

Early vs. delayed introduction of Chinese characters in beginning Mandarin classes: Is the “early advantage” due to more instructional hours?

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Abstract: Knell and West (2017) found an advantage for the early introduction of Chinese characters in beginning Mandarin. This advantage might be because the group experiencing early character instruction had more instructional hours dedicated to character instruction.

Knell and West (2017) concluded that their study supports early introduction of Chinese characters in Mandarin instruction for middle school beginning students. In their study, one group of students (the “early” group) was taught characters from the beginning, while a “delayed” group began character instruction at the beginning of the second semester. The early group did significantly better on tests of reading comprehension and character writing at the end of the year.

The early group, however, had a total of 30 hours of character instruction, while the delay group had considerably less, about 18 to 20 hours (E. Knell, personal communication). Table 1 presents the final score on the two tests, and the results of a test of efficiency, a procedure introduced by Beniko Mason (e.g. Mason, 2007) that calculates gains per unit time. As presented in table 1, the gains per hour of instruction for both groups are nearly identical.

Table 1. Mean scores and gains/hour

| Reading Comprehension | Score | Hours | pts/hour |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| Early | 11.7 | 30 | 0.4 |
| Delayed | 8.3 | 20 | 0.415 |

| Character Reading | Score | Hours | pts/hour |
|-------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| Early | 9.1 | 30 | 0.3 |
| Delayed | 6.6 | 20 | 0.33 |

It is thus no surprise that the delayed group did better on the reading comprehension and character reading tests. We must ask what would happen if both groups had the same instructional time. This was the case in Packard (1990), who found no difference in early and delayed character instruction for university students of beginning Mandarin. In other words, what would happen if we increased the number of hours of instruction for the delayed group?

E. Knell (personal communication) has pointed out that adding ten more hours of instruction in the second semester, enough to give both groups 30 hours at the end of year, might

overload the students, resulting in a decline in efficiency. If, however, the additional hours were spread out over four semesters, with the delay group doing 20 hours for semesters 2,3, and 4, both groups would have the same number of total hours. We would then know if the delay group's advantage was due to their early start or the result more instructional hours. (This assumes that during the third and fourth semesters, the efficiency of both groups remains as it was the first year, as presented in table 1.)

It also needs to be pointed out the classes in Knell and West's study were taught using a traditional method. The results might be different with a comprehension-based approach focusing on understanding interesting texts. There is evidence from Chinese as a first language that children improve in character recognition as a result of reading, that is, encountering unfamiliar words in context (Ku and Anderson, 2001), that more reading results in greater vocabulary knowledge (Shu, Anderson and Zhang, 1995) and better writing in Chinese (Lee and Krashen, 1996).

Finally, the groups were not significantly different on a test of character recognition, suggesting that the delayed group was more efficient, gaining just as much as the early group with fewer hours of instruction.

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