalized status of Chinese characters teaching in international Chinese education.

The current state of Chinese characters teaching is directly reflected in the textbooks. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, this study explores the patterns of Chinese characters occurrence and teaching methods in textbooks, aiming to identify the problems in Chinese characters teaching. Additionally, these issues can help propose new approaches to teach Chinese characters, enhancing the teaching quality, and gradually moving characters teaching beyond the lagging position.

Research Objectives

This research has two main objectives: First, to identify the issues existing in current Chinese character teaching through the review and analysis of mainstream integrated curriculum textbooks. Second, based on these issues, to propose new teaching strategies, improve teaching methods, and provide recommendations for the revision of textbooks.

Research Scope

At present, there have been many studies related to the design of teaching Chinese characters and the development of textbooks. The results have been vast and fruitful, ranging from general design of teaching, arrangement of textbooks, to the cognitive order of Chinese characters and specific methods of teaching.

In the 1990s, international Chinese language education gradually took off and got on the right track. At that time, characters teaching lagged behind the whole teaching and was even at a subordinate position (Fei, 1998, pp. 118-126), and "it is difficult to teach/learn Chinese characters" became a common problem in this area. In order to understand the characters teaching situation and needs of international students, Shi and Wan (1998, pp. 36-48) conducted a survey with international students at Beijing Language and Culture University. They highlighted the necessity of synchronized Chinese characters teaching and language teaching, proposing that characters instruction should be given more attention and its delayed status should be addressed. Subsequently, Li (1998, pp. 127-131) and Bian (1999, pp. 72-77) also emphasized the importance of clarifying the role of

Chinese characters teaching, positioning it as a crucial component of international Chinese language education.

Gradually, Chinese characters teaching gained greater attention from both teachers and learners, and the status of characters teaching has been improved (Wan, 2004, pp. 40-48). However, due to the inherent complexity of Chinese characters, such as their numerous strokes and large number. There remains a "difficult to teach/learn" issue (Li, 2014, pp. 356-367). In response to this challenge, Jiang (2007, pp. 91-97) conducted experiments and suggested that a teaching method focused on "more recognition, less writing" was more effective. Li and Ruan (2012, pp. 83-90) further pointed out the importance of combining characters teaching with overall language teaching to address students' perception that "Chinese character is difficult to learn".

In addition, there have been numerous outstanding research findings regarding the design of Chinese characters teaching. Firstly, in terms of cultural teaching, Liu (2005, pp. 5-8) emphasized that introducing historical and cultural knowledge into characters teaching can help students better understand the evolution of character forms as well as the cultural meanings behind characters. This view was supported by Shi (2018, pp. 3-19) and Wang (2018), who pointed out that learning the culture enhances students' linguistic awareness and stimulates their interests in learning Chinese characters.

Then, the culture embedded in Chinese characters is exactly reflected in their forms. Zuo (2005) analyzed the evolution of character forms, pronunciations, and meanings, as well as the principles of character constructions. Since Chinese character forms are based on logical principles,

teaching based on character forms is also considered an important approach. For example, pictophonetic characters constitute the majority of modern Chinese characters, playing a significant role. Wan (2000, pp. 62-69), Li (2005, pp. 104-110) and Zhang (2007, pp. 21-28) emphasized the importance of pictophonetic characters in Chinese characters teaching, explaining that semantic and phonetic components can represent the meaning and pronunciation of a character to some extent. They suggested using pictophonetic characters to help students categorize, generalize, and memorize Chinese characters. Besides, component-based teaching is also a commonly used method. Cui (1997, pp. 51-56, 64), Wan (1999, pp. 32-41), Liang (2004, pp. 76-80) and Li (2008, pp. 1-11) highlighted the feasibility of transitioning from component-based teaching to characters teaching, arguing that component is the basic part of Chinese characters. It has relative stability and can help students generalize and summarize characters. Moreover, the logical principles in Chinese characters can also aid students in recognizing and memorizing characters, even discovering the interests and philosophy embedded inside. Zheng (1998, pp. 89-92), Zhao (2006, pp. 20-22) and Li (2008, pp. 30-36) also pointed out that the motivation and interpretability of Chinese characters are beneficial to teaching, as explaining the principles of characters can helps students understand and memorize them.

Additionally, cognitive strategies are various techniques that learners use during the learning process to aid memory and comprehension, and it is also an important method in Chinese characters teaching. Zhou and Wei (2004, pp. 1-9) proposed that the cognitive process of characters learning involves not only the memorization of shapes but also the understanding of

meanings and mastery of pronunciations. Li (2006, pp. 13-21) indicated that Chinese characters teaching should begin with the construction rules of character shapes, and through the decomposition and recombination of characters to help students better understand and memorize them. Furthermore, when learning Chinese characters, students can effectively improve their memorization efficiency by adopting cognitive strategies such as association and decomposition.

Besides, in terms of teaching methods, traditional teaching methods, such as writing exercises with copybooks and teaching strokes order, still influence characters teaching to some extent. Zhao and Tian (2000, pp. 211-214) pointed out that traditional methods have undeniable advantages in enhancing students' abilities of writing. However, modern Chinese characters teaching has gradually incorporated information technology and multimedia tools, enhancing the interactivity and engagement of teaching. Sun and Zhang (2022, pp. 68-76) mentioned that integrating tools such as computer-assisted instruction (CAI) and electronic whiteboards help improve students' ability to recognize the shapes and structures of Chinese characters.

At the same time, in order to elevate the status of characters teaching and achieve teaching objectives, scholars have also made efforts in textbook compilation. Xiao (1994, pp. 63-66) discovered that in 1990s, whether long-term or short-term textbooks, there was a noticeable lack of Chinese characters teaching, with some textbooks even completely omitting characters teaching. He pointed out that this would negatively affect the outcomes of learners. Later, Zhang (1998, pp. 140-148), Yang (2003, pp. 52-57), Liu (2004, pp. 144) and Li (2011, pp. 87-95) also recognized this issue.

They analyzed existing textbooks and offered valuable suggestions for the development of textbooks focused on Chinese characters teaching.

Nowadays, the status of the Chinese characters teaching and the quality of teaching materials have been improved. However, it is not possible to raise the status of Chinese characters to the same level with phonetics, vocabulary and grammar within a short time. It is still necessary to keep abreast of the real-time teaching materials and observe the teaching trends, so as to identify the problems in time and propose new ways to solve them.

Research Methodology

This research chooses HSK Standard Courses (9 volumes) and Hanyu Courses (6 volumes) published by Beijing Language and Culture University as research materials. HSK Standard Courses is based on the HSK test syllabus, and it is the official textbook authorised by Center for Language Education and Cooperation. At the same time, although Hanyu Courses is not based on the same syllabus with HSK Standard Courses, it is also aimed at foreign students who have a primary level in Chinese, and has a complete teaching system. According to a survey, HSK Standard Courses and Hanyu Courses are commonly used as teaching materials in colleges and universities such as Beijing Language and Culture University and Beijing Normal University, as well as in many domestic and foreign Chinese language training institutes. So, these two textbooks are representative and authoritative. In addition, this research aims to look at the situation and current status of Chinese character teaching in comprehensive textbooks, so we need to select textbooks that contain phonetics, vocabulary, grammar and characters at the same time.

Therefore, HSK Standard Courses and Hanyu Courses are the best objects of this research.

After determining the textbooks, it is necessary to intercept the same-period parts as objects, so as to ensure that it is possible to see the process and status of Chinese characters teaching in the same period of time. In this research, 255 classes (60min/one class) of contents in HSK Standard Courses and 306 classes (50min/one class) of contents in Hanyu Courses are taken as objects.

Research Results

This study conducts both quantitative and qualitative analyses of Chinese characters teaching contents in HSK Standard Courses and Hanyu Courses as the research materials. It identifies three major issues currently present in Chinese characters teaching.

1. The proportion of Chinese characters teaching is insufficient

Through combining these two textbooks, we organize the proportion of characters teaching. Characters teaching occupies a relatively small proportion in both textbooks, with no more than two pages per lesson in HSK Standard Courses and no more than five pages per lesson in Hanyu Courses. This reflects the situation of characters teaching in comprehensive curriculum: small proportion and short duration. Although the textbooks have inserted characters teaching as a necessary part, they still do not give it enough time and weight.

Therefore, it is necessary to extend the length and increase the proportion of characters teaching. We can start from expanding the teaching

content and providing more practice activities to raise the status of Chinese characters teaching and change its lagging position.

2. Current Chinese characters teaching is primarily word-based

Through analyzing the occurrence of characters in textbooks, we find that in HSK Standard Courses and Hanyu Courses, a considerable part of characters are taught based on words, especially in HSK Standard Courses, from Lesson 31 onwards, characters teaching has been changed to the teaching of vocabulary, which seems to teach Chinese characters, but in fact, it is more like vocabulary teaching as the students are taught more words through learning characters. Although this way of teaching enables students to master more words as soon as possible, it deviates from the original goal of Chinese characters teaching: to understand and write Chinese characters.

Word is the smallest linguistic unit that combines sound and meaning and can be used independently. Chinese language teaching has always been based on the words, which not only enables students to quickly master the pronunciation and meaning of the words, but also helps students to complete the combination of words, thus generating thousands of phrases and sentences, to achieve the purpose of communication and mastery this language. Teaching Chinese based on words is a very cost-effective way because it is fast, efficient and of good quality. However, this method ignores the special function of Chinese characters, Chinese characters are independent due to their unique way of production, development and capable of expressing complete meanings, which is different from words. If characters-based teaching can be added into Chinese language education, it can complement the word-based teaching and help

students learn to use a word and at the same time understand the meanings of its components, so that they can truly understand the word.

For example, when we teach "camel (骆驼)", the word-based method will directly tell students that "camel" is a kind of animal that walks in the desert with a heavy load, and its appearance is similar to a horse, but has two humps, and has great endurance. Then, if students know the pronunciation, shape and meaning of "camel", it is considered to have mastered the word. However, the character-based method will break down the "camel(骆驼)" into two characters and explain them to students. The small seal script "骆" is 駱, its left part is "horse (马)", and the right part is same with "road(路)", means expedition. The original meaning of the "camel (骆驼)" is to ride a horse and go on a long journey. Besides, the small seal script "驼" is 駝, the left half is also "horse(马)", and the right half is "snake (蛇)", which means a kind of animal that is similar to horses, walking in formation like the shape of snakes. In this case, the animal that fulfils these three conditions of being similar to a horse, being able to travel long distances, and walking in a serpentine formation is "camel (骆驼)". Therefore, we can see why the word "camel(骆驼)" uses the characters "骆" and "驼" to refer this animal. It can be seen that character-based method can make students further understand the meaning of the word and the way of expression.

As a result, Chinese characters teaching needs to appropriately reduce the word-based method and return to the character-based teaching, so that learners can truly understand the characters, which could reduce the learners' memory burden.

3. Primarily focused on symbolic teaching

At present, Chinese characters teaching is based on semiotics. However, this teaching method has some drawbacks. To some extent, symbolic method is efficient and convenient but ignores the characteristics of Chinese characters. Unlike other linguistic symbols, Chinese characters have ideological characteristics, and thus the arbitrariness between the referents is weak and the rationale is strong. Its unique expressive function and developmental origins make it different from other linguistic symbols, so it is no longer suitable for "symbolic teaching".

Words, sentences and some other linguistic symbols are more arbitrary and suitable for "symbolic teaching". Le (1995, pp. 15-18) pointed out that all symbols are made up of "signifier" and "signified". Then, linguistic symbols also have both "signifier" and "signified". Saussure (1996) argues that linguistic symbols are arbitrary, so the connection between "signifier" and "signified" is also arbitrary. For example, in Chinese, "花" is used to indicate the concept of "ornamental plant consisting of corolla, calyx, receptacle and stamen", whereas in English it is used to indicate this concept by "flower". It is hard to say if there is any necessary and natural connection between "花", "flower" and the real flowers, and it is also impossible to explain why the words "花" and "flower" have the same meaning. It reflects the arbitrariness of linguistic symbols. In this case, "symbolic teaching" can improve the efficiency of language learning, so that students do not get entangled in the correlation between "signifier" and "signified", but directly learn the pronunciation and meaning of the target words and phrases, and apply them in practice.

However, Chinese characters are more rational and not suitable for "symbolic teaching". From the very beginning, Chinese characters already had a close relationship between the "signifier" and "signified". Take "花 (flower)" as an example, the small seal script "花(flower)" is 𦾔, and it is already the shape of the real flowers. As for Chinese characters, there is a strong connection between "signifier" and "signified". A considerable number of characters have a natural, direct, and close connection with their referents, which makes them become a special symbol system that distinguishes them from other characters. Therefore, it is no longer appropriate to continue to use the "symbolic teaching" method. Instead, it is more suitable to trace the meaning of characters back to their shapes, and to clarify the relationship between their "signifier" and "signified", which can help students to truly understand characters.

The popularity of symbolic teaching will lead to the inevitable result that "knowing what they are, not knowing why they are". This method teaches Chinese characters as existing, ready-made symbols, without looking deeply into the concrete connection between their "signifier" and "signified". As long as students master the pronunciation and shape of the character, they have achieved the learning goal. This teaching method only focuses on the present life of Chinese characters, but ignores their past life, so learners only know how to write the characters, but do not know why they are written in this way, and do not understand the meaning of characters, such learning is undoubtedly one-sided.

Discussion of Results

Through a review and analysis of the textbooks, this research identifies three main issues in current Chinese characters teaching: small proportion of characters teaching, word-based teaching and symbolic teaching. To address these issues, the study proposes four instructional strategies.

1. Apply "The Six Categories of Chinese Characters" into textbooks

Through the analysis of these two textbooks, this research found that the proportion of Chinese characters teaching is very small, and the textbooks primarily employ a symbolic method, focusing on teaching students the shapes and writing of Chinese characters without explaining why a character is written in a particular way or the meaning behind its structure. This approach is not conducive to students' understanding and memorization of Chinese characters. To address this issue, it is recommended to increase the section dedicated to Chinese character explanations in textbooks. The traditional theory of "The Six Categories of Chinese Characters" could be utilized to teach students about the origins and structural principles of Chinese characters.

"The Six Categories of Chinese Characters", from Shuowen Jiezi (Xu, 1963), are used to reveal the construction and general rules of Chinese characters, which are "deictographs (指事), pictographs (象形), pictophonetic characters (形声), syssemantographs (会意), notative characters (转注) and phonetic loan characters (假借)". Although this theory was formed in ancient times, it is a mature and well-founded system that still serves as a guide for

teaching characters today. (In this theory, "notative characters (转注) and phonetic loan characters (假借)" are still controversial and their boundaries are not clear, so we will not discuss them).

When teaching Chinese characters, we can tell students the four categories of characters, "deictographs（指事）, pictographs（象形),pictophonetic characters（形声）, syssemantographs(会意)". In HSK Standard Courses, an attempt has been made to explain above four categories of characters to students, but the explanation is mainly introductory with simple examples, which is superficial and doesn't teach students the characters systematically. If characters teaching is to be based on "the four categories of Chinese characters", it is necessary to change the previous teaching mode of "dabbing at the water", and try to help students to categorize and analyze the characters in accordance with the logic of these four categories. Firstly, at the beginning of the teaching, students need to be introduced to the basics of the four categories of Chinese characters, so that they can have a general understanding of the theory and ways to category characters, which has already been done in HSK Standard Courses. Afterwards, the students are taught characters according to the "the four categories of Chinese characters" in each lesson. In a long run, students will be able to have a systematic knowledge and a clear, in-depth understanding of Chinese characters.

Among these four categories of Chinese characters, pictographs are main single-component characters, and most of them are relatively simple, which are intuitive and easy for students to learn, so we can use graphic method to teach. Pictographs are originally a description of the reality. At the beginning, their appearances are very close to the real things,

even if the long term development, they can be seen in the shadow of reality today, such as "日, 月, 云, 雨, 山, 火", etc. When explaining these characters, we can combine pictures and the original writing style of characters to help students feel the different ways of creating characters, which can help them understand the shapes and remember the meaning of characters more clearly. Simple pictographs are often found in the elementary level textbooks. They are not only simple in structure and meaning, but also highly used, so using above teaching method can help ease students' fear of Chinese characters, and lay a good foundation at the very beginning of the learning process.

Unlike pictographs, deictographs don't completely depict the reality. They use the symbols to show the reality that can't be depicted directly, for example, "上, 下, 本, 末, 刃, 左, 凶", etc. For this kind of characters, the graphic method can also be adopted, in which the abstract symbols and concepts are shown and explained to students in the form of drawings, so that they can understand the idea of characters' composition. Simple deictographs are often used in everyday life, and this is a very effective way for beginners to learn Chinese characters.

In addition, pictophonetic character is one of the most common kind of characters. Du (2004, pp. 418-422) has introduced the "linkage method" in detail for pictophonetic characters teaching. The "linkage method" is based on the theory of family-characters. According to the link of pictograms and phonetic signs, students will be able to recognize the system of Chinese characters. The "linkage method" is divided into the linkage of pictograms and the linkage of phonetic signs, taking the pictogram "月" as an example. "月" mainly represents the parts of human body,

such as "肚, 肩, 膀, 肝, 胆, 脾, 胃, 胳, 膊, 臂, 脚", etc. In this way, most of characters that related to the parts of human body can be linked together, which can effectively help students to summarize characters. Besides, phonetic signs can also be linked, taking the phonetic sign "方" as an example, "房, 放, 访, 芳, 防, 坊, 纺, 仿" can be linked together because of the similar pronunciation. Even if students do not know this character, but when they see the "方" inside, they can guess the pronunciation. The "linkage method" can be used in the teaching of pictophonetic characters, but it is only suitable for learners who have a certain number of characters and literacy. Because the linkage between pictograms and phonetic signs requires a large reserve of characters, so it's not suitable for beginners. For elementary-level learners, it is necessary to adopt the approach of "gradual linkage" in teaching. When a pictophonetic character comes up, students should be introduced to its pictogram and phonetic sign, and simple family-characters should be expanded appropriately. For example, if we talk about "眼", we can extend characters like "瞧", "睡", "盯", which also contain "目", and are also commonly used in our daily life. After students have acquired a certain amount of literacy, they will develop a systematic knowledge of Chinese characters. The "linkage method" not only helps students to identify the meaning and sound of characters, but also allows learners to understand the rules of characters.

Syssemantographs have similarities with pictophonetic characters in terms of their composition, as they are both made up of two or more parts. However, since the syssemantographs are formed by combining two or more single characters, and their meanings are also derived from the combination of these components, such as "众, 泪, 走, 尘, 采". Each

different character has its own way to combine meanings, thus the "linkage method" is no longer available to the teaching of syssemantographs. Therefore, we should adopt "explain one by one" to tell students about syssemantographs' formations and meanings. Similar with pictophonetic characters, the mastery of syssemantographs also based on a certain amount of Chinese character reserves. For example, after learning "小" and "土", learners can understand "尘". After learning "人", learners can understand "众". Elementary learners need to know a certain number of single characters before understanding the related syssemantographs. In conclusion, teaching Chinese characters based on the four categories of characters can help students understand, summarize and memorize characters better. However, the teaching sequence is roughly arranged by pictographs, deictographs, pictophonetic character and syssemantographs, but this is only a general teaching sequence based on the students' reserve of characters, which is interspersed in the actual teaching.

Overall, it is necessary to apply the four categories of characters into characters teaching, which not only helps students to summarize the constructions of characters, but also assists them to truly understand Chinese characters.

2. Incorporate radicals teaching

After analyzing the textbooks, it is found that current Chinese characters instruction is primarily word-based, with characters explained according to the order in which they appear in words. Additionally, there is no support for students to summarize or generalize after the explanation, which hinders systematic learning of Chinese characters. In order to address this issue, the radicals teaching method could be incorporated, grouping

characters with similar components or meanings together, which would facilitate students' ability to summarize and generalize.

On the surface, Chinese characters appear to be numerous and complex, and there is no uniformity in writing. However, if they are disassembled, it is found that there is a pattern in components and meanings. Wang (2006) pointed out that the radicals of Chinese characters have an ideographic function, which helps to identify the meaning of characters and also helps to classify them.

Some of characters with the same radical are also related in meaning. For example, in HSK Standard Courses, "讠" has characters like "说, 试, 课, 读, 词, 语". The meaning of "讠" is "speak", which is related to speech, language, etc. So the characters that start with "讠" are also commonly used in this area and related to each other. Another example is "钅", some characters like "银, 锻, 错, 钟, 针, 钢, 铁, 镜" are related to metal texture, utensils, etc., and has a similar meaning. There are many more examples of "same radical with similar meanings". If characters are classified according to the radicals, students can remember the meaning more quickly. Besides, these characters also have similar shapes, which is helpful for memorizing characters and writing. Therefore, the method of teaching character with different radicals is highly feasible.

However, not all Chinese characters can be taught in this way. Some of characters that use strokes as radicals are not obviously related to each other in terms of meaning and are not similar in shape. For example, "不, 七, 三, 两, 上, 下, 万, 业, 且, 无, 丁" with the same radical "一" and "九, 么, 乐, 丢" with the same radical "丿", these characters do not need to be taught by radicals. In addition, although it is feasible to teach characters

by radicals, it is necessary to choose the right target students and time for teaching. When a certain number of Chinese characters with the same radicals have been accumulated, it is easier to see the correlation between their meanings. At the same time, characters with same radical and similar meaning often come from different levels and will not appear in the same teaching stage. Therefore, radical teaching should be targeted at students with a certain level of literacy, and it's not suitable for students who are just starting to learn Chinese characters. Besides, it takes a long time to teach characters by radicals, and help students to accumulate more and more characters. In the actual teaching process, teachers can judge whether to start the radical teaching according to the literacy of students. Generally, when students have mastered three or more characters with the same radical, then they can start to summarize.

3. Restore the original context

Textbooks could also include explanations of the original context in which Chinese characters were created. When studying characters with many strokes or complex structures, helping students restore the context of characters formation can enable them to better understand the structure and meaning.

Chinese characters, especially the compound characters, have their own contexts, and the restoration of these contexts in teaching is very conducive to help students understand and memorize characters. Take "剧" as an example, the small seal script of "剧" is 劇, which consists of three parts, the upper left part is "虎(tiger)", the lower left part is "猪(porcupine)", and the right part is "刀(knife)". Tiger and porcupine

in ancient times are fierce beasts, the original meaning of "剧" is fighting fierce beasts with knife. In ancient times, this is a game in the palace, which undoubtedly contains a violent fight and obvious conflict. The context of this character has remained unchanged for thousands years, and nowadays "剧" is used as a noun to represent a form of literature and art that expresses social life through strong personality conflicts, or as an adjective that represents fierce, intense, and strong. But no matter what the lexical nature is, the original logical meaning of "剧" still remains. Similarly, many Chinese characters were created with a context in which their structure and meaning could be clearly understood. However, with the development of the times, the appearance of Chinese characters has changed considerably, and some characters are more complex and the original context of their creation is no longer visible, so many learners find it's difficult to learn Chinese characters. Long-term symbolic teaching has made students focus only on the external strokes and strokes order of Chinese characters, so when they encounter complex characters, they are afraid and resistant to them. Therefore, it is necessary to restore the context in which the characters were created. After understanding the ideas behind characters and the meanings represented by different parts, the overall understanding will be much simpler. This not only reduces the memory burden for students, but also helps them to truly recognize and understand characters.

Based on above examples, it can be seen that restoring the contexts of characters requires restoring the appearances of characters at first. Then, when teaching Chinese characters to foreign students, is it necessary to tell students about the ancient characters? This needs to be judged on the basis of teaching target and their learning level. Students who

are aimed at learning and applying Chinese in a systematic way should be taught the ancient characters and contexts of characters, so that they can deeply understand the ideas of Chinese characters. However, for short-term learners, who just learn for travelling, working, communicating and other purposes, there is no need to learn ancient characters or their contexts.

In addition, apart from ancient characters, traditional Chinese characters can also restore the contexts of characters. Due to their special historical background origins, traditional Chinese characters used in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan have retained some traces of ancient characters, which can reveal the contexts of characters, such as "劇", "怀", "风", and so on. Nowadays, Chinese characters teaching is based on simplified characters, and the teaching of traditional characters is not advocated. However, for foreign learners living in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, traditional characters can be used appropriately to help them sort out contexts of characters, so that they can understand the characters.

4. Add more exercises and classroom activities into textbooks

Practical activities are an integral part of Chinese characters teaching. Currently, in these two textbooks, there are no flexible exercises and classroom activities designed for characters, but only a few mechanical exercises, which are not helpful for students to understand, memorize and write Chinese characters efficiently. In the teaching process, after the teacher finished explanation, a certain amount of time should be reserved for students to practice. Comparing with traditional mechanical exercises, some activities that require students' initiative will be better. Therefore, it is necessary to incorporate more engaging and flexible practical activities into textbooks. The following two exercises can be inserted into textbooks:

4.1 Chinese character puzzle

The "radical teaching" can make students understand the components of Chinese characters and memorize them according to their radicals. After completing the teaching, corresponding exercises can be carried out to effectively check students' learning result. For example, a "Chinese Character Puzzle" activity can be set up, in which the characters learnt in this lesson or past are disassembled into parts and put together, so as to let students put together as many complete characters as they can. For example, 10 components "扌，女，木，火，子，马，亻，丁，古，口" can be combined to form nearly 20 Chinese characters, such as "打，扣，好，妈，姑，如，李，休，枯，呆，伙，灯，仔，吗，仃，估，叮，咕" and so on. This activity allows students to recall characters that they have already learned and deepen their impression.

Group activity is a very common form of practice in teaching, which can motivate students' interest and enthusiasm, make them feel involved in class, and improve the learning result. In the past, vocabulary, grammar and communication were the main targets of group activities, while Chinese characters practice was almost empty. So, "Chinese Character Puzzle" can be put at the end of the course as a group activity, with the main purpose of practicing Chinese characters, and competing to see which group can put together more complete Chinese characters. In this way, the gap in Chinese characters activity is filled and it can also make characters learning more interesting.

4.2 One Chinese Character, One Picture

At the initial stage of Chinese characters teaching , teachers often start with simple pictograms, such as "日、月、水、火", together

with simple pictures to help students understand the characters. In fact, not only pictographs but also other types of characters can be taught and practiced in this way. As mentioned in the previous section, a large proportion of Chinese characters exist in their own contexts of creation. After understanding the context of a character and what its parts represent, students will have their own understanding. Therefore, allowing learners to draw the character in the form of paintings not only examines their understanding and memory of the character, but also enhances their interests in learning and deepens impression.

The practice of "one character, one picture" can be assigned to students as a classroom exercise or assignment. This is a convenient way for teachers to identify problems in students' understanding of Chinese characters and to correct them in time. It is also an interesting exercise for students to reduce their fear of learning characters and to gradually understand and accept the phonetic and ideological forms of Chinese characters.

Recommendations

Through analyzing the HSK Standard Courses and the Hanyu Courses, this research finds out current problems in Chinese characters teaching in teaching Chinese as a foreign language: Firstly, Chinese characters teaching has a lower status and small proportion, far less than the teaching of phonetics, vocabulary and grammar. Secondly, Chinese characters teaching is based on words, with the majority of characters appearing in the form of vocabulary, which places more emphasis on the application of characters after they have entered into the vocabulary and deviates from

the characters teaching. Thirdly, current Chinese characters teaching adopts symbolic methods, and characters are taught to students as symbols, so that the students do not understand the principles of characters' composition and the way to express meanings, thus they cannot learn the Chinese characters in a real way.

After clarifying the current problems in Chinese characters teaching, we put forward some new ideas. Firstly, Shuowen Jiezi (Explaining and Analyzing Characters) should be used correctly, and the four categories of Chinese characters "pictographs", "deictographs", "syssemantographs", and "pictophonetic characters" should be applied into teaching. Different types of Chinese characters are taught to students in different ways, such as graphic method, linkage method and so on, which could help learners to summarize the construction rules of Chinese characters, so that they can understand them better and memorize them faster. Secondly, "radicals teaching" uses the ideograms of radicals to classify Chinese characters into different categories, and put characters with "same radical and similar meanings" together, so as to let learners understand and memorize different types of characters, and reduce the burden of memory. Thirdly, for some Chinese characters with so many components and complex shapes, ancient or traditional characters can be used to help students restore the context of the characters, so that learners can better understand the meaning of them. Fourthly, a suitable number of exercises and classroom activities should be included in textbooks, for example, "Chinese character puzzle" and "one character one picture", so as to test the results of teaching, consolidate the foundation of the Chinese characters, and enhance the interest in learning.

Chinese character is an important part of Chinese culture and condense the wisdom of Chinese for thousands of years. At the same time, teaching Chinese as a foreign language is also a national and ethnic cause. Its original purpose is to enhance the international influence of Chinese language and let the world know and understand China. As an important part of Chinese language, Chinese characters contain philosophical and social values that have been passed down for thousands of years and need to be emphasized in education. Nowadays, the status of Chinese characters teaching has been rising, but it is still at a "lagging behind" position, and the teaching methods are fixed. Therefore, teachers need to make constant changes to raise the importance and status of Chinese characters teaching, improve textbooks and adopt more flexible and innovative methods to teach. Besides, teachers should also incorporate Chinese culture and the characteristics of Chinese characters into teaching, so that learners can really understand Chinese characters, and better understand China through learning Chinese characters.

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