

The Application of Gestalt Theory in Teaching Chinese Characters to Foreign Students

Xiaoli Mo

Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, Guangdong, 526061, China
Molly_189@126.com

Abstract: Gestalt theory is a cognitive learning theory that helps learners complete tasks with the guidance of teachers from the perspective of psychological cognition. This paper takes the teaching of Chinese characters in non-Chinese cultural circles as an example to explore the guiding significance of the principles of perceptual wholeness, background-figure, and insight learning theory in Gestalt theory regarding cognitive and learning theories for Chinese character teaching, thereby guiding students to engage in meaningful learning.

Keywords: Teaching Chinese Characters to Foreign Learners, Gestalt, Perceptual Wholeness, Background-Figure Principle, Insight Theory

1. Introduction

The Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on Comprehensively Strengthening the Work on Language and Character Work in the New Era of China serves as a guiding document for comprehensively strengthening Chinese language work and is of strategic significance for the development of language and writing in the new era. "The Opinions propose: 'Strengthen the construction of the international Chinese language teacher team; attract more overseas Chinese language teachers to pursue master's and doctoral degrees related to international Chinese language education; build a global Putonghua proficiency testing system; improve the examination standards for international Chinese language education; strengthen the promotion and application of the Chinese language in overseas Chinese schools and enhance the overseas Chinese language teachers' training.'" [1] The Chinese language is an important carrier of Chinese culture. Promoting the Chinese language can add new elements to the world cultural exchanges and integration, helping to break down cultural barriers, enhance the influence of Chinese culture, and promote international educational exchanges and cooperation.

Teaching Chinese characters to foreign learners under the guidance of Gestalt theory means applying scientific cognitive learning theories to teaching, enabling teachers to help students learn and master Chinese characters better.

2. Teaching Chinese Characters to Non-native Speakers

As the writing symbols of the Chinese language, Chinese characters are an indispensable tool for acquiring Chinese written proficiency. To obtain a comprehensive and systematic Chinese communicative ability, Chinese characters are obviously unavoidable. Chinese characters are the backbone of the Chinese language, and the acquisition of Chinese characters influences the final acquisition of the Chinese language. To conduct teaching of Chinese as a foreign language, it is necessary to treat Chinese characters as a relatively independent system and start from their inherent laws to carry out teaching work on Chinese characters. The fundamental purpose of Chinese character teaching is to selectively introduce to learners, through more vivid and intuitive means, the objective and scientific understanding of the Chinese character system obtained from the research on Chinese characters, helping them master Chinese characters, and on the basis of understanding the basic characteristics and laws of Chinese characters, they can learn and write Chinese characters and then master comprehensive Chinese language skills. [2]

The teaching of Chinese characters to foreign learners has a long history. In ancient times, there were records of interpreters in the Western Han Dynasty, and during the Sui and Tang Dynasties, many

students from Japan, Korea, Vietnam and other countries studying in Chang'an. It was not until the 1950s that China began to teach Chinese as a foreign language formally, and in the mid-1990s, the teaching of Chinese characters to foreigners was proposed. Before the 1990s, research on teaching Chinese characters to foreigners mainly focused on what to teach and how to teach, aiming to solve the problems of the difficulty of teaching and learning Chinese characters. After that, with the deepening of teaching Chinese characters to Non-native Speakers, teaching methods and teaching materials have emerged in an endless stream.

In recent years, with the rapid development of China's economy and the continuous expansion of foreign exchanges, the Chinese fever has continued to heat up, and the number of Confucius Institutes abroad has increased sharply. In China, more and more international students come to study Chinese. Universities such as Beijing Language and Culture University have set up Chinese language training colleges. International Chinese education has indeed made great progress. In 1984, Beijing Language Institute, now Beijing Language and Culture University, established the Chinese Proficiency Test Design Team (HSK) to test the Chinese proficiency of international students, and the number of people registering for HSK has increased year by year. Another example is that in 2002, the Chinese-language competition Chinese Bridge, sponsored by the Confucius Institute Headquarters and the Office of Chinese Language Council International, attracted students from all over the world to participate. Among them, the most influential ones are the Chinese Bridge-Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students (Figure 1), the Chinese Bridge Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreign Secondary School Students, and the Chinese Bridge-Chinese Proficiency Competition for Foreigners across the Globe. According to China Education Daily, more than 190 countries and regions, 85 countries have incorporated Chinese into their national education systems, and more than 30 million foreign people are learning Chinese.

Since the teaching objects of teaching Chinese as a foreign language are foreign students and Chinese-language learners with limited Chinese proficiency and extremely lacking in Chinese character knowledge and theory, and mainly students from non-Chinese cultural circle backgrounds. In the prosperous development pattern of international Chinese education, Chinese character teaching has not received enough attention and is in a lagging state. Some teachers only teach students the most basic composition of Chinese characters, ignoring the culture behind the Chinese language; in the compilation of teaching materials, Chinese characters are often regarded as appendages of vocabulary and grammar; in classroom teaching, Chinese character teaching is in a subordinate position or even ignored; in teaching theories, teaching experiences and traditional teaching methods of domestic Chinese language teaching are often borrowed, or Western teaching theories are simply copied.

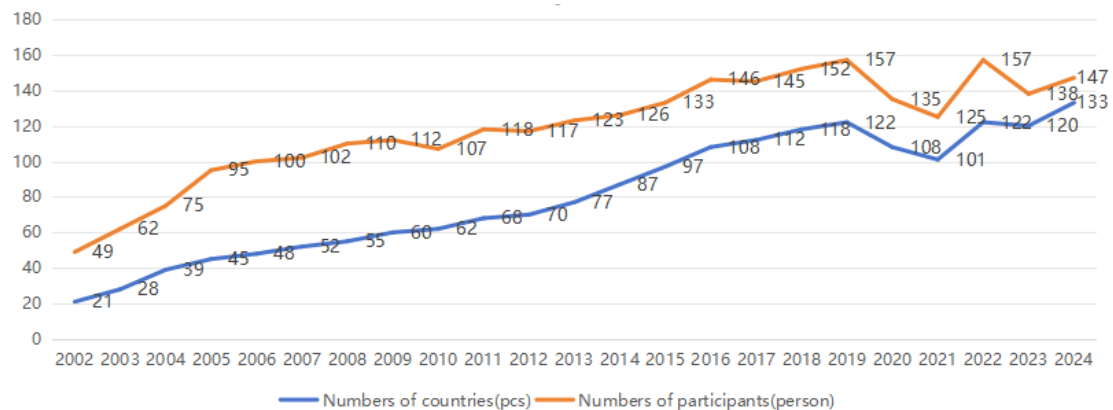


Figure 1: Numbers of countries and participants in the Chinese-Bridge Proficiency Competition for Foreign College Students in the past 22 years.

3. Gestalt Theory

Gestalt emerged in Germany in the 20th century, is a psychological term and a psychological school-Gestalt psychology, also known as configuration psychology. Gestalt in German means a whole or complete figure.

The early Gestalt put its emphasis on perception research, demonstrated the integrity of psychology through perception research, and then proposed a series of organizational rules of perceptual figures, namely the principle of perceptual integrity, and applied them to the teaching field. Later, Gestalt

psychologists also developed unique perspectives on the nature of learning, learning transfer, memory. They believe that learning is intelligent behavior and a process of insight. Gestalt theory is a great revolution of traditional cognitive methods and has a significant and far-reaching impact on people's cognitive methods.

Essentially, Gestalt theory is a cognitive learning theory that enables learners to complete tasks with the help and guidance of teachers. The learning of Chinese characters is a process of knowing, understanding, memorizing and using Chinese characters. In this process, learners' learning abilities are well developed. The principles of perceptual integrity, figure-ground, and insight learning theory in Gestalt theory have guiding significance for Chinese character teaching.

4. The Application of Gestalt Theory in Teaching Chinese Characters to Foreign Learners

At present, the teaching of Chinese characters to foreign learners is mainly classroom-based, and students' learning mainly depends on the comprehensible verbal input and guidance provided by teachers in class. Gestalt theory relies on the leading role of teachers in the teaching process, that is, according to the teaching content and the actual situation of students, teachers try to use Gestalt cognitive rules to help students. Chinese characters learning is a complex psychological activity. Students rely on the comprehensible verbal input and guidance of teachers to master Chinese characters and apply them. The responsibility of teachers is to help students master Chinese characters and pave the way for students' Chinese learning. The application of Gestalt theory in the process of Chinese character teaching is manifested in the principles of perceptual integrity, figure-ground, and insight learning theory.

4.1. The Application of the Principle of Perceptual Integrity in Chinese Character Teaching

Gestalt believes that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the whole determines the perception of the parts; and the integrative function of perception is inseparable from the characteristics of the components that make up the whole. According to Gestalt theory, people do not respond to the components of a thing when they know it, but respond to its overall shape (Gestalt). People tend to see the entire shape of an external object at a glance, grasp the rough structure of the object, and then notice its details, that is, "perception does not first perceive various components and then notice the whole, but first perceives the phenomenon of the whole, and then notices the components that make up the whole." [3]

The application of the principle of perceptual integrity in teaching is reflected in the following aspects: teaching whole characters first and then components; integrating form, sound and meaning; and distinguishing similar-looking characters.

4.1.1. Teaching Whole Characters First and Then Components

At present, there are stroke teaching, component teaching, and whole-character teaching in teaching Chinese characters to foreign learners. According to Gestalt theory, a Chinese character itself is a Gestalt. In teaching Chinese characters to foreign learners, whole-character teaching should be carried out first, followed by partial teaching, that is, stroke and component teaching. The recognition effect of a complete figure is better than that of a part of the figure. [4] Through whole-character teaching, students can grasp the shape of Chinese characters as a whole, cultivate a sense of Chinese characters, and construct an effective Gestalt, and then carry out stroke or component teaching of Chinese characters. If stroke or component teaching of Chinese characters is carried out first, the Gestalt of the whole Chinese character constructed by students will have gaps, which will affect students' overall perception of the shape of Chinese characters. For example, when students perceive the Chinese character "you", they do not first perceive the two components, but first perceive its overall shape and then notice its components.

4.1.2. Integrating Form, Sound and Meaning

At present, in the teaching of Chinese characters to foreign learners, teaching models such as language first and characters later, interspersing language and characters, synchronizing language and characters and setting up separate Chinese character courses are often adopted. These models either attach Chinese characters to vocabulary teaching or grammar teaching, or isolate them, and the teaching effect is often not ideal. According to the principle of perceptual integrity, Chinese characters should be taught as a whole. The shape, sound and meaning of Chinese characters should not be taught

separately and then pieced together; nor should only how to write and read a certain character be taught, but also the meaning of the Chinese character should be taught to students, and when necessary, the unique cultural connotations contained therein should be taught, that is, the form, sound, meaning and cultural connotations of Chinese characters need to be grasped as a whole. If the form, sound, meaning and various parts of Chinese characters are taught separately, the Chinese character Gestalt containing form, sound, meaning and cultural connotations constructed by students will have gaps, and the connections between form, sound, meaning and cultural connotations will be broken.

4.1.3. Distinguishing Similar-Looking Characters

The teaching objects of Chinese characters to foreign learners are mainly students from non-Chinese cultural circle backgrounds whose native language systems are phonemic or syllabic writing systems. For them, Chinese characters may be pictures at first; when they begin to understand and master the strokes and stroke orders of Chinese characters, Chinese characters become scattered stroke blocks in their eyes.[5] This leads to a wide variety of misspellings of Chinese characters, especially similar-looking characters, with many types of errors, such as adding or subtracting strokes and deforming or replacing components. Analyze the motives of students' Chinese character writing errors by applying the proximity or contiguity principle, similarity principle, simplicity principle and closure principle within the principle of perceptual integrity, so as to help students avoid confusion of similar-looking characters.

1) Proximity or Contiguity Principle

Gestalt believes that when two objects are relatively close or contiguous in space or time, these two objects tend to be perceived as a whole. When learning Chinese characters, "students always tend to miswrite components with separated strokes as components with connected strokes, and components with non-connected or non-protruding strokes are easily written as connected or protruding components;"[6] or mistake blocked strokes for non-blocked or still-connected strokes, that is, confuse the continuity of strokes. Continuity is a perceptual tendency of lines. Even if lines are blocked by other lines, people still perceive them as non-blocked or still continuous when perceiving. For example, students perceive the Chinese characters with non-protruding strokes, protruding strokes, and connected strokes as the same whole. Students are confused whether the strokes are connected, resulting in stroke deformation errors.

2) Similarity Principle

The similarity principle refers to that when the physical attributes such as the shape, size, color, and intensity of stimuli are relatively similar, these stimuli are easily grouped together to form a whole. The recognition of Chinese characters by people is equivalent to the recognition of figures, which is to recognize Chinese characters as a whole. Some strokes or Chinese characters with small distinguishing features are often perceived as the same whole; or people directly perceive Chinese characters or certain components of Chinese characters as familiar symbols, numbers or letters, that is, people's cognition is affected by the similarity principle. For example, due to overall perception, students mistake the clothes radical for ritual radical, perceive the bamboo radical, which is the top part of characters related to bamboo as two letters k; and even recognize square-shaped Chinese characters as circles.

3) Simplicity Principle

When people perceive complex objects, as long as there are no specific requirements, they tend to regard the objects as organized and simple regular figures, that is, the simplicity principle. In terms of Chinese character errors, the Gestalt psychology of students is most reflected in that when writing Chinese characters, students unconsciously omit additional strokes and perceive them as another whole without the additional strokes. For example, when students recognize the Chinese character "ben", meaning the root of a tree, they omit one horizontal stroke and perceive it as "mu", whose basic meaning is a tree.

4) Closure Principle

People have a perceptual tendency to make incomplete figures complete, and make a discontinuous and gapped figure tend to be reconciled psychologically as much as possible, that is, the tendency to fill gaps, also known as the closure principle. Through this mental activity, incomplete figures are often perceived as complete or closed. In Chinese character writing, it is manifested that students tend to close some non-sealed components due to Gestalt psychological trends to make them closed and complete. For example, students tend to think that Chinese characters with non-protruding strokes, and

protruding strokes are closed figures and perceive them as connected strokes.

Chinese characters are a writing symbol system for recording the Chinese language and are a unity of form, sound and meaning, which is different from phonemic or syllabic writing systems. With their unique structures and spatial layouts, Chinese characters not only give birth to the art of calligraphy, but also produce many similar-looking characters. When students from non-Chinese cultural circle backgrounds learn Chinese characters, they mistake similar-looking characters for the same Chinese character due to perceptual integrity. This inspires teachers to avoid students' stroke errors in actual teaching according to Gestalt theory.

4.2. The Application of the Figure - Ground Principle in Chinese Character Teaching

The purpose of Chinese character teaching is to make students understand and use Chinese characters. According to the figure-ground principle, teachers use pictures or real objects to help students establish the connection between Chinese characters and objects. For example, for the Chinese character "horse", it is often difficult for students to understand what it specifically refers to by explaining it according to dictionaries or teaching materials. The methods for teachers to make students understand "horse" are:

- 1) Replace or explain it with the corresponding mother tongue of students;
- 2) Pictures are used,

The figure-ground principle holds that the figure refers to the prominent part of a certain cognitive concept or perception, has a certain shape and is highly structured, that is, the focus part of attention. The background is the part opposite to the figure, with blurred details and undifferentiated, that is, the part that serves as a foil to highlight the figure.[7] In picture-assisted Chinese character teaching, the "horse" on the picture is the figure, and the rest is the background. Some Chinese characters are difficult to explain without relying on context. When teachers explain such Chinese characters, they often rely on context, sentences or words. At this time, the Chinese character is the figure, and the context, sentences and words it relies on naturally become the background.

Any object in a perceptual field is composed of two parts: figure and background. The greater the distinction between the figure and the background, the easier the figure is to become our perceptual object; conversely, the more difficult it is to separate the figure from the background. It inspires that in actual teaching, the distinction between the figure and the background should be increased. For example, for the Chinese character horse, the selected figure should have a background with high distinction from horse, such as grassland, rather than a background with low distinction, such as donkey. With a low-distinction figure and background, it is difficult for students to understand which is a horse and which is a donkey.

4.3. The Application of Insight Learning Theory in Chinese Character Teaching

The insight theory is a learning theory proposed by the Gestalt psychology school, starting from the research of the German psychologist Wolfgang Kohler on chimpanzees. The research shows that in order to obtain food, chimpanzees do not blindly try and error, but observe the relationship between their behaviors and the situation before making a response, and carry out thinking similar to verifying hypotheses in their minds, and then have an overall understanding of the situation. Once learners perceive the inter-relationships among the elements in a specific situation and produce new experiences, creative results will emerge. This sudden and penetrating process of solving problems is called insight.[8] Kohler believes that the mastery of relationships is the understanding process. Grasping the internal nature of the problem situation can avoid a large number of random and blind actions unrelated to this problem situation, transfer the learning results to new problem situations, and the understanding obtained through insight is not easily forgotten.

Students from non-Chinese cultural circle backgrounds often memorize Chinese characters by rote and mechanically when they first learn them. As a result, they only remember the symbols of Chinese characters but cannot understand their actual meanings. Teachers rely on situations, with the help of relevant sentences, words or life scenes, let students understand the relationship between Chinese characters and situations by themselves, generate insight, and then transfer learning; and combine the shapes and pronunciations of Chinese characters to let students establish the connections among the forms, sounds and meanings of Chinese characters and carry out meaningful learning. For example, for the Chinese character "chui", which has rich meanings, such as "blow" and "boast", after explaining its

pronunciation and glyph, teachers can use sentences like "Stop blowing. The fire has gone out." and "Stop boasting. I got it." to help students understand the relationship between context and Chinese characters, and then comprehend their meanings.

5. Conclusion

Teaching Chinese characters to foreigners is not only the foundation but also an important part of teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and it plays a very significant role in improving students' Chinese proficiency. This paper attempts to apply Gestalt theory to the teaching of Chinese characters for foreigners. From the perspective of psychological cognition, Gestalt theory helps students effectively master Chinese characters. Learning Chinese characters is not about rote memorization; there are rules to follow. Teachers conduct Chinese character teaching according to the principle of perceptual integrity and the principle of figure and ground, create relevant situations, establish the relationship between teaching content and situations, enable students to have learning transfer, guide students to conduct meaningful learning, and let students learn to apply what they have learned so as to improve the teaching quality.

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