

A Study on the Arrangement and Presentation of Chinese Character Teaching Content in International Chinese Textbooks

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Abstract

Chinese characters are one of the core challenges of international Chinese teaching. The arrangement and presentation of Chinese characters in textbooks directly impacts teaching efficiency and learners' development of Chinese character proficiency. This study, focusing on three typical character arrangement methods in mainstream international Chinese textbooks, examines the functional differences between reading and writing characters. Through comparative analysis, the authors explore the practical characteristics, applicable scenarios, and existing problems of these different arrangement methods. The study found that: while the pinyin arrangement method lowers the threshold for reading for beginners, it can lead to pinyin dependency, and the simultaneous implementation of reading and writing can increase the learning burden. The stroke order arrangement method conforms to the structural laws of Chinese characters and helps strengthen the writing foundation, but it is limited by its detachment from practical scenarios and the lag of commonly used characters. The commonly used character priority method aligns with daily life needs and can quickly stimulate learning motivation, but the complex structure of commonly used characters can increase the difficulty of reading and writing. At the same time, a "separate track" arrangement for character recognition and character writing is more aligned with learners' cognitive patterns at the elementary level, while a "simultaneous arrangement" is more suitable for intermediate and higher levels. The conclusions of this article can provide a reference for the scientific arrangement of Chinese character content in international Chinese textbooks, helping to improve the relevance and effectiveness of Chinese character instruction.

Keywords

International Chinese textbooks, Chinese character instruction, arrangement method, character recognition, character writing.

1. Introduction

With the deepening international promotion of Chinese, Chinese character instruction remains a bottleneck in the international Chinese teaching system. Unlike phonetic scripts, the ideographic properties, structural complexity, and writing standards of Chinese characters pose unique challenges to learners from non-Chinese speaking backgrounds. As the core vehicle for teaching activities, the arrangement and presentation of Chinese character content in textbooks directly determine the scientific nature of the teaching approach. The current international Chinese textbook market features a diverse array of Chinese character layouts, but debate remains over their suitability and the logic of their arrangement for both reading and writing. Some textbooks employ a simultaneous "Chinese character and pinyin" presentation, attempting to use pinyin to support reading; others prioritize a systematic approach based on stroke counts, emphasizing the fundamentals of handwriting; and still others prioritize the frequency of commonly used characters to enhance practicality. However,

existing textbooks often confuse reading with writing—placing characters that require handwriting and those that require only reading in the same order. This places a heavy cognitive load on beginners, requiring them to memorize both character form and pronunciation while mastering the stroke order. Furthermore, the appropriate scenarios for each layout are unclear. For example, starting-level textbooks that solely utilize a stroke-based approach can leave out commonly used characters, leading to learners being able to write simple characters but not understand the text. Over-reliance on pinyin-based approaches can hinder the development of independent character recognition skills. Based on this, this article uses mainstream international Chinese textbooks, such as the New Practical Chinese Reader, Chinese Language Course, and Developing Chinese, as its analysis samples. It systematically compares the advantages and disadvantages of three typical arrangement methods, focusing on the differences in the arrangement order between readable and written characters. This aims to clarify the applicable stages and optimization directions of different arrangement methods, provide practical references for the compilation of Chinese character content in international Chinese textbooks, and provide theoretical support for the phased development of "reading" and "writing" skills in Chinese character instruction.

2. Core Categories and Arrangement Principles of Chinese Character Instruction in International Chinese Textbooks

When arranging Chinese character instruction in international Chinese textbooks, it's crucial to first clarify the core categories of "reading characters" and "writing characters." Then, based on learners' cognitive patterns and the characteristics of Chinese characters, establish arrangement principles. This forms the foundation for subsequent design.

Conceptually, reading characters require learners to master the "shape-sound-meaning" correspondence and be able to identify them during reading, without requiring strict handwriting standards. Writing characters, on top of this, additionally require mastery of stroke order and structure, enabling independent, standardized writing. The functional differences between the two determine the arrangement logic: reading characters emphasize "rapid accumulation to support reading," while writing characters emphasize "solid mastery to support writing." For example, beginner learners need to recognize high-frequency characters like "餐 (food), 馆 (restaurant), 电 (phone), 电话 (phone)" to understand everyday expressions like "going to a restaurant to eat" and "making a phone call," but they don't need to write them immediately. They can first practice writing with simple characters like "你 (likely referring to a character), 我 (likely referring to a character), 他 (likely referring to a character), 一 (likely referring to a character), 二 (likely referring to a character). This division reduces initial learning pressure and aligns with the "input-first, output-latency" principle of language learning.

Chinese character arrangement should adhere to three core principles: First, a gradual progression, with strokes, components, and entire characters progressing from simple to complex. For example, starting with horizontal, vertical, left-falling, and right-falling strokes, then moving on to characters with compound structures (一, 丿, 丨, 捺). Second, practicality, focusing on learners' daily lives and communication needs, prioritizes high-frequency characters found in textbooks and daily conversations, avoiding purely theoretical arrangement[1]. Third, cognitive adaptation, accommodating non-Chinese learners' accustomedness to linear phonetic writing, balances systematicity and accessibility, and does not prioritize regularity over learning experience.

Although current mainstream textbooks recognize these principles, there are still deviations in practice: some textbooks, in pursuit of "strict stroke order", focus on "one, two, three", but place

high-frequency characters such as "you, me, he" at the end, resulting in learners having difficulty understanding the text due to the lack of core characters; other textbooks select commonly used characters but do not distinguish between reading and writing, and require students to master "good, study, school" simultaneously. These characters are difficult for beginners and can easily cause frustration.

3. Practical Characteristics and Teaching Suitability of Pinyin-Based Chinese Character Arrangement

Pinyin-based Chinese is a common Chinese character arrangement method used in beginner Chinese textbooks. Its core principle is to present Chinese characters and pinyin simultaneously, using pinyin as a bridge to help learners quickly establish the "character shape-character pronunciation" correspondence, reducing initial difficulty in recognizing and reading. Its actual usage and teaching suitability require analysis based on textbook examples and teaching scenarios. In terms of practical characteristics, there are two main presentation methods: one is a direct "character-pinyin" association. For example, in the first volume of the "New Practical Chinese Reader," family terms such as "mama," "dad," "ge," and "jie" are all marked with tonal pinyin to facilitate accurate pronunciation[2]. The other is a layered presentation of "text-pinyin-Chinese characters." For example, in the dialogue texts of the beginner volume of "Experiencing Chinese," the full text is presented first, followed by a separate presentation of core Chinese characters with repeated pinyin markings, strengthening the "text-character-pronunciation" connection. Furthermore, this type of arrangement often simultaneously promotes pinyin learning and character recognition. After teaching initial consonants and finals, simple Chinese characters are immediately combined for pinyin practice, effectively bridging the gap between tools and content. In terms of teaching adaptability, the advantages are concentrated at the beginner level: First, it lowers the barrier to reading and recognizing characters. Non-Chinese learners do not need to memorize complex character shapes. Instead, they can use pinyin to pronounce characters and understand their meanings in context. For example, when learning the character "水 (shuǐ)", they can associate "shuǐ" with "drink water" and "fruit", reducing the memorization burden. Second, it boosts learning confidence, allowing students to quickly master a batch of Chinese characters in the early stages. Within 1-2 weeks, they can recognize "你好", "谢谢", and "再见", meeting basic communication needs. However, there are significant limitations: First, it can easily lead to pinyin dependence. Even with long-term support, some learners neglect character shape memorization and cannot recognize "大", "小", "多", and "少" without pinyin. Second, there is a conflict between recognition and writing. Textbooks often require both recognition and writing of characters like "妈" and "爸爸". Although they have fewer strokes, the "撇点" and "曲勾" are difficult for beginners, which can hinder their enthusiasm for reading and recognizing characters. Third, there is a lack of guidance on character shape patterns, with excessive focus on "sound" and insufficient emphasis on stroke and component patterns. For example, when learning "河", "江", and "海", the meaning of "氵" is not emphasized, forcing learners to memorize them in isolation. In summary, the pinyin-coordinated method is more suitable for the zero-starting stage of reading, but the usage time needs to be controlled. After learners have mastered 50-100 core reading characters, the pinyin annotations should be gradually reduced[3]. At the same time, the reading and writing goals should be distinguished - giving priority to reading and postponing writing requirements, so as to avoid pinyin dependence and writing pressure affecting the long-term development of Chinese character ability.

4. The Logical Structure and Application Limitations of the Stroke-Sequential Approach to Chinese Character Arrangement

The stroke sequence method is structured based on the number and type of strokes in Chinese characters, following a "few to many, simple to complex" logic. It begins by teaching characters with simple strokes, then moves on to characters with more strokes. This approach also emphasizes stroke order and standard writing practices. This approach adheres to the structural principles of Chinese characters, but its application scenarios and teaching effectiveness must be determined based on learners' needs. The logical structure consists of two layers: first, stroke progression. The textbook begins by teaching the eight basic strokes—horizontal, vertical, left-falling, and right-falling strokes—before using simple characters to help learners master stroke forms and writing order. Second, character progression, progressing by stroke count, with a gradient of "one stroke, two strokes, three strokes," for example. For example, the first unit of the beginner's textbook, "Chinese Language Course," begins with "一, 二, 三, 十" and continues with "人, 入, 八, 儿." Each unit maintains a fixed stroke count for each character, and includes stroke sequence animations and writing exercises to reinforce the "stroke-to-character" connection. Some textbooks also incorporate component components, such as teaching the character "人" (person) before moving on to "仁" (benevolence) and "休" (rest), achieving a seamless transition from strokes to components to the entire character. The teaching focuses on strengthening the writing foundation: first, helping learners develop standardized writing habits to avoid incorrect stroke order that can lead to character deformation; second, gradually increasing the number of strokes reduces writing anxiety. Learning simple characters with 2-4 strokes at the beginner level makes it easier for learners to master the technique and build confidence; third, strengthening the understanding of character structure. By explaining the patterns of strokes and components, learners understand the composition of Chinese characters, laying the foundation for subsequent learning of complex characters. However, its limitations are also prominent: first, it is divorced from practical scenarios, and commonly used characters lag behind. Although "one, two, three" are simple, their frequency of daily use is far lower than "you, me, him". Giving priority to teaching the former will make learners "able to write simple characters but unable to read the text". For example, the first two units of the first volume of the "Chinese Course" are arranged according to strokes[4]. When learners encounter the dialogues in the third unit, they need to learn "you, me, him" additionally, which causes a disconnect between "writing" and "reading". Second, the cultivation of reading ability lags behind, with excessive focus on writing and neglect of the accumulation of reading characters, which affects text comprehension and language input. Third, the motivation for learning is insufficient. Simple stroke characters are mostly abstract symbols and lack contextual support. Learners easily feel that "learning is useless" and their enthusiasm decreases. In summary, the stroke sequence method is more suitable for the primary writing stage of international Chinese teaching, but it needs to be combined with the "commonly used characters first" reading arrangement - first accumulate high-frequency reading characters, and then choose writing characters with simple strokes to practice writing, to achieve a balance of "reading as the basis and writing as the supplement", and avoid emphasizing the stroke sequence and being divorced from the practical teaching goals.

5. The Practical Logic and Room for Optimization of the Commonly Used Characters Approach

The commonly used character priority approach prioritizes character frequency, drawing on the "List of Commonly Used Characters in Modern Chinese" and the communicative needs of

international Chinese language instruction. It prioritizes characters frequently encountered in texts, dialogues, and everyday life, helping learners quickly master practical Chinese characters and meet their reading and communication needs. This approach aligns with the "use-first" approach, but there is still room for improvement in the balance between reading and writing[5].

The practical logic has three key features: First, high-frequency characters are prioritized for reading. For example, in the first unit of the first volume of the elementary textbook "Developing Chinese," core characters such as "you, good, I, yes, and country" in the dialogue are all high-frequency characters. The textbook also uses text repetition and images to help learners grasp the "form-meaning" connection. Second, reading and writing are "differentiated." High-frequency characters are learned first, followed by writing of simpler characters. Of the 15 reading characters in this unit, only five, "one, two, three, you, and I," are used for writing, reducing writing pressure. Third, common characters are presented in a contextualized manner, with everyday scenes being used. For example, when learning "rice, vegetables, water, and tea," the characters are combined with the dialogue "eating and drinking tea" to strengthen the "character-phrase-sentence" connection.

The advantages of this teaching method focus on practicality and learning motivation: First, it quickly meets communication and reading needs. Mastering 20 high-frequency characters such as "you, me, him, good, go, eat, sleep" allows students to understand basic expressions such as "I'm going to eat." Second, it stimulates interest. High-frequency characters are close to everyday life, allowing learners to experience the value of "learning in practice." For example, learning "天, 晴, 雨, 冷" can be used to describe the weather, enhancing a sense of accomplishment. Third, it adheres to the principle of "input-driven learning." A large number of high-frequency characters provide a foundation for subsequent speaking and writing, avoiding the problem of "learning without application."

However, there is significant room for improvement. First, the difficulty level of some high-frequency characters is mismatched with the writing level. High-frequency characters like "国" (country) and "学" (study) are complex and unsuitable for writing at the elementary level. The first volume of the beginner textbook "Developing Chinese" lists "国" (country) as a writing character, causing some learners to give up due to difficulty. Second, there is a lack of systematic connection between strokes and components, focusing more on frequency than structural patterns. For example, when teaching "你" (good) and "好," the characteristics of "亻" (female) and "女" (female) are not explained, leaving learners to memorize characters in isolation. Third, the repetition rate of reading characters is low. Some textbooks introduce 20 high-frequency reading characters in a single unit, but subsequent repetition is rare, making them easily forgotten.

In summary, prioritizing common characters is a core direction for the arrangement of Chinese characters in international Chinese textbooks and requires further optimization: First, establishing a "high-frequency character recognition and writing system" that divides writing characters into elementary, intermediate, and advanced levels according to their structural complexity, with phased implementation[6]. Second, integrating stroke and component patterns, clarifying the semantic functions of core components when teaching high-frequency characters, and helping learners develop a systematic understanding. Third, reinforcing the repetition of reading characters, consolidating their memory through after-class exercises and unit reviews.

6. Comparison of the two arrangement modes of reading characters and writing characters

The order in which characters are arranged for reading and writing is a core issue in Chinese character instruction in international Chinese textbooks. Currently, two main approaches are used: "separate-track" and "synchronous" approaches. The differences in their logic, applicable scenarios, and teaching effectiveness directly impact learners' development of character proficiency, requiring comparative analysis based on textbook examples and teaching practice. The core principle of separate-track approaches is to "first meet reading needs, then advance writing needs": In the early stages, prioritizing reading characters helps learners quickly transition into reading and communication. Once a solid foundation in reading is established, simpler reading characters are then selected for writing practice. For example, the first unit of the first volume of the elementary textbook "Developing Chinese" contains 15 reading characters and only 5 writing characters, all of which are drawn from the reading characters. Writing practice is typically introduced after one to two weeks of reading, and the characters chosen are often characters with fewer strokes, such as "一, 二, 你, 我." Its advantages are concentrated at the elementary level: it reduces cognitive load, eliminating the pressure of "reading and writing" simultaneously; it rapidly improves reading ability, enabling students to understand simple conversations after mastering 50 characters; and it protects learning motivation, preventing frustration caused by writing difficulties. Synchronous programming allows for parallel learning of reading and writing, emphasizing the integrated memorization of "shape, sound, meaning, and writing," allowing students to practice writing while learning to read. For example, in the first volume of the "New Practical Chinese Reader," each unit contains an equal number of characters for reading and writing. When learning the character "mama," students simultaneously read the pinyin, understand the meaning, and practice the strokes, believing that writing can help strengthen their memory of the character's shape. This model is more suitable for intermediate and advanced levels: learners already have a basic understanding of strokes and components, and the characters they are learning to write are generally of moderate difficulty, consisting of 5-8 strokes. The teaching goal shifts to "integrating reading and writing." However, using it at the elementary level can present challenges. For example, requiring beginners to simultaneously learn to read and write the characters "mama" and "bada" can be challenging, hindering both writing confidence and reading memory. The two modes are not mutually exclusive and need to be adjusted according to the stage: the primary level prioritizes the track, with reading as the core and writing as the supplement; the intermediate level can transition to "semi-synchronous", practicing the writing of previously recognized words while reading new words; the advanced level uses synchronous arrangement to achieve integrated reading and writing[7].

7. Conclusion

This study focused on three Chinese character arrangement methods in international Chinese textbooks: pinyin-based, stroke-ordered, and commonly used character-based. The study also examined the differences in the order of characters for reading and writing. The study concluded that the three methods need to be adapted to the specific stage of learning. Pinyin-based approaches can lower the barrier to entry for beginners, but require limited usage to prevent pinyin dependency, making them suitable for the early stages of reading. Stroke-ordered approaches align with the structural patterns of Chinese characters and strengthen the writing foundation, but require integration with commonly used character-based approaches to avoid becoming impractical, making them suitable for the early stages of writing. Commonly used character-based approaches, which address communication needs and stimulate learning motivation, are the core approach. These approaches require optimizing the transition between

reading and writing and guiding structural patterns, making them suitable for all stages, especially the early stages of reading. The three methods can be integrated, such as a combined approach of "commonly used character-based reading with pinyin as a supplement and stroke-ordered writing" at the early stages of learning to balance reading and writing. The arrangement of characters for reading and writing needs to be adjusted according to the learning stage. For beginners, learners have limited cognitive load, so "tracked arrangement" can reduce stress and accelerate the accumulation of reading characters. For intermediate and advanced learners who already have basic character cognition, "synchronized arrangement" can bridge the gap between reading and writing and meet comprehensive proficiency requirements. Textbooks need to clearly define the scope of both, establish a "graded recognition and writing system for high-frequency characters," and implement them in stages based on structural complexity to avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to simultaneous learning. Textbook arrangement of Chinese characters also needs to balance practicality and systematicity: selecting high-frequency characters based on communication needs and stimulating motivation through contextual presentation; incorporating stroke and component patterns to help learners develop systematic cognition and apply them to other situations; and reinforcing the repetition of characters for reading, solidifying their memory through after-class exercises and unit reviews. This study sample only covers mainstream textbooks and does not include regional textbooks. The sample size can be expanded to explore more appropriate arrangement methods based on the cognitive characteristics of learners from different native language backgrounds. Future textbooks need to be more learner-centered, balancing practicality and cognitive adaptability while respecting the laws of Chinese characters to improve the efficiency of Chinese character teaching.

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