

Grammar of Character: A Culture-Infused Approach to Language Learning

Using Musical Intelligence as a Decoding System for Young Children



Der-Jen Sun

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Character

The word character carries four meanings—
glyph, role, trait, and virtue.

Guiding students' writing through these layers moves from surface to depth.

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My first year of teaching

In my first year of teaching, I was asked to guide third graders to write their first composition.

I knew it could not begin by teaching writing.

So I gave them a world to enter—The Animal Beauty Contest.

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Mission

Choose one animal as today's self.

Name three traits: looks, ability, or virtue.

Plan one stage action: a walk, a signature move, or a call.

Write a 40–60-word campaign speech.

You have 20 seconds on stage to win votes.



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Scaffold

I am a _____, because _____, so people will _____.
My signature skill is _____; the rule I keep is _____.
Vote for me because _____. I will _____ for everyone.

Transfer: image → traits → norms → manifesto.

Encoding: turn the speech into short, readable lines.

Recognition: present → vote → three-word feedback (Strong / Clear / Memorable).

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Why I teach this way

A – Affection: When the child wants to be heard

Blank minds come from storyless spaces.

Inside a story, meaning arrives first.

The heart longs to be heard, the voice follows, the hand writes.

This urge to publish and share is Affection.



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Opening —

My material begins with a stone.

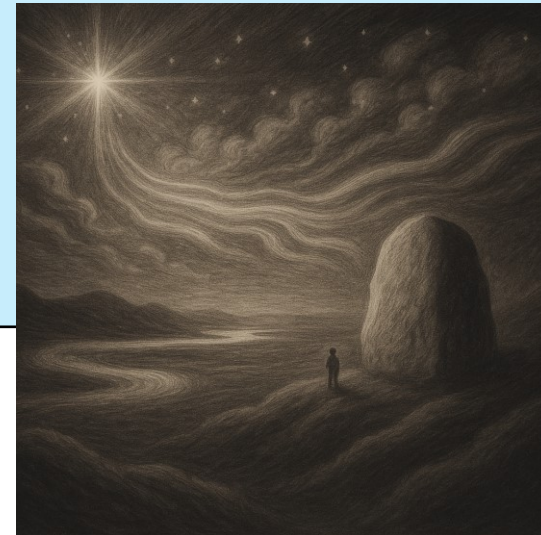
In Dream of the Red Chamber, Cao Xueqin also begins with a stone.

In Chinese culture, a “stone” often suggests numbness, no feeling.

But this stone had been refined by Nüwa
and had learned to feel.

Yet it was never chosen to mend the sky.

Instead, it was cast aside on the Great Wilderness Mountain,
forgotten.



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C – Context: When Knowledge Descends

C

There are only two kinds of “difficult” children in my experience:
those who cannot learn, because they do not yet feel;
and those who will not learn, because they do not yet want.
They trouble many teachers.
So I formed an elite class
dedicated to seeking the forgotten “Spiritual Stone” children.
I gave them stickers.
Each sticker marked the moment I saw something good in them.





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The Decoding System

C H A R A C T E R

My decoding system is spelled with nine letters:

CHARACTER.

Each letter stands for one condition.

Context—Home—Affection— Read aloud—

Awakening—Commitment—Transfer—Encoding—Recognition

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C – Context: When Knowledge Descends

C



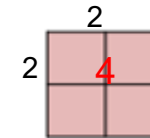
I design a Sim Life.

I lead children down to earth

to experience life and recover feeling.

I say, “Sim Life.”

The child asks, “What are we playing?”



A square with area 4 has side length 2.

A square with area 9 has side length 3.

A square with area 16 has side length 4.

$$\sqrt{4} = 2$$

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H – Home: Where Musical Intelligence Grows

C

H

There are two kinds of intelligences in language learning.

If you first think of phonics, grammar, words

→ raise your left hand.

→ Linguistic intelligence.

If you first think of sound, rhythm, feeling

→ raise your right hand.

→ Musical intelligence.

The following is an example of the evolution of 10 Chinese characters through time:

	seal script (ancient)	seal script (archaic)	seal script (archaic)	seal script (archaic)	seal script (archaic)	seal script (archaic)	seal script (archaic)	seal script (archaic)	seal script (archaic)
人 (rén) person	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	𠤎	人
女 (nǚ) woman	𡚦	𡚦	𡚦	𡚦	𡚦	𡚦	𡚦	𡚦	女
耳 (ěr) ear	𦊮	𦊮	𦊮	𦊮	𦊮	𦊮	𦊮	𦊮	耳
馬 (mǎ) horse	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	馬
魚 (yú) fish	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	𩺰	魚
山 (shān) mountain	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	山
日 (rì) sun	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	日
月 (yuè) moon	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	月
雨 (yǔ) rain	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	雨
雲 (yún) cloud	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	𠂔	雲



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H – Home: Where Musical Intelligence Grows

C

H

There are two kinds of intelligences in music learning.

If you are more comfortable with notation, sight-reading, and memorizing by sight

→ raise your left hand.

→ Linguistic intelligence.

If you are more comfortable with listening, rehearsing in groups, and memorizing by ear

→ raise your right hand.

→ Musical intelligence.



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H – Home: Where Musical Intelligence Grows

C

H

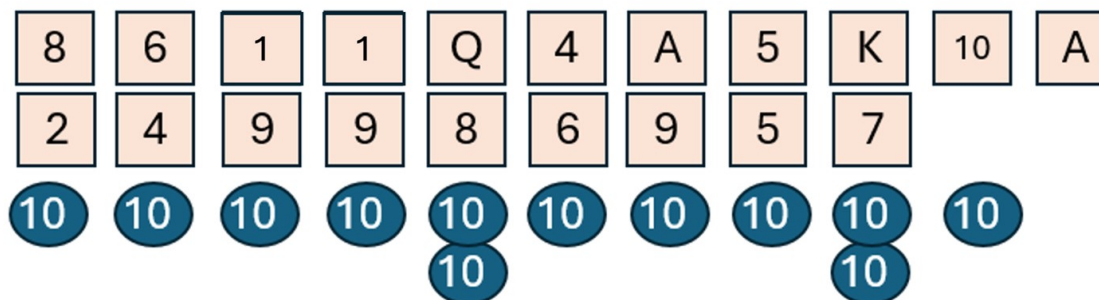


Sim Life — Accountant

Task: Use \$10 coins to write equations for 20 cards.

Sim Life trains the hand to act, the eye to track, and thought to stand somewhere real.

Mentor • Peers • Artistic tools



$$= 10 + 10 + 10 + 10 + 20 + 10 + 10 + 10 + 20 + 10 + 1$$

$$= 121$$

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A – Affection: Where Meaning Becomes Breath

C

H

A



We begin with affection—no child learns for a stranger.

Language must become breath before it becomes text.

The first word my baby ever spoke clearly was 愛 (love).



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A — Affection: Watering Heaven

C

H

A



This is our child — watering a piece of heaven — with music.

這是我的學生 —— 用音樂灌溉靈芝。

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R – Read Aloud: When Language Awakens

C H A R

Sim Life: Mathematician

Reading aloud makes thinking audible, invites correction, and builds shared meaning.

Role	Multiplicand	Multiplier	Product
Sign		×	=
Sound	2	1 → 9	2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18

Left side shows the role, sign and action.
Right side shows the sounds.

Multiplication Chorus Derjen Sun



Multiplicand

Multiplied

Product

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A – Awakening: When Light Begins to Think

C H A R A

Sim Life: Coloring the Action

Use movement to express music; let the body teach the mind to notice.

Unit 6 副詞：劉姥姥三進大觀園—摸抽與靈動

Character-Based Grammar



Adverbs : Coloring the Action

副詞：為動作上色

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C – Commitment: Learning is knowing what to cut.

C

H

A

R

A

C

Sim Life: Flower Spirit

Show your preference within a musical scale.

When re and sol are set aside,

do mi fa la ti form the Japanese pentatonic.

**Commitment is the courage to keep what matters
and cut what does not.**





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T – Transfer: Ladders to the Stars

C

H

A

R

A

C

T

Sim Life: The Chess Player

Task:

- 8 heads (○)
- 20 legs (●)
- How many chickens?
- How many rabbits?

After they solved the problem, I show them something

$$x + y = 8$$

$$2x + 4y = 20$$

$$x = ? \quad y = ?$$

○	●	●	●	●
○	●	●	●	●
○	●	●		
○	●	●		
○	●	●		
○	●	●		
○	●	●		
○	●	●		

The chessboard puzzle is appropriate for kindergarten top to lower primary.

The equations are shown only as a teacher's translation, not a test.

Children may not fully master the symbols, but they can sense:

"These signs tell the same story we just solved."

This is the ladder.

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E — Encoding: When Heaven Becomes Language

C H A R A C T E

Sim Life: Animal Carnival

Conduct the movement of music with your body.

Turn experience into recordable language others can revisit.



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R – Recognition: When meaning becomes visible

C H A R A C T E R

Sim Life: Find a stage and friends to perform.

Let everyone be included.





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Making Parts of Speech Come Alive

C H A R A C T E R

- Nouns: name the world, honor each being's uniqueness—plant respect.
- Pronouns: call and respond, truly see each other—nurture relationship.
- Verbs: rise and act, turn will into deeds—build responsibility.
- Adjectives: describe with care, perceive beauty in difference—cultivate empathy.
- Adverbs: refine expression, carry grace within strength—learn balance.
- Prepositions: place and connect, know one's space—practice boundaries and belonging.
- Conjunctions: bridge what is apart, weave diversity into unity—learn cooperation.
- Articles: recognize the chosen one, see the one among the many—learn cherishing.

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 1 冠詞：石頭與絳珠草—命定與啟始

Character-Based Grammar



Articles : Honoring the Chosen one.

冠詞：尊重揀選.

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 4A 動詞：晴雯補裘—真情與倔強		Character-Based Grammar
中文 詩意開場語 動作，是心的言語。 一針一線， 不只是補綻裂的衣裳， 更縫合著情感與忠誠。	English Poetic Prelude Action is the language of the heart. Every stitch does more than mend a garment— it weaves together affection and loyalty.	
Verbs : Breathing Life		動詞：呼吸生命

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 7 介係詞：賈元春省親—孝順與孤絕

Character-Based Grammar



Prepositions : Bridge of Relation.

介係詞：關係的橋樑

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 9A. 動詞片語：約伯(命與運)

中文	English
命的重擊 一天之內，他失去了兒女、 財產、健康。 命運像黑夜一樣， 重重壓下。 他的名字，在希伯來文裡就是： 「受逼迫的人」。	<i>The Blow of Fate</i> In a single day, he lost his children, wealth, and health. Fate pressed down on him like the darkest night. His very name in Hebrew means: “The afflicted one.”

Imperative verbs : Shaping the World with Words.
祈使動詞：用語言去塑造世界。

Character-Based Grammar

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 4B 動詞：熙鳳理事—權謀與掌控

Character-Based Grammar



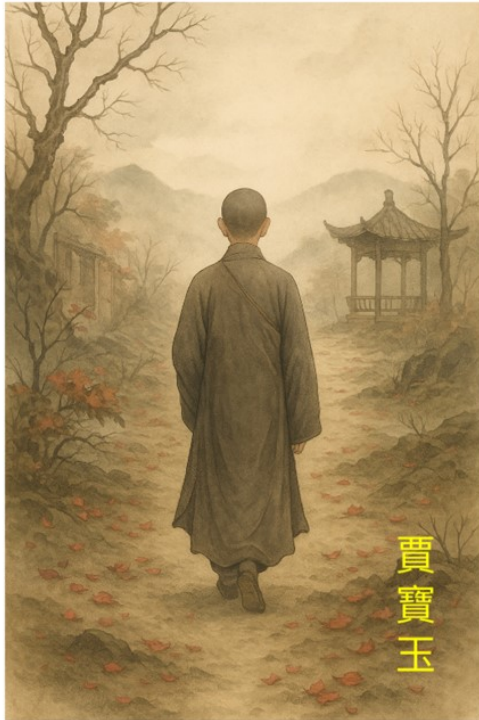
Verbs : Moving the World.

動詞：推動世界

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 9C 動詞片語：寶玉出家—迷惘與超脫

Character-Based Grammar



Phrasal Verbs : Drifting with Others

動詞片語：動詞和朋友一起走

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 5A 形容詞：黛玉初入賈府—羞怯與驚艷

Character-Based Grammar



Adjectives : Seeing with Words.

形容詞：看見形象

A Glimpse of the Teaching Materials

Unit 8. 連接詞：湘雲、探春與惜春 (思想的橋樑)



Conjunctions: Tying Thoughts Together.
連接詞：思想的橋樑

Character-Based Grammar

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Closing —

We are not here to finish a syllabus. We are here to unfold a soul.
If a child learns grammar but loses wonder—we failed.
If a child learns to decode text but cannot name grace in his own life—we failed.
But when language becomes seeing, and seeing becomes naming, and naming becomes living—character appears.
This is why we teach.

We do not teach language.
We awaken a soul—
and language begins to sing.

“When music speaks, the heart remembers.”





‘When music speaks, the heart remembers.’

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