

Teaching Chinese Characters Using Cultural Background Understanding

By Elisa Christiana, B.A.
Petra Christian University, Surabaya
elisa.li.88@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Since the chance of learning Chinese language is opened in Indonesia, the students have the eagerness in learning this foreign language, but many of them are facing various kinds of problem, especially writing, because Chinese writing system is totally different from Indonesian language. Due to the limitation of knowledge about the nature and the cultural connotation of the Chinese characters, Chinese language teachers used to teach to write the characters stroke by stroke, the writing class turns to be a very dull and boring subject, and the learning result is unsatisfactory. The researcher was challenged to teach Chinese characters using cultural background understanding towards eighteen students from International Business Management Department Petra Christian University. This research used qualitative research method supported by quantitative method. The result showed that this teaching method was very effective to encourage the students to learn Chinese language and successfully improved the writing skill.

Keywords: Chinese Characters, *Hànzì*, Cultural Understanding, Writing.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese character, or called “*hànzì*”, is one of the oldest and most widely used writing systems in the world. It has a history of five or six thousand years, and it is used by about one fourth of the total population of the earth. The creation and evolution of *hànzì* are the basic carriers of the traditional Chinese culture and as an important tool for extending, spreading and exchanging ideas they have played a tremendous role in the long history of the Chinese nation (Xiè, 1999:5).

As China continues her role on the world stage, demand for Chinese as a foreign language is growing all over the world. Not only because of the booming of China as the leading country, but the globalization era cause this language plays an important role, not only for communication, but also as a language for education, politics, commerce, economy, international relationship, social life, art, science, technology, etc.

Since reformation in 1998, the chance of learning Chinese language has been widely opened in Indonesia. Although the students have the eagerness in learning this foreign language, many of them are facing various kinds of problem, especially mastering writing skill. In the process of learning Chinese language, mastering writing skill is very important. The reason is not only because oral skill has a limitation in space and time, but also because there are so many characters which have the same pronunciation (homophone) with different meanings. Only by writing down the *hànzì* we can differ the meaning.

Due to the limitation of their knowledge about the nature and the cultural connotation of the *hànzì*, Chinese language teachers used to teach the students writing the characters stroke by stroke, the writing class turns to be a very dull and boring subject, and the learning result is unsatisfactory. To overcome this, the researcher was challenged to teach *hànzì* using cultural understanding to motivate the students and help them to memorize the characters, and master the writing skill well.

2. LIBRARY AND THEORETICAL OVERCIEW

2.1 CHINESE LANGUAGE, THOUGHT and CULTURE

Language is not merely a means of communication, language has close relationship with thought and culture.

Hànzì is square in shape, indicates the sound, image, and meaning, three of them interlinked in one character. It stimulates the brain, so that Chinese people is good in thinking precisely by using left and right hemisphere. Analytic and accuracy way of thinking go hand in hand with language. That is why *hànzì* can be analyzed precisely.

Characters influence the way of thinking, and the way of thinking will affect the characteristics of cultural development. Talking about culture, “the culture of the Chinese language” and “the culture of the *hànzì*” are two different basic concepts. The culture of the Chinese language means when a person utters or writes something, express the culture of the Chinese people, while the culture of the *hànzì* can be seen from the creation of the characters. The characters show the culture and transfer the philosophy of the Chinese people in that era.

The definition of “the culture of *hànzì*” should focus on macro and micro perspective. Macro perspective here covers the origin of *hànzì*, evolution, configuration and other basic rules embodied in the cultural connotation; while micro perspective refers to the cultural message carried by the character, to be revealed by understanding the meaning of the character. Macro perspective is built upon the micro perspective, thus, research should start from micro perspective, accumulating the data, summarize the pattern, and then gradually move to the study of the macro. However, the micro does not study a single character separately without putting the whole Chinese language system and the macro background in mind, because the goal of the research should be the macro perspective. Both macro and micro research must put the *hànzì* as the center of study, as the fundamental starting point.

2.2 THE INVENTION and CREATION OF THE CHINESE CHARACTERS

Nelson in his book *God's Promise to the Chinese* mentioned that the ancient Chinese had indeed possessed an unusual knowledge of sacred history, which they had incorporated into their written language (1997:ix). The genesis and remote of the Chinese character is over a period of more than five or six thousand years. There were three theories about the creation of Chinese characters:

1. Invented by Fú Xī (伏羲);
2. Invented during the period of Shén Nóng (神农) as the rope binding;
3. Invented by Cāng Jié (仓颉);

The above comparatively acceptable legend might tell us the beginning of the invention, but obviously, the invention of more than fifty thousand *hànzì* was not possible done by one person only. Archeologist came to a conclusion that the invention of *hànzì* was done by hundred thousand of Chinese common people through their labor and life, then spread out and recognized by public.

In the study of the creation of *hànzì*, there is a traditional theory known as “six writings” (六书). It is differentiated into six types of characters in terms of their creation: pictographs (象形), indicatives (指示), ideographs or logical aggregates (会意), phonetic compounds or

determinative phonetics (形声), mutual explanatories (转注) and phonetic loans (假借). In practice, only the first four refer to the ways to compose *hànzì*, the last two are concerned with the ways to use them (Xiè, 1999:5).

- | | | | |
|------------------|------------|------------|----------|
| 1. Pictographs | yuè | 月 (moon) | |
| 2. Indicatives | shàng | 上 (upper) | |
| 3. Ideographs | míng | 明 (bright) | |
| 4. Determination | + | Phonetic | Compound |
| | zhú | 相 (mutual) | xiāng |
| | 木 (bamboo) | + | 箱 (case) |
| | mù | 每 (every) | méi |
| | 木 (wood) | + | 梅 (plum) |

Among these four ways, phonetic compounds or determinative phonetics is the mostly used one. In “*Shuō Wén Jiě Zì*”, 7,679 characters (82.1%) from 9,353 characters are phonetic compounds (Zhāng, 1992:24; Zhào, 2008:416; Zuǒ, 2009:22), in “*Kāng Xī Zì Diǎn*”, dictionary published in 1716 AD, 42,300 characters (89.9%) from 47,035 characters are phonetic compounds (Zhào, 2008:416; Zuǒ, 2009:23). From 7,000 mostly used characters, there are 5,631 characters (80.44%) are phonetic compounds (Liú, 2010:374). From 2,905 characters for Intermediate level HSK test, there are 1,920 characters (66.1%) are phonetic compounds (Hú, 2008:50).

Hànzì created are the root or the basic carriers of the traditional Chinese culture and as an important tool for extending, spreading and exchanging ideas. They have played a tremendous role in long history of the Chinese nation. Without *hànzì* there would be no such splendid Chinese culture. In the world today, *hànzì* are not only indispensable to any Chinese user, but also have an ever increasing important role to play in worldwide culture development (Sū, 2003:12).

2.3 THE STEPS OF WRITING

The smallest part of a *hànzì* is called stroke (笔画). There are two categories of stroke, i.e. basic stroke and extended stroke. There are only six basic strokes and twenty five extended strokes. One or more strokes put together form a component (部件), either it is a whole character (成字部件) which has a meaning, or part of a character (不成字部件) which does not have a meaning. The main component, which usually indicates the meaning of the character is the radical (部首) of the character. One or more components put together form a character. A character which has only one component is called single component character (独体字); a character which consist of more than one component is called compound character (合体字).

By knowing the strokes, the students will learn how to combine the strokes to form a component or a character. There are three ways to combine the strokes, i.e. separate way (二, 八, 川), correlate way (丁, 人, 刀), and intersect way (七, 九, 力). Knowing how to combine the strokes is very important, because base on the same strokes we will write many different

Teaching Chinese Characters Using Cultural Background Understanding

characters, e.g. from “ | , 冂, 一, | , 一” these five strokes form 田, 由, 甲, 申, and 甲 five characters.

After that the students have to know the direction or gesture of writing every stroke (笔势), and the sequence of writing (笔序), these two is called the order of strokes (笔顺). There are eight tips to be follows:

- | | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------|---------|
| 1. Héng first, then shù | 先横后竖 | : 十、干 |
| 2. Piě first, then nà | 先撇后捺 | : 人、木 |
| 3. Upper to bottom | 从上到下 | : 三、合 |
| 4. Left first, then right | 从左到右 | : 做、州 |
| 5. Outer first, then inner | 从外到里 | : 月、向 |
| 6. Outer to inner, then closing | 从外到里再封口 | : 日、国 |
| 7. Middle first, then left and right | 先中间后左右 | : 小、水、业 |
| 8. Irregular | 例外 | : 非、坐 |

2.4 THE ORIGINAL AND SIMPLIFIED CHARACTERS

There are original characters which are used in Taiwan as official characters, while simplified characters are more popular in mainland China, but original characters are still exist in mainland China.

The general trend of the evolution of *hànzì* from ancient era up till today is simplified. To enable the illiterate easy to understand and learn *hànzì*, for the development of education, and to make written communication more efficient, through several times of amendment, finally in the year of 1986, government of People Republic of China announced the implementation of 2,235 simplified characters (Zhāng, 1992:100).

With this policy, there might be some advantages due to the reduction of the strokes, but some scholars felt that the change has ruined the rule of creation and the structure of the *hànzì*, which caused the degradation or the forfeit of Chinese culture. The government might have realized this situation, so they made a statement: "In the future, the simplification of *hànzì* should be done with cautious, so that the *hànzì* can remain relatively stable for a long period of time." (Zhāng, 1992:101)

2.5 LEARNING CHINESE AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Indonesian students are learning Chinese language in Indonesia, in a country where Chinese language is not used as daily communication language, so the students are learning Chinese as a foreign language.

According to L. Jakobovits, a psychologist from America, there are several factors that determine the success or failure of a student in learning foreign language, i.e.: talent 33%, intelligence 20%, persistence and motivation 33%, and the other factors 14% (Zhōu, 2005:22). It seems that the talent, persistence and motivation play an important role in learning.

There are two reasons to learn foreign language, first is integrative motivation, and the second is instrumental motivation. For the first reason, not only learn the language, the learners are also ready to accept the culture and lifestyle of the people of the target language; learners with the second motivation have practical purposes, such as reading scientific literature, looking

for a job, business, etc. Usually learners with the first motivation will have better learning result (Zhōu, 2005:22-23). Whatever the motivation is, the aim of learning a foreign language is to enable the students to use the target language for communication, including oral communication (listening - speaking skill) as well as written communication (reading - writing skill).

Learning or teaching foreign language is different from learning or teaching mother-tongue or a local language. The teacher has to find out the criteria of his/her students before teaching to choose the most suitable textbook (materials) and to design the best teaching method (Zhōu, 2005:14-15).

2.6 THE PEDAGOGY CONCEPT OF TEACHING CHINESE CHARACTERS

Writing is an activity that involves the use of graphic (picture) symbols or combination of letters (components, characters) relating to the sounds we produce in the speaking activity. Although *hànzì* mostly are phonetic compounds (80-90%), the characters do not completely sound and converge in the spelling system, this writing system is totally different from alphabetic system. There is no direct connection between shape, sound and meaning.

Many learners say that *hànzì* are difficult to differ, difficult to memorize and difficult to write (Liú, 2010:370). However, no matter how hard it is, the students have to learn how to write it, because *hànzì* is the only tool to record the Chinese language, as we do not have any other alternative recording instruments (Hú, 2008:72). Without mastering Chinese characters, it will be difficult for the students to raise the reading and composition ability. The quantity of characters they master is the decisive factor to increase the vocabulary (Hú, 2008:84).

In writing *hànzì*, the students need to master not only the sentence structure (grammar) and the ability to choose appropriate words to express the thought, but the accuracy in writing the character itself is very important. In that case, the teacher does not only ask the students to write something and give mark on the finish product for correction without any attention in the process of writing itself. From the process of writing, we can clearly see how far the students understand the characters. Not only memorizing the steps of writing stroke by stroke, but also how the student can put the components at the right place, the most important thing is they can understand the meaning and the usage of the character (Lǚ, 2008:464).

The teaching methods chosen, the teaching result, whether it is good or bad, has a direct relationship with the teacher's teaching philosophy, because the teaching philosophy of Chinese characters is the guiding ideology and principles of every teacher in the teaching of Chinese characters, it is the sense of the teacher him/herself towards teaching Chinese characters, which includes the knowledge of the teacher towards the characteristics of the nature and image, sound and meaning of the Chinese characters. With good teaching philosophy, teachers will fully consider the characteristics and the development of Chinese characters themselves, he/she will take full account of the relationship between Chinese characters and Chinese language, and he/she will be very concerned about the difficulties of the students to learn Chinese characters (Hú, 2008:71).

There are two methods, i.e. to teach writing according to the context, or to teach writing – including reading, separated from listening and speaking.

In the first method, the teacher teaches each character according to the context in the textbook. In that case, the students will not learn the characters from the simple to the complicated ones. It is very common to find complicated characters appear in the first chapter,

Teaching Chinese Characters Using Cultural Background Understanding

for instant: “谢谢.” (Thank you). This character has twelve strokes, consists of three components: “讠”, “身”, and “寸”, it is not easy to write, but is very important for practical use.

In the second method, the teacher teaches characters without putting any consideration on the context. The students study the characters step by step, according to the seven rules suggested by Liú Xún (2002), i.e.:

- a. Learn to recognize the character first, know how to read and know the meaning, then learn how to write.
For example: learn to read “我” (I) first, then learn to write “我” .
- b. Learn the single component character first, then the compound one.
For example: “尖” (sharp), start with learning how to write “小” (small) and “大” (big) first, then combine both of them to form “尖”.
- c. Learn the simple character first, then learn the complicated one.
For example: 一 → 人 → 大 → 头 → 买 → 卖 → 读.
- d. Learn the mostly used character (3,500 characters) first.
For example: 的, 一, 是, 在, 不, 了, etc.
- e. Learn the history of the character first, then learn how to write.
For example: “安” (peace), come from “宀” (roof) and “女” (woman). The original form depicted a woman sitting quietly under the roof, symbolizing “peaceful”, it means a woman who stays back in the house is safe and peaceful.
- f. Introduce several similar characters altogether, so that the students can see the difference clearly.
For example: “很”, “银”, “限”, “狠”, “恨”, “良”, “娘” etc.
- g. Emphasized on standard *hànzì*.
For example: the students have to write “关” instead of “関” for “to close”.

The differences between these two methods are: the first one will pay more attention to the practical use, focus on the listening and speaking skill, does not emphasize on reading and writing; with the second method, the students will learn the characters separately from the context, this cause the disconnection between the listening-speaking and the reading-writing skill, inadvertently this situation will increase the burden on the beginners. Of course, the teacher can mix them up, teach them in turn (Zhào, 2008:430-431).

Lài Míngdé mentioned four methods for teaching writing *hànzì* (Hé, 2009:182-182):

- a. Exposing the characters by introducing the form (image), the pronunciation and the meaning altogether. The teacher can show them the flash cards, pictures, etc.
- b. Explaining the structure of the characters, for instance: the strokes, the component, the radical, then the whole character.
- c. Telling the background of the characters, for example: the creation, the culture, the philosophy concept of the characters.
- d. Giving various kinds of exercise to make the students familiar with the characters.

The goal of the above mentioned methods is to make the students memorize the characters better, to read and write correctly, and the most important thing is the students can use it properly. None of the methods can be used separately. The teachers have to combine them wisely. When we learn a foreign language, actually we also will learn the culture value behind the language. According to Christensen there is not much argument these days about the importance

of culture in the foreign language curriculum. The majority numbers of foreign language teachers will agree that gaining culture skills is an important part of achieving competency in a foreign language (Everson, 2009:19). It is believed that by knowing the cultural meaning, the students can learn the *hànzì* better.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

To solve classroom problems, and to improve the quality of the classroom, the researcher practice the classroom action research, There were two cycles of planning, implementing, observation and reflection. Latief (2009:6) stated that the criteria of success in Classroom Action Research is not only measured with the achievement in learning skills as indicated by the scores, but giving joyful learning experience which motivate the students to sustain life-long self learning. Although students' academic achievement is one of the criteria of success, but students' motivation in learning is more important as the goal rather than the scores representing students' achievement in learning.

This research used qualitative approaches, supported by quantitative approaches. The researcher got the verbal and also nonverbal data through research and observation done in the classroom, which was analyzed to give accurate and meaningful information according to the purpose of this research.

The researcher got the verbal data by asking questions to the selected students to know what their opinion was about writing *hànzì* before and after the treatment, i.e. teaching *hànzì* by introducing cultural meaning. The researcher also got report from the observer, who sat in the classroom to observe whether the teaching-learning process had been done according to the plan, the students' learning attitude, their behavior in the classroom, and their performance in the class.

The researcher also claimed this research as a quantitative research, because the researcher collected numerical data to know how the students showed the result of learning through the test conducted, and also the conclusion summarized from the answers of questionnaire returned to the researcher.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 PLANNING

According to the syllabus, the students have to master at least 200 characters in Mandarin I, and another 200 characters will be taught in Mandarin II. This research was done towards eighteen B class students who took Mandarin II in odd semester 2010/2011. They had learnt Chinese language for one semester, but did not have any input about Chinese culture understanding behind the *hànzì*.

To know their opinion about Chinese language, the researcher reviewed the short questionnaire which had been filled in by the students before they started Mandarin I. Among the eighteen students, fifteen students said that Chinese language was difficult, among them, six students specifically mentioned that writing *hànzì* was the most difficult one, and only three students said Chinese language was important for their future.

The textbook used was "*Hànyǔ Jiàochéng P*". This book emphasizes the speaking and communication skill. The characters in this book are divided into two categories, one is the characters to be recognized and read only, the other one is the characters which should be learnt

how to write.

In Mandarin I, the students had learnt lesson one until twelve, totally one hundred and fifty one characters which were belonged to second category only. To know how many characters the students remembered, the researcher gave them a preliminary test for half an hour in the first meeting on the 10th August 2010. The result of the test showed:

39 characters = none of the student remembered
50 characters = 1-3 students could write correctly
22 characters = 4-6 students could write correctly
11 characters = 7-9 students could write correctly
11 characters = 10-12 students could write correctly
10 characters = 13-15 students could write correctly
8 characters = 16-18 students could write correctly

The above test showed that nine students could remember only twenty nine characters (19.2%), consisted of: the numbers “one” to “ten”, the personal pronoun “I”, “you” and “he”, and other mostly used and simple characters, like “to be”, “man”, “good”, “big”, “small”, “middle”, “no”, “very”, “study”, “Chinese language”, “teacher”, “father” and “mother”.

Based on the above finding, the researcher planned to review several important or mostly used characters from lesson one to twelve, especially five groups of characters which seemed rather weak, i.e.: culinary, clothing, color, words connected with education and family relationship. While reviewing these characters by using Chinese cultural understanding, the researcher continued with part of the characters from lesson thirteen to fifteen, totally 130 characters were taught from the beginning of odd semester 2010/2011 until midterm exam.

Based on the theory of teaching Chinese character for foreign students, the researcher set up the sequence, and designed the Basic Course Outlines/Course Syllabus, Class Schedule, and Lesson Plan, and prepared all the tools/instruments needed for teaching-learning process.

4.2 IMPLEMENTATION

In teaching writing *hànzì*, the researcher started with reviewing the name of strokes, the steps of writing, and the component concept, then used the teaching techniques:

- a. Learnt to recognize the character, then learnt how to write. The teacher reviewed the pronunciation and meaning first. After the students getting familiar with the characters, then the teacher taught them how to write it, including the name of strokes and the steps of writing.
- b. Learnt the single component character, then combined the single component to be the compound one. The teacher introduced “日” (the sun) and “生” (to give birth) first, then combined both of them into one character: “星” (star). Another way round, the teacher also taught the students how to split a compound character into single component.
- c. Learnt the history of the character, then learnt how to write. The teacher described the background of the characters, including: the creation, the culture and the philosophy concept of the characters. This method was used as one of the alternatives to raise learning interest.

According to the Lesson Plan, the researcher described the Chinese culture of the five topics, i.e.: culinary, clothing, color, words connected with education and family relationship. For example, when the researcher taught them the character “男” for man, the researcher would

Teaching Chinese Characters Using Cultural Background Understanding

tell them that male was very dominant in Chinese family, because in ancient China it was the duty of men to work and earn money for his family. As China is founded on agriculture, so the men were working in the field.



The character “田” (field) and the character “力” (strength) were put together to form the character “男” (male), is the symbol for “masculine”, the male of the human species.

The culture of characters was introduced to the students for the first time, and had opened the mind of the students. Besides knowing the culture of the characters, the researcher also hoped that the students could develop their imagination by making up their own story, for example: “茶” (tea). By knowing that tea was good for health, the students could imagine a saying: “He who drinks tea regularly will have long life until 108 years old.” The students then broke up the character of “茶” as follows:

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{“++”} = \text{ten “+”} + \text{ten “+”} = 20 \\ \text{“人”} = \text{eight “八”} \\ \text{“十”} = \text{ten “十”} \\ \text{“八”} = \text{eight “八”} \end{array} \right\} = 108$$

= 88

The above explanation certainly had nothing to do with the Chinese culture. However, the story composed by the students could help them to remember the character better.

By having the above sharing, one of the students had a very outstanding imagination and composed a very good story for the character “婚” (to get married). She said the character was divided into two parts, “女” (girl or woman) and “昏” (to feel dizzy): a girl became dizzy because she wanted to get married, or she became dizzy after getting married. This is an evidence that this teaching method was a kind of bait, let the students think and find the answer by themselves. By being active, the students would have deeper impression on the characters, help them to remember the characters better. The fun they had during the learning process would encourage and motivate them to study further.

4.3 OBSERVATION

4.3.1 Observation Sheet by the Observer

The observer sat-in in the classroom during the teaching-learning process, and took note. The researcher compiled the notes, and we could see the improvement of the attitude of the students: from two students not paying attention to zero, then the participation in interaction also got better from time to time, which created a very nice class atmosphere. The observer had given the researcher a very good input, i.e. not to teach the characters which were seldom to be used, so that the researcher could revise the lesson plan for the next meeting (second cycle).

4.3.2 Interview Sheet by the Students

After having two writing classes, the teacher gave a test to the students to know whether

they had mastered the characters or not. Within two months, two daily tests and midterm test were conducted. The researcher chose two students to be interviewed, i.e. Student 3 and Student 7 who had got the highest and also the lowest score in Test I. Then the researcher continued to observe their performance until Midterm exam.

From these two students, it was clearly seen the improvement, not only the score, but the change of study attitude. The Student 3 at the beginning felt that he needed to study harder although he had got the highest mark, but still not good enough. The second test gave him a challenge to compose his own stories to memorize the characters, and after the midterm test, he had a very wonderful confession about studying Mandarin. He said: “Not only because it will be good for my future, but also because I am a Chinese. The second reason is I believe the culture and philosophy of Chinese character will make me a better person.”

In Mandarin I, the Student 7 felt that Chinese language was very difficult, made him almost give up. After having writing class in Mandarin II, he promised to study harder. The lowest mark did not make him lose his eagerness to learn. After the second test, the student showed that he would keep on studying, and after the midterm exam he realized that the language was very important to be mastered, because it would be useful for his future.

4.3.3 The Score of the Test

To show the effectiveness of this teaching method, the students were evaluated for three times according to the time schedule, i.e. on 31 August, 23 September and 12 October 2010.

From these three tests, ten students got higher score from one test to another, like Student 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 16, and 18; six students got higher score on the second test, but a bit lower on the midterm test, like Student 2, 3, 6, 10, 15 and 17; two students got lower score on the second test, but higher score on the midterm test, i.e. Student 1 and 13. There were many reasons for this phenomenon, but anyway, the score of midterm test was better than the first test, and the class average score was higher from time to time:

31 August 2010	→ 71.34
23 September 2010	→ 80.98
12 October 2010	→ 85.33

The average score of second test was 9.64 higher than the first test, and the midterm score was 4.35 higher than the second test. This difference was caused by the change of treatment between Writing I (Test I) and Writing II + III (Test II). In Writing I, the researcher taught forty characters in one meeting. According to the observer, there were several characters which were seldom to be used and were not close to their daily life, so it was difficult for the students to memorize. Besides, in one meeting teaching forty characters were not efficient. Having the input from the observer and the students, the researcher decreased the quantity of the characters in Writing II and III to be twenty five and thirty characters in each meeting. The researcher also chose the characters which were close to their daily life, especially the commonly used ones. The result of Test II was quite satisfactory, so the researcher maintained the same strategy in Writing IV – thirty five commonly used characters, including some characters which had been learned in Mandarin I.

The above test results could prove that the teaching method was acceptable by the students, although sometime they still complained about the quantity of the characters, especially Writing I.

Teaching Chinese Characters Using Cultural Background Understanding

Like the preliminary test, after doing their midterm exam, the researcher gave them additional half an hour time to write down the *hanzi* they could remember. Starting from the beginning of odd semester 2010/2011 until midterm exam, there were four Writing classes, totally one hundred and thirty characters were taught. The result showed as follows:

- 3 characters = none of the student remembered
- 4 characters = 1-3 students could write correctly
- 7 characters = 4-6 students could write correctly
- 19 characters = 7-9 students could write correctly
- 23 characters = 10-12 students could write correctly
- 39 characters = 13-15 students could write correctly
- 35 characters = 16-18 students could write correctly

The researcher compared the above test result with the preliminary test, as follows:

Table 4.1 Score Comparison between Preliminary and Post Test

Qty of students	Preliminary (151 characters)	Post Test (130 characters)
0	39 (25.83%)	3 (2.31%)
1-3	50 (33.12%)	4 (3.08%)
4-6	22 (14.57%)	7 (5.38%)
7-9	11 (7.28%)	19 (14.62%)
10-12	11 (7.28%)	23 (17.69%)
13-15	10 (6.62%)	39 (30%)
16-18	8 (5.3%)	35 (26.92%)

From the above table we can see that in preliminary test only 5.3% from one hundred and fifty one characters were remembered by 16-18 students, while in post test, there were 26.92% from one hundred and thirty characters were mastered by the students. In preliminary test, the students forgot 25.83% of the characters, while in post test only three characters (2.31%) were forgotten. These three characters are seldom being used ones.

4.3.4 The Feedback from the Students

After teaching for two months and the tests were conducted, a questionnaire was distributed to the students to know how the teaching method had help the students to memorize the *hànzì* better, and whether the culture input had increase their eagerness to learn Chinese language in the future.

The feedback from the students is analyzed as the followings.

1. When the students filled in the questionnaire before Mandarin I started, fifteen students said that Chinese language was difficult, among them, six students specifically mentioned that writing *hànzì* was the most difficult one, and only three students said Chinese language was important for their future. After treatment, they gave different opinion: ten students said Chinese language was difficult, five students admitted that Chinese language was an international language, two students realized that the language was his

- or her mother tongue, and one student said Chinese language was a beautiful language.
2. According to Jakobovits, talent, persistence and motivation play an important role in learning a foreign language. Fifteen students answered that it was a need for them to learn Mandarin; it was important for his or her future, easier for them to find a job with high salary. This belongs to instrumental motivation, because they had practical purposes. Three students learnt Chinese language due to their own interest (hobby). This belongs to integrative motivation.
 3. Ten of the students admit that they have difficulty in learning Chinese language, and writing is the most difficult one. However, they have strong motivation in learning this language, because it was needed for their future, to made them easier to find a job with high salary.
 4. When the students started learning Mandarin in the first semester, most of them did not realized that the Chinese characters had connection with Chinese culture, they were very interested to know it when they learnt it in the second semester. They could memorize the characters faster after knowing the culture. From this class, they were not only learning how to write the *hanzi*, but also Chinese culture. By this input, they could learn how to draw a connecting line between the *hanzi* and the culture, which can help them when they have self-learning later.
 5. Most of the students found this teaching method was very interesting and encouraging, because their results were improving. They found out that writing *hanzi* actually was not as difficult as they thought before.
 6. It is very clear to say that teaching Chinese character through introducing Chinese cultural understand has brought very positive impact to the students. Gaining culture knowledge is an important part of achieving competency in foreign language. They found out that *hanzi* is so meaningful and fun. The good score they have got made them happy. They would not only learn the language further, but also the Chinese culture. These eighteen students are Chinese, but most of them knew nothing about Chinese culture. This mandarin class became very important to them, because they could learn the culture of their ancestor.

4.4 REFLECTION

We can say that the findings of this research are positive. The eagerness of the students to study Chinese language was quite high, and the test result also showed improvement. However, the researcher admitted that there were still many weaknesses in this research. There were too many characters to be explained, the researcher often ran out of time explaining the characters one by one. Within 90 minutes, prepared approximately twenty five characters would be better. The textbook used was also not that ideal for this class. The distribution of the characters was not systematic. Based on the above findings, the researcher designed the lesson plan to teach the characters according to topics: culinary, clothing, color, education, and family. This could help the students to reorganize the characters. It seemed this strategy was correct, and acceptable by the students.

5. CONCLUSION

After conducting the teaching process, observation, the test evaluation, and analyzing the feedback from the students, the researcher drew the following conclusions. Due to the bad language environment in Indonesia and the big difference between Chinese and Indonesia language, Chinese language became a difficult language to be learned, especially writing. However, this problem could be solved. Teaching Chinese character through cultural understanding is an alternative way to improve the writing skill of the students. It could also increase students' eagerness in learning Chinese language as well as Chinese culture.

The observer found out the change of the attitude of the students: from two students not paying attention to all of the students were paying attention, then the participation and interaction also got better from time to time, which created a very nice class atmosphere. While from the students' side, it was clearly seen the improvement, not only the score, but the change of study attitude, like Student No. 7 who almost gave up in previous semester, realized that the language was very important to be mastered, because it would be useful for his future. At the end of the semester, fifteen students answered that it was a need for them to learn Mandarin, because it was important for his or her future, easier for them to find a job with high salary. They had a very strong instrumental motivation.

Because they also found out that writing *hanzi* actually was not as difficult as they thought before, supported by the higher score they got, this encourage them to learn this foreign language.

Chinese characters are full of meaning and bearing very rich cultural connotation, the researcher suggests the Chinese teachers to read more to enrich their knowledge about Chinese culture. There is no single perfect teaching method which can be conducted all alone. Competent teachers have to be resourceful and creative, to apply various kinds of teaching method in teaching writing skill, which is considered to be a very tough and dull subject. Using telling stories about the culture of the characters will be very interesting. It can motivate the students to learn Chinese language and help the student to master the writing skill well.

The researcher really hopes this paper can encourage the Chinese teachers to improve their capability and creativity in teaching Chinese language.

6. REFERENCE

- Cai, Xin-fa. 2006. *Shuo Wen Da Wen*. Taoyuan: Xin De Press
- Cheng, Yu-zhen. 1998. *Zhongguo Wenhua Yaolue*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching & Research Publisher.
- Cui, Xi-liang. 2008. *Hanyu Zuowei Di-er Yuyan de Xide yu Renzhi Yanjiu*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Everson, Michael & Yun Xiao. 2009. *Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language: Theories and applications*. Boston: Cheng & Tsui Company, Inc.
- Gong, Wen-xiang. 1998. *Food in Chinese Culture*. Beijing: CAV Television Production Co. Ltd.
- Guan, Zhi-ying. 2002. *Hanyu Jiaoxue yu Jiaoshi Peixun*. Sichuan: Sichuan Renmin Press.

Teaching Chinese Characters Using Cultural Background Understanding

Han, Cheng. 2002. *Hanzi Bai Wen*. Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Press.

Han, Jian-tang. 2006. *Zhong Hua Wen Hua*. Beijing: Beijing Language University Press.

He, Shu-zhen, Zhang, Xiao-yu, Chen, Li-fen, Shu, Zhao-min, Cai, Ya-xun, Lai, Mingde. 2009. *Huayuwen Jiaoxue Daolun*. Taipei: San Min Shuju Press.

Hu, Wenhua. 2008. *Hanzi yu Duiwai Hanzi Jiaoxue*. Shanghai: Xuelin Press.

Hu, Yu-shu. 1993. *Xiandai Hanyu*. Hongkong: Joint Publishing (H.K.) Co. Ltd.

Huang, Bo-rong & Liao, Xu-dong. 2002. *Xiandai Hanyu*. Beijing: Gao Deng Jiaoyu Press.

Ji, De-yu. 1997. *Hanzi Shi Qu*. Shanghai: Fudan University Press.

Kantor Penerangan Dewan Negara Republik Rakyat Tiongkok. 2007. *Tiongkok – Indonesia*. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press.

Kemmis, S., & Mc. Taggart. 1992. *The Action Research Planner*. Victoria: Deakin University Press.

Latief, Mohammad Adnan. 2009. *Classroom Action Research in Language Learning*. Malang: Universitas Negeri Malang Press.

Li, Le-yi. 1999. *The Origins of Simplified Chinese Characters*. Beijing: Sinolingua Press.

Li, Xiao-ding. 2008. *Hanzi de Qiyuan yu Yanbian Luncong*. Taipei: Lianjing Co. Press.

Liu, Lanyun. 2000. *Chu Ji Hanyu Keben – Hanzi Duxie Lianxi*. Beijing: Beijing Language & Culture University Press.

Liu, Xun. 2002. *Hanyu Zuowei Di Er Yuyan Jiaoxue Jianlun*. Beijing: Beijing Language University Press.

Liu Xun. 2010. *Dui Wai Hanyu Jiaoyuxue Yinlun*. Beijing: Beijing Language University Press.

Liu, You-xin. 2003. *Hanyu Hanzi Dawen*. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan Press.

Lo, Chiung-yu. 2008. *Chinese Characters for Beginners*. Taipei: Panda Media Co., Ltd.

Lǚ, Bi-song. 2008. *Hanyu ke Hanyu Zuowei Di-er Yuyan Jiaoxue*. Beijing: Peking University Press.

Mc Niff, et. Al. 1996. *You and Your Action Research Project*. New York: Routledge Publication.

Mill, Geoffrey E. 2000. *Action Research: A Guide for the Teacher Reseacher*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

Moleong, L. J. 2007. *Metodologi Penelitian Kualitatif*. Bandung: PT. Remaja Rosdakarya.

Teaching Chinese Characters Using Cultural Background Understanding

- Nelson, E. R., Broadberry, R.E., and Chock, Ginger Tong. 1997. *God's Promise to the Chinese*. Dunlap: Read Books Publisher.
- Ong Tee Wah, Dr. 1999. *Fun With Chinese Characters*. Singapore: Federal Publications (S) Pte. Ltd.
- Qiu, Zhao-yu. 2001. *Wenzi de Aomi*. Singapore: Popular Book Co. (Pte) Ltd.
- Sudianto. 2001. *Asal Usul Huruf Mandarin (Jilid 1)*. Jakarta: Milenium Baru Abad 21.
- Suparto, ST., BA. 2002. *Kemiripan Aksara Mandarin*. Jakarta: Puspa Swara.
- Su, Pei-cheng. 2003. *Xiandai Hanzixue Gangyao*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Suyanto, K.K.E. 2001. *Penelitian Tindakan Kelas*. Jakarta: Insan Cendikia.
- Song, Ru-yu. 2008. *Huayuwen Jiaoshi de Zhuanye Dazhan*. Taipei: Xiuwei Zixun Keji Co., Ltd.
- Xie, Guang-hui. 1999. *The Composition of Common Chinese Characters – An Illustrated Account*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Yang, Ji-zhou. 2006. *Hanyu Jiaocheng Book I*. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press.
- Yu, Chun-chi. 2008. *Zou Xiang Shijie de Hanyu Jiaoxue Tansuo*. Beijing: Waiyu Jiaoxue yu Yanjiu Press.
- Zhang, De-sheng. 2002. *Shenbian de Wenzixue*. Shanghai: Shanghai Kexue Jishu Wenxian Press.
- Zhang, Jing-xian. 1992. *Xiandai Hanzi Jiaocheng*. Beijing: Xiandai Press.
- Zhang, Wang-xi. 2005. *Duiwai Hanyu Yanjiu yu Pinglun*. Beijing: Jiaoyue Kexue Press.
- Zhao, Jin-ming. 2008. *Duiwai Hanyu Jiaoxue Gailun*. Beijing: Shangwu Yinshuguan.
- Zhongyuan Daxue Yingyong Huayu Wenxue Xi. 2006. *Yinni Huawen Jiaoyu Yu Jiaoxue*. Taipei: ChungYuan Christian University Press.
- Zhou, Xiao-bing and Li Han-ou. 2005. *The Guidance of Teaching Chinese to Foreigners*. Guangzhou: Zhongshan University Press
- Zuo, Min-an. 2009. *Xi Shuo Hanzi*. Taipei: Lianjing Co. Press.