

Teaching Both Simplified and Traditional Characters to Learners of Chinese as L2

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Abstract

In the acquisition of Chinese as a second language, learning Chinese characters is an essential part of the learning process. There are various approaches to how and when Chinese characters should be introduced. Some scholars claim simplified characters should be given priority, while others promote teaching traditional characters first. Yet to some, teaching traditional and simplified characters simultaneously is preferable, while others believe that learning Hanyu Pinyin alone reduces the learning load and advocate the idea that learning characters be postponed to the later stages. This study discusses reading priorities for students of L2 Chinese in an environment that promotes balanced teaching of traditional and simplified characters from scratch. Results show that most learners prefer simplified characters though the number of students who equally acquired both characters in a set is also high. Fewer students prefer traditional characters, whereas texts in Hanyu Pinyin were not students' preferred choice. Moreover, learners' text comprehensions were better and more accurate when texts were written in characters.

Keywords: teaching Chinese as L2, traditional and simplified characters, reading priorities, reading comprehension

Povzetek

Pri usvajanju kitajščine kot tujega jezika je učenje kitajskih pismenk ključni del učnega procesa. Obstajajo različni pristopi glede tega, kako in kdaj naj bi se študenti seznanili s pismenkami. Nekateri dajejo prednost poenostavljenim pismenkam, medtem ko drugi zagovarjajo najprvo poučevanje tradicionalnih pismenk. Spet tretji priporočajo hkratno usvajanje obojih ali pa zagovarjajo učenje izključno Hanyu Pinyin, s čimer zmanjšajo začetno obremenitev študentov in predstavljajo usvajanje pismenk v kasnejše faze učenja. Raziskava razpravlja, kateremu naboru pismenk bodo študenti dali prednost v učnem okolju, ki sicer spodbuja uravnoteženo poučevanje tako tradicionalnih kot poenostavljenih pismenk od začetka učnega procesa. Rezultati kažejo, da večina študentov raje uporablja poenostavljene pismenke, čeprav je tudi število študentov, ki enakovredno usvojijo tradicionalne in poenostavljene pismenke, visoko. Malo študentov se nagiba k branju tradicionalnih pismenk, tudi besedila v Hanyu Pinyinu so bila redko izbrana. Poleg tega je bilo razumevanje besedil boljše in natančnejše takrat, ko je bilo besedilo napisano v pismenkah.

Ključne besede: poučevanje kitajščine kot tujega jezika, tradicionalne in poenostavljene pismenke, prednosti pri branju, bralno razumevanje

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1 Introduction

Chinese characters are a major feature of the Chinese writing system. They carry historical and cultural information and are part of China's cultural heritage. From learners' perspective, Chinese characters are both fascinating and intriguing. On one hand, they can be one of the reasons why foreigners want to learn Chinese, and on the other hand, they are considered one of the main difficulties learners are facing. Namely, according to Cole (1997), one can reach a relatively high level of spoken Chinese in a few months, however, when it comes to the written text, learners might not be able to reach a reasonably high level even after years of hard work.

For students who come from a non-sinographic background, a logographic writing system is difficult to comprehend, therefore, learning Chinese characters is difficult for them. Generally speaking, there are four main approaches to teaching characters; 1) to introduce traditional characters first, 2) to start teaching simplified characters first, 3) to teach both traditional and simplified characters simultaneously, or 4) to postpone teaching characters to later stages of the learning process and operate just with Hanyu Pinyin at the beginner level to reduce the learning load.

This paper elaborates on the following research questions. First, if students are given free hands, would Hanyu Pinyin as an alphabetical script be their preferred choice or not? Second, does the educational environment that promotes balanced teaching of traditional and simplified characters from the beginning of the learning process make any influence on learners' preferences regarding simplified or traditional characters? And third, what are the possible reasons that motivate students' choices? We also need to consider the fact that the target students are not exposed to the Chinese language and Chinese characters in their daily life and there are not many opportunities for communication in Chinese.

2 Previous studies

2.1 Discussion on traditional and simplified characters

In terms of their graphical form, Chinese characters have undergone various processes, from getting more simplified on the one hand, and complicated or complex on the other hand, however, the dominant trend has been simplification (Zhang, 1997). The vast majority of current simplified characters are derived from the simplified or 'common' characters of past generations. Some of them are derived from ancient cursive characters, and some are still 'ancient original characters' and 'ancient common characters' (Li, 1996). As Su (2003) noted, simplified characters and traditional characters are a set of two different forms that will continue to coexist for a long time.

Since the *Chinese Character Simplification Scheme* was promulgated in the 1950s, the research on simplified characters and relations between traditional and simplified characters have also been the subject of numerous discussions. It is worth noticing that the English terms ‘traditional’ and ‘simplified’ characters can be understood in a broader or narrower sense.

Zhang (1997) elaborated on the relationship between *jiantizi* 简体字 and *jianhuazi* 简化字 which are both treated as ‘simplified’ characters. Popular among the masses, the *Jiantizi* characters are not organized and adapted to the simpler form of common characters, they are not officially recognized characters and can be written in a variety of ways. *Jianhuazi* characters, on the other hand, are organized and adapted to the simpler forms of characters, they are officially approved and thus written in a single way.

Peng (2009) stated that the simplification of Chinese characters is a macro-level adjustment of character forms. The terms ‘simplified’ and ‘traditional’ characters in a narrower sense refer to both the simplified characters and the corresponding traditional characters that originally existed from 1956 when they were determined by the government. In this sense, *jiantizi* and *jianhuazi* are interchangeable, both representing Chinese characters that have been simplified by the government.

A broader description of ‘simplified’ and ‘traditional’ characters refers to the number of strokes. Characters with more strokes are called ‘traditional’, whereas characters with fewer strokes are called ‘simplified’. According to this principle, there are also ‘variant characters’ (*yitizi* 异体字 or *yixiezi* 异写字) that existed before the official simplification and ‘the old characters’ (*jiuxingzi* 旧形字, *jiu zixing* 旧字形) that existed before the collation.

In the *General Standardized Chinese Character List* published in 2013, the term ‘simplified characters’ *jianhuazi* has been replaced by the expression ‘standardized characters’ *guifanzi* 规范字 to avoid ambiguity.

In this paper, the term ‘simplified characters’ or *jiantizi* 简体字 refers to the narrower meaning, i.e. *jianhuazi* 简化字 or *guifanzi* 规范字 ‘standardized characters’, while ‘traditional characters’ are the corresponding characters of the *jianhuazi*.

2.2 Characters used by native speakers

Nowadays, both traditional and simplified characters are used in different Chinese-speaking regions. In mainland China, the prevailing form of writing is simplified Chinese, and almost all publications are written in simplified characters. Exceptions are research related to ancient Chinese literature or occasional printings which require traditional Chinese characters. On the other hand, traditional characters are still commonly used

in Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, and in some Asian countries where Chinese characters have been preserved.

The co-existence of two different forms has brought some inconvenience to communication and understanding. However, with understanding the types and principles of simplification of the Chinese characters, and with some training, one can acquire the other form very quickly and can read texts regardless of whether they are written in traditional or simplified characters. Gao (2016) showed that after learning simplified characters, learning traditional characters is not as difficult as one would think. Also, people who have learned traditional characters may find it easier to learn simplified characters. Nguyen (2020) demonstrated that the experience of learning traditional characters can boost both literacy and vocabulary.

Regarding the use of Chinese characters in general, Yuan (1989) proposed the approach of knowing traditional [characters] and writing [in] simplified [ones]. Shi (1992) also advocated the idea of using simplified characters to recognize traditional ones in response to the new situation of character use briefly described at the beginning of this section. 'Using simplified characters' points at all types of usages, namely when making printings, when reading, and when doing handwriting, while 'to recognize traditional' means to recognize traditional characters only in a certain scope and at a certain stage, and advocates using simplified characters mainly but still recognizing traditional characters as a supplement to the simplified forms.

2.3 Characters from the perspective of language acquisition

Article 20 of the *Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language of the People's Republic of China* 中华人民共和国国家通用语言文字法 published in 2000 includes guidelines on the use of Putonghua and the standardized Chinese characters in Chinese classes for foreigners. However, the actual situation reveals that different regions and countries use different approaches when teaching Chinese, even more, teaching materials are written differently; sometimes in traditional and sometimes in simplified characters, pinyin or phonetic transcriptions can also be observed.

In relation to teaching Chinese as a second language, different scholars promote different views on the choice of using simplified or traditional characters. Chen (1981) noticed that international students who had only been taught simplified Chinese characters often encounter difficulties in learning traditional characters when reading the traditional Chinese characters in newspapers and classical books of the past. To help students overcome such difficulties Chen (1981) offered a historical overview of the simplification of Chinese characters and introduced the four categories of simplified Chinese characters in order to explain the simplification principles.

Shi Dingguo (1997) placed a wider focus on teaching Chinese as a second language. His observations of language classes made him conclude on the following most

commonly used approaches. These are a) encouraging speaking before reading characters (*Xian yu hou wen* 先语后文), b) integrating activities of speaking and reading characters (*yu wen bingjin* 语文并进), c) interspersing speaking and reading characters, (*yu wen chuancha* 语文穿插), and d) setting up a separate class for reading and writing characters (*duli she duxie hanzi ke* 独立设读写汉字课). He further pointed out that the purpose of teaching characters is to complement listening and speaking skills and to develop students' reading and writing skills. Also, he stressed that the Chinese characters being taught should be modern Chinese characters, while in a certain scope, the etymology of characters can also be introduced, and the development of Chinese characters can be taught in a well-balanced manner to optimize the learning outcome.

Similarly, Bian (1999) stated that teaching Chinese characters in the teaching of Chinese as a second language refers to modern Chinese characters, using the method of instruction in a non-native language. The aim of such a method is to master the skills on how to use Chinese characters. He explicitly stated that teaching of Chinese as a second language is the teaching of 'modern Chinese characters'.

It has frequently been pointed out that the simplification of Chinese characters has made the modern written Chinese language relatively easy to learn and use compared to the times of original traditional characters. Therefore, several scholars claim that simplified characters should be used for teaching, whereas traditional Chinese characters should be kept within the scope of recognition rather than in writing. Liu (2009) and Gao (2016) agree that simplified characters can be taught with fewer strokes and faster writing speed, and that simplified characters are easier to use and memorize.

Lü (1999) and Wen (2013) suggested that when teaching Chinese characters to foreign students, both simplified and traditional characters should be taught, and that simplified characters should be taught first, followed by traditional characters.

Opposed to that, Zhou (2007) undertakes the teacher's perspective and claims that teachers should reinforce the learning of traditional characters, and they should be able to recognize and write commonly used traditional characters to the best possible extent, as well as have a historical perspective and a clear understanding of the evolution of Chinese characters in ancient and modern times.

Miu (2012) believes that teaching simplified or traditional characters should be accompanied by the requirements of the local conditions, and under the premise of teaching simplified Chinese characters, courses on the transcription between traditional and simplified characters should be introduced. However, this should happen only when a learner has reached a certain level of understanding of the morphology, phonology, and meaning of Chinese characters. In such a way they can learn the other form of the Chinese character system in a more effective and

convenient way. Cai (2011) believes that students' understanding of the forms and meanings of characters could be facilitated by knowing some commonly used traditional characters on top of learning simplified characters well.

Wang (2013) and Zhao (2016) stress that teaching Chinese culture is inseparable from the teaching of Chinese characters. Wang believes that appropriate input of cultural knowledge can help improve the mastering of Chinese characters, and that teaching traditional characters can be used as a supplement to Chinese character teaching in the beginning stages. Traditional characters can be used to facilitate the teaching of Chinese culture, but learners do not need to master traditional characters.

Zhao (2016) pointed out that there is no need to deliberately avoid the problems caused by differences between traditional and simplified Chinese characters in teaching, and that the negative impact of differences between traditional and simplified Chinese characters in the teaching process can be minimized by enhancing interoperability through comparative teaching or extended teaching, and by teaching at different levels to accommodate different levels of differences and needs. For example, Lu (2022) recently analyzed some foreigners' mistakes on 61 commonly used Chinese characters with 'silk' *xi* 系 as a component in the HSK dynamic corpus, and proposed teaching strategies such as teaching Chinese characters based on simplified Chinese and supplemented by traditional Chinese; by using the ideographic function of the side parts of 'xi' and using the ideographic function of the phonetic symbol of 'xi', introducing culture to assist the Chinese characters teaching.

2.4 Factors influencing the choice of a character set

Numerous studies have shown that the choice of teaching traditional or simplified characters depends on a variety of factors, from target learners and their backgrounds to the purpose and aim of teaching, whereby the final choice of approach needs to be based on the actual situation.

Chen J. and Chen K. (2019) discuss that Chinese character education in Confucius Institutes is supposed to guide their students to choose the right teaching materials, teachers, and even other language institutions according to their practical needs. Similarly, Wang (2003) proposes that schools and teachers should consider the different needs of the students to develop teaching plans, followed by the allocation of classes and the selection of teaching materials according to the individual interests of students.

Deng (2016) suggests that teaching traditional characters can contribute to a deeper understanding of Chinese culture, but for the purpose of teaching, various practical factors should be fully considered to make an appropriate choice in traditional and simplified Chinese characters. Similarly, Ye Shuyang (2018) pointed out that simplified characters should be a prerequisite for teaching and traditional characters

as a useful supplementary tool to help Chinese learners understand the cultural connotations of Chinese characters and more comprehensively memorize and master the phonetic, morphological, and meaning elements of Chinese characters.

Li and Ye (2012) suggest that teaching Chinese as a second language – they specifically write about teaching Chinese to English native speakers - should include combined teaching of both traditional and simplified Chinese characters to help to better understand and learn Chinese characters. This is referred to as knowing the traditional and learning the simplified. Chen (2021) also suggested the introduction of traditional Chinese characters to meet different learning purposes of learners through which the purpose and effect of ‘using the classical to explain the contemporary’ and ‘using the traditional to explain the simple’ may be achieved.

By analyzing and comparing the strokes and semantic components of traditional and simplified characters, Wang, Su, and Miu (2017) suggested that simplified should be the only choice at the beginning level, while the different needs of learners should be considered at the intermediate and advanced levels, and suggested several ways to address the co-existence of traditional and simplified at the realistic level. Similarly, Xia (2017) suggested that Chinese character instruction should be given in different ways for different levels of learners while allowing traditional as well as simplified characters to co-exist.

In addition, Wang (2003) pointed out that the presence of both traditional and simplified Chinese characters sometimes affects the effectiveness of classroom teaching, and that unsatisfactory classroom teaching will lead students to give up learning Chinese characters or even give up learning Chinese.

Li (2016) argued that teaching traditional and simplified Chinese characters together in a targeted way is the most desirable approach at present. The teaching of traditional characters should be emphasized under the premise that the teaching of simplified characters is the dominant approach, and the Chinese character curriculum should establish and promote the teaching of culture based on traditional characters, striving to reduce the frequency of using both scripts.

Pu (2005) suggested that Thai-Chinese character teaching should focus on simplified characters, however, both traditional and simplified characters should be taught and both scripts should be written. Chen (2015) conducted a research study on the transition between traditional and simplified Chinese characters for secondary school students in Thailand, which pointed out that the choice of traditional or simplified Chinese characters should be guided by the needs of learners for their studies, work, and life.

Nguyen (2020) analyzed the influence of Vietnamese intermediate Chinese bilinguals’ experiences of learning traditional and simplified characters on their Chinese character-related language skills, and suggested that while teaching simplified

characters, students should be purposefully taught some traditional characters and related knowledge to deepen their understanding of Chinese characters, and suggested the establishment of courses on Chinese characters.

After analyzing the use of traditional and simplified Chinese characters and the learning situation of international students in Chinese language classes on both sides of Taiwan and the mainland of China, Lin (2020) suggested that we should take the learning needs of international students as a guide, pay attention to the fun of teaching characters, maintain the status quo of local common characters as the dominant one, and moderately supplement the knowledge of unfamiliar character forms.

Among the studies on reading comprehension, let us mention Cui (2020) who tested students' recognition speed and accuracy of reading traditional and simplified characters, and noted that learners got useful information faster when facing traditional Chinese characters because of their stronger regularity in the phonetic part. However, when it comes to the traditional Chinese characters with more complex structures, it was easier for students to recognize simplified characters.

3 Design of this study

The above-mentioned researchers undertook different approaches, however, they indirectly implicate that teaching traditional and simplified characters requires a dominant character form and a supplementary character form.

The Sinology program at the University of Ljubljana presently promotes balanced learning of both traditional and simplified characters. In this study, we are interested in the students' perspectives on the topic, namely what reading priorities concerning traditional and simplified characters would students prefer to follow?

3.1 Background information

The study was conducted at the University of Ljubljana, Department of Asian Studies, and lasted for 12 weeks. Participants were 18 first-year sinology students aged 18 or 19. Their first language belongs to an Indo-European language family. They are therefore used to an alphabetical writing system rather than a logographical writing system. As first-year students, they have studied Chinese for only six months prior to this experiment.

In this Sinology program, students are taught simplified and traditional characters at the same time. They use local Chinese textbooks written by local Chinese teachers, which combine both traditional and simplified characters at the same time. New vocabulary in the textbook is presented in an alternating manner, meaning that the odd lessons first introduce traditional characters, followed by simplified characters,

Hanyu Pinyin, and translation into Slovenian, while all even lessons first introduce simplified characters, add their traditional counterparts, Hanyu Pinyin, and translation into Slovenian. The study materials tend to avoid preference for either simplified or traditional characters, which differs from the above-mentioned approaches.

In the texts section, Hanyu Pinyin is not available as a supplementary annotation, however, diacritical marks for tones are added to all the characters throughout the textbook. Hanyu Pinyin is introduced and used only in the first two weeks of their studies, and from the third week on, all the texts are presented using only Chinese characters. This set high requirements for the students because it requires them to recognize Chinese characters from the very first steps on.

Based on these facts, the first research question of this study was whether students would choose to read texts in Hanyu Pinyin as the 'easy' option – if they could –, or would they prefer reading texts in characters. If so, then which character set would they decide on and what was their motivation for their selection?

The testing materials for this survey were created based on their current language level, and the topics of reading comprehension materials used in the experiment were selected from the topics that the participants had already studied. The grammar and vocabulary used in the reading materials are from HSK levels 1-3, and the fonts used in the printed Chinese characters are either Kaiti or SimSun and for the pinyin Times New Roman was selected. The students have been taught the same contents by the same teachers and received instruction in both simplified and traditional characters in their Chinese studies.

3.2 Survey

There were 18 participants included in the research. Though estimated as beginners, they were divided into two groups according to their Chinese test results. Students in Group A were placed between HSK levels 2 and 3, whereas students in Group B achieved Chinese proficiency between HSK levels 1 or 2.

For 12 consecutive weeks, they were given testing materials which consisted of three texts, one in Hanyu Pinyin, one in simplified characters, and one in traditional characters, whereby the order of texts was randomly mixed every week. Students had to read the texts and answer the corresponding questions within a specified time. They were required to complete the reading comprehension according to the instructions. Every text included five questions, and each of them was evaluated with two points, which altogether makes 10 points per text and 30 points per the whole test. In the final, supplementary question learners were asked to write a brief feedback about the priority order of those three texts and reasons for choosing that particular sequence. They were also asked to write down which of the three texts they found most difficult and why.

Based on the answers, the learners' reading priorities and comprehension levels were calculated.

4 Results and discussion

This survey measured students' reading preferences among Hanyu Pinyin, simplified characters, and traditional characters. At the same time, differences in reading comprehension were considered, too. They were calculated from the mistakes that students have made.

Table 1 below shows the sum of the 12 weekly scores per text type and the maximum score per text type is 2160. Recall that the highest possible average score per text would be 10.

Table 1: Total and average score of three writing forms

Text types	Simplified Chinese	Traditional Chinese	Hanyu Pinyin
Total	1254	1271	1171
Average	5.81	5.88	5.42

Reading materials in traditional characters yielded the highest average, followed by texts in simplified characters, whereby texts in Hanyu Pinyin got the lowest score. The difference in reading comprehension between traditional and simplified characters was not very large, whereas students got quite lower results in texts written in Hanyu Pinyin, even though it is supposed to be 'easier' to read than characters. Generally speaking, the results have shown that participants' reading comprehension was higher with texts written in characters, regardless of the specific character set.

A more detailed look at the data reveals that the difference in results was the most obvious for texts in traditional characters, whereas the difference was not so remarkable for texts in Hanyu pinyin (see Table 2 below). While Group A answered 7.23 questions out of 10 in traditional characters correctly, Group B got on average just 4.54 points out of 10. On the other hand, none of the groups performed relatively poor in reading texts in Hanyu Pinyin. The average score for Group A was 6.66, and the average score for Group B was 4.19.

Table 2: The difference in reading comprehension between both groups

Text types	Simplified Chinese	Traditional Chinese	Hanyu Pinyin
Group A	768	781	719
Average	7.11	7.23	6.66
Group B	486	490	452
Average	4.5	4.54	4.19
Total difference	282	291	267
Average difference	2.61	2.67	2.47

Table 1 and Table 2 reveal that students got the best results when reading texts in traditional characters or in simplified characters. On the other hand, their performance was not so well in relation to texts in Hanyu Pinyin. This indicates that the teaching approach of strongly promoting both character sets from the beginning of their learning process has a certain impact on the students' learning outcomes. At the same time, we can preliminarily conclude, that the difference in reading comprehension increases with the proficiency level. Students with higher language proficiency level (even though all of them are still at the beginner stage), has demonstrated better reading comprehension of texts written in characters. This means that already at the beginning level of learning Chinese as a second language, teachers should require students to read texts in Chinese characters since it is beneficial for reading comprehension and contributes to higher language proficiency. The analysis of the participants' results demonstrates the positive impact of insisting on teaching Chinese characters, especially for reading comprehension.

Regarding the students' preferences of which text type to choose first, we can observe the following tendencies. According to the results of the 169 valid questionnaires received from two groups of learners, the learners' preferences can be classified into the following four categories.

First, priority is given to simplified characters. Approximately 34.3% of all answers were speaking in favor of texts in simplified characters.

Second, priority is given to traditional characters. In 19.5% of cases, students would choose texts in traditional characters as their first choice.

Third, priority is given to Hanyu Pinyin. Among the submitted answers, 17.8% of the total votes were given to this alphabetical script.

The last category consists of answers that it does not matter in which form the text is written. The main principle of reading texts was simply from the first to the last, from the top to the bottom. This principle reflects no preference for one of the three options

and sets them to an equal position. 27.8% of the texts were read according to this principle.¹

Figure 1 below shows the students' preferences if they are free to choose whatever they want.

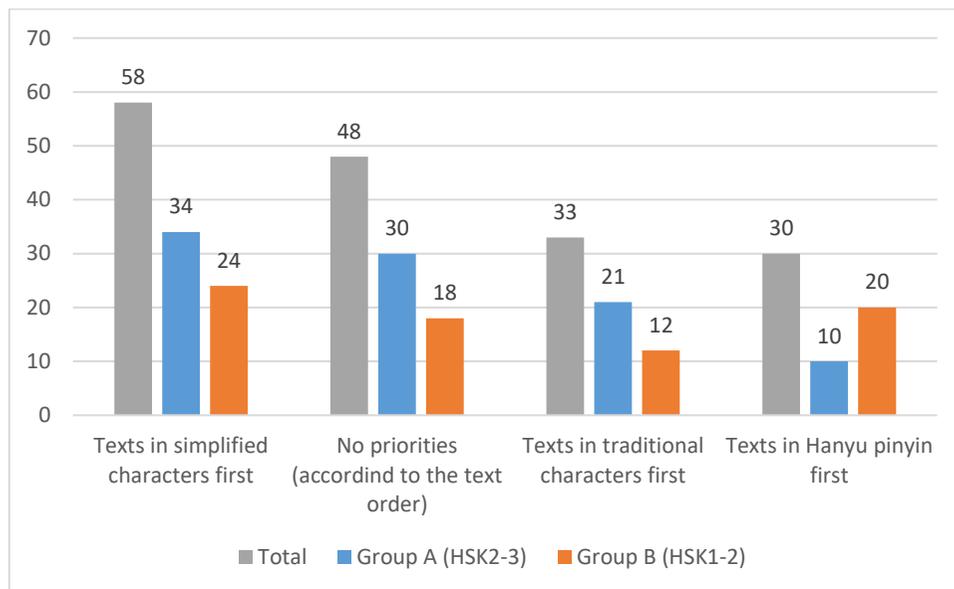


Figure 1: Reading preferences by A and B group students

The results have shown that 58 students from both groups prefer texts with simplified characters. Ten students less, namely 48 students claim that they have no preferences regarding the given character set, in 33 cases, students first read texts in traditional characters, whereas in 30 situations, pinyin was students' first choice. This indicates that even though the selected teaching approach promotes unbiased and balanced use of simplified and traditional characters, learners would still prefer simplified characters to traditional or pinyin. This might be related to the fact that simplified characters have fewer strokes compared to traditional characters, which makes them easier to remember and write.

An obvious difference in priorities can be observed if we consider stronger and weaker students. While both groups prefer simplified characters, their second choice is already different. Better students do not have any preferences, whereas weaker students would choose pinyin as their second option. Further on, while better students

¹ There was one single specific answer that the learner has no priorities, and this response was added to the last group.

would put traditional characters as their third choice and pinyin as the last, weaker students would put traditional characters as their last choice.

This indicates that learners all tend to choose to start with the contents that they are familiar with or with the contents that seem easier, which is associated with the process of learning from the simple to the complex. Moreover, a study by scholars at the Laboratory of Cognitive Neuroscience and The French National Centre for Scientific Research (Velay & Longcamp, 2012 in Shi, 2018) has shown that people are reading with their eyes, while brain memorizes by handwriting. It would be interesting to also include this aspect of learning and consider whether better students practice more by handwriting compared to their peers or not.

Similarly, Group A students selected Hanyu Pinyin as their last choice, which indicates that the learners with better Chinese language proficiency find it difficult to read pinyin-only texts. Moreover, recall that reading comprehension of pinyin-only texts was lower in both groups. Even though the learners come from the L1 environment where Latin script is used for writing and reading, they understand a Chinese text better if it is written in characters.

According to Hoover and Gough (1986), reading consists of two parts, namely decoding and linguistic comprehension, both of which are necessary for reading success. Reading comprehension is a combination of decoding and language comprehension. Successful reading comprehension depends on quick and accurate word recognition, and individual differences in reading comprehension are mainly due to differences in readers' word recognitions (Perfetti, 2007). This indicates that the decoding between the form and meaning of Chinese characters is better than the decoding between the sound and meaning in the process of acquiring Chinese. This also indicates the need to develop learners' awareness of the connection between the form, sound, and meaning of Chinese characters already at the beginning level.

5 Conclusion

Chinese characters are very challenging for Chinese learners, and they are also an important factor that affects the persistence of learners. Most learners of Chinese at the beginning level, especially those from backgrounds that are not familiar with a logographic writing system, find Chinese easy until writing system is introduced to them. The characters then seem to become an obstacle to further learning progress.

This study has shown that even learners who have learned Chinese for only half a year can perform better results if they are encouraged to learn characters. Their reading comprehension was higher, if the texts were written in characters compared to those written in Hanyu Pinyin, whereby it did not really matter which set of

characters was used. Generally speaking, texts in characters are more user-friendly even to L2 learners at the basic level.

Students' tendency to prefer simplified characters can be summarized and interpreted as follows. Simplified characters are students' preferred choice because they have fewer strokes and are therefore easier to recognize, distinguish and write. Due to their semantic clues, they are also faster to read than pinyin-only transcriptions. Moreover, because of the numerous homophones in Chinese, it is not easy for learners to recognize the specific Chinese character represented by the pinyin.

Choosing the existing text order as the main principle without paying attention to either traditional or simplified characters can be understood in the following way. Following the text from the top to the bottom helps readers to focus on the reading itself. It is easier to grasp the ideas when going through the text once and then returning to reread it. If the learners do not find any differences in the difficulty level, they tend to choose this principle.

Traditional characters may be the first choice for students who have established strong visual connections between the present forms and the development of characters. It is worth mentioning that participants in this survey have probably attended the 'Development of Chinese script' class which also includes the explanation of the 214 Kangxi radicals and the development of specific characters. Some of the participants also mentioned in the questionnaire that although they did not know all the words in the reading text, they tried to guess some of the meanings from the context clues of the text, especially when faced with familiar topics.

Hanyu Pinyin was sometimes the first choice for weaker students of auditory learning style students. However, with the learning progression, Hanyu Pinyin starts losing its importance. Some students from Group A have stated that they find the pinyin-only version difficult and time-consuming since they need to imagine and convert pinyin into Chinese characters first and then place it within the context. Similarly, radicals (semantic keys) may serve as a clue to guess the meaning of unknown words.

Lack of vocabulary was one of the reasons for learners' mistakes. Students mentioned that they either did not know some of the characters, or they recognized some of the characters but did not understand the content, or did not understand the questions.

To sum up, this study has shown that the selected teaching approach has a certain impact on learning outcomes, however, from the learners' point of view, simplified characters that have fewer strokes and are easier to read or write are suggested to serve as the primary choice and should be acquired first. Introducing traditional characters is beneficial, too, especially in addition to the knowledge of simplified Chinese characters. By comparing traditional and simplified Chinese characters,

students can deepen their understanding of the different script forms, thus achieving the goal of using traditional and simplified Chinese characters together, recognizing the traditional form and writing the simplified form, or using the traditional form in recognizing the simplified form. After they have mastered some of the traditional and simplified Chinese characters and have a good understanding of the simplification of Chinese characters, learners can independently choose whether to focus on using simplified or traditional characters according to their personal interests, future career preferences, development directions, etc.

This approach would reduce learners' fear of the numerous characters needed to learn to reach literacy. However, regardless of the form of the Chinese characters, they have definitely a positive effect on the reading comprehension of learners. Thus, in Chinese language teaching, it is advisable to insist on using Chinese characters to present the teaching content.

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