

## **Teaching Strategic Reading for CSL Learners**

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Mandarin Chinese is one of the daily languages of the people who live in Mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and the overseas Chinese communities. Recently more and more Chinese language programs are emerging in K-12 schools and colleges. Based on the characteristics of the Chinese writing system, this article offers some suggestions for Chinese as Second Language (CSL) reading instruction.

### **Characteristics of the Chinese Writing System**

Chinese is a non-Roman logographic script, which contains approximately 7,000 distinct morphemes. The basic unit of representation of Chinese is the character (漢字 [汉字] *hànzì*), which corresponds to a single syllable morpheme rather than a phoneme. There are approximately 700 phonetic radicals and about 140 semantic radicals currently in use. Integrating two of those radicals, which provide either phonetic or semantic information to form semantic-phonetic compounding, is, by far, the most dominant method. It is used in the vast majority (roughly 80%-90%) of multiple-unit characters (Perfetti, C. A., & Liu, Y., 2006). The diverse combination of characters forms different words, which makes the Chinese language changeable and varied.

There are two versions of Chinese characters, one simplified and one traditional. Typically, simplified characters require fewer strokes than traditional characters. There are 2,238 simplified characters out of approximately 7,000 characters that are used by educated native speakers of Chinese (DeFrancis, 1984). The use of simplified characters is common on Mainland China, but traditional characters prevail in Taiwan. Hong Kong and Singapore use both systems. In the United States, Chinese communities may use either system, depending on the origins of their members. Mostly, modern Chinese is presented horizontally from left to right, which is the same as English print. The traditional convention of written Chinese is from right to left in a vertical way. This is an inherent complication of written Chinese, making reading Chinese a very tough task for Chinese as Second Language (CSL) learners. So for CSL teachers, how to teach Chinese reading is a crucial and demanding issue.

### **Reading Comprehension Strategies for CSL learners**

Much research shows that reading comprehension is not based on knowing each character. To be a good reader requires using appropriate and efficient reading comprehension strategies (Chamot, 2005; Grabe, 2004; Eskey, 2005). Teaching strategic reading is important. Following are four main strategies, each of which can be practically applied to classroom techniques.

1. *Identify the purpose in reading.* By doing so, you know what you are looking for and can weed out the less important information. If reading for the main idea, you can skim the text first. The first and last sentences of each paragraph and the first and last paragraph usually contain conclusive ideas of the text. If you are reading for specific information, such as names, dates, definition of a key concept, you can scan the text to extract specific information without reading through the whole text.

2. *Use semantic mapping or clustering.* The point of using semantic mapping or clustering is to prevent readers from becoming overwhelmed by a long string of ideas or facts. Readers can use graphic organizers to reorganize the information in their own way.

3. *Guess when you aren't certain.* An efficient reader doesn't need to recognize each character. Sometimes, recognizing every character does not necessarily result in comprehension. The understanding of culture or background information also plays a significant role in reading comprehension. Learners can use guessing to their advantage to do the following:

- Guess the meaning of a character
- Guess about a cultural reference
- Guess content messages
- Infer implied meaning

4. *Analyze characters.* The knowledge of character is significant for reading comprehension (Anderson, R.C., Freebody, P. 1981; Beck, Perfetti & McKeown, 1982). One way for learners to make guessing pay off when they don't immediately recognize a word is to analyze it in terms of what they know about it.

- Look for the semantic radical (such as semantic radical “氵” which is usually associated with water) that may give clues.
- Look for grammatical contexts that may signal information
- Look at semantic context for clues

However, contextual information is usually more reliable than semantic information from the semantic radicals. In addition, Chinese native speakers tend to infer the character meaning from context rather than from semantic radicals (Koda, 2000).

## **Classroom Techniques for CLS Reading Instruction**

### *1. Language - Experience Approach*

“The beauty of this approach is that the student provides the text, through dictation, that serves as the basis for reading instruction” (Peregoy, S., Boyle, O. & Cadiero-Kaplan, K., 2008: 297). Language-Experience reading helps learners map from spoken Chinese to written Chinese and to see reading and writing as purposeful communication about their own interests and needs. The following are the basic steps:

- Pair up students.
- Student A tells a story based on his/her own interest. Meanwhile, Student B writes down verbatim by dictation.
- Student A reads back the story.

Based on the basic steps of Language – Experience Approach, CSL teachers can adjust according to the real classroom situation. For example, handwriting Chinese characters are time consuming and hard for CLS learners. Typing Chinese on the computer might be a better way to do this activity. For the very beginning learner, narrative can be replaced by dialogue. For

example, the teacher can give out a real-life situation, such as exchanging shoes in a store. One student plays the role of customer and one plays the role of salesman. While they are having a conversation, one of them types down the whole dialogue. The other one can read the whole dialogue. Later, they change their role and use this approach again.

### *2. Direct Reading - Thinking Activity (DR-TA)*

By using DR-TA, the teacher invites predictions and confirmations on one portion of text at a time and then tells students how many paragraphs to read to find out whether their predictions are correct. For example, in the beginning the teacher can ask students to make a prediction of the main idea of this text by looking at the title. Do they have any prior knowledge about it? The teacher models two efficient reading comprehension strategies: guessing by the title and using background information. In this way, students gain experience in prediction and monitoring their comprehension as more mature readers do.

### *3. Retell stories by Guide Questions*

Retelling is widely used in reading comprehension instruction. Retelling trains students to grasp the main idea of a text and reorganize it in their own way. However, for the beginning learner, the teacher can use some guide questions to help them retell. Learners first answer the given questions and then combine the answers into a paragraph. The retelling is completed! Gradually, learners can ask the guide questions mentally and retell a text without the written guide questions.

### *4. Reader's Theater*

Reader's theater is an excellent activity for learners to respond to the reading. Learners read the story and dramatize a script from a story they have read. For teenagers and adult learners, they can videotape when they act out their script. The group activity involves students in meaningful and motivational reading activities. Teachers should select reading stories based on student's age, Chinese proficiency and interest.

In conclusion, it is necessary to make CSL learners be aware of the characteristics of the Chinese written system from the beginning. And keep in mind that reading comprehension does not just mean character recognition. Rote memorizing individual characters is neither the correct nor an effective way of improving reading proficiency. Teachers should help students to be a strategic CSL readers, readers who know diverse reading strategies and know how and when to use those strategies.

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