



The Study of Teaching Strategies of Chinese Characters to Thai Students

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Abstract

The study of teaching Chinese characters is a weak link of teaching Chinese to foreigners, and it's uncommon for the study of teaching strategies of Chinese characters. In our opinion, teaching Chinese characters is the basic for the acquisition of other language skills, which can directly influence the improvement of students' Chinese. Thai students tend to copy Chinese characters to help themselves remembering the characters, and most of them are interested in the culture of Chinese characters. There are some problems in their order of strokes when they write Chinese characters. According to the learning characteristics of Thai students, a teaching mode to combine "teaching spoken Chinese and characters separately" with "teaching spoken Chinese and characters simultaneously" is been promoted. We should pay more attention to introduce the knowledge of the culture of Chinese characters, and we suggest that we can offer the Chinese calligraphy course for Thai students to improve their interests for Chinese characters and consolidate their knowledge about Chinese characters, especially the knowledge about the strokes.

Keywords : teaching chinese characters thai students teaching strategies culture of chinese characters

Introduction

One of the difficulties in teaching Chinese as a foreign language is the teaching of Chinese characters, of which generally the foreign students also have fear when learning Chinese. However, compared to the research of teaching pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar teaching, the research of Chinese characters teaching is far from enough. And among those factors which may have influences on Chinese characters teaching,

the study on the factor of the learner's nation also lag behind that of other aspects.¹

As Thailand does not belong to the cultural cycle of Chinese characters, it is not easy for Thai students to learn Chinese characters. In the process of teaching Thai students Chinese, we need to think carefully about producing an effective Chinese characters teaching method which is special to Thai students. This paper aims to study the importance

of Chinese characters teaching, the characteristics of Thai students' acquisition of Chinese characters and the Chinese characters teaching strategies related to Thai students, so as to provide certain reference for Chinese characters teaching and the relevant research.

The Importance of Chinese Characters Teaching

As Chinese character is the written form of Chinese language, the acquisition of Chinese characters has a very close relation to the acquisition of Chinese pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Chinese character is the combination of pronunciation, form and meaning and many characters are words on their own. Therefore, for foreign students, having mastered the pronunciation, the meaning and the writing of Chinese characters may lay a good foundation for the learning of Chinese phonetics, vocabulary and grammar. From this perspective, the importance of Chinese characters teaching should not be ignored. If we avoid or take no account of Chinese characters teaching just because there are difficulties in the learning of Chinese characters, the improvement of the learners' language skills will be badly affected. Especially in the intermediate and advanced stages, the improvement of such language skills of Chinese as listening, speaking, reading and writing language skills greatly depends on the learner's good master of Chinese characters, then if Chinese characters teaching is not paid enough attention from the very beginning, for foreign students, the more they learn Chinese, the harder it will be.

Second, the Chinese character is the carrier of Chinese culture. Chinese culture, which has a history of thousands of years, can be inherited and pass down from generation to generation till

today largely because it was recorded by Chinese characters and the Chinese characters themselves consist of one important part of the Chinese culture. Therefore, those foreign students who want to make further understanding and study of the Chinese culture must have a good master of the Chinese characters. The historical evolution of Chinese characters and their morphological structure reflect the rich cultural connotation. Through the study of Chinese characters, foreign students also can obtain information related to Chinese history, Chinese folk customs, Chinese folk arts and so on, which in turn can improve their Chinese level and increase their interests in Chinese culture.

According to Han Guanling (2009), who once did a survey among 436 Thai college students who majored in Chinese, in the primary stage, those who thought Chinese characters was the biggest problem in learning Chinese, consisted of the largest proportion of students. While in the middle and advanced stage, those who thought grammar was the biggest problem in learning Chinese, made the largest proportion of students and those who thought Chinese characters was the biggest problem in learning Chinese made the second.

Therefore, in the teaching process, we should pay enough attention to the teaching of Chinese characters. What is especially important is that we should start to teach Chinese characters in the primary stage, that is, from the very beginning of their learning Chinese. And throughout the whole process of teaching Chinese, we should put special emphasis on the teaching of Chinese characters in case that Chinese characters be a barrier to the improvement of those foreign students' Chinese.

The Acquisition Characteristics of Chinese Characters of Thai Students

Chinese words are completely different from that of Thailand, with the former being ideographic (each word meaningful) characters, while the latter photography. Because of the differences between the two words, Thailand students have their own features in the acquisition of Chinese characters. When teaching Chinese characters, we should pay attention to those characteristics of Thai students and make our teaching targeted. We conducted a random survey to 58 Thailand undergraduates who were from Khon Kaen University and majored in Chinese and summed up some characteristics of Thai students' learning Chinese characters:

I. Copying Being the Main Method of memorizing Chinese Characters

We conducted a survey on the method students took to memorize Chinese characters and found that the majority of students tend to memorize Chinese characters through repeated copying them. And they generally believed that it was necessary to practice writing Chinese characters time and time again as most Chinese characters have many strokes. The average students had to copy 5-10 times before they finally mastered the writing of Chinese characters. The result is consistent with that of Jiang Meilin (2012) who conducted a survey on Chinese characters learning strategies of Thailand students who were in their primary stage of learning Chinese. According to Jiang's survey, 71.4% students once used the learning strategy of repeatedly writing a single Chinese character and 34.8% of those students often or always used this strategy. Relative to the European and American students, Thai students did not exclude writing Chinese characters. Although they also had certain

difficulty in doing it, they still thought that Chinese handwriting had important effects to Chinese character acquisition and hope to master Chinese characters through repeated practice.

II. Hoping to Get Information Related to Chinese characters

Among those students who accepted our survey, almost over 90% of the Thai students had very strong desire to learn and understand cultural knowledge related to Chinese characters. Although Thailand does not belong to the cultural cycle of Chinese characters, Chinese characters and the related culture are not strange things to Thailand students with more and more close communications between Thailand and China. Most students have come into contact with Chinese characters and Chinese culture before they started to learn Chinese, and part of Thailand students were of ethnic Chinese origin. Therefore, although they haven't studied Chinese language systematically, they have deep feelings on Chinese characters and Chinese culture because of the influences of their patterns and grandparents and they have more intense enthusiasm and interests in learning Chinese characters and Chinese culture.

III. Thinking That the Strokes and the Stroke Orders of Chinese characters are the biggest problems in writing Chinese characters

We have found that, as Thailand students, compared with European and American students, have less strange feelings to Chinese characters, they are relatively more easy to master the forms of Chinese characters and will make less structural mistakes when writing Chinese characters. But as Thai is alphabetic writing, the way to write Thai is different from that of Chinese characters, so most Thai students have certain

difficulties in mastering the strokes and the strokes order of Chinese characters. When writing Chinese characters, quite a few students just put the Chinese character strokes together and pay less attention to the strokes' right order. Therefore, it is common for Thai students to miss one or some strokes or do not put the right stroke in the right place, and so on and so forth.

Chinese Characters Teaching Strategy for Thai Students

From the above we can see that when learning Chinese characters, because of the influence of their native language as well as the emotional attitude to Chinese characters, Thai students have their characteristics in Chinese character acquisition strategy. Based on these characteristics and combined with the characteristics and rules of Chinese characters, we summarized the following effective Chinese characters teaching strategies:

1. Combining Teaching Spoken Chinese and Characters Separately Mode and Teaching Spoken Chinese and Characters Simultaneously Mode

Whether spoken Chinese and Characters should be taught separately or simultaneously has been a controversial question in academia. Nowadays in China the existing Chinese characters teaching which is aimed at foreign students are more conducted with teaching spoken Chinese and characters simultaneously mode. That is, foreign students are not offered Chinese characters courses and they get to know the Chinese characters mainly through the texts used in other Chinese courses. This mode can reduce the learning load of the students in the short term. But in the long run, the Chinese characters they learned in other Chinese courses can not meet the needs

of furthering their study of Chinese. According to A List of Commonly Used Modern Chinese Characters, there are 2500 the most commonly used Chinese characters and 1000 less commonly used. And An Outline of Chinese Proficiency Vocabulary and Chinese Characters Grade specified a literacy quantity of 3000. Therefore, foreign students' acquisition of Chinese characters might be too slow, if their only way to enlarge vocabulary is through other Chinese courses.

As Thai students have stronger subjective willingness to learn Chinese characters and they are willing to take the initiative to write and memorize Chinese characters, teaching spoken Chinese and Characters separately mode is beneficial for the students to lay a stronger foundation of Chinese characters, so that they can study the Chinese characters systematically. In the "2+2" united training project cooperated with Khon Kaen university, we set Chinese characters course for 2-3 grade of Thai undergraduates who majored in Chinese. We systematically give lectures about Chinese characters and guide students to read and write Chinese characters and help them form a normal writing habit and let them understand relevant culture of Chinese characters, etc. Good teaching results have been achieved. Now we have 3 class hours of Chinese characters per week. This course eliminated the students' fear of Chinese characters, increased their knowledge of Chinese characters. Hence, when writing or memorizing Chinese characters, they tend to do it by following the rules of Chinese characters. And the efficiency of learning Chinese characters was greatly improved. For example, in the Chinese characters classes, we summed up such components and radicals in Chinese characters as “扌”、“讠”、“讠” and so on,

explained them to the students and then asked them to make a list of those Chinese characters which have those components and radicals. We found in this way the students had some changes in their former way of memorizing Chinese characters which mainly rely on mechanical copying the characters. Now they paid more attention to the internal rules of Chinese characters to memorize them. The time they need to memorize Chinese characters became less and the memory of the characters becomes more solid. But there are also some problems about the Chinese characters course. Firstly, due to the limitation of course arrangement, it is impossible to have enough class hours for the Chinese characters class; secondly, there are many things to learn in the Chinese characters class so it also might be burdens to students. Therefore, teaching spoken Chinese and Characters simultaneously mode is also necessary.

On the basis of Chinese characters courses, we also teach Chinese characters in comprehensive course, writing and reading classes to help students to use and consolidate those Chinese characters they have learned. Through the combination of teaching spoken Chinese and Characters separately mode and teaching spoken Chinese and Characters simultaneously mode, students had a better understanding of the structure and rules of Chinese characters and other relevant knowledge, expanded their vocabulary without too much difficulties.

Paying More Attention to the Cultural Knowledge of Chinese Characters in teaching process

Most of Thai students are interested in the culture of Chinese characters, so we should emphasize the cultural foundation of Chinese characters. When our ancestor created Chinese

characters, they often reinvest characters with profoundly cultural connotation. To attract students to learn Chinese characters, we can add some cultural knowledge about the history and structure of Chinese characters. This way can also give students a deeper impression about Chinese characters. For example, students are often interested in the glyph of Chinese characters, especially in their beginning period to learn Chinese characters. We usually introduce some cultural knowledge about the glyph in this period to make students understand the long history and special glyph of Chinese characters. At the same time, students can have a direct impression with Chinese characters by this teaching method. We often choose some most common and typical characters, such as “山”、“日”、“水”、“火”、“女”、“刀” to teach at first. These characters can represent the glyph of Chinese characters to certain degree and their glyphs closely link with the objects. From these glyphs, students can experience the mystery of Chinese characters immediately. In addition, we can teach some cultural knowledge to foreign students by teaching Chinese characters. For example, Xieyin is a cultural phenomenon in China; actually it's also a phonetic phenomenon of Chinese characters because there are many homophonic characters in Chinese. When we teach these homophonic characters, we can introduce Xieyin to students.

Attracting Students' Interests in Chinese Characters by Teaching Chinese Calligraphy

With the development of Chinese characters, the art of calligraphy also has a very long history in China. We get a quite good effect in teaching Chinese characters by offering calligraphy course to students. From this course, students can not only

practice their calligraphy, but also can consolidate their knowledge of characters. We've compared students who have calligraphy course with those not, we found that the former have more active attitude toward Chinese characters and grasp strokes and structures of Chinese characters better.

Conclusion

Thai students are interested in learning Chinese characters, and they don't feel totally unfamiliar with Chinese characters and their culture. We should teach them Chinese characters according to their features so that students can learn Chinese characters more efficiently.

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