

Modifications for Teaching Mandarin Chinese

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Mandarin Chinese, a language with a significant gap between its aural and written form, benefits from some modifications to instruction. Unlike many commonly-taught languages, Chinese has no changes to verbs or nouns (no conjugation, tense, case, declension, nor masculine/feminine words). Therefore, some language features that can present challenges for other language teachers who use implicit, comprehensible input-based methods simply do not exist in Chinese. Chinese is different, and it is taught better when taking those differences into account.

The three steps which are now standard practice in TPRS (Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling) have been a helpful way for me to sequence instruction. As I teach, I use steps I think of as: 1. Establishing Meaning; 2. Massive Auditory Input; 3. Massive Reading Input. Reading Chinese, in my mind, has two sub-steps: 3a. Reading Aloud with the Class, and 3b. Reading Semi-Independently. Using those steps as a framework, I will highlight some modifications for teaching Mandarin Chinese with comprehensible input that I have found helpful.

Step 1: Establishing Meaning

First, one to perhaps three new words or phrases are introduced to students by showing pinyin and an English equivalent of each. (Pinyin is the phonetic writing system used to indicate pronunciation of Chinese. It includes letters and tone marks. An example: *nǐmen hǎo, zhè shì pīnyīn.*) The emphasis in this step is introducing new sounds in Chinese and connecting those sounds to their meaning. With novice and intermediate-low students, pinyin and English is shown, but no characters are introduced yet.

Why not show students characters, pinyin, and their meaning together at this first step? In my experience as a teacher of Chinese, I have found that for most students, introducing all three elements at once makes for a heavier mental load than is beneficial. As a result of this overload, sometimes students have a difficult time retaining any new language; sometimes students simply miss the characters completely. I have talked with other Chinese teachers who have likewise created materials with very large characters and very small pinyin in an attempt to introduce new words and help their students retain characters along with pinyin. However, since pinyin was still in view, students sometimes did not even notice the characters were there, much less recall any character form later! It seems that non-native learners of Chinese pick up on alphabetic writing automatically and involuntarily. Since in step 1 we are working with connecting sounds with their meaning, the visual representation of them in characters can be delayed. Students who love seeing characters from the first moment are not hindered by delaying their introduction by a class period or two. Otherwise, there is a strong possibility of overemphasis on form instead of focus on meaning in this initial step. The conscious mind takes over, and the unconscious mind, where implicit language gains are made, is circumvented.

Step 2: Massive Auditory Input

After briefly introducing new words and their sounds, the next step is massive auditory input. The emphasis in this step is to bring those new sound-meaning pieces of language and incorporate them into the students' existing mental representation of Chinese. This occurs through varied, unpredictable, and interesting auditory input to which students must frequently respond. Through this process, the students' comprehension and usage deepen and broaden, and the rhythm and feel of the language as a whole is provided.

A frequent concern of Chinese teachers is how to help students gain accuracy with pronunciation and tones. A common approach is direct, explicit instruction about pinyin spelling, pronunciation, and tone marks, with frequent error correction from the teacher when students speak. However, my teaching experience leads me to believe that tones can be acquired implicitly through massive auditory input and no direct instruction (unless questions arise from students). Students hear correct language modeled again and again, and students output them quite accurately over time. I experienced this shift in pronunciation accuracy when I moved from reliance on a skill-building approach to a comprehension-based approach to instruction. A student in his fourth year of Chinese had deeply-entrenched pronunciation errors with no improvement shown after direct instruction on tones and pinyin pronunciation. However, after about three or four months of CI, my student's pronunciation had improved dramatically enough that he had also noticed. We discussed the situation, and concluded that

just hearing more Chinese that he could understand made the difference. He was not “trying” harder, he was just speaking what he had heard without thinking about it.

Step 3: Massive Reading Input

3a. Reading Aloud with the Class

Chinese lacks much correspondence between how it sounds and how it looks in print. Therefore, introducing Chinese characters in contextualized, meaningful reading requires some special consideration. The emphasis in this step is on taking those now familiar sound-meaning pieces of language and connecting them to their visual appearance in characters. Over time, I have concluded that this is best done in two sub-steps: reading aloud to and with the class, and then providing semi-independent, supported reading activities for students.

A huge innovation in Chinese reading comes from Terry Waltz, PhD's, *Cold Character Reading*. “Cold” is used in the sense that students do not first see individual characters; they encounter a story or other text that includes new characters, and hear that text read aloud in order to comprehend it. The principle is that the Chinese is in the students' heads already by sound and meaning through massive auditory input; now they are seeing how it looks in print. This puts students in a situation more like that of Chinese children who are learning to read: the language “sounds right” and only one task is required now: to connect that familiar language to how it looks in print. Students follow along silently at first and may join in reading aloud with the teacher as the characters become familiar. Students differ in how many repetitions are needed for them to begin to associate the character form with their familiar sound and meaning. Last school year, I polled my level one high school students after the first semester to ask how many times they perceived it necessary to encounter a character read aloud before they recognized it on their own. Their answers ranged between three and over twenty repetitions to retain that character-sound-meaning connection.

I have found this approach to reading Chinese a significant improvement over other ways I have taught reading in the past, with a higher average retention of characters for all students, and very accurate, confident reading skills by stronger students. I believe *Cold Character Reading* works so well because it allows character reading as an unconscious, implicit process rather than requiring conscious analysis of character forms and memorization. However, reading material must be suitable for the process. *Cold Character Reading* requires texts that, especially for beginning students, are carefully designed. Repetitions of the new characters need to be much higher, perhaps at least twenty, than repetitions of words needed for a phonetically-written language. One way to work around

this need for so many repetitions in reading is to re-read a shorter text, but to do something different with it each time to avoid student boredom.

After several minutes of reading with the class, noting the meaning of character components, brief, direct instruction about character forms can be conducted in a similar way to grammar “pop-ups.” (Pop-ups are a few seconds-long, meaning-based explanation of something about the language just read. For example, in a sentence with the particle *zhe* 着, I might point to it and ask, “What does this *zhe* 着 add to the meaning here?” and ensure that the class understands it means “on-going action”.) With components within forms, pointing out the “female” component on the left side of the character for “mom” demonstrates the logic of the character and its meaning, especially when students start to recognize the component in words like “she”, “little sister”, and “grandma.” While students’ reading ability progresses implicitly, this explicit knowledge may assist them as a back-up system if they later encounter Chinese characters that seem unfamiliar. They will also be able to predict, to some degree and over the long term, the meaning and possibly the sound of new characters based partly on their knowledge of components.

3b. Reading Semi-Independently

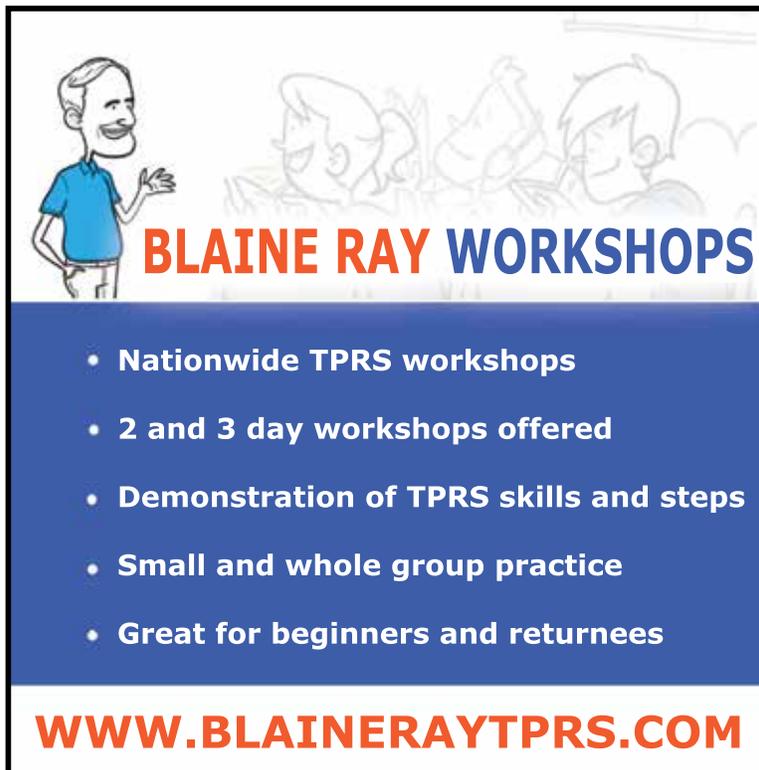
Following plenty of guided reading aloud, students are ready for somewhat more independent reading activities. To help my planning process, I refer to a chart of about twenty-five reading activities I have gleaned from other teachers or created myself. Whenever possible, I prepare an alternative text that includes similar vocabulary rather than give the students the same text we read aloud together. In that way, students cannot rely on memorized storylines, but are truly drawing new meaning from character texts. In these semi-independent activities, I only show characters. Student retention is inevitably not 100%, as language acquisition is not a neat, linear process. However, the vast majority of the time when students need assistance, a quick read-aloud of the unrecognized characters by the teacher or a classmate clarifies the meaning completely.

For fully independent reading activities such as Free Voluntary Reading or Sustained Silent Reading, it is ideal to have audio and print text both available. However, beginning-level Chinese books with accompanying audio materials are very limited at present. Another way to accommodate the occasional need to re-hear the sound of printed characters is to provide a pinyin copy of the character reading as a supportive reference, but *not* to present both pinyin and characters in view together. For example, the pinyin reading can be available on the back of a corresponding page of character text.

Conclusion

In spite of the significant gap between the aural and written forms of Mandarin Chinese, with slight modifications to instruction at each of the three steps of TPR Storytelling®, teaching with Comprehensible Input is as beneficial as a methodology for Mandarin as it is for any other language.

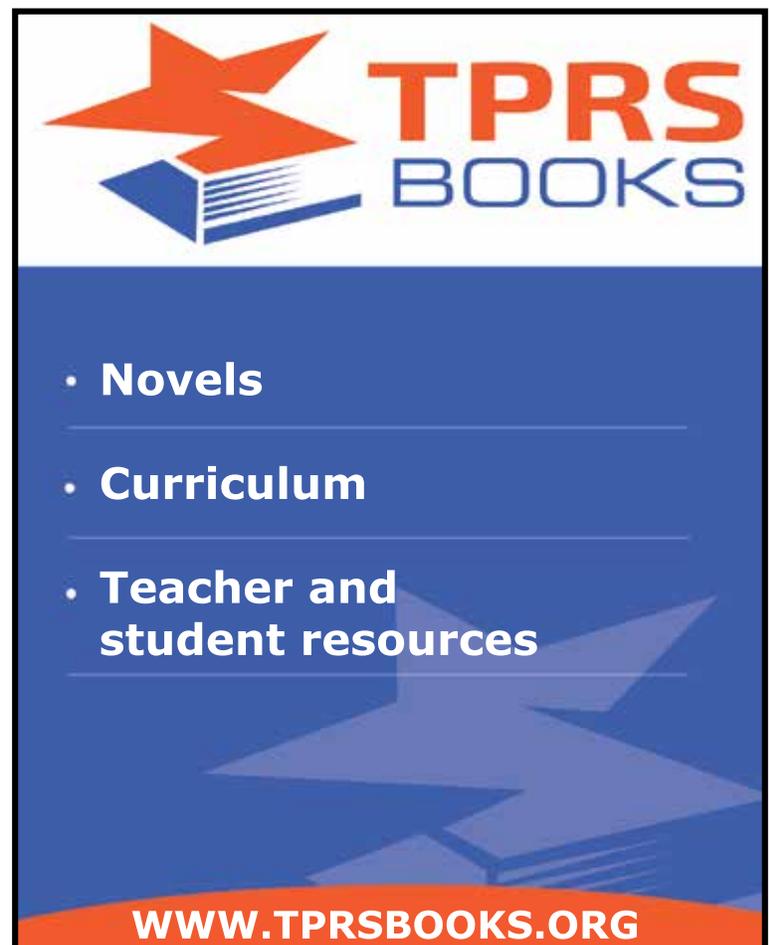
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