

# Study on Chinese Character Acquisition Strategies for Beginner Level Second Language Learners

Liang Zhao

Xi'an Shiyu University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710061, China

---

**Abstract:** More and more scholars are paying attention to the acquisition strategies of Chinese as a second language. This is because when teachers fully understand learners' acquisition strategies, they can use this as an entry point to formulate teaching methods suitable for learners, and the teaching effect will naturally get twice the result with half the effort. For beginners, Chinese characters are considered to be the most difficult part of learning Chinese as a second language. Of course, it is necessary to study their acquisition strategies in detail. Combined with the characteristics of primary second language learners' Chinese character acquisition strategies, teachers can improve the shortcomings of Chinese character teaching design and implement more efficient and targeted classroom teaching.

**Keywords:** Learning of Second Language; Chinese Character; Acquisition Strategies.

---

## 1. Introduction

With the deepening and promotion of international Chinese language education, the status of Chinese character teaching is increasingly prominent. In the process of Chinese language teaching, Chinese characters are recognized as "difficult to recognize, write, and remember". This is because although Chinese characters have three elements of form, sound, and meaning, only the form has its own independent development pattern, and the sound and meaning of the characters are only the sound and meaning of the Chinese words they record (Dong Kun, 1991). Secondly, the combination of sound, form, and meaning has also been commonly used and agreed upon by people for a long time, without any rules to follow, undoubtedly increasing the memory burden on second language learners.

Of course, we should also recognize that the difficulty of acquiring Chinese characters is mainly reflected in the initial stage of Chinese language learning. Many excellent second language learners generally realize that as long as they master the correct methods, Chinese characters will not become a stumbling block in Chinese language learning, instead, be greatly helpful with vocabulary and sentences, making Chinese language learning more efficient. Therefore, it is particularly important to study the strategies for second language learners to acquire Chinese characters, summarize effective methods and generalize them. According to the perspective of cognitive psychology in learning, if students can master learning methods and skills, they can repeatedly use these skills, which is more useful than knowledge itself (Jiang Xin, 2007).

## 2. Research Status

### 1. Foreign related research

The exploration of learning strategies in the foreign second language teaching community started relatively early and has yielded rich results. McGinnis conducted a study on Chinese character learning methods for second language learners and found that there are many self-reported Chinese character learning methods among participants. The most commonly used strategy is repetition, fabricating stories unrelated to

semantic and phonetic symbols, while using semantic and phonetic symbol strategies is not the most commonly used strategy for students.

Ke. C conducted a survey on Chinese language beginners from several universities in the United States, using a self-designed questionnaire to understand their Chinese character learning strategies and using Chinese character test scores as an indicator of learning effectiveness. This research method is very inspiring. After comparing the relative effectiveness of different strategies among students, he found that the most effective Chinese character learning strategies that students consider include: learning and applying Chinese character components (semantic and phonetic symbols), repeating Chinese characters, and paying attention to the connection between new and old character structures and meanings. However, Ke C's research requires students to compare the relative effectiveness of two learning methods, reflecting their understanding of the effectiveness of different Chinese character learning methods, rather than their actual use of Chinese character learning strategies.

### 2. Domestic related research

At present, research related to the acquisition of Chinese characters in China mainly involves: (1) the relationship between the frequency of appearance, word formation, complexity of character shapes (number of strokes, number of components) and the acquisition of Chinese characters; (2) The relationship between the mastery of Chinese character components and the acquisition of Chinese characters; (3) The relationship between the awareness of Chinese character phonetic and radical part and phonogram character acquisition; (4) The relationship between Chinese character learning strategies and Chinese character acquisition for international students; (5) The relationship between the orthographic awareness of international students and the acquisition of Chinese characters; (6) The relationship between the overall arrangement of Chinese character teaching in Chinese language teaching and the efficiency of Chinese character teaching; (7) The relationship between specific teaching implementation methods and teaching efficiency. It can be seen that research related to Chinese character acquisition strategies is only a minority, and there is still a lot of room for development.

### 3. Definition of Chinese Character Acquisition Strategies

There is currently no unified definition in the academic community regarding learning (acquisition) strategies. The following are the most common definitions:

1. Consider learning strategies as learning activities or steps. It is not a simple event, but an intellectual activity used to improve learning efficiency, encode, analyze, and extract information. It is a set of operational processes for selecting and integrating learning techniques.

2. View learning strategies as rules, abilities, or skills for learning.

3. Viewing learning strategies as a learning plan, which is a complex one formulated by learners to achieve learning objectives.

Second language learning is a complex process that integrates multiple disciplines such as linguistics, psychology, and cross-cultural communication. Therefore, we cannot simply define second language learning strategies as learning steps or plans. We prefer to believe that it is the various plans, approaches, steps, methods, techniques, and regulatory measures adopted by language learners to effectively master the language rule system, develop language skills and communication abilities, and solve problems encountered in the learning process (Liu Jun, 2006).

Based on this definition, we believe that Chinese character learning strategies refer to all behaviors taken by learners to promote the acquisition, storage, extraction, and utilization of Chinese characters, including various plans, approaches, steps, methods, techniques, and regulatory measures.

### 4. Classification of Chinese Character Acquisition Strategies

There are currently many quantitative studies on second language acquisition strategies, and many scales have emerged. A popular SILL scale developed by Oxford examines the learning strategies of second language learners from five aspects: memory strategy, cognitive strategy, compensation strategy, metacognitive strategy, and affective strategy. But this scale is based on learning English as a second language and cannot be directly applied to learning Chinese as a second language. As the most unique part of Chinese, Chinese characters are significantly different from English letters, and the learning strategies of Chinese characters cannot be simply measured by these five dimensions.

Therefore, Jiang Xin and Zhao Guo (2001) combined previous research and fully considered the particularity of Chinese character acquisition, developed a set of Chinese character acquisition strategy scales with high reliability and validity. This scale divides learning strategies into two categories based on traditional classification methods: cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies. Further subdivide cognitive strategies into six aspects, namely stroke strategy, phonetic & semantic strategy, glyph strategy, inductive strategy, review strategy, and application strategy. This classification is still the first in academia and is considered effective in subsequent teaching practices. It is currently widely used as a classification method for Chinese character learning strategies. The metacognitive strategy only considers two aspects: monitoring and planning.

### 5. The Selection of Chinese Character Acquisition Strategies

Jiang Xin and Zhao Guo (2001) found that when using the above scale to test international students with basic Chinese proficiency, overall, the most commonly used acquisition strategy by students is the glyph strategy, and the least used is the inductive strategy. Comparing "Chinese character circle" students with "non Chinese character circle" students, the former uses more phonetic & semantic and application strategies, and less glyph and review strategies, indicating that the mother tongue background can affect learners' learning strategy choices. Comparing male and female students, there was no difference in their cognitive strategy choices, indicating that gender is not a factor that affects learner strategy choices.

In recent years, the academic community has increasingly focused on national research, concentrating on the use of learning strategies by learners in a specific country. As Zeng Qi (2015) studied the strategies for students at the Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan to acquire Chinese characters, he found that in the early stages of learning and writing Chinese characters, learners tend to use more glyph strategies, treating each character as a picture for overall cognition. Therefore, learners often cannot detect a series of problems such as missing strokes and incorrect stroke order. The proposed solutions include: firstly, providing students with more training on merging and splitting Chinese characters, and secondly, emphasizing the cultivation of students' awareness of orthography.

In recent years, the academic community has increasingly focused on national research, focusing on the use of learning strategies by learners in a specific country. As Zeng Qi (2015) studied the strategies for students at the Confucius Institute in Azerbaijan to acquire Chinese characters, he found that in the early stages of learning and writing Chinese characters, learners tend to use more glyph strategies, treating each character as a picture for overall cognition. Therefore, learners often cannot detect a series of problems such as missing strokes and incorrect stroke order. The proposed solutions include: firstly, providing students with more training on merging and splitting Chinese characters, and secondly, emphasizing the cultivation of students' awareness of orthography.

Tian Jiabin (2016) found during a survey of first and second year students at Siberian Federal University in Russia that personality factors and mastery of other foreign languages can also have an impact on learners' Chinese character acquisition strategies. She divided the personalities of the participants into three categories: introverted, extroverted, and neutral. The test found that neutral learners are better at using inductive strategies, introverted learners are better at applying strategies, and extroverted learners are more inclined to use phonetic & semantic strategies. This may be explained as follows: 1. Neutral personality students are willing to maintain close communication with the outside world, widely obtain Chinese character information, and can also calm down to summarize and think quietly, analyze and process Chinese character information, and seek patterns to bring the old with the new. 2. Introverted learners, who do not like to express themselves in public and are not good at using conversation to obtain information, tend to obtain information through reading and express emotions through writing. And both of these methods are actually great applications of

Chinese characters. 3. Outgoing learners enjoy reading aloud and communicating with others to promote language learning. In order to ensure effective and accurate output, they must pay extra attention to the pronunciation and meaning of Chinese characters.

In addition, although the other foreign languages mastered by the subjects belong to the Western phonetic system and are vastly different from the ideographic system of Chinese, the language skills and methods already mastered are difficult to directly apply to Chinese language learning. However, this still has an impact on the choice of Chinese character strategies for learners. The more types of foreign languages learners master, the more they will choose acquisition strategies to help themselves.

Tian Jiabin (2016) also used a case study method to compare the acquisition strategies of excellent and underachieving Chinese character learners. The following conclusions were drawn: excellent Chinese character learners have a strong interest in learning Chinese characters, value Chinese character components, diligently review and use inductive strategies, and often use metacognitive strategies to reflect on their learning process; Underachievers in Chinese character learning lack interest in Chinese characters, prioritize reading over writing, believe that review is not important, and generally do not use metacognitive strategies. The suggestion put forward is that teachers should enhance the learning motivation of second language learners to acquire Chinese characters. External motivation can rely on some utilitarian stimuli, while the formation of internal motivation requires teachers to help learners realize that learning Chinese characters is systematic, scientific, and interesting, thereby stimulating their inner desire for knowledge and exploration.

Du Chao (2018) found through his research on the acquisition strategies of Chinese characters by Pakistani international students at Tianjin Normal University that beginner level learners use the most phonetic and semantic strategies, followed by inductive, applied, and compensatory strategies, and use less glyph strategies. It is worth noting that there is a significant relationship between the use of phonetic and semantic strategies, inductive strategies, and monitoring strategies and the performance of Chinese character writing and application. Therefore, in daily teaching, teachers should encourage students to remember and learn the pronunciation and meaning of Chinese characters as a whole, and use Chinese characters as much as possible; When writing Chinese characters, it is important to monitor your own writing situation.

With the rapid development of computer technology and Internet technology, second language learners have also shown some new characteristics in acquiring Chinese characters in recent years. During her teaching at the Confucius Institute in Newcastle, Australia, Zhen Yu (2020) found that Chinese language learners in non target language environments tend to rely more on various mobile Chinese character learning tools when learning Chinese characters. These tools can be roughly divided into four categories based on their purposes: writing exercises, dictionary queries, Chinese character expansion, and communicative applications. According to statistical analysis, among beginner level Chinese language learners, the number of people using writing practice tools is the highest, followed by dictionary queries, and finally communication applications.

Skritter, an application founded by American Nick Winter, ranks first in terms of usage rate for writing exercises and

teaches foreigners how to write Chinese characters. The media language is English, which is widely favored by native English speakers. This product has a dynamic demonstration function for Chinese character writing, which is very helpful for beginners to quickly grasp the stroke order and complete character writing.

The Pleco Chinese English Dictionary ranks first in terms of dictionary query usage, originally developed by Mike Love, a programmer from New York, USA. Mike found many inconveniences while learning Chinese, so he had the idea of developing a practical dictionary. This application has a convenient word extraction function. In addition to traditional handwriting input, it also supports photo recognition and speech recognition, greatly alleviating the embarrassment of beginners being unable to search for words without writing.

Second language learners are very enthusiastic in the initial stage of learning and eager to share their newly acquired language knowledge. Therefore, communicative application tools have also been favored by novice learners. One noteworthy APP is Hello Talk, where the system can match users with language partners of comparable proficiency, allowing them to communicate one-on-one and supervise each other's learning. In a set language exchange mode, learners often achieve unexpected Chinese character output due to the communication pressure caused by the system's time or word count requirements, achieving good communication application effects.

## 6. Conclusion

Through the review of Chinese character acquisition strategies for beginner level second language learners in this article, the author found that learners generally use more glyph strategies and less inductive strategies. Mother tongue background, personality factors, and foreign language learning experience all affect the choice of acquisition strategies by learners, while gender factors do not have an impact on the choice of acquisition strategies. And because of the rapid development of computer and Internet technology, more and more second language learners tend to adopt tool strategies and use mobile learning tools of Chinese characters with various functions to achieve twice the result with half the effort.

I hope the above conclusions can help international Chinese language teachers to achieve targeted teaching strategies for Chinese characters. However, due to limited time and lack of practical teaching experience, there are inevitably shortcomings in the research methodology of this article. But I believe that with the passage of time, the accumulation of theoretical knowledge and teaching practice, the author will definitely have a deeper understanding of Chinese character acquisition strategies.

## References

- [1] Jiang Xin, Zhao Guo. A Survey and Study on Chinese Character Learning Strategies of Primary Foreign Students [J]. *Language Teaching and Research*, 2001 (4).
- [2] Liu Xun. *Introduction to Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 2006.
- [3] Jiang Xin. *Psychological Exploration of Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language* [M]. Beijing: Education Science Press, 2007.

- [4] Zeng Qi. Research on Chinese Character Acquisition Strategies for Students at Confucius Institutes in Azerbaijan [D]. Master's Thesis of Anhui University, 2015.
- [5] Tian Jiabin. Research on Chinese Character Learning Strategies for Russian Junior Chinese Learners in Non target Language Environments [D]. Master's Thesis, Beijing Foreign Studies University, 2016.
- [6] Du Chao. Research on the Relationship between Chinese Character Acquisition Strategies and Acquisition Effects for Pakistani International Students [D]. Master's Thesis of Tianjin Normal University, 2018.
- [7] Wei Wanchuan. A Study on the Cognitive Process of Chinese Character Acquisition in the Past Twenty Years [J]. Overseas Chinese Education, 2019 (1).
- [8] Zhen Yu. Research on Chinese Character Acquisition Strategies in Non target Language Environments: A Case Study of Confucius Institute Students in Newcastle, Australia [D]. Master's Thesis, Central China Normal University, 2020.
- [9] Mc Ginnis. Student attitudes and approaches in the learning of written Chinese [C]. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Association for Applied Linguistics, Long Beach, CA, 1995.
- [10] Ke. C. Effects of strategies on the learning of Chinese Characters of among foreign language studies [C]. Journal of the Chinese Language Teacher's Association, 1998 33.2, 93-122.