



## Re-Enforcing Chinese Curriculum Design and an Effective Method of Teaching Chinese towards Non-Chinese Speakers

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### Abstract

*In the aspects of teaching methods and techniques, teaching Chinese to non-Chinese speakers, especially towards adult students, is still a new field. The lack of compelling effective methods is largely due to the unique characteristics of Chinese, primarily that Chinese characters and pronunciation have little or no correlation. In this paper, I analyze a few teaching methods which are accepted by different people or in different times, including:*

1. *Teach listening/speaking through pinyin only*
2. *Teach reading/writing/listening/speaking at the same time before the 1910s*
3. *Teach reading/writing/listening/speaking at the same time after the 1950s*
4. *Teach reading/writing/listening/speaking at the same time in the 21st century*
5. *Teach characters with pictorial origins first*
6. *Teach massive amount of characters using flashcards*

*After pointing out the drawbacks of these methods, I present a new teaching method and a re-enforcing Chinese curriculum design. The new method is evolved from long time teaching and researching. And the innovative curriculum design serves as the basis of the teaching method. Within one to two years, a beginner student with zero background in Chinese, who also has demanding tasks from work or life (my typical student), is able to make substantial progress in Chinese.*

*This method has three stages for beginner students to go through. I give detailed explanations on how these three stages work along with the curriculum.*

*The curriculum includes two stand alone and also related series, Mandarin Express series and Chinese Reading and Writing series. Through outlining the three stages of teaching and learning, I demonstrate the re-enforcement relationship between these two series, which beginner students can greatly benefit from. Special emphasis is given on the selection of a small number of characters (a total of 320 characters), with statistical research support and explanations of why that matters.*

A few definitions on the terms: Chinese refers to Putonghua (Mandarin); Chinese characters refer to simplified characters, unless otherwise specified; the students refer to people who are over 16 years old, have no Chinese background, have not taken any Chinese lessons, and probably have responsibilities from work or family.

The curriculum and the method outlined in this paper can be easily adopted into any environment where the student's profile fits the above description. For these students, learning Chinese has always been difficult; so is teaching them Chinese. I hope this paper can contribute to the knowledge pool regarding teaching Chinese to non-Chinese speakers as a second language.

One of the factors which make Chinese so difficult is Chinese characters. There are so many of them, often different characters with minor differences in strokes. In order to make learning Chinese easier for the students, some teachers bypass characters, and only teach the students pinyin. In this way, the students' tasks can be reduced to:

1. Associate a single syllable with a meaning
2. Associate the meanings of a combination of syllables in particular order
3. Learn grammar to construct sentences in an acceptable order



For a short period, a beginner student is able to gain some basic speaking ability. But this won't last. Since many Chinese words sound the same, very soon the students will find it difficult to differentiate words by pinyin alone. For example, take a look at the following pinyin:

shishi, shìshì, shìshí, shíshì, shíshí, shíshī, shǐshī, shī shì, shǐshí, shǐshī

There is no certain way to know what these words mean. Let's add characters, and the meanings become clear:

shishi, shìshì, shìshí, shíshì, shíshí, shíshī, shǐshī, shī shì, shǐshí, shǐshī  
试试, 事事, 事实, 实事, 时时, 石狮, 实施, 失逝, 史实, 史诗

If the teachers continue to use pinyin only in class, the students will be forced to spend great amounts of energy trying to memorize all the tone markers. This method is not self-sustainable.

For students to get a real grasp of Chinese, characters must be taught. There have been a few approaches on teaching characters along with the evolvement of Chinese.

The oldest method is to teach Chinese reading and writing at the same time as speaking and listening. Before the 1910s, many characters were in a more complexed traditional form. Also, Chinese used in daily conversation was different from the written version. The written Chinese followed a classical format of writing (gǔ wén 古文). The students had to:

1. Learn the sound of characters
2. Learn the writing of characters
3. Learn the formation of characters, e.g. radicals, in order to consult dictionaries when necessary
4. Learn the meanings of characters
5. Learn the meanings of characters in different combinations
6. Learn the grammar of written text
7. Learn a different grammar in daily conversations

After the 1920s, vernacular text (bái huà wén 白话文) was widely accepted. In the 1950s, the simplified characters were introduced. Also, a phonetic system (pinyin) using Roman letters was created. Compared to other phonetic systems, pinyin is simpler and easier to use. These three factors made great impact on learning Chinese. The student's tasks had been made easier:

1. Learn the sound of characters (easier with pinyin)
2. Learn the writing of characters (easier with simplified characters)
3. Learn the formation of characters (easier with simplified characters)
4. Learn the meanings of characters
5. Learn the meanings of characters in different combinations
6. Learn the grammar of both spoken and written Chinese

In the 21st century, technology has given us new tools to teach and learn Chinese. One of them is smartphone dictionary apps which help students find out meanings of a given character or word easily. It is no longer necessary to learn character formations. The list can be further shortened into:

1. Learn the sound of characters
2. Learn the writing of characters
3. Learn the meanings of characters
4. Learn the meanings of characters in different combinations
5. Learn the grammar of both spoken and written Chinese

Even with all these developments, teaching speaking/listening at the same time as reading/writing still makes learning difficult. For example, to teach greeting, the teachers usually start with “nǐ hǎo ma? wǒ hěn hǎo.” (你好吗? 我很好。) In this simple exchange, the students need to learn: the pronunciation of five characters; how to write them; the meanings of each character; the basic sentence order. And the next exchange - “nǐ jiào shénme míngzi? wǒ jiào Dàwèi.” (你叫什么名字? 我叫大卫) - presents



seven new characters together with all the associated information. And it goes on and on. This method gives out a massive amount of Chinese in a very short time, and demands the students put in a great deal of time and energy. Everyone would be daunted.

In order to make Chinese less daunting, a certain kind of screening is needed. In the above five-point list, three of them deal directly with single characters. This is the reason that many teachers try to teach more single characters.

One approach is based on Chinese's pictorial origin. Teachers' first choice is always xiàng xíng zì (象形字), a category of Chinese characters which have an obvious correlation with the physical objects, for example 木、日、川、水、山. Secondly, teachers like to teach zhǐ shì zì (指示字), for example 上、下. In this category, certain strokes give clues to the meanings of the characters. The third category is huì yì zì (会意), for example 采、炎. In this category, parts of characters are arranged in a certain way to generate new meanings. These three categories of characters are fun because each character tells a story.

But teachers favouring this approach often avoid a question which directly affects the learning outcome: how effective is it to learn them to improve the students' reading and writing ability? The answer is "not much". Research shows that, in 5000 existing characters, about 300 are xiàng xíng zì, around 20 zhǐ shì zì, around 500 huì yì zì. If we scrutinize all these characters, we will find that many characters are not in active use. This reduces drastically the character pool that can be taught to beginner students. Moreover, this method overlooks the majority of Chinese characters, which is the fourth category, xíng shēng zì (形声字), for example 请、跑.

Another approach is based on the total number of common Chinese characters. Between 1986 and 1988 Department of Computer Science of Shanxi University did an analysis on a collection of 2,000,000 characters of text from sources that were considered a fair cross-section of the modern Chinese language at the time. The result was that 2,500 common characters covered 97.97% of the total texts. The conclusion is: if the students learn these 2,500 characters, surely they can read Chinese. Following this line of thought, flash cards or books which outline hundreds and thousands of unique characters are printed and are easily available.

This approach has huge problems. It is first of all an intimidating task. Secondly, even for those who do this, the result will not be satisfying. They find they are at a situation where they can recognize a lot of characters, but these characters don't yield any comprehensive meaning.

The reason is that this approach neglects an essential characteristic of Chinese: different combinations of characters create new meanings. For example:

快+活 小+说 本+事 个+子 活+该 欢+喜 喜+欢

Understanding the meaning of each single character does not help decipher the meaning as a whole.

After analyzing the above teaching methods, and after years of trial and error, I have developed a teaching method which has three stages for beginner students to go through. Since this method is manifested in my Chinese curriculum, I will explain how these stages work along with the curriculum, which includes Mandarin Express series (focusing on speaking and listening) and Chinese Reading and Writing series (focusing on reading and writing).

### Stage one:

The teachers use pinyin alone for the first four chapters in Mandarin Express to make learning Chinese approachable and achievable. As the students approach different characters with the same pronunciation, i.e. the same pinyin representing different meanings, for example wǔ/wǔ, zài/zài (五/午, 在/再), stage two starts.

### Stage two:

Two separate classes are taught. One focuses on speaking and listening, while the other one on reading and writing.



The text in Chinese Reading and Writing is painstakingly crafted. A short list of single characters, a total of 320, is selected. For each character, plenty of illustrations are given, such as combinations, sentences and narratives. All the illustrations are strictly confined to the characters already presented. Some research data explains why this character screening matters. There was a study in 1928 on the usage of Chinese characters. Researchers counted over 900,000 running texts in various sources, and identified about 4800 unique characters. The conclusion is that the 400 most frequently used characters comprise 73.1% of the total text, and on the other end of the spectrum, the least frequently used 2319 characters comprise a mere 2.5% of the total text.

Many decades have passed. The most frequently used characters in 1928 must be different from the ones now. Therefore, I decided to use the current character ranking as reference. The guiding principle remains the same that we must focus on a small number of the most frequently used characters to achieve a high frequency rate.

However, this ranking alone is not enough. For the purpose of introducing words, rather than single characters, I also used the character count from Mandarin Express Intro and Basic Level. That enables me to make some of the reading and writing texts have a counter part in the speaking and listening texts, hence to create a favorable environment of re-enforcement.

In the listening and speaking class, the students' tasks are:

1. Associate a single syllable with a meaning
2. Associate the meanings of a combination of syllables in particular order
3. Learn grammar to construct sentences in an acceptable order

In the reading and writing class, the students' tasks are:

1. Tally characters and their combinations with the learned sounds and meanings
2. Learn the writing of characters
3. Expand the usage of learned characters in new combinations

Occasionally, the situation is reversed. The students learn a new character in the reading and writing class first, and later use the character again in the listening and speaking class. This situation arises because a few characters are ranked high in the frequency list, but they don't appear in Mandarin Express series till a later chapter. In order to make sure that the students have a healthy exposure towards the high frequency characters, I decided to introduce these characters first. Nevertheless, the students still benefit from this re-enforcing relationship.

As the character selection is small, students are able to optimize the usages of each character. It is like the teachers give the students bricks, they can build houses. It boosts students' confidence and lays a good foundation for stage three.

### Stage three:

The dual class comes into one at Mandarin Express Pre-Intermediate Level A, a character based textbook where bite sized text is used and pinyin is no longer there.

Following this method, difficult tasks are dispersed into smaller ones. The students get necessary re-enforcement. Beginner students can achieve substantial learning results, have a great learning experience, and most importantly, gain the means to carry on with their study.

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