Abstract

The Chinese education policy of Singapore has always been more than a language issue; in particular the education reforms of late have generated much media attention and public debate. Indeed various reformative stances of numerous scales have been put up by the ruling government from time to time so as to suit the changing needs of each learning generation and to keep in step with the future.

Essentially the Chinese written language is a logographic system, where each logogram (symbol) represents a morpheme (a meaningful unit of language), with the characters not of simple forms but containing internal complexity, which daunts the learning spirit of students who are used to the English language which is a phonographic system. Despite this, the teaching of the Chinese written language has not received as much attention as it is deemed needed both in the education reforms and within the academia. This research paper thus serves as a pioneer exploratory study on the teaching of Chinese characters, through an analysis of the character list from Primary One to Primary Three, the foundational stage of the Singapore education system.

The paper is divided into three major sections. First, through a comparison of the 1980 and 2001 version of the Chinese syllabus, it illuminates the lack of attention devoted to teaching compound characters,
which affects the student’s ability to comprehend the fundamental structure of each Chinese character.

Second, a detailed analysis of the 2001 syllabus elucidates the shortcomings of the present state of Chinese character teaching: (1) the teaching of compound characters is random, and does not adhere to the process of learning from the basic simple component to the more complicated construct; (2) the teaching of lexicon meaning is at times random, paying little attention to the grasp of the root meaning; (3) the Chinese syllables’ proportion is skewed towards the learning of more written than read Chinese characters, which amplify the student’s learning burden at the foundational stage of Chinese education.

In the final section a proposition to remedy the dilemma of teaching Chinese characters is discussed. Three key criteria emerge for a detail analysis: (1) highest frequency; (2) simplest structure; and (3) least character strokes. This is tied in closely with the reorganization of the proposed character list directed at a more effective case of learning Chinese characters.

The concluding section of this paper offers some implications of the proposed findings and suggestions of teaching Chinese characters to future reforms of Chinese education. It is believed that in hand with the role of syllabus, educators and society, learning of Chinese language for students presents a more positive outlook in the near future.