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**CHINESE LANGUAGE ACQUISITION. CONSTRAINTS OCCURRING
IN THE FIRST STAGES OF LEARNING CHINESE BY POLISH
BEGINNER STUDENTS**

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Chinese Language Acquisition. Constraints Occurring in the First Stages of Learning Chinese by Polish Beginner Students

Learning a language is always demanding, especially when you decide upon learning it in a certain age, or when the decision of learning it is encouraged or decided by someone else. The motivation factors are always different, thus the language acquisition is also going to be somewhat different. It is crucial to have a desire to learn a language, especially when it is as difficult as Chinese.

Chinese, as a nation, is one of the most traditional nations on Earth, using the script which has been used for over five thousands of years. Although, it has undergone numerous changes, and we can look at characters from a totally new perspective, as if it was a totally new language than the one used before, it has its roots in the ancient Chinese character writing style. What is more, the stroke order and the precision in writing every stroke in the manner it has been written over those thousands of years, is still considered to be crucial for the Chinese native speakers. It might be compared to Polish orthography, something necessary in order to write proper Polish words, phrases, sentences.

The aim of this article is to provide the analysis of the Chinese language acquisition of characters by beginner students of various ages divided into two language groups: youth and adults. Various aspects of learning Chinese characters will be analyzed, with special emphasis on the constraints the students need to deal with in the process of learning the characters. What is more, each aspect will be summarized and certain examples from class observation and other sources will be provided, in order to illustrate the entire scope of a particular learning problem. Finally, the most important elements will be summarized and pointed out in order to give a conclusion to the entire article.

Key words: Chinese language, Chinese characters, psycholinguistics, language acquisition.

1. Research Sample Introduction

The analyzed research sample amounts to 42 students divided into two groups: youth and adults. The first group (22 students), aged 10–19 are students of primary schools, gymnasium, and middle schools, whereas the other group (20 students) consists of students aged: 20 and more, where we can find university students and working people. As we can see in the table below (see table 1), students of both groups had no previous experience in terms of learning Chinese, it is an important factor which will help obtaining clear results of the Chinese characters' acquisition in the further parts of this article devoted to the process of the analysis of the collected material.

The reason why I have decided to divide the subject groups in such a way is because both of this groups living background and living situation is different, what will have further implications in terms of learning Chinese writing style.

Table 1

Research sample – students taking part in the pilot study

Research Sample	Age	Background	Amount of students
Youth	10–19	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ No previous Chinese experience▪ Primary and grammar school students▪ High school and university students	22
Adults	20 and over	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ No previous Chinese experience▪ University students▪ Workers	20

It is important to mention the fact that, the reasons for learning the language in question 'were similar to almost half of the first group, namely: parents' encouragement. However, the other half of the first group of students decided to learn Chinese because they wanted to start doing something making them outstanding as far as their interests are concerned.

As far as the other age group is concerned, Chinese was taken up mainly for 'instrumental purposes' as their future university major, in order to use it in the future for earning purposes, just like the students which were already working (in order to see more about motivation and instrumental motivation [1; 2].

2. Research Methods Introduction

In order to write this article I have used the following methods:

- Weekly class observation of the characters' acquisition process,
- Weekly class observation of the progress in the amount of the learnt characters,
- Weekly written test,
- Writing Chinese characters on the blackboard – the verification of the stroke order,
- Oral examination – oral explanations of how to write certain characters
- Monthly after class conversations / meetings – discussions about the struggles in learning characters,

The above mentioned methods have been used in order to keep track of the progress in learning Chinese characters by both age groups. The methods in question helped in researching the learning progress, changing motivation and students' attitude towards learning Chinese. Each age group had class once a week for two hours (120 minutes). The students and children were taught in groups of 11 people a group, whereas the adults were taught in groups of 10 students each group. Due to the fact, that all of the students were of Polish origin, there were no further complications in terms of the language environment influencing the learning process. Both age groups were taught in Poland, where they had no Chinese language background and the teacher was their only medium with the language. The textbooks used for the purposes of this article were books by yang Jizhou: 'HanyuJiaocheng' volume 1 and 2 [3; 4].

The chosen area of research has not been investigated thoroughly in Poland, and because most of the notion and research of this article was created especially for the purposes of this paper, based on observations, and various testing strategies, thus there will be more original text and fewer cited remarks of other linguists.

3. The Analytical Chapter

In the following chapter I will introduce the specificity of Chinese as opposed to Polish, what is more I will introduce the specificity of learning Chinese characters

and the constraints the students need to go through while learning characters, and how it influences their learning.

a. Chinese language Introduction

Before moving to the Chinese characters introduction, it would be wise to introduce the general differences between Polish and Chinese, in order to know, more or less, how many difficulties the Polish students struggle with, while learning Chinese characters (table 2).

Table 2

Polish and Chinese language comparison

POLISH	CHINESE
West Slavic Language	Sino-Tibetan Language http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sino-Tibetan_languages
97% Poles	56 ethnic groups
Homogenous language (only 5 main dialects: greater Polish, Lesser Polish, Massovian, Silesian, Kashubian)	Various dialects (it is said to have over one hundred of dialects)
Non-tonal language	Tonal language
Latin script	Chinese characters and their phonetic representation
Complicated grammar	Simplistic grammar
SVO language	SVO language

As it can be seen in the table above, Polish language is rather a unified language, which is spoken by the 97% of Polish people, whereas in China, there are over 56 ethnic groups speaking their own dialects. Numerous times, participating in HANBAN training programs, I have heard that there are over one hundred dialects in China nowadays, thus there was a need to create one language of spoken communication – Mandarin Chinese + the governmental language used in mass media, and other sources of communication across China. Chinese writing system stayed the same. It has rather simplistic grammar, comparing to Polish that is a very good issue, because Polish grammar is very complicated. There is no conjugation,

declination, flexion, rather vague plural and gender distinction. Chinese, as well as Polish, is the SVO language, however the Chinese sentence structure is much stricter than the structure of a Polish sentence.

What is the most difficult issue concerning Chinese, is the fact that it is a tonal language, consisting of four (five) tones, which have corresponding characters, called in Chinese: 'hanzi' and their phonetic representation, called: 'pinyin'.

Thus, while learning Chinese, the students need to learn five various elements at the same time:

- The meaning
- The tone
- The pinyin
- The hanzi
- And the stroke order of the character.

At the beginning, learning Chinese is like learning a totally new language. Students need to learn HOW to learn Chinese first.

b. Chinese characters' Acquisition Introduction

Characters are often compared to pictures of squares, rectangles and other shapes [5, p. 1 – 3). As opposed to other languages, there are only few words which consist of only one letter, such as onomatopoeic sounds or interjections like a for instance sound of surprise '啊!' or '哦!' [6].

As stated before, it is rather a grammatically simple language. What is more, it is a syllabic language, where each syllable has its own visual representation in the form of a character, commonly known as: 'hanzi'. However, there is a limited amount of such syllables, 419 to be exact.

As it can be seen in the table above (table 3), the sentence 'I am Polish' – is a compilation of five syllables which can exist alone. 'I' + 'to be' + 'Poland' + 'person' means I am Polish. Only the word 'Poland' is written together, due to the fact that it is a phonetic equivalent of the English word Poland.

Table 3

An example of a Chinese sentence written in monosyllabic characters' structure
(based on [6])

Simplified Character Version and Pīnyīn	English Definition
我 wǒ	I / me / my
是 shì	is / are / am / yes / to be
波兰 Bōlán	Poland
人 rén	man / person / people
我是波兰人	I am Polish

However, although there are only 26 letters in the Chinese alphabet [7, p. 6], there are 419 syllables and most of them can have four or five tonal representation (there are also multiple meaning syllables, or polysemic syllables, or polyphonic syllables). We can observe it in the table below, on the example of the word 'mi' (table 4).

Table 4

Chinese phonetic and written representation of one syllable and its meaning







Syllable	Tone	Character representation	Translation
MI {	Mī	咪	Sound for calling a cat
	Mí	谜	Riddle
	Mǐ	米	rice
	Mì	密	Secret

We can find four various tonal representations with four corresponding characters, meaning '咪' – 'sound for calling a cat', '谜' – 'a riddle', '米' – 'rice', and '密' – 'a secret' [8; 9].

In terms of learning Chinese characters, students face numerous problems. In the past, characters were simply pictograms, ideograms, which connected to the historical origin of how they were created in the ancient times, could help to memorize them in present (table 5).

Table 5




The evolution of Chinese characters – pictures
(based on [10])

English translation	Pictogram evolution			Traditional character	Simplified character	Pinyin
Horse				馬	马	Mǎ
Moon				月	月	Yuè

As it can be observed, the characters look much different, than they used to in the past, but it is still crucial to write them in the appropriate manner. One of the first issues is the matter of learning the strokes and their order in even a single character. In the below mentioned table, we can see three out of twelve examples of strokes and the specificity of their writing system. There are twelve strokes which are used in order to write Chinese characters, however I will just mention three of them, most difficult to my students, namely: 横折钩, 撇 and 横钩, 竖钩, 弯钩 (table 6).

Table 6

Chinese writing system – strokes and their writing explanations
(based on [5, c. 107 – 109; 11])

Stroke's name	Visual representation	Example	Explanation of the writing system
横折钩 héngzhégōu		喝	The horizontal stroke with a downward turn and hook is written first from left to right, then downward, and finally a turn is made toward the top-left by quickly lifting the pen to make the hook.
撇 piě		八	The downward stroke to the left is written from top-right to bottom-left.
横钩 hénggōu, 竖钩 shùgōu, 弯钩 wāngōu		字, 小, 狗	The stroke with a hook: the hook is written by lifting the pen quickly as you approach the end of the hook.

Students' first struggle is to write these strokes correctly.

Another problem they are facing is the similarity in terms of the final representation of certain characters, such as:

日 and 目, 士 and 土, 我 and 找, 见 and 贝
天 and 夫, 快 and 块, 大 and 太, 信 and 言

They often forget to write a stroke in ‘目’ (‘eye’) making it ‘日’ (‘sun’), or they prolong the stroke in the word ‘day’ – ‘天’, making it a part of a character meaning ‘husband’ or a ‘doctor’ – ‘夫’. There are only tiny elements differentiating the above mentioned characters, but they were crucial for the correct writing of the characters.

Thanks to such details, people learning Chinese tend to be more patient and organized with time, what helps children, teenagers and university students enhance their comprehension, abilities in reading and writing, and it also helps improve problem-solving management in all of the age groups [12; 13; 14].

Another difficulty in learning Chinese characters, which the students struggle with, is the fact that the characters must be written with the appropriate stroke order. The stroke order is also a little bit like orthography for Polish people, thus it is crucial to know HOW to write correctly. There are eight major rules to write Chinese characters correctly, the following example is just ‘a taste’ of what the students need to struggle with, in the character learning process (figure 1).

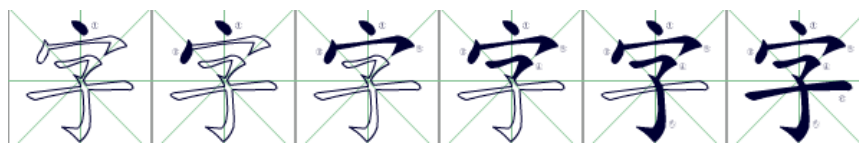


Figure 1. Stroke order of the word ‘character’

What is more, there are many characters, which students have to remember. Many of which are quite similar. The way they cope with the problem is quite interesting. They tend to see the characters as pictures; students describe the characters ‘in their heads’ in order to create their own story. For example the word ‘man’ – ‘男’ is a compilation of the word ‘田’ – ‘field’ and ‘strength’ – ‘力’, thus a man is a person who works on the field, and has to have a lot of strength (男=田+力).

The word ‘good’ is a compilation of a word ‘son’ – ‘子’ and ‘a female’ – ‘女’, because it is good when there is a mother and a son in the family (好=女+子).

Another example is: ‘peace’ – ‘安’, because it is peaceful when there is ‘a female’ – ‘女’ in the house – ‘宀’ (安=宀+女).

However, those explanations are known worldwide. My students have prepared yet another description of certain words, more descriptive, less logical. The word ‘white’ – ‘白’ looks like an open copying machine for the adult students, whereas youth group sees it as a drink with a straw. The word ‘常’ – ‘often’, is seen by the kids as an Indian person, who works out in the gym a lot, and has got a hat with feathers on its top. Adults have no idea to the given character. However, they all see the word ten – ‘十’ as a cross, or a plus sign, and the word ‘sleepy’ – ‘困’ – as a tree on the bed.

Another important factor influencing students’ attitude towards learning Chinese characters, is the motivation factor. Unfortunately, learning Chinese is like opening one door, behind which you find another three or more sets of doors just waiting for you with the unknown. One learns one character, and then he gets ‘bombed’ with yet another characters which occurring with the previous one, introduce totally new meanings of the previously learnt character. Thus motivation for learning characters and hard work one needs to put into learning is crucial.

It turns out that the motivation in the first group of students is, as follows:

- 10 students are encouraged by their parents;
- 7 treat it as a new hobby;
- 4 believe it will be useful to know Chinese in future.

Whereas, students from the adult group learn, because:

- 10 students believe it will help them in the future, to find better jobs;
- 5 students learn Chinese because they co-operate with China, thus they need to know the language;
- 5 treat it as new hobby, and a language that will keep them younger.

As it can be noticed, the motivation factors vary depending on the age group, but the majority of youth is encouraged by their parents, thus it is a less conscious decision to learn Chinese, and Chinese characters, thus learning is less effective,

whereas in the adult group, the students are highly motivated for the instrumental purposes, believing that knowing Chinese will enable them to have better living standards by obtaining better paid jobs, thus the motivation rises.

Finally, the last part of this article is shortly devoted to the results in terms of the Chinese characters acquisition process. I have divided the one year course into three stages, out of which each occurs in different periods of time– 0 – 3 months, 4th month and after 4 months. It turns out, that the first group of students, the youth, learns a striking amount of characters within the first period of time – which amounts up to 300. Adults learn approximately 400–450 characters. The middle stage is the ‘loss of hope’ stage, in which the students struggle the most, thus learn the smallest amount of characters, 30 and 70 respectively. The reason for such situation, is because of the fact that students become aware of the difficulties, and they stand in front of a difficult decision, ‘what to do? Keep up and learn more aware of what is waiting ahead? Or just give up?’. After this 4th month, most of the students accept the difficulty and keep on learning. The pace is slower than at the beginning, but they are more aware of their knowledge and more respectful towards Chinese characters and learning Chinese, what is the key to success.

4. Conclusions

As it has been introduced in the previous chapter, the students, without group division, tend to struggle with similar issues while learning Chinese, especially Chinese characters. Apart from the fact, that they have to learn all the five elements of the language in question at the same time (meaning, tone, pinyin, hanzi, stroke order), something they are not accustomed to do, they also have to follow the rules in which they have to write each, out of 12 stroke types, and then put them in appropriate order, where you have eight major ways of writing the characters. Not to mention the fact, that the students need to struggle with precision in the writing process, so that none of the strokes would go over its place, because then it may mean yet another character. What is more, they have to remember to put the word in a strict and fixed order, although Chinese is SVO language.

However, students found their own ways to cope with the problems of learning Chinese characters; they memorize the characters by means of collocations, or mental representations as they see the characters as pictures introducing a story, what helps them to put the words in their memory for longer.

Another important factor, described above, is the issue of the motivation factor, which has crucial influence on the learning process. It turns out, that when the decision about learning Chinese characters is more conscious, the acquisition process is better and faster; comparing it to a situation when the parents are encouraging, not so aware of the difficulty of Chinese writing system, kids, who get disappointed soon.

The last analyzed material is the stages of learning Chinese Characters. We can see, that after three months of very good and energetic learning process, the period of doubt occurs, after which (ap. After 1 month) the students which stay and keep on with learning Chinese, are more mature in learning the characters, and although the process is slower, it is more self-aware, and stays in the students' minds longer. Learning Chinese is like canoeing, you never know when the dangerous waterfall comes (doubt), you just have to keep on rowing.

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Банька Катаржина

Засвоєння китайської мови. Труднощі, які виникають на перших етапах вивчення китайської мови польськими студентами-початківцями

Засвоєння мови завжди вимагає великих витрат, особливо якщо ви вирішите вивчити її у певному віці, коли рішення навчатися бажане, або хтось інший вирішив, щоб ви навчалися. Фактори мотивації завжди різні, тому й оволодіння мовою також буде дещо відрізнятися. Важливо мати бажання вивчити мову, особливо коли вона така складна, як китайська.

Китайська мова, як нація, є однією з найбільш традиційних на Землі, і вона розвивалась більш ніж п'ять тисяч років. Хоча, мова зазнала численних змін, і ми можемо подивитися на ієрогліфи з абсолютно нової точки зору, вона йде своїм корінням в стародавній стиль письма китайських ієрогліфів. Більше того, порядок написання і точність у письмовій формі кожної риси в належному порядку, як вона була написана за ті тисячі років, до цих пір вважається вирішальним для носіїв китайської мови. Це може бути порівняно з

польської орфографією, дещо-що необхідно для того, щоб написати правильно польські слова, фрази, речення.

Метою даної статті є аналіз вивчення китайської мови, ієрогліфів учнями-початківцями, які були поділені на дві мовні групи: молодь та дорослі. Автор проаналізував різні аспекти навчання китайських ієрогліфів, при цьому особлива увага приділена труднощам, з якими учні стикаються у процесі вивчення ієрогліфів. Більше того, проаналізовано кожен аспект та для ілюстрації конкретної задачі навчання наведено певні приклади з класу спостережень. Також узагальнено та зазначено найбільш важливі елементи й зроблені висновки за статтею в цілому.

Ключові слова: китайська мова, китайські ієрогліфи, психолінгвістика, засвоєння мови.

Банька Катаржина

Усвоение китайского языка. Трудности, которые возникают на первых этапах изучения китайского языка польскими начинающими студентами

Изучение языка всегда требует больших затрат, особенно если вы решите узнать его в определенном возрасте, или когда решение учиться желаемое, или кто-то другой решил, чтобы вы учили китайский. Факторы мотивации всегда разные, поэтому и усвоение языка также будет несколько отличаться. Важно иметь желание изучить язык, особенно когда он такой сложный, как китайский.

Китайский язык, как и нация, является одним из наиболее традиционных на Земле, и он развивался более чем пять тысяч лет. Хотя, речь подверглась многочисленным изменениям, и мы можем посмотреть на иероглифы с совершенно новой точки зрения, он уходит своими корнями в древний стиль письма китайских иероглифов. Более того, порядок написания и точность в письменной форме каждой черточки в надлежащем порядке, как она была написана за те тысячи лет, до сих пор считается решающим для носителей китайского языка. Это может быть сравнено с польской орфографией, когда кое-что необходимо для того, чтобы написать правильно польские слова, фразы, предложения.

Целью данной статьи является анализ усвоения китайского языка, иероглифов начинающими учениками, которые были поделены на две языковые группы: молодежь и взрослые. Автор проанализировал различные аспекты обучения китайских иероглифов, уделив при этом особое внимание трудностям, с которыми сталкиваются ученики в процессе изучения иероглифов. Более того, проанализирован каждый аспект и для иллюстрации конкретной задачи обучения приведены и определенные примеры из класса наблюдений. Также обобщены и указаны наиболее важные элементы, чтобы и сделаны выводы по статье в целом.

Ключевые слова: китайский язык, китайские иероглифы, психолінгвістика, усвоение языка.

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