

## From Character to Radical: Distance Chinese Characters Course and Pedagogy

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### Abstract

This presentation is part of NGL (Next Generation Learning) project<sup>1</sup> at Dalarna University. When teachers teach Chinese characters to non-native speakers, the most common practice is to apply orthography as a pedagogic method and ask students to memorize by repeatedly writing which is the same as teachers teach Chinese children in primary schools; however, since our adult students at Dalarna University often report that the learning process of Chinese characters is boring and inefficient, we need to develop a new pedagogic methods to meet our students' needs. Hence, the main purpose of this presentation is to explore alternative methods to teach Chinese characters to Swedish students in distance Chinese characters courses.

Previous research (Feldman & Siok, 1999; Wang & Ching, 2009; Yeh et al., 2003; Deng et al., 2008) have reported that when non-native students read Chinese characters, the visual part of their brains which processes images will be activated: they will use the meanings, shapes, and pictographic features, which are related to visual cognition, to categorize, analogize, analyze, and build their own theory to learn Chinese characters. Hence, teachers can use these findings as clues to develop alternative and more optimized methodologies to teach characters to non-native students.

Additionally, in research about the methodology of Chinese characters teaching (Ho et al., 2003; Shen et al., 2005), the focus on individual Chinese characters has been shifted to semantic and phonetic radicals. Thus, using semantic radicals, which are also characters, as teaching elements to reinforce students' above-mentioned visual cognition and logic ability may be used in our Chinese character classrooms to Swedish students. Because students' mother tongue - Swedish is an alphabetic language, they naturally incline to learn a new language according to the pronunciation. We may also use phonetic radicals, which are also characters, to help students memorize more homonymous radicals and characters. In this way, students may efficiently acquire both the pronunciations and meanings of Chinese characters through radical-based teaching. Findings of a recent questionnaire completed by our Swedish students provide strong support for this methodological approach: the most difficult part of learning Chinese characters is to memorize because many Chinese characters share similar shapes and semantic and phonetic radicals.

This presentation is composed of three parts: 1. Literature reviews and academic findings of Chinese characters and teaching pedagogy; 2. How to use the strength of distance education and radical-based teaching approach to reinforce students' cognitive abilities and help them acquire Chinese characters in class; 3. Discuss the strengths and the weaknesses of distance education and its implication to our further researches on teaching character pedagogy.

*Keywords:* Chinese characters, Chinese radicals, learning strategy, visual cognition, pedagogy, distance course

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<sup>1</sup> Abstract of NGL project: The language department at Högskolan Dalarna enjoys the reputation of delivering a wide range of language distance courses of high quality. Due to the increasing interest in Chinese language, culture and society among European students, the Chinese subject at HDa has grown to become the largest Chinese program in Sweden. However, teaching the Chinese ideographic writing system in web-based education has become the most pressing challenge to the Chinese instructors, in terms of teaching technology and pedagogy. This research project aims to overcome the technological obstacles in the virtual classroom and develop the most optimized pedagogic method for teaching Chinese characters online.

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