



Writing Vocabulary Problems of Teaching Chinese to Thai Students

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Abstract

Research concerned about writing vocabulary teaching of Chinese as a second language has yet to be strengthened. Could Thai students enlarge their vocabulary by writing teaching? Breaking the bondage of Chinese characters and the concept barrier, we can create more opportunities for Chinese writing vocabulary accumulation and transformation in writing vocabulary teaching to Thai students. General vocabulary teaching methods to the expansion of common vocabulary are effective, but unfit for writing vocabulary teaching. Function - Module Method is a new attempt in Chinese writing vocabulary teaching to Thai students.

Introduction

Research about writing vocabulary is one of the key problems concerned about research on second language writing teaching. Raimes (1985) said that whatever the phase of the second language learners are, the biggest obstacle they encountered in writing is the lack of vocabulary. It is obviously that vocabulary becomes one of the biggest difficulties for second language writing (Uzawa, Cumming, 1989).

Domestic and overseas research on second language writing vocabulary mainly concentrates on the distinction between receptive

vocabulary and productive vocabulary, put forward by Paul Nation (1984). Schmitt and Meara (1997) indicated that receptive vocabulary is much more 19% to 25% than productive vocabulary, and as time goes by the two kinds of vocabulary can change. Henriksen (1999) indicated that learners can transform receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary by using receptive vocabulary actively. LIU (2001) improved that receptive vocabulary is 2 to 3 times of productive vocabulary. The development process and characteristics of them are different, and there are cross and spiral situation between them.

Keywords: Teaching Chinese as a Second Language; Teaching Chinese to Thai students; Writing; Vocabulary Teaching; Function - Module Method

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Teaching Chinese as a second language has a late start and the vocabulary research of Chinese writing obviously lags behind that of English as a second language. According to our review, we found that research about Chinese writing are basically limited to compiling teaching materials, writing teaching skills and curriculum setting, rare writing vocabulary specially research (GENG, LUO, 2012).

As far as we know, there are many studies focus on Thai students' Chinese teaching and learning, and vocabulary teaching and learning (e.g. LI, 2008). But generally speaking Thai students' Chinese writing vocabulary problems are seldom considered. Are there any writing problems for Thai students' Chinese writing vocabulary? Could Thai students enlarge their vocabulary by writing? And what we should do as teachers to help them to solve their writing vocabulary problems? This paper will discuss related problems of Thai students' Chinese writing vocabulary and writing teaching.

Measurement of Thai students' Chinese writing vocabulary

As many researches show that second language learners need to supplemented new words to expand the receptive vocabulary constantly; on the other hand, they need to use the new learned words, grasp them skillfully, and make them into productive vocabulary eventually (Hartmann, 1946; Laufer, 1998; Henriksen, 1999). That is, for most of Thai students who are leaning Chinese, their expression ability of speaking and writing will be greatly limited by productive vocabulary, which transformed from receptive vocabulary dynamically. So do Thai students have enough receptive vocabulary for transforming

into productive vocabulary? And what is the rate of receptive vocabulary and productive vocabulary? Some measurement could be done for this.

In order to measure Chinese writing vocabulary of Thai students, we designed two test papers for survey. One paper was adopted in the form of 100 single choice questions, and each question's basic score was 1. It was used to measure the foundation vocabulary, namely, learners maximum vocabulary, can be regarded as receptive vocabulary. The other was adopted in the form of 10 short composite writing questions, and each question's basic score was 10. It was used to test the effective use of vocabulary, namely, learners can skillfully use them, as productive vocabulary. We do not elaborate details of the two test papers at present. We chose sophomore students (grade 2) and junior students (grade 3) at a university of Thailand as participants. The grade 2 students who learnt Chinese about one and a half year (nearly 300 hours), were close to intermediate level. The grade 3 students who learnt Chinese about two and a half years (nearly 500 hours), were close to advanced level. Meanwhile, corresponding phases of Vietnam students were selected as reference group for comparison. The four group students finished the test papers, answered 100 single choice questions and wrote ten short composite writing questions. These questions could basically detect their Chinese vocabulary.

According to the statistical analysis of the test results, we drew some conclusion as the following: 1) participants and reference group grasped nearly the same large of Chinese receptive vocabulary. Grade 2 of Thai students' vocabulary is from 2,200 to 3,500 and Grade 3 is



from 3,000 to 4,600, meanwhile, the vocabulary of Vietnam students are from 2,500 to 3,500 and 3,000 to 4,800. 2) Productive vocabulary is not optimistic. Participants of grade 2 just got the number from 1,100 to 1,900, and grade 3 is from 1,000 to 2,400. On the contrary, the reference group got a relatively good data, which is from 1,500 to 2,100 and 1,800 to 2,900.

GENG, LUO (2012) once made a corresponding definition of Chinese vocabulary according to two outlines: Chinese words and Chinese characters outline of Chinese Proficiency Test (revision) (National Committee for the Chinese Proficiency Test Office Examination Center, 2001), and The new Chinese Proficiency Test: HSK outline(1-6) (Han ban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, 2010). Their conclusion is that Chinese learners need to master vocabulary at least 2,500 which is the minimum number for senior level. (GENG, LUO, 2012)

From the statistical calculation of the data, the two groups receptive vocabulary are basically the same, but as for productive vocabulary, the participants is behind at the reference group. And grade 3 participants productive vocabulary is lower than 2,500, which we defined for senior level. It is difficult to do effectively writing under such small productive vocabulary. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen writing vocabulary teaching for Thai students after them entering the senior stage.

Teaching of writing vocabulary to Thai students

1. Problems of teaching Chinese writing to Thai students

The first big problem is characters. Relative to the Chinese culture circle's students, almost all

of the Thai students are not interested in Chinese characters writing. Vocabulary and grasping Chinese characters have some certain correlation.

According to our investigation, it is the Chinese characters memory but not the Chinese characters writing, being the biggest problem. Actually, Chinese characters memory is not terrible. Firstly, the amount of Chinese characters is limited. There are 8,822 words and 2,905 Chinese characters in Chinese words and Chinese characters outline of Chinese Proficiency Test (revision), 5,000 words and 2,632 in The new Chinese Proficiency Test: HSK outline(6) According to the 5,000 words and 2,632 characters, we did word frequency statistics, and we found that high-frequency characters is also used in high frequency words or common words, although there are many 4 times and under low-frequency characters, but these characters are just belong to low-frequency words or uncommonly-used words. Secondly, Chinese characters have very strong regularity. Characters' side component, radical and component part, relationship between the pronunciation and meanings of words, are helpful for characters' teaching. Thirdly, Chinese writing may be appropriately to avoid Chinese characters (GENG, LUO, 2012).

In addition, we found that current Chinese writing materials just mean to reflect the nature of "writing", focus too much on the techniques and methods and ignore vocabulary teaching. There are nearly no specialized vocabulary Settings, it seems that vocabulary teaching is the task of other courses.

We think that the writing class vocabulary is different from the vocabulary of speaking and other subjects, some words need special

accumulation: 1) Colloquial vocabulary is not suitable for writing. 2) Different type of writing needs different vocabulary support. 3) Some important vocabulary need teachers special guide. Moreover, writing vocabulary can be easily transformed into productive vocabulary and help to improve the whole Chinese learning.

2. A writing vocabulary teaching method for Thai students

There are many approaches and methods of vocabulary teaching, and there are some certain methods for teaching Chinese as a second language, such as: 1) Using characteristics of Chinese characters inventions in vocabulary teaching guide. 2) Using characteristics of Chinese morpheme in vocabulary expansion. 3) Using characteristics of Chinese word-formation in vocabulary accumulation. These common vocabulary teaching methods are very effective to expand vocabulary in short time, help to cram for exams temporarily, but for the help of writing teaching are not as big as imagination.

Writing need more productive vocabulary which can not rely on cramming, and must accumulate and gain in daily training. We will discuss a writing vocabulary method or vocabulary accumulation method which eases to grasp and apply for Thai students, named Function-Module Method. We will focus on its definition and theoretical basis, operation procedure, and experiment demonstration.

1) Definition and Theoretical Basis

Module idea emerged from lexical chunks theory (Lewis, 1997), but not the same. If lexical chunk is word, word group level, the module is phrase, discourse level. Module contains lexical chunk and the way of thinking, has a fixed

mode and logical sequence, or even contains certain writing semi-finished products. Function is the specific situation with communication project. Functional teaching activities are applicable to not only intensive reading, speaking, but also writing, and which can play a unique role in writing vocabulary teaching. Setting function project as the key link, introducing specific situation, determining vocabulary and its use according to the situation and function of project, students learn the words, be familiar with their use of the environment, function and context can be mastered at the same.

According to the above contents, the so-called Function-Module Method is a method based on the function of specific projects, with setting given situation, implanting given modules, through a series of fixed function project and specific language module, to solidify and expand vocabulary gradually by vivid, visual way. It also accord with the memory nature of the schema theory.

2) Operation Procedure

We describe the common travel activities as an example to introduce the operation procedure of Function - Module Method. First of all, we segment function project into necessary series subproject as needed, such as tourism preparation, journey knowledge, and tourism feeling. The journey knowledge can be segmented into smaller specific project, such as food, accommodation, travel and scenery, etc. Then we determine specific module for each little project, and prepare necessary vocabulary for each module. For instance, the scenery description can be determined into modules as “the beautify scenery is infinite that……” (Fengguangwuxian 风光无限……), “it makes you……”(Rang ren 让人……), The module



“cannot help ……”(jinbuzhu 禁不住……), can fill many words, such as “cannot help eulogizing”, “cannot help a day-dreaming”, etc. Next, we write each subproject gradually, from small to large, and make it become an independent chapter. Finally, we organize all the projects and subpro-jects; make them into a complete article.

Function-Module Method train students to finish kinds of tasks with a specific format and fixed words which must be mastered, and when students meet similar tasks later, they just need to do a reasonable language transfer job to reproduce the task. At this time, writing is not only the words of the paper, it is lifelike specific activities. Writing activities under Function-Module Method can restrain the choice of words, regulate the use of words. Students once master a module; they can more easily get words knowledge and gain practical skills, the vocabulary that is used once, may also be remembered for long time. Research shows that vocabulary with high recurrence rate and cycle of rate is not always easy to master, some vocabulary even if occurrence probability and recurrence rate is very low, is still also easy to master (James Milton, 2009). It seems that Function-Module Method can help promoting receptive vocabulary transform into productive vocabulary faster in writing vocabulary teaching.

3) Experiment

We choose sophomore students of a Thai university to implement the writing teaching experiment of Function-Module Method. The experiment group selected two parallel classes at random, one class of 25 people, as the participants, using Function-Module Method to teach writing, the other class of 26 people, as

reference, using common method. The experiment time is two months. After the experiment, the experiment group did a corresponding questionnaire survey, and the specific conditions are shown below:

Table 1 Teaching contrast of the participant and the reference group (for teacher)

Items	Participant				Reference			
	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
1.classroom atmosphere	16	7	2		3	5	18	
2. teaching organization	19	3	2	1		7	12	7
3. interact between teacher and students	15	5	2	3		2	5	19
4. teaching methods	20		3	2	2	1	1	23
5. teaching effect	20		5		8	7	6	5

(A, B, C, D means different levels from good to bad)

The 1-5 items are evaluation of teacher’s teaching. The experimental class prefers to choose A or B at each item, rather than C or D. By contrast, the reference class is inclined to choose C or D, instead of A or B (Talbe1).

Table 2 Teaching contrast of the participant and the reference group (for learners)

Items	Participant				Reference			
	A	B	C	D	A	B	C	D
6.learning interests	20	2	1	2		4	10	12
7.thinking traning	15	7	1	2	2	3	6	15
8.mastery of knowledge	16		9		5	4	9	8
9.ability training	18	2		5	4	4	6	12
10.learning achievement	19	2	3	1	3	9	7	7

(A, B, C, D means different levels from good to bad)

Items 6-10 are evaluation of students' learning. It can be obviously found that the experimental class is better than the reference class in many items by contrast (Table 2). The following table is vocabulary usage:

Table 3 vocabulary usage at the initial and the end of the participant and the reference group

Items	Full marks	Average of participant		Average of Reference	
		Initial test	End test	Initial test	End test
Fluency	5	3.2	4.5	3.0	2.9
Accuracy	5	2.7	3.9	3.0	2.9
Idiomacity	5	3.0	4.4	2.8	3.2
Coherence	5	4.1	4.6	3.9	3.8
Logic	5	1.8	3.8	1.8	3.7
Diversity	5	1.6	3.9	2.0	3.0
Total score	30	16.4	25.1	16.5	19.5

As is shown, the experimental class had got obvious improvement, but the comparative classes had got no obvious improvement, and even some of the items had setback phenomenon (Table 3).

Thai students are smart, creative; tend to study in a relaxed and lively atmosphere. They are used to consultation and discussion of classroom activities and easy to work with. Function-Module Method just can meet these aspects, thus those students can accepted it easily and we could achieve successful experiment objectively. The widespread problem for Chinese as a second language learning is that learners are good at speaking, but are weak in writing. There are defects in the written language teaching for Chinese as a second language, written language teaching must be strengthened (GENG, LIU 2011), and Function-Module Method just can make up for this problem. The Thai students' experimental data tell us, as long as the teaching

method is proper, the written language teaching and its application in writing can be solved basically.

Conclusions

Teaching writing of Chinese as a second language creates more opportunities for vocabulary accumulation and transformation, but the common vocabulary teaching methods are effective to common vocabulary extension, and are not suitable for writing teaching and the accumulation of writing vocabulary. The Function-Module Method summarized out of the practical experiences of teaching Chinese writing for Thai students, which has its advantages in expending receptive vocabulary and transforming receptive vocabulary into productive vocabulary effectively, can promote written language teaching and writing expression significantly. In a word, the experiment shows that Thai students can easily enlarge their vocabulary by writing teaching and class writing activities. Nevertheless, the teaching mode, method and experimental effect remain to be inspected continually. Teaching how to write vocabulary of Chinese as a second language is not limited to the scope of the discussion above, this paper puts forward some opinions and practice can provide some specific research case, which also provide ideas for the future further research.



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