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What is more effective in introducing Chinese characters to CFL beginners? A study of rote memorisation, delayed character introduction and character colour-coding

Panel: Chinese language teaching in primary and secondary schools in Europe

This is a co-authored paper and Caitríona Osborne will be the one to present.

The paper presents results of the investigation of four different methods in introducing Chinese characters to beginner learners of Chinese as a foreign language (CFL). Approximately 98 learners aged 14–16 participated in the research and are divided into four groups. Three groups of participants are learning Chinese via one of the three approaches: rote memorization (Dehn, 2008; Greenberg, 2000), delayed character introduction (Chen, Wang & Cai, 2010; Ye, 2013) and character colour-coding (Dummit, 2008; Pleco, 2016). The fourth group of participants is used as a control group and has been taught with the usual mixed approach observed in five Irish higher institutions. Two formative evaluations were conducted to analyse the participants' development in learning the character recall and recognition, as well as the use of characters. Previous research (e.g. Poole & Sung, 2015; Xu, Chang, Zhang & Perfetti, 2013; Tan, Spinks, Eden, Perfetti & Siok, 2005) in the area of CFL acquisition tends to focus on learners' ability to recall characters, with less emphasis on the overall use of Chinese language. Therefore, the evaluations presented to the participants in this study not only focused on character recall and recognition, but also the ability to use Chinese language in communication. The evaluations consist of sections including: (1) dictation; (2) recognising and recalling characters; (3) cloze tests; (4) reordering sentences of a Chinese conversation and; (5) producing a text in describing a picture. The first formative evaluation was carried out after around four weeks' teaching and the second one was conducted after another four weeks of teaching. Therefore, the results reported here reflect the effectiveness of each teaching method on the study of Chinese characters in the first eight weeks. The study reveals that rote memorisation seems to be the most effect method in helping CFL beginners in acquiring the individual characters, particularly the orthography of Chinese characters, however only in the early stages of learning CFL. Character colour-coding proved to be useful in the acquisition of character phonology and for learning the use of characters during the study. Although delayed character introduction was hypothesised to be effective in assisting learners to acquire the phonology and semantics of Chinese characters, this method did not show significant positive effects among CFL beginners in the early stage or later stage of character learning. The control group at first showed promising signs in terms of acquiring character use, however this did not continue over the course of the study. As this is an ongoing one-year project and the data collection will continue until May 2017, further analyses will be conducted to scrutinise these initial findings.

Keywords: Chinese language; Chinese as a foreign language; Language pedagogy