Pinyin annotation and beginning level CFL reading instruction

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1. The use of Pinyin annotation

- As a romanization system for standard (Mandarin) Chinese, Pinyin has been used as a primary tool to help CFL learners with pronunciation as well as inputting Chinese on a computer/mobile devices.
- In beginning level CFL textbooks such as Chinese Link, Pinyin are used in:
  - New word lists: Help with pronunciation of individual characters and words
  - The main learning text: Annotation of the main lesson text
  - Learning activities in the learning textbook (but not the Student Activities Manual)
  - Examples: New words, main lesson text, learning tasks
- For CFL learners whose primary interest is learning spoken Chinese, Pinyin can also serve as the text of learning (instead of Chinese characters).

2. Pinyin annotation tools

- Learner needs for Pinyin annotation and its usefulness are evident in the availability of many online and stand-alone Pinyin annotation tools
  - Stand-alone: e.g., NJStar, etc.
  - Online:
    - http://mandarinspot.com/annotate
    - http://www.mandarintools.com/

3. Classroom observation about the use of Pinyin annotation

- Textbook: Chinese Link
- Intermediate Chinese class in Fall 2009 at MTSU:
  - First notice of the issue: Students could read aloud Chinese texts in Chinese Link fluently, but when presented with a Chinese text without Pinyin annotation, their reading fluency dropped considerably.
  - Students' feedback at the end of semester is that reading supplementary Chinese texts (provided by the instructor) without Pinyin annotation benefited them most in learning Chinese characters.
  - Only 3 students
- Elementary Chinese class in Fall 2010 at MTSU
  - Similar observation with more students

4. Pedagogical questions

- Is Pinyin annotation helpful or counter-productive in assisting CFL learners with acquisition of Chinese characters?

- When and to what extend should we provide reading materials with Pinyin annotation where the main learning objectives are the acquisition of Chinese characters and reading proficiency in Chinese text?

5. This research

- Research questions:
  - What do students think of learning Chinese through texts with Pinyin annotation?
  - What other researchers have found about Pinyin annotation and Chinese character acquisition?
- Methodology:
  - Student survey: 25 students
  - Literature review
- Participants:
  - 25 students from two first semester Elementary Chinese classes;
  - 3 class hours per week;
  - Textbook: Chinese Link;
  - Pinyin was taught during the first two weeks;
  - Chinese characters were introduced simultaneously with Pinyin;
  - Participation in the survey is voluntary.

5.1 Survey results (I)

- Q1. How often do you use Pinyin in the New Word list in each lesson to help you learn the pronunciation of individual characters or words?

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Few times	Sometimes	Often	Very often

- Result:
  - Mean: 4.4
  - Standard deviation: 0.8

- Comment: Confirms the usefulness of Pinyin as a pronunciation tool

5.1 Survey results (II)

- Q2. When I read Chinese texts annotated with Pinyin (for example, the main learning text in Chinese Link),
  - A. I look at Pinyin and ignore the Chinese characters.
  - B. I look at the Chinese characters and ignore Pinyin.
  - C. I look at both the Chinese characters and Pinyin.
- Result:
  - Option A: 7 people
  - Option B: None
  - Option C: 18 people
- Comment: Pinyin is (potentially) distractive.

5.1 Survey results (III)

- Q3. In **Chinese Link**, the main learning text in each lesson has both Chinese characters and Pinyin printed side by side. Reading Chinese text with Pinyin annotation helps me recognizing Chinese characters.

1	2	3	4	5
Disagree completely	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree completely

- Results:
  - Mean: 3.7
  - S.D.: 1.4
  - Option 1: 2 people, Option 2: 4 people
- Comment: Most students tend to agree with the statement, but there are some who do not agree.

5.1 Survey results (IV)

- Q4. In **Chinese Link**, having Chinese text with Pinyin annotation side-by-side prevents me from focusing on Chinese characters.

1	2	3	4	5
Disagree completely	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree completely

- Result:
  - Mean: 2.3
  - S.D.: 1.1
  - Options 3 and 4: 10 people
- Comment: Some students find it distractive.

5.1 Survey results (V)

Q5. Reading the main learning text in Chinese characters only (i.e., without Pinyin side-by-side) will help me focus on recognizing Chinese characters.

1	2	3	4	5
Disagree completely	Somewhat disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Agree completely

- Results:
  - Mean: 3.4
  - S.D.: 1.1
- Comment: Students agree in general that Chinese text only will help.

5.2 Survey conclusion

- Conclusions from our survey:
  - Pinyin annotation distracts students' attention on Chinese texts;
  - There is (less than strong) agreement that Pinyin annotation helps learning characters. At the same time, however, some students agree that it also hinders their focusing on characters.
  - Students agree that reading in Chinese texts only (without Pinyin annotation) helps recognition.

6. Other previous researches (I)

- Chun 2003 and 2007
  - Examines the role of Pinyin and English words as stimulus prompts in the learning of Chinese characters
  - Design:
    - Pinyin was presented 5 seconds after the character
    - Pinyin was presented simultaneously with the character
    - Pinyin was presented in written form and in spoken form
  - Findings:
    - Recall of pronunciation was enhanced when characters were presented first and its Pinyin prompts were given as feedback (in contrast to simultaneous presentation)
    - Same effects were found when Pinyin was presented on the right
  - Explanation
    - Limited working memory
    - Split attention when too many prompts were given, resulting in blocking effect

6. Other previous researches (II)

- Packard (1990)
  - Effects of time lag in introducing Chinese characters into the elementary Chinese curriculum.
  - Design:
    - No-lag group: Simultaneous introduction of characters and Pinyin
    - Lag group: 3 weeks after the introduction of Pinyin
  - Findings:
    - Lag group:
      - Better able to discriminate phonetically and transcribe unfamiliar Mandarin syllables;
      - More fluent in spoken Mandarin
    - No consistent differences between the groups in character reading or writing

7. Suggestions for classroom pedagogy

- Reliance on Pinyin annotated texts for reading comprehension is potentially distractive for beginning level students.
- The use of Pinyin annotation should be limited in beginning level CFL reading instruction if the objectives of learning is acquisition of Chinese characters and reading proficiency:
  - Use technology to present Chinese texts/characters first and then use Pinyin as feedback prompt.
  - If Pinyin is to be provided for the reading text, it is better to separate it from the text.

References

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