

## Trying out new ways of teaching written Chinese: My professional enquiry journey

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**Abstract:** This article is a summary of a professional enquiry I conducted in my second year of teaching Chinese in Scotland as part of the Hanban programme. I wanted to investigate different, more effective ways of enabling Scottish pupils to recognise and remember Chinese characters. The feedback was positive but there are still more questions to consider.

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**Keywords:** teaching Chinese characters, kinaesthetic learning, visual learning.

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### Introduction

I am a Hanban teacher from China and am here in Scotland for my third year now. My students range from Nursery to High School and the vast majority of them have never learned any Mandarin before. I was a High School teacher of English before I came to Scotland. My main task in China was to prepare my students for the Gaokao, the very challenging national entrance examination for university. I did this for many years, preparing pupils for what is a highly competitive exam, which for many would determine their future. Then, one day, I decided that I would like to do something fresh and began seeking out new pastures which would give me the opportunity to do something different with my teaching. This thirst for professional development eventually brought me to Scotland and to a new chapter in my professional and personal life. I sought a challenge – and found it! Teaching Mandarin to Scottish learners was to provide the stimulus I was searching for.

### Language learning in China – and in Scotland

Language learning in China is quite different from here in Scotland in terms of the options we provide at the stage of primary and secondary school. Russian used to be a very popular modern language in China before the 1980s, but subsequently English took over and it remains the first second foreign language today. Currently, in Tianjin, the city I come from, very few primary and secondary schools provide teaching of any languages other than English. Pupils are required to learn English from P1 until they finish their studies at University. A certain level of English (National band 4) is a must for them to get their university diploma. Students majoring in a Modern Language will have the opportunity to choose a second additional language, such as French, Spanish, German or Japanese for example.

Nowadays, an increasing number of people have realised that mastering an additional language will give them an advantage over others in their future career. Chinese students are eager to know the outside world, so people have been putting more effort into learning English. Many young children start their English lessons at the age of four or earlier. Teachers focus more on speaking and listening in primary, and more on reading and grammar in secondary schools.

In comparison to when I was studying English, great changes have taken place in teaching. Gradually, teachers are beginning to realise that students learn vocabulary and skills more effectively through communication and providing contexts. I am lucky because I showed great interest in languages in primary school and I had an opportunity to study in Tianjin Foreign Languages School for six years. Our teachers asked us to take part in many “support activities” which was great fun. Every year we had teachers from America or Australia to teach us. They would ask us to read many sentences using the same structure and we had to work out the rules ourselves. This was always followed up with extensive exercises to help us remember the rules. Nevertheless, I would say at that time in general, language teaching was more about memorising vocabulary and grammar rules. As China is opening up to the world, the Chinese government has become aware of the problems and they know that education and exams are in need of reform. Things are better now than they were twenty years ago, but I think we still have a long way to go.

Being a language teacher gives me an opportunity to do something to help young people to understand the world better, become more tolerant of and open to, different people and cultures. I really enjoy the job.

## **My Professional Enquiry**

In September 2017, the beginning of my second year here, we were asked to do a Professional Enquiry. The recommendation that teachers should also become ‘researchers’ arose from the Recommendations of the Donaldson Report (Donaldson, 2013). According to Donaldson, a teaching profession that bases its practice (i.e. what they do in class) on research, will provide a more profound way of achieving effective learning and teaching.

Unsurprisingly, however, I was unsure about how to begin to tackle this idea of doing my own research. My mind was an absolute blank, as I did not have any prior experience of doing such an activity. However, the Confucius Institute for Scotland’s Schools (CISS) provided guidance and regular feedback. Thus, together with my colleagues, mentors and fellow Hanban teachers, I gradually developed a clearer idea about what topic to focus on.

My topic for the Professional Enquiry was whether visual learning is a better way of learning Chinese characters for beginners or not? The Chinese language is different from European languages in as much as it is made up of characters. Some Chinese characters stem from images of a certain object. For example, a round circle ○ with a dot in the

middle became 日 for the sun and 月 for the moon. However, many Chinese characters also have a phonetic component. According to Wieger (1915):

*Some phonetic complexes were originally simple pictographs that were later augmented by the addition of a semantic root. An example is 炷 zhù "candle" (now archaic, meaning "lampwick"), which was originally a pictograph 主, a character that is now pronounced zhǔ and means "host", or the character 火 huǒ "fire" was added to indicate that the meaning is fire-related. (Extract from Wikipedia, entry on "Written Chinese.")*

In my two years' teaching here, I found that the learning of Chinese characters and pronunciation are the most difficult parts for the students here to master. When they first start to study Mandarin, they find writing characters fun because everything is new to them. However, after a while, their enthusiasm wears off and they realise, with a certain amount of shock, that learning the writing system is quite difficult, and that there is a need to follow a certain procedure when writing. I am therefore very keen to find out how I can help them keep going and specifically, remember the order of the strokes (the lines that make up the characters) and how to differentiate between some characters that look very similar to each other.

Repetition sometimes works but it can often be very time-consuming and not motivating for beginners. I had been thinking of how I can help pupils for quite some time until I saw someone writing words in sand, which sparked an idea in my mind. If we can write on different materials, can we try making words with different things?

I first tried the method with my Senior students (S6). They had learned Mandarin up to HSK1 (6 levels in total and level 1 roughly equals to CEFR A1) for 4 weeks. They could recognise about 30 Chinese characters and write 5 or 6 without any guidance. In order to make it easier to carry out the activity, I gave them a reference list with all the characters they had learned. Then I asked them to make Chinese characters individually using Chinese chess pieces, which are in this case black and white. Once finished, they asked their classmates to recognise what words they had made and read them aloud. It seemed that they enjoyed the process very much. In this game, learners must recognise the structures and duplicate them on the Chinese chess board (the squares here are only one colour), and they have to make their words correct and clear so that their classmates can understand which word they have made.



Then I asked pupils to work in pairs, but I changed the rules a little. I gave them a list of 10 words altogether so that it would not be too hard for them. The first student would choose a word in secret, so the second student could only follow the hints. Each learner put one piece of chess at a time on the board with their own colour until finally they would be able to discern the word. The first pair to finish all ten words would win. It was interesting to observe the students during the process. They observed carefully, thought hard, and tried to adapt. My seniors enjoyed the games, especially the second one. They told me that in the second game, they focused on the structures of the words and it needed two of them to do team work in order to work it out, so it really helped them to remember the words.



This feedback encouraged me a lot, so I prepared to try out the same strategy with my junior classes. My junior classes are bigger and most of them have had no Mandarin before. I only had them for ten weeks and usually I did not spend all my ten weeks teaching Chinese characters. So finally, I decided to start from the writing of Mandarin numbers. We spent two periods on numbers. The first period we focused on the pronunciation and different gestures. I showed them the characters, but I did not ask them to remember or write them. This was to help them link the characters with their meaning and pronunciation. I studied the ten characters and found most of them consisted of dots, horizontal and vertical strokes.

With this in mind, for the second period, I brought along some straws and lollipop sticks and asked them to make Chinese characters in pairs. I chose the straws that have a bend on one end, so learners can use that part to form a “hook” or “vertical hook” in Chinese characters. The rule is that pupils cannot bend or cut the sticks, but if necessary, they can bend straws or swirl them to make a dot.

This proved to be great fun for the learners and they were much more creative than I expected. I would make the outside part of 四 (which means four) with four lollipop sticks because they are all straight lines and it is easy to do so. However, two of my creative students made it with two straws with the short ends linking together and one stick at the bottom to close the box. They are happy because theirs looks quite different

from the work of the other students. They learned, and they had great fun as well. In this game, my students learned about the different ways in which strokes make up Chinese characters, whilst combining characters in different ways can make new words with different meanings.

The second half of the lesson I asked pupils to follow me and write the ten characters with brush pens on our magic mats. Most of them remembered the structures of the words and gave me positive feedback on the first part of the lesson. They said they enjoyed the way we learned the characters and because they had to decide which materials to choose, they spent quite some time studying the structures of each character.

By the last period, we had accumulated about 20 words including the 10 numbers. We finally made a Chinese dragon with different Chinese characters as the scales of the dragon, which was great fun.

## Reflections

Our Confucius hub serves learners from Nursery to High School. Thus, if I have an opportunity to teach Mandarin in nursery or P1 to P3, considering their age, I will try to teach Chinese characters with play dough and see what results from this.

Teaching is great fun. We never know what will happen if we apply something new. It might be a failure, or it might be better than we expect it. We are always aiming to improve. I was fortunate because, as it turned out, the pupils welcomed my new method and I had positive feedback. Yet I still have some concerns:

- First, my class of senior pupils is a small class. Is it possible to practise the same thing in a bigger class and bigger group? How do I monitor them?
- Second, my junior classes are block courses. There are no exams. Do I have enough time to do it if it is a credit class? Would it be better if I can see the pupils regularly to make a proper evaluation of my activity?
- Third, if I have an opportunity to teach adults, would they be interested in the method? Would they feel it childish and not feasible? Are there better ways of teaching Chinese characters to adults using visual learning?
- Fourth, if I could have an opportunity to teach Mandarin to non-native-speakers when I am back to China, are there any better ways to teach characters as China is so different from Scotland in terms of the environment for learning Mandarin? Could I still use these methods, or could I find some other ways to do it better?
- Finally, because my job is teaching English in China, I am wondering whether there is any chance to apply this method to my teaching at home. English letters are quite different from Chinese characters; could I nevertheless adapt the method in reverse to my teaching at home?

I am a beginner with regard to teaching Mandarin, but I have learned quite a lot in my two years' teaching here. I have enjoyed it very much because what I have done here brings me to the very foundation of language teaching, which previously in China I was

hardly involved with when I taught English to students there. Here I start from very basic vocabulary instead of massive reading and writing. I should say I focus more attention on how I can prepare my students well enough for different exams. So, I have been asking myself, am I able to apply something similar to my teaching back to China? I am really not sure if it will be a success under the pressure of time, but I am more than happy if I can try some hands-on activities to help learners remember some difficult words and to make the class more fun so that they will enjoy the class instead of pushing them too hard.

I am very grateful to have had a chance to conduct a Professional Enquiry, and to reflect on my teaching here in Scotland. Amongst other things, I learned how to organise materials for research and create a survey, collect data, and analyse the findings. The process helped me to think back and look forward. I feel I am now much better equipped when trying to evaluate something. I can reflect more effectively on my practice.