

Difference in the Process of Listening to Chinese: Foreign Learners of Character-writing and Non-character-writing

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There is a dearth of information identifying the difference in the process of listening to Chinese between foreign learners from character-writing and non-character-writing systems. Based on questionnaire, interview, and observation, this paper presents these findings: a) In identifying the difficulties in listening, students of non-character-writing systems feel that the tone of Chinese is very difficult to pick up, while for students of character-writing systems, it is difficult to distinguish the combinations of vowels and consonants; b) In the decoding process, most students from non-character-writing systems would process a word through Chinese pronunciation, translate it into a media language¹, (that is, English) and then arrive at the word's meaning, while most students from character-writing systems find the word's meaning through Chinese pronunciation, which is a quicker process of listening. Language background and teaching and learning styles, which result in the difference between these two groups of students, are compared and discussed in this paper.

The four major cultural circles in the world are Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and Confucianism. The Confucian Cultural Circle is also known as the Chinese Character Circle, and includes China (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao) and other countries and areas that have been "influenced by Chinese heritage culture and use/used Chinese characters" at some point in their histories, such as Japan, Vietnam, Korea, Singapore, and others (Feng, 2004, p. 2). The Non-Chinese Cultural Circle refers to the rest of the three circles. In this paper, we refer to students from the Non-Chinese Cultural Circle as non-character-writing students, while students who come from the Chinese Cultural Circle are referred to as character-writing students. We identify the difference in listening between these two groups of students and give the explanations.

Literature Review

Some focus has been paid toward character teaching/learning between character-writing and non-character-writing students. However, very little research reflects on the problem of listening comprehension. Several papers raise issues of listening but limit the study to a specific group of students: Ma (1995, 1996, 1999) discusses hindrances in listening among individual groups of students in Japan, Korea, and the United States respectively. Chen (1997) states the problems in tone of American students in learning Chinese. Wang (1998) unfolds the issues of marking tones for Hungarian students. However, there is a lack of research discussing the difference of decoding style in listening between character-writing and non-character-writing students.

We are teacher researchers. Through our teaching experience, we have noticed that students from character-writing systems and non-character-writing students have very different responses to listening to Chinese, especially in their early stage of learning Chinese. In order to make the difference between these two groups of students clear so as to find effective means of helping each specific group of students, we designed a questionnaire, had interviews with individual students, and observed their listening processes. We compared these three kinds of data and found several differences.

Methods

Research Object

Two groups of elementary level students were used to collect data. They had no prior knowledge of Chinese before coming to this course. Our division of these two groups is based on students' different cultural backgrounds. Students in Group 1 came from non-character-writing countries in Europe, Africa, and Western Asia; students in Group 2 came from character-writing countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Teaching starts from Pinyin, a Chinese spelling system. The two groups have the same class structure (listening), length (four hours a week), and textbook. One teacher is responsible for delivering the course to these two groups.

Research Methods and the Process

Qualitative research methods were applied in this research. We have collected three different kinds of data. The first round of data was collected through a questionnaire. We issued 40 questionnaires and collected 34 copies back (85%). Among these 34 copies, 18 copies are from non-character-writing students, and 16 copies from character-writing students. The details are included in Table 1.

The second round of data was obtained via interviews. Based on the results of the questionnaire, we conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with six students from these two groups. We tape-recorded and transcribed the contents, which helps us know the students' personal reactions to hearing spoken Chinese. The background of these six students is included in Table 2.

The third round of data comes from our observations. We observed these two groups of students for four months in their listening class, especially those six students with whom we conducted interviews. We observed and took notes during observation in order to get a full picture of the listening process. We noted students' questions, opinions, learning styles, attendance records, test records, and interactions with the teacher.

The three kinds of data collection will help us to look at the decoding process in listening in a comprehensive way, which prevents us from putting our subjective views and opinions into the data (Wood, 1991).

Table 1: Background of the two groups of students

Group of students	Number	Countries
1 Students of non-character writing	18	Italy, Spain, Congo, Tanzania, Cameroon, Togo, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Iran, Oman, Azerbaijan, Armenia
2 Students of character-writing	16	South Korea, Japan, D.P.R.Korea, Vietnam

Table 2: Background of the 6 interviewed students

NO.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Class	A1	A1	A1	A1	A2	A2
Sex	male	female	female	male	female	male
Nationality	Iran	Spain	Sri Lanka	Azerbaijan	Vietnam	Vietnam
Native language	Persian	Spanish	Sinhalese	Azerbaijan	Vietnamese	Vietnamese
Other foreign languages	English	Little English	English	Russian, English	Little English	Little English
Type of students	Study for Ph.D after learning Chinese	Research after learning Chinese	Study Chinese	Study for a degree after learning Chinese	Study Chinese	Study for a degree after learning Chinese

Questionnaire

Design of the questionnaire. The questionnaire is in four parts. It is about students' personal information, attitudes toward the listening course, listening skills, and feedback about the listening course. The first and fourth parts are open-ended, which requires students to fill it in by themselves. The second and third parts are multiple choice. Two language versions are used – English and Chinese – to provide convenience for students to understand it better. The results of the questionnaire show that there are many differences between character-writing and non-character-writing students. In this paper, we will identify their decoding process in listening.

Interviews

In order to get a more detailed picture of the decoding process, we chose six students from these two groups to interview. The interviews were semi-structured and open-ended. We tape-recorded and transcribed the content into Chinese/English depending on the reply version. When we had interviews with two character-writing students in group 2 we used

Chinese, while with four students in group 1 (who are non-character-writing), we used mostly English with very few Chinese words.

Observation

We have spent four months in observation and have more than 10,000 words of notes. From these observations, we have noticed that the two groups of students have different decoding processes, and this has affected their learning outcomes. See Table 3.

Results

Results of the questionnaire

Description of Non-character-writing Students. When listening to word pronunciation, 67% of the students have some level of difficulty in identifying certain tones; 33% of the students feel that it is difficult to identify vowels, consonants, or the combination of vowels and consonants; when they hear a word pronounced, 50% of the students' first reactions are to compare it to the meaning of the word in a media language (English), 17% of the students react to Pinyin, 11% of the students think of the Chinese meaning, and 22% of the students compare it to the meaning in their mother tongue; in reference to word understanding, 44% of the students combine the meaning of the word with its meaning in the media language, 28% of the students compare it to their mother tongue, 17% of the students connect it to Chinese characters, and 11% of the students react to the meaning directly.

From the data described in Table 4, we notice that non-character-writing students are similar in many ways: Most of these students have a difficult time finding meaning in tones; half of them combine the spoken word with the meaning through a media language, 30% of these students use their mother tongue, and very few of them use characters to understand the meaning.

Description of Character-writing Students. When listening to a word pronunciation, 19% of the students feel that it is difficult to distinguish tones, 81% of the students feel that it is difficult to hear vowel or consonant sounds or the combination of them; when they hear a word pronounced, the first reaction of 12% of the students is to find the meaning through the media language, 25% of the students think about Pinyin, and 45% of the students understand the Chinese meaning.

It seems that tone is not a difficult issue for character-writing students. Instead, they find it difficult to identify the combination of vowels and consonants. Half of them are able to connect the Chinese meaning with the word they heard directly; they very seldom use the media language. This is also consistent with several reviews of error analysis in vowel and consonant sounds among Korean, Japanese, and Vietnamese speakers (Fu & Zhang, 2004; Wang, 1996; Wang, B., 1999).

In listening comprehension, non-character-writing and character-writing students differ in the decoding process. For most of the non-character-writing students, the sequence is: Chinese pronunciation → meaning of media language → Chinese word meaning; while most of the character-writing students go from Chinese pronunciation → word meaning. The

Table 3: Observation notes

Students Items compared		Students of non-character writing	Students of character-writing
Listening comprehension process	Sound perception	Feel tones are difficult, especially the second and third tone; there are many mistakes in tones when reading words or sentences and oral speaking; it takes a long time to identify tones, so they normally ignore them while listening.	They can read tones correctly; for Korean students, character can remind them of the meaning and pronunciation, but they cannot listen to each word clearly; Japanese students can understand general ideas but cannot identify some of the pinyin clearly.
	Speech Comprehension	They combine pronunciation with the meaning by media language; many students can listen to pinyin clearly but don't understand the meaning; they need too much time to reflect on the meaning when listening; they cannot understand some of the meaning until they listen more than 3 times.	They combine pronunciation with the meaning by Chinese or mother language; they can reflect on the meaning and almost understand all words when listening to dialogue twice; they think cassette speaks only a little fast; if slower, they can understand even better.
	Information storage	Seldom make notes; it is hard for them to repeat after listening because they don't understand; they are used to writing pinyin without tones; there are many difficulties in writing characters, and it comes very slowly.	Most of them can make notes; they can repeat dialogue after listening twice; they can also write characters.
Learning Outcome		They are varied in outcome; in general, their level of listening is worse than students of character-writing. On the final exam, only 50% of them get more than 80 scores. At the end of term, few can talk with teacher in simple Chinese; the outcome is not good.	They don't have many differences in learning outcome; improvement is quick; on final (same paper for two classes), 90% of them get more than 80 scores. Most can talk with teacher in simple Chinese; outcome is good.

Table 4: One part of the questionnaire

Questions	Choices provided	Percentage of non-character-writing students	Percentage of character-writing students
What do you feel is the most difficult problem when you listen to pinyin?	Consonant	11	19
	Vowel	11	12
	Intonation	67	19
	The combination of consonant and vowel	11	50
What do you feel is the most difficult problem when you listen to a sentence?	Identify each pronunciation	28	70
	Separate words and phrases	11	6
	Understand meaning	28	6
	Write the characters	33	18
What do you reflect first in your mind when you hear a character/word?	Chinese Pinyin	17	25
	Meaning of media language	50	12
	Meaning of it in mother tongue	22	18
	Chinese meaning	11	45
What do you combine with the meaning when you hear a character/word?	Direct connection	11	25
	Character	17	25
	Media language	44	0
	Mother tongue	28	50

former process is slower than the latter since the reaction to the media language in the decoding process takes more cognitive time.

Results of the Interviews

Non-character-writing Students. Student 1 came to China to learn Chinese; after that, he will pursue a Ph.D. He is Muslim. He is good at English listening and speaking but can only identify about 500 English words. This makes it difficult for him to understand the English explanations in his textbooks. His Chinese listening is at the lower intermediate level in his class. As he described, in listening comprehension he hears a word and translates it into English (a media language), then translates it into his mother tongue – Persian – then to the word meaning. Just as he says, “firstly English, secondly Persian, lastly meaning.” He feels

that the decoding process is too complicated and takes too much time. We suggested that he should try to combine the meaning with his mother tongue directly. He pointed out:

Too much English [explanations in the textbook]. You should use more pictures instead of translating Chinese into English. Using pictures in teaching is much better.

His complaint shows that he does not like to get to the meaning through using a media language in the decoding process. In reference to Chinese sound perception, he mentioned “the problem is to understand tones.” Nevertheless, the following quote shows that this student is able to differentiate the subtle varieties in paired consonants, such as retroflex consonant and non-retroflex consonant, which is difficult for character-writing students.

I went to buy something. When I asked them “zhe shi duoshao qian?” they just told me ‘siba.’ But you teach us ‘shi’ not ‘si,’ but people outside say ‘si!’

Student 2 is a senior visiting scholar. After the language course, she will do research work at the Ph.D level. She likes Chinese culture and realizes the importance of commanding the Chinese language. Her listening is below average in her class. During the interview, she expressed the difficulty of understanding tones; she was able to identify the difference between the tones she said and the tones Chinese speakers said but failed to judge them correctly. She gave this example: “One day I said to [a] receptionist ‘ni (the third tone) hao (the third tone),’ but he just replied ‘ni (the fourth tone) hao (the fourth tone)!’ ”

She also mentioned “I don’t like to use English to learn Chinese.” However, her understanding of words is through the media language of English. Since she is not proficient in English, she feels that it is too difficult to learn Chinese through English. Just as she mentioned “They explain things in English while my English is not good and I cannot understand.” She expressed that it would be much better to learn through pictures and videos instead of using English.

Student 3 came to learn Chinese because of the need in her daily life; she will stay in China for 2-3 years. She studies very hard and has made good progress. She is the best in her class. She uses English as a media language in her country as well. In listening comprehension, she connects the meaning of a word to its meaning in English. She mentioned:

It is easy for me because the books always explain in English. I remember the English meaning. But I know it in my mother tongue as well.

Student 4 was in Class A1 at first. He worked very hard and soon his level was at the top. After the mid-term, he moved to Class A2. He had a bit more difficulty in Class A2 at first. Soon he caught up and was average in Class A2. The interview happened just after he moved to Class A2. He described his decoding process in the following way:

I use English to understand meaning. If I don't understand the meaning in English, I try to find the explanation in Russian; if I still have problem[s], I [find] the meaning in Azerbaijani.

Although he was in Class A2, he has many points in common with students in Class A1. He also expressed the difficulties in understanding tone. However, he can ignore them and focus on meaning. This is related to the redundancy of language. Mistakes in the tone of a single word will not affect the communication when the whole sentence is clear (Zhao, 1998).

It is evident that there are some consistencies among these four non-character-writing students. They all show difficulty with hearing tones. Their decoding styles and understanding processes are: Chinese sound → meaning of media language (English) → word meaning. This finding correlates to the results of the questionnaire. In addition, students whose English understanding levels are high will have a faster decoding process. Contrarily, students whose English levels are low complain that the textbook has too many English explanations. This prevents them from being able to understand.

Character-writing Students. Student 5 is very interested in Chinese culture. She hopes to go back to her country and use Chinese in her work. She plans to spend one year learning Chinese; if it's not enough, she will extend the time. She belongs to the upper intermediate level in her class. She described her decoding process, and it shows that she has a strong sense of learning Chinese by combining Chinese sound with meaning directly instead of through her mother tongue:

For vocabulary, I don't look up the dictionary. I listen to the pronunciation first. I try to understand them in Chinese instead of Vietnamese; if I still have problem[s] in understanding, I use Vietnamese.

Student 6 will have a degree after the language course. He studies hard and learns quickly. He is the best at listening in his class. In regards to listening comprehension, he stated:

If I understand the meaning, I will be easy to write it out and also easy to speak it out. If I don't know the meaning, I will be difficult to write it out. When I listen, I combine the sound with Vietnamese, not English.

He also mentioned that there are six tones in his native language, so he doesn't find it difficult to pick up on tones. Instead, he mentioned that he finds it difficult to pick up on consonant sounds.

Consistencies also exist among the character-writing students. Their decoding style and processes are: Chinese pronunciation → Chinese meaning/mother-tongue meaning/word meaning. These two students did not seem to have much difficulty in understanding their sound perception during the interview. However, observations support that character-writing students have a similar decoding style.

The Consistency of the Questionnaire, Interviews, and Observations

Different methods are used to collect data and will make the conclusion more comprehensive. We have identified the same issue by using questionnaire, interview and observation in order to get a full picture of the differences between character-writing students and non-character-writing students. This fits for triangulation, one of the methods in qualitative research.

Observations prove and support what we have found in the questionnaires and interviews. Character-writing students find it difficult to identify elements within a syllable and can not easily differentiate between the vowels and consonants in one word. The decoding process for character-writing students is: Chinese sound → Chinese meaning/mother-tongue meaning/word meaning. Non-character-writing students always fail to identify tones and also find it difficult to use them correctly, although they are good at identifying each sound in a word. The decoding process for non-character writing-students is: Chinese sound → media language meaning → meaning.

Wang (1999) divides listening comprehension into sound perception, word/sentence comprehension, and information storage. In our research, Character-writing students combine the pronunciation with meaning directly, while non-character-writing students use media languages to get the meaning; Character-writing students use Chinese or their mother-tongue to understand a word meaning and store it in the form of a character while non-character-writing students use a media language to understand a word meaning and store it either in the media language or their mother-tongue. Character-writing students can get the general idea of what they have heard and speak it out again, while non-character writing students find it difficult to do so. We think these differences are not only related to the nature of the students' mother-tongues, but they are also related to the teaching and learning styles of the students. Our observations also support the fact that students have applied various strategies to their language learning. This results in different learning outcomes.

Discussion

It is interesting to notice that these two groups of students are in the same Chinese environment, use the same textbook, and face the same teaching style, but their reaction to sounds is different. Why has this happened? This phenomenon arouses our interest in this research.

Sound Perception

Yang (1996) states that the nature of listening comprehension is in a human being's process of receiving and decoding language signals through audio organs. Speech is the meaningful sound human beings pronounce. It has three characteristics: physical, philological, and social. World languages vary in pronunciation and tongue positions. The same sound can have different functions in different languages. A 'tone language' is a language in which the pitch of a word can make the meaning of the word different (Yip, 2002). Chinese is tonal. It makes full use of frequency while many other languages do not use

tones. Instead, some languages emphasize the duration and intensity of sound, such as English. Sound perception refers to the reaction of the physical characteristics (frequency, intensity, duration) of a sound; it combines with the reaction of the brain to the social characteristics (meaning of a sound), which unite as the sensitivity of sound position. “Generally speaking, people find it easy to pronounce the sounds which have already existed in their native languages, and find it difficult to pronounce those sounds that do not exist in their native languages.” (Zhao, 1998, p. 372). If one wants to react accurately and quickly to those foreign sounds, one must be sensitive to the segmental and super-segmental phonemes which are important in the sound system. In Chinese, the important segmental phoneme is a syllable composed of vowels and consonants. The important super-segmental phonemes are tone and rhyme (knowledge of tone is beyond the scope of this paper; one can read *Tone* written by Yip (2002) for reference). Single-syllable tone in a morpheme and rhyme compose the unique character of Chinese sounds. If one wants to learn Chinese sounds well, one must be sensitive to these three parts. For foreign students, the first two parts are even more important. The best way to command it is:

1. Treat a syllable as a whole part and try to avoid separating the vowel and consonant.
2. Be sensitive and practice listening to tones more.

Discussion of the Difficulties in Tone Perception

Hyman (2001) describes that a tone language is a language in which the indication of pitch represents the lexical realization in some morphemes. Chinese is tonal. Different tones represent different meanings. Non-character-writing students don't have tones in their native languages. That is why they find it difficult to have a positive sound transfer. Sometimes they have negative sound transfers from their native languages instead. They have shown many errors in their listening and speaking. Just as Student 4 mentioned, “Tone is very difficult, we don't have tone in our native language.” Student 1 complained “If every sound should have a tone, I feel [that it is] very difficult to speak out a sentence.” Actually, it is not just the tone of a single character; the tones of two-character words, phrases, and sentences are all difficult parts of the language which make it difficult for non-character-writing students to improve their listening comprehension. To be more accurate, they express that the second and third tones are the most difficult to command. This is consistent with Yu's (1988) view of the sequence in difficulties of tones: the first tone is the easiest, then the fourth tone and the second tone, while the third tone is the most difficult.

However, among non-character-writing students, the level of listening comprehension is varied. Students 3 and 4 are better than Students 1 and 2. We presume it is related to the learning strategy that each individual applies to listening. Szeto's (2000) research shows that in adults learning Cantonese as a second language, the language learning ability is very important and correlates to tonal accuracy. Another fact is the hindrance of the media language which we have already analyzed.

Among character-writing students, Vietnamese speakers have six tones, more than Chinese tones, so positive tone transfer is effective to Vietnamese students. Korean and Japanese speakers have no tones in their languages, but their languages have been influenced by Chinese language and culture. Both countries once used Chinese as their official language and have borrowed many words in addition to inventing their own languages. Tone is not a

main problem for these students. If we follow Hyman's classification, Chinese, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Korean are all tonal languages with minor differences, so students from character-writing systems do not have problems with identifying tones when listening to Chinese. If we rank the level of difficulty students have with understanding tone, it is: non-character-writing students, Korean students, Japanese students, and Vietnamese students.

Discussion of Syllable Characters in Chinese Sound Identification

Another characteristic of Chinese sound is the independent and isolated syllable. Chinese syllables are simple and are always arranged in the order of the consonant first and the vowel second. The total number of syllables is about 400, not counting the tones and retroflex finals. In Chinese, vowels and consonants are not prominent individually; they combine and form a syllable. This requires learners to identify individual syllables instead of vowels and consonants. Chinese syllables have two characteristics: one is the function of concentration and condensation within one syllable; the other is the function of dispersion among syllables (Pan, 2004). So when foreign students listen to Chinese sounds, they feel that each syllable is clear, but the elements within one syllable are not easy to identify.

Most non-character-writing students share some characteristics in their languages. They are good at identifying vowels and consonants since the combinations in their languages are more complicated than in Chinese. For example, in English, vowels and consonants can appear either in front or at the end of a syllable, while in Chinese, the combination of syllables is always consonant first and vowel second, so it is easy for non-character-writing students to identify. However, this skill is not important in listening to Chinese since Chinese syllables are easy to identify. Instead, tone is difficult for them. The questionnaire showed that 67% of non-character-writing students feel tone is quite a difficult part of learning Chinese.

Syllables in Korean include a consonant plus a vowel (+ consonant), which is similar to Chinese, so Korean students are familiar with the Chinese spelling system. They are sensitive to one syllable but pay no attention to the vowels and consonants within. Japanese speakers treat one syllable as one part of speech. They are also very sensitive to syllable perception and ignore the vowel and consonant perception within one syllable. Vietnamese has six tones. Students from Korea, Japan, and Vietnam are sensitive to syllables but weak at identifying vowels and consonants within a syllable. They are inclined to be more focused on one syllable and treat it as a unit. As we have explained, this style of decoding is very similar to Chinese. The weakness of character-writing students with sound identification will not have any negative influence on Chinese sound learning. Furthermore, character-writing students benefit from easily identifying tones, the most difficult part of learning Chinese. These two factors help character-writing students easily and accurately judge a word's meaning when they listen to its pronunciation. It is the same process when they listen to a phrase or a sentence. The ability to judge tones accelerates them in understanding the meaning of a word or a sentence.

Non-character-writing students are in a disadvantaged position in acquiring Chinese sounds, compared to character-writing students, since they are not familiar with tone. Their advantages in identifying vowels and consonants are not important in Chinese sound learning.

Discussion of Cultural and Social Effects Leading to Difference in Listening Comprehension

The questionnaire showed that 50% of character-writing students use their mother-tongues to learn Chinese, and the rest directly combine Chinese sounds to meanings. Whether it is through Chinese or another mother-tongue, the understanding of a word's meaning is direct and accurate. From our observation, we noticed that they always used a Chinese-Korean, Chinese-Japanese, or Chinese-Vietnamese dictionary. Following this process in learning will no doubt help students to improve their Chinese learning-level efficiently.

As we have mentioned, character-writing students share cultural backgrounds, that is, the heritage of Chinese culture and characters. Chinese culture includes the Chinese cultural application to education. Teaching and learning styles are different among different countries of character-writing and non-character writing systems (Biggs & Watkins, 1996; An, 2000; Edward & An, 2006). Chinese teaching is instruction-oriented. Heavy instruction in class and memorization outside of class require students to follow their teacher's words without any ignorance. Character-writing students are influenced by Chinese heritage culture and easily adapt themselves when they receive a Chinese teacher's instruction. They have no objection to this style of teaching. Their motivation accompanies their familiarity with the learning strategy. This process (easily identifying tones, understanding meaning, following the teacher's instruction, using the same learning strategy, showing progress in learning outcomes, and elevating motivation) leads character-writing students to feel more and more comfortable with Chinese learning and teaching, and it leads them to make steady progress. In an interview, one student mentioned "I want to know Chinese; I try not [to] use Vietnamese in Chinese language learning."

For non-character-writing students, identifying the tone is very difficult, as we have shown from the data collection. They cannot judge the accurate tone which leads to the correct meaning when they listen to a word pronunciation. If they find it difficult with one word, two or more words and sentences will be even more difficult. As a result, they misunderstand words' meanings and mess up during conversations or in listening.

Chinese teaching style focuses on instruction and memorization; plus, it emphasizes strictly commanding the skills through basic knowledge learning. We noticed that while listening, these two groups are in a language lab with no visual facilities. Students must depend on their prior knowledge, preview, and quickness of the decoding process to understand the meaning correctly. These will all accumulate difficulties for non-character-writing students. First, their decoding process is slow because they use a media language; second, they are not used to the Chinese learning style of previewing the text in great detail; third, they do not have a relative Chinese background which helps them to understand the contents better. Rost (2005) points out that comprehension is related to the frame of conversation, that is, specific topic, culture, and content. If the frame is not settled, the listener will find it difficult to understand the meaning.

We have already stated that unlike character-writing students, most non-character-writing students use media language to understand meaning. However, English explanations in the textbook are not accurate or do not contain the same degree of meaning, style, and usage. Sometimes one word in Chinese cannot be exactly explained in English and vice versa. "At moments, there are some unsatisfied vocabulary translations and English explanations in

textbooks” (Wang, S., 1999, p. 39). “Textbook translations are always being criticized” (Liu, 2004, p. 15). Shi (2003) points out:

Through several decades, we have written six to seven hundred textbooks, some vocabulary has been explained and translated again and again. However, no change and reform has been done in style and way of translation. Translation has become the backward part in textbook writing of teaching Chinese as a foreign language. We must realize it and make efforts to change and improve it. (p. 25)

It seems that students understand only half or part of the meaning via media language. This will hinder their ability to improve their Chinese quickly and directly. However, without English, they feel that it is difficult to use their mother tongue to help them learn Chinese (the questionnaire showed only 20-30% use a mother tongue to learn Chinese), since there are not explanations in every students’ language in the textbook. In our interviews, some of the non-character-writing students expressed their dissatisfaction toward the textbooks. They complained that there were too many English explanations and suggested having more visual pictures to construct the connection between sound and meaning.

Non-character-writing students belong to another cultural circle, which makes it difficult to understand Chinese teaching and learning styles in a short time. Very detailed previews, word by word note-taking, and a large amount of memorization after class will make them feel that Chinese is hard to learn. As they do not have any background and experience in Chinese language, facing a completely new teaching and learning style, plus the complicated decoding process, their motivation will gradually slow down. If their English is good enough, their decoding via English will accelerate them toward understanding, and they can follow the pace and still be motivated, while those who have poor English will be confused and will lose self-confidence in learning.

In this paper, we only discuss the difference in the listening comprehension of elementary level students. When these students pass this stage and enter higher levels, the situation might change, but this is beyond the discussion of this paper.

Conclusion

Through a questionnaire, interviews, and observation, we have found 1) character-writing students feel that it is difficult to identify the elements within one syllable while non-character-writing students feel that it is difficult to learn tone; 2) character-writing students and non-character-writing students use different decoding processes. The style and process of decoding used by character-writing students is: Chinese sound → Chinese meaning/mother-tongue meaning/word meaning; while the non-character-writing students’ process goes from the Chinese sound → media language → word meaning. The former process is quicker, and the latter is longer. We compare the difference of the two groups from physical (nature of languages) and social aspects (teaching and learning styles), respectively.

We point out that character-writing students benefit more from Chinese heritage culture and find it relatively easy to adapt to learning Chinese. Having no difficulty in learning tone also helps them to understand quickly and accurately. Non-character-writing students are not

in as good a situation when learning Chinese due to their language backgrounds and previous educational experiences.

We suggest that teachers combine listening and speaking lessons together for those non-character-writing students instead of a pure listening course in a language lab which has no other visual facilities. The latter will not help students in listening; instead, it will discourage them and attack their motivation in learning Chinese. Here we challenge the standard listening course and whether it should be a pure process of listening with no other visual help or a comprehensive resource in helping students to understand what they have heard.

In listening and speaking classes, teachers should focus on the sensitivity of one syllable instead of the vowels and consonants within; tone knowledge and special training will also speed up the accuracy of students' listening comprehension.

We argue whether teachers should use a media language for explanation. We suggest that teachers guide students to use the media language less in listening when they are at the elementary level. Visual pictures and stories will help students judge the content and will increase the combination of meaning and sound directly. At the same time, textbooks should try to avoid explaining terms only in English.

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ⁱ Media language: We refer to the language which non-character-writing students used for helping them to understand Chinese meaning. It might be his/her second language or foreign language. Students transfer Chinese characters to the meaning of media language, usually, English, then through English meaning to Chinese meaning.